

Of Time, Honor, and Memory: Oral Law in Albania

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This essay provides a historical account of the role of oral tradition in passing on from generation to generation an ancient code of customary law that has shaped and dominated the lives of northern Albanians until well into the mid-twentieth century. This traditional body of customary law is known as the *Kode* of Lekë Dukagjini. It represents a series of norms, mores, and injunctions that were passed down by word of mouth for generations and reputedly originally formulated by Lekë Dukagjini, an Albanian prince and companion-in-arms to Albania's national hero, George Kastriot Skanderbeg (1405-68). Lekë Dukagjini ruled the territories of Pulati, Puka, Mirdita, Lura, and Luma in northern Albania—known today as the region of Dukagjini—until the Ottoman armies seized Albania's northernmost city of Shkodër in 1479.

Throughout the past five to six centuries this corpus of customary law has been referred to as *Kanuni i Lekë Dukagjinit*, *Kanuni i Malsisë* (the Code of the Highlands), or *Kanuni i maleve* (the Code of the Mountains). The “Code” is an inexact term, since *Kanun*, deriving from the Greek *kanon*, simultaneously signifies “norm,” “rule,” and “measure.” The *Kanun*, but most particularly the norm of vengeance, or blood taking, as its standard punitive apparatus, continue to this day to be a subject of historical, sociological, anthropological, and juridical interest involving various theoretical frames of reference from the dominant trends of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to today.

The *Kanun* of Lekë Dukagjini was not the only customary law in Albania. Some regions in the north attributed theirs to Skanderbeg (*Kanuni i Skënderbeut*—the Code of Skanderbeg), and in the south another Code (*Kanuni i Labërisë*—the Code of Labëria) was enforced, although not as rigidly as the *Kanun* of Lekë Dukagjini. Although the latter two are little known, they, too, are worthy of sociological and anthropological attention.

Before the Ottoman Turks invaded Albania over 600 years ago, the country was divided into several petty principalities, none of which was sufficiently strong for long enough to subject a neighboring territory to its rule. Faced with the danger of Ottoman invasion, Skanderbeg was able to unite all of the Albanian princes and their territories under his unchallenged leadership in a single state. Lekë Dukagjini was one of his closest friends and allies. They both were Christian crusaders and resisted the whole force of the Ottoman army for a quarter of a century. Although the Ottomans finally conquered Albania ten years after the death of Skanderbeg, they were

unable to exert more than a nominal authority outside the main towns, and certainly not in the remote highlands of northern Albania, which formed the northwestern corner of Ottoman Turkey in Europe. As Edith Durham, to whom we owe essentially the first in-depth interest and study on Albania's customary law, has put it, "the mountain tribesman has never been more than nominally conquered—and is still unsubdued. Empires pass over him and run off like water from a duck's back" (Durham 1910:453).¹

Like other foreign invaders before them, the Turks barely bothered with the highlanders of northern Albania. A number of authors point to the fact that there were no roads² along which the Ottoman forces, strong enough to be effective, could march in order to reduce them to real submission. Johnson (1916:36) writes:

The conquering arm of the Turk[s] reduced the Bulgarian inhabitants of open plains to complete subjection within a comparatively short time; but a century and a quarter was required to secure a less firm hold upon the mountains of Serbia, while the inaccessible wilds of Albania and Montenegro were never completely subjected to Turkish power.

As Margaret Hasluck³ points out, "the Turkish government, unable to enforce its will, accepted the situation and left the mountaineers to govern themselves, as they had presumably done under their native princes and chiefs" (1954:9).

In reading the *Kanun*, Lekë Dukagjini appears as a kind of Albanian Moses, whose teachings were recorded in the memories of elders, the tribal elite, and in the mountains of northern Albania in the form of proverbs and rites and were handed down from the middle ages. It is obvious that the bulk of the tribal laws existed much earlier than the time of Lekë Dukagjini (Durham 1910). In point of fact, what Prince Dukagjini really did was to codify and add to the existing customary law as well as introducing and enforcing it—along with the penalties—more rigidly in the territories under his control (Durham 1910; Whitaker 1968). The Code was later gradually accepted and obeyed as common law in the entire area of northern Albania, in Kosovo, as well as in Montenegro.⁴

¹ Like several other foreign travelers—Lord Byron, Rose Wilder Lane, and Margaret Hasluck, for example—Durham became enamored of Albania, but significantly more than any of these other recorded travelers. She spent the first two decades of the twentieth century traveling in the Balkans, visited Albania numerous times prior to and after World War I, and befriended 24 tribes (Durham 1910), learning about their origin and becoming known and respected by them as *Krajlica e Malsorëve* (the Queen of the Highlanders). Durham wrote seven books and numerous articles on Albania and the Balkans and influenced British foreign policy at that time. She remains to date one of the most respected foreign personalities among Albanians, both northerners and southerners alike.

