

NEWSDAY

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@DATELINE:Theth, Albania

@HEADLINE:Murder as a 'Matter of Honor' / In Albania, revenge killings are accepted part of tribal loyalty

Theth, Albania - He sits smoking cigarettes in the front of the fireplace in his simple stone house, contemplating whether to murder again. Last April, the dark-haired, slightly built farmer killed his neighbor's brother-in-law to avenge the murder of his younger brother, who was slain by the neighbor. Now the farmer is debating whether to retaliate for the murder of his cousin, who was killed by a member of the neighbor's family.

"I felt better after the killing. I owed it to my brother," says the soft-spoken man who welcomes his guests with coffee, liquor, fruit and cigarettes. "It was a matter of honor. "

The farmer, who requested anonymity, considers himself a Catholic, and a large picture of Jesus dominates his living room. Yet in the remote, beautiful Alps of northern Albania many still pledge allegiance to principles that resound more deeply than any religion: the Kanun of Leke Dukagjini or Code of Leke. This is common law that since medieval times has attempted to bring order to a region so isolated it escaped governance by the capital. Even today, a four-wheel-drive vehicle is necessary to reach the mountain villages, and visitors are rare.

The code dictates unbending tribal loyalty and regulates life inside the community through the concepts of honor and revenge. According to the code, "There is no fine for vindicating an offense to honor . . . any offense to honor is not paid for with property but by the spilling of blood or by a magnanimous pardon through the mediation of a good friend. " A man is dishonored, for example, if someone insults or pushes him, calls him a liar or fails to repay a debt. A family member's slaying should be vindicated by killing the murderer or a member of his family.

Albanians estimate there are 10,000 blood feuds raging in these jagged peaks. They may seem trivial as Albania slides into anarchy with thousands rioting because they lost their life savings in collapsed pyramid schemes.

Yesterday, parliament elected President Sali Berisha, uncontested, to a second five-year term hours after a nationwide state of emergency was declared. Security forces were recovering weapons seized in weekend attacks on police stations; 20 arrests were reported. About a dozen people have died in the unrest, which led the Italian government to send two helicopters to embattled Vlore and airlift 35 foreigners to safety.

Berisha hails from the mountains, from Tropoja, on the Kosovo border, a code stronghold. While no one accuses Berisha of participating

in a blood feud, they tie his stubborn, vengeful nature to his roots and say it has poisoned his government. Sources believe that Berisha's secret police force, which was sent in to break up early, peaceful protests against the government and was firing off weapons yesterday in celebration, is comprised of people from the north.

"Our mentality has a savage element. It is part of our history and you see it now," says Elsa Ballauri, a writer and poet who recently founded The Albanian Human Rights Group.

"The Psychology of the Blood-Revenge and the Role of Law in Albania," a paper by sociology professor Edmond Dragoti, notes that "Albanians' idea for a government never passes the boundary of his city, of his mountain. " He adds the blood revenge mentality persists because of the absence of more civilized habits.

Indeed, some look at all the bullying and violence so prevalent in Albanian politics and say it is a direct result of a mentality that sees nothing wrong with brutalizing adversaries - even dissidents.

Soon after he was elected in 1992, Berisha started sacking members of his own party who dared disagree with him. Dozens of modulating voices were eliminated.

Others such as Neritan Ceka, now chairman of the Democratic Alliance Party, left.

"I watched as he created a party based on revenge. He decided everything and just couldn't stand to be challenged," Ceka recalled.

Meanwhile, opposition leaders and journalists were routinely beaten and harassed. The situation worsened after the 1994 defeat of a referendum on a new constitution. Berisha took the failure as a personal affront, an attitude that led to the sabotage - fraud, beatings, intimidation, international observers reported - of last May's parliamentary elections. Berisha consolidated power: His Democratic Party holds 122 of the 140 seats in parliament.

But western countries were appalled and distanced themselves from the government. When the pyramid schemes crumbled, western countries tied relief to democratic reforms. Now Albania is an economic and social disaster area.

Ironically, democracy resuscitated the blood-feud tradition. Dictator Enver Hoxha tried to stamp out vendettas by forcibly moving families when a controversy arose. Since the end of communism people were free to move back to their villages and some re-opened old wounds. In 1992, a man was beheaded in the lobby of a Tirana hotel as revenge for a murder committed 40 years earlier.

"People think democracy lets you do everything you want to - even have blood feuds," says Gjergj Deda, first chief of police in Shkodra, the largest city in the Albanian mountains. "We're seeing more revenge killings. It used to be just the old people but now it is the young ones too. " Deda says bringing an accused murderer to justice takes longer in the courts than it does in the community, and some people refuse to

wait. "They tell us we're not fast enough," he says. Djorni Maka, an 87-year-old priest who tries to reconcile families in blood feuds, says communism actually fostered the idea of swift justice because suspects were usually imprisoned immediately and found guilty.

"For fifty years here there was no spirit of community, no fellowship, no religion," he says. "It is difficult for people to forgive. " But some Albanians insist democracy has let them down. Tereszina Meshaj's 23-year-old son, Gjergj, was murdered in October, 1995. His killer was questioned by police and then released.

"How could they catch him and let him go," Meshaj demanded to know. "We're much better with the code. The state won't take care of anything. " The murderer's father, 52, sits at home a few doors away. He admits his son killed Gjergj, but says it was self-defense. The killer and his two brothers are living abroad to avoid revenge by Gjergj's family. Women and children are never retaliated against.

Experts say 10,000 men and teenaged boys can't leave their homes because once they step outside they are targets for revenge.

Indeed, the father has been a prisoner in his home for more than two years. He has tried to negotiate a truce with the Meshaj family but hasn't succeeded.