² The first all-weather road in northern Albania was constructed in 1916 by the Austro-Hungarian armies during their temporary occupation; it ran from Shkodër to Durrës, with a branch in Tirana (Hasluck 1954:9).

³ A Scottish folklorist who lived in Albania for 13 years prior to World War II, Margaret Hasluck (1885-1948), is the author of the renowned book, *The Unwritten Law in Albania*, published posthumously in 1954.

⁴ Albanians and Montenegrins, "divided as they are by language and by the bitter course of history, have a largely common culture" (Elsie and Mathie-Heck 2005:xv). Edith Durham observed not only that certain tribes of *Malsia e madhe* (Great Mountainous Land) in Albania and in Montenegro were consanguineous—that is, they acknowledged blood-relationship and traced their descent from a common male ancestor (Durham 1910)—but also that they had virtually the same tribal law and custom up to the end of the eighteenth century and indeed well into the nineteenth (Durham 1923). Durham even believed that the "present language and nationality of such tribes—that

Every social system, or document in which a given system is embodied, has a history, which means that it has had its beginnings even if these are shrouded in antiquity (Gouldner 1960). Like all documents of uncertain origin, however, the question of the origin of the *Kanun* can be easily bogged down in a metaphysical morass. Some believe that its origin can be traced in some measure to the ancient Illyrians, the direct ancestors of the Albanians and from whom they inherited their language, various traditions, customs, and certain aspects of their legal system. Indeed, as Durham points out, the Albanian mountaineer “boasts and believes that he is the oldest thing in the Balkan Peninsula” (1910:453). Others assume that parts of the *Kanun* are adaptations from Roman law; other parts very likely do go back to the Bronze Age. J. H. Hutton (1954:xii) observes that Albanian customary law is “primitive enough in many ways to be compared with the customary law of tribes much less civilized than the Albanians,” whereas Ismail Kadare (1988a), Albania’s most celebrated writer, argues that the Code predates Aeschylus.

Although the *Kanun* of Lekë Dukagjini has no identifiable origin, the striking similarities between the common laws of Homeric Greece and the *Kanun* make it possible to imagine that this corpus of unwritten law, known and practiced in various forms in other parts of the Balkans, in southern Italy, and among the northern Caucasian peoples, could well have originated in Illyria. This might explain why, of all other societies, in northern Albania customary law persisted well into the mid-twentieth century as the only, or “parallel,” informal legal system; to some degree it remains valid in various areas even today.

Like Émile Durkheim (1968 [1912]), who believed that by studying the religious beliefs and practices of the Aboriginal populations of Australia one could understand all religion in its most elementary form, Edith Durham—studying Albania’s customary law and writing about it at the same time as Durkheim—assumed that she had discovered “the land of the living past.” Durham, like her contemporary historian Robert Seton-Watson, started from the assumption that the key to understanding the past is the understanding of the present.⁵ Durham felt that she had found that past in northern Albania and that the Balkans could be approached as an *in vivo* tableau of a society functioning on the basis of tribal customary law, a sort of living laboratory—or reservation—for the study of Europe’s distant tribal past and the origins of the European civilization.⁶ In her renowned and now-classic book *High Albania*, Edith Durham writes (1985[1909]:1):

The wanderer from the West stands awestruck amongst them [the Albanians], filled with vague memories of the cradle of his race, saying: “This did I do some thousands of years

is, whether today they are Serbophone and Montenegrin, or Albanophone and Albanian—has been determined mainly by whether they came under the influence of the Orthodox Serbian Church or of the Roman Catholic Church” (Durham 1910:454).

⁵ “The past as a key to the present—this is true of every country and period. The present as a key to the past—this is peculiarly true of Central and South—Eastern Europe” (Seton-Watson 1923:16).

⁶ Elsie and Mathie-Heck (2005) consider Albania of the early twentieth century as “the only intact heroic society in Europe.”

ago; thus did I lie in wait for my enemy; so thought I and so acted I in the beginning of Time.”

Our information is incomplete but suggests that the *Kanun* of Lekë Dukagjini, in the codified form in which we know it today, is not quite the same as the customary law that has habitually been practiced throughout the centuries. It has surely had its “spontaneous development,” to use Henry Maine’s language in *Ancient Law* (1861), but it has also been purposefully changed by human agency to suit the purposes of those who transmitted the oral law. As Margaret Hasluck has observed, “Every type of unwritten law has been constantly recast, added to, and restarted down the centuries by a body of experts drawn from the rank of rulers” (1954:9).

Each new era made modifications to the code, which have been attributed to “a conscious desire for alternation” (Hutton 1954). It is most certain, for example, that the *Kanun*, especially that part of it that spells out the rules regulating vengeance, changed when the Ottomans introduced firearms as weapons. Because firearms made killing easier than before, new rules had to be adopted to prevent the great loss of life inflicted by their use.

For centuries the *Kanun* was not written down. It remained in the verbal custody of the village or tribal elders and subject to modification or reinterpretation from time to time by assemblies of clans or villages. And just as the application of the traditional *Kanun* varied somewhat from one to another of the relatively isolated mountain communities, so too, no doubt, “in the same community the centuries brought some changes in its interpretation and application, since both of these depended considerably on the memory and wisdom of the local chieftains and elders” (Kastrati 1955:124). As to the accuracy of the northern tribesman’s memory, Edith Durham observed that he possess “an extraordinary memory, and has handed down quantities of oral traditions, most of which remain to be collected” (1910:453). Durham also made a similar assessment with regard to elderly Montenegrins, who, being unable to read or write, had “marvelous memories and stores of oral tradition” (1909:86).

Traveling through northern Albania and Montenegro at the end of the nineteenth century, W. H. Cozens-Hardy (1894:389) observed that “the rhapsodist of the Homeric type” was still alive among the people of these areas. Analysis of the traditional Albanian epic songs (*këngë trimërie*) show significantly that in the absence of a literate society in the highlands of Albania, epic songs served as a repository of collective memory about their national history, the lives and traditions of their ancestors, and the norms and institutions regulating their remote communities.

An ethical and aesthetical expression of the permanence and the power of the *Kanun* may be seen in its influence on Albanian folklore. The rhapsode places the following words in the mouth of the Albanian hero Gjergj Elez Alia, long ill as a result of nine wounds inflicted upon him in nine battles, before a duel he must fight with Baloz the Black, who epitomizes the Arab invader (Camaj 1989:xv):

Më ke lypë motrën para se mejdanin,
Më lype berret para se çobanin,
E jam dredhë n'kët log me t'kallxue

*Se ne të parët nji Kanun na kanë lane:
Armët me i dhanë përpara e mandej gjanë.*

(You demanded my sister before the duel,
You demanded the herds from the herdsman,
And I have come here to show you
That our ancestors left us a Kanun:
First a trial of arms and then the property [is taken].)

Martin Camaj draws a parallel between the *Kanun* of Lekë Dukagjini and the Albanian epic songs, “the *true natural form* of which is not written but *sung*, and hence in eternal wandering from mouth to mouth and from generation to generation” (1989:xv). Rose Wilder Lane (1923:180), for her part, provides an interesting account of her conversation with a clansman from the northernmost Albanian village of Thethi, in which he said:

I am an old man, and I have seen that when men go down to the cities to learn what is in books they come back scorning the wisdom of their fathers and remembering nothing of it, and they speak foolishly, words which do not agree with one another. But the things that a man knows because he has seen them, the things he considers while he walks on the trails and while he sits by the fires, these things are not many, but they are sound. Then when a man is lonely he puts words to these things and the words become a song, and the song stays as it was said, in the memories of those that hear it.

It wasn't until the mid-1930s that the *Kanun* of Lekë Dukagjini, which until then was handed down orally from father to son and from generation to generation for who knows how many hundreds of years, was meticulously transcribed in its fullest form and published integrally in Albanian. The author of the text was Shtjefën Konstantin Gjeçov, an ardent patriot and Franciscan priest, born in Kosovo in 1874. He began his labors in 1913 collecting, sifting through, and writing ancient stories as preserved in the repository of collective memory of the chieftains and the elderly in northern Albania and Kosovo. It is widely believed that he has provided the best, the fullest, the most trustworthy and most authoritative version of the customary law as remembered, interpreted, and applied in a given community at the time he himself studied it.

As of today, Gjeçov's account has never been contested by any student of Albanian customary law. Indeed, in the form it is compiled, Gjeçov's work is genuinely a professional piece of ethnographic anthropology. His approach to this unwritten “Torah” is that of the Talmudist: he surrounds quotes from the *Kanun* with his own interpretations and reconstructs the “ancient law” on the basis of his own empirical observations. In numerous footnotes he draws parallels with the Indian Laws of Manu, Roman Law, Greek Public Law, and the Ten Commandments. At the time of his death in 1929, the final text was not ready. The document, as

it is known to us today, was completed by priests from his order, using Gjeçov's manuscripts and notes, and published in book form under Gjeçov's name in 1933.⁷

Leonard Fox, the English translator of the *Kanun*, points to an astonishing resemblance between the customary law of the northern Albanians and that of the peoples of the North Caucasus. Quoting early twentieth century German anthropologist Adolf Dirr, Fox (1989:xix) informs us that the two systems of customary law may be considered practically interchangeable:

The analogies are so strong that one immediately asks oneself the questions that always arise in ethnography: Borrowing? Common origin? Basic similarity of thought? Although Dirr gave numerous examples, particularly those involving hospitality and the blood feud, he made no attempt to explain the striking similarities between the two systems.

Like all documents whose origin remains unknown to us, opinions about the *Kanun* abound. For those romantic elegists who enthuse about heroic settings and cycles of heroic verse, mythology, and legendry, like Fox, the Code of Lekë Dukagjini is “the expression and reflection of the Albanian character, a character which embodies an uncompromising morality based on justice, honor, and respect for oneself and others” (Fox 1989:xix).

The *Kanun* covered all aspects of life of northern Albanian society and the relationships between its members. The cornerstone of the *Kanun* was the concept of *Besa*—a term very rich in meaning and use, which means oath, faith, trust, protection, truce, word of honor, or all of these together—since honor was the primary and most important cohesive institution of Albanian social fabric. Inseparably connected with this was the high value placed by Albanian mountaineers upon the lineage honor. Family honor was a supreme value among them to the extent that any explanation of the extended family among the Ghegs⁸ must take account of this cosmo-philosophical element (Whitaker 1968). Honor was the principal value of traditional northern Albanian society, something prized above personal liberty, or even life itself. For “what profit is life to a man if his honor be not clean? To cleanse his honor no price is too great” (Dako 1919:33).

In this extremely remote cosmo-philosophical world Honor (*Nderi*), the Word of Honor (*Besa*), and Hospitality (*Mikpritja*) were indissoluble elements of people's lives. Honor, *Besa*, and Hospitality were the pillars that formed the lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*) of the northern Albanian highlanders, around which their entire life revolved. Honor represented their *supreme moral value*; *Besa* was their *true religion*,⁹ and Hospitality their *most sublime virtue*.

As a sacred promise and obligation to keep one's given word, *Besa* was idolized and romanticized in the rhapsodies of the Albanians who immigrated to southern Italy after the death of their national hero, George Kastriot Skanderbeg. In the famous song *Kostantini and Garendina*, the mother reminds her son, now in his grave, of his *Besa*, and she summons him to

⁷ The *Kanun* of Lekë Dukagjini was first translated and published in Italian in 1941, than in English in 1989, and in Russian in 1994. See Gjeçov 1989 for bibliographical data.

⁸ The traditional name commonly used to refer to northern Albanians *vis-à-vis* the Tosks of the southern part of the country.

⁹ “La Besa c'est la religion albanaise, c'est la religion du peuple” (Godart 1922:75).

arise in order to fulfill his promise—to bring her daughter back from a foreign land (Camaj 1989:xv):

*Kostantin, biri im,
Ku është besa që më dhe
Të më sillje Garendinën,
Garendinën t'ët motër?
Besa jote është nën dhe!*

(Konstantin, my son,
Where is the *besa* you gave me
That you would bring Garendina back to me,
Garendina, your sister?
Your *besa* is under the earth!)

In the course of this rhapsody, the motif of which occurs among other Balkan peoples as well, Kostantin rises from the dead, fulfills his promise, and returns to the grave.¹⁰

Numerous foreign travelers testify on the hospitality of the Albanians, both in northern and southern Albania. In the northernmost highlands of Albania, however, their hospitality has been solemnized, romanticized, and glorified by foreign travelers and a number of renowned anthropologists and historians, as well as diplomats.¹¹ At the end of the nineteenth century, W. H. Cozens-Hardy confessed that in northern Albania there was “every element of romance to fascinate the traveler” (1894:401). His confession is indicative to the Western bourgeois vogue or romantic primitivism to which the Balkan lands were subjected at the turn of the twentieth century and during the interwar period (Fussell 1980).

Having said this, however, the glorification of the Albanian hospitality by foreigners has happened for at least six distinct reasons: (1) the remarkable forms and rituals in which hospitality is expressed among the mountaineers of northern Albania; (2) the universality of its reach, involving uncompromising protection of one’s guest, even one with whom the host is in a state of blood feud; (3) its profound power in their society and on each individual’s life both as a constitutive principle of morality and as a central element of their day-to-day life; (4) its unparalleled altruistic appeal and application; (5) the unusually scarce material resources as well as the extremely remote, harsh, and inhospitable geographical setting—amounting to an almost absolute isolation—in which people conferred such hospitality that is beyond any description;

¹⁰ The motif of this rhapsody has been captured masterfully and restyled as a fascinating story by Ismail Kadare (1988b) in his novel *Doruntine*.

¹¹ There exists an extensive literature, largely written by early foreign travelers to the area in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries up to the Second World War. See, among others, Shpëtim Mema (1987) and Allcock and Young (1991). Among the most celebrated individuals that have traveled to Albania were Lord Byron (see his poem *Childe Harold*, published in 1812-18), Lord Broughton (see his book *Travels in Albania and Other Provinces of Turkey in 1809 & 1810*, published in 1813), and Edward Lear (see his books *Journal of a Landscape Painter in Greece and Albania* [1851] and *Journal of a Landscape Painter in Southern Albania* [1852]). Other renowned figures include Baron Franz Nopsca, Edith M. Durham, and so on.

and equally important, (6) the way in which hospitality was sanctified in the *Kanun* as a basic institution of society (Tarifa 2007b:94-95).

Edith Durham noted that “hospitality is the law of the mountains” and she accepted it even when meager, since the tribesman gave freely and of his best (1910:463). “He offers you bread and salt and [his] heart (*buk e krype e zemer*)” (*ibid.*).

The law of hospitality was most meaningfully and distinctively exemplified in the way in which the *Kanun* defined the home of the Albanian. The definition of the Albanian house in the *Kanun* is: “The house of the Albanian belongs to God and the guest.”¹² Hence, before it is the house of its master, it is the house of one’s guest. The guest in an Albanian’s life represents the supreme ethical category; it is more important than blood. One could pardon (through the mediation of good friends) the man who spilled the blood of one’s father or one’s son, but never the blood of a guest. A guest was really a semi-God. Albanians exalted the institution of the guest above all other human relations, even those of kinship (Kadare 1990).

The *Kanun* is not a religious document. It is a secular legal system¹³—hence binding for Christians and Muslims alike—but it was sacred nonetheless. The American sociologist Richard Schwartz (1955:566) has pointed out that the “secularity and specificity” of the *Kanun* make it “sufficiently similar” to western legal systems to “permit fruitful comparison, but different enough to suggest general hypotheses, particularly on the relations between law and society.” The *Kanun* carried much greater authority than the two main religious faiths prevailing in the highlands of northern Albania—Christianity and Islam. As Durham puts it, “to the tribesmen . . . all the so-called laws of Lek are as divine decrees” (1910:465). So much did the *Kanun* influence the mentality and the lives of the mountaineers of northern Albania that, with Lekë Dukagjini cast in the role of the Marquess of Queensberry, the words “Lek said so” “obtained far more obedience than the Ten Commandments and the teachings of the hodjas and the priests were often in vain if they ran counter to that of Lek” (Durham 1928:65).

Like many other travelers and observers of Albanian life in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Durham offers first-hand evidence of the superficiality and pragmatism of the Albanians in religious matters, hence the rapidity with which they would change their religion. Durham observed (1910:465):

Whole districts have been known to turn Moslem suddenly, in order to score off a priest who has offended them. Nor do they become good Moslems. I have lived with Moslem tribesmen all night and all day, but I have never seen one pray or perform the ceremonial ablutions; and his women are all unveiled. So long as he is allowed to go on being Albanian in his own way the tribesman will assume any faith that is convenient. Islam lets him have his own way, consequently Islam is spreading. In some transition districts (e.g., Lura), people will go both to mosque and to church. If they don’t get what they want from one they try the other.

¹² The Code, § 602 (Gjeçov 1989).

¹³ According to Edith Durham, Lekë Dukagjini appears to have been excommunicated by Pope Paul II “for his most un-Christian code” (1928:66).

Almost 200 years before Durham began her trips to Albania and throughout the Balkans, another renowned British traveler and writer, Lady M. W. Montagu, wrote about the triviality of religion in the lives of the Albanians as follows:

These people, living between Christians and Mohamedans, and not being skilled in controversy, declare that they are utterly unable to judge which religion is best, but, to be certain of not entirely rejecting the truth, they very prudently follow both: they go to the mosque on Fridays and to the church on Sundays, saying, for their excuse, that they are sure of protection from the true Prophet, but which that is they are not able to determine in this world.¹⁴

Special rituals common to members of both religions restored equilibrium after major events such as birth, marriage, and death. As Coon observed (1950-30),

All of those rituals, which reinforced their social habits, were of much greater importance to the mountaineers than the rites of church or mosque, which were not as well adjusted to this particular form of society.

In short, the teaching of Christianity and of Islam all had to yield to the *Kanun* of Lekë Dukagjini. Then again, under the *Kanun*, both religions were equally protected and used: offences against sacred objects and religious functionaries of either denomination were punished more severely than were comparable acts against lay persons and property, and oaths, basic in the compurgatorial juridical procedure, were equally acceptable when sworn on the Bible or the Koran, at a church or a mosque, depending upon the religion of the swearer (see Hasluck 1954:159-60, 176-77).

It was precisely this Durkheimian version of sacred—although secular—authority of the *Kanun* that accounted for the universal conformity given to it. It also accounted for the “enviable tolerance” that has historically characterized the relations between Moslems and Christians in Albania (Barnes 1918). Schwartz is in agreement with this. He persuasively asserts that “the secular nature” and “the cross-religious effectiveness of the *Kanun*”—which he attributes to “an earlier pagan code, common to all the tribes and which the *Kanun* of Lekë merely summarized and consolidated”—appear to have “permitted relatively peaceful relations among proponents of traditionally antagonistic faiths” (Schwartz 1955:567). We can add that the very success of the system based on the *Kanun* suggests an explanation for its longevity and unwavering authority, which has remained unchallenged well into the twentieth century.

With its 1,263 articles, the *Kanun* was comprehensive, universal, and inescapable for any family or clan member or the broader community of mountaineers in the areas in which it was introduced and enforced with rigidity. It was literally devised as a legal framework to govern every aspect of life and did not leave out a single aspect of economics, ethics, or the slightest human action. On the contrary, the *Kanun* described in great detail numerous substantive rules

¹⁴ Montagu 1740, Letter XXVII, dated April 1, 1717.

bearing particularly on the prevention and settlement of troublesome disputes. As Ismail Kadare puts it, the power of the *Kanun* “reached everywhere, covering lands, the boundaries of fields; it made its way into the foundations of houses, into tombs, to churches, to roads, to markets, to weddings” (1990:27). It sanctioned, for Christians as well as Muslims, the attitude toward marriage, the selection of wives, the rites to be conducted during wedding ceremonies and birth, the generational roles in family and society, the rigid gender division of labor, the forms of punishment, the rules of blood feud, and the customs to be followed when a person died (Tarifa 2007). In a word, the *Kanun* was the law that governed everything in peoples’ lives, from the cradle to the grave. It contained statutory, criminal, civil, and family laws as well as procedural rules for both criminal and civil courts. As such, it took care of all of these subjects “once and forever,” and it served to shape up rigorously patterned forms of behavior while inhibiting change in a society whose members were “trained from childhood to believe in its infallible authority” (Coon 1950:37).

Ian Whitaker (1968) suggests that for its comprehensiveness, clarity, and logic, the *Kanun* of Lekë Dukagjini—in the codified version that has come down to us by way of oral tradition—“deserves to be ranked among the great legal documents of the world.” Ismail Kadare (1990:73) concludes that the *Kanun* was “not merely a constitution, it was also a colossal myth that had taken on the form of a constitution. Universal riches compared to which the Code of Hammurabi and the other legal structures of those regions look like children’s toys.”

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