

THE BLOOD FEUD IN MONTENEGRO

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Introduction

The universality of conflict based on man's dependence upon others versus the need for individual satisfaction has been pointed out by Goldschmidt (1960:528):

Conflict between these two interests may therefore be expected as a recurrent element in every social system. The cultural mode may place emphasis upon individual self-help or upon subordination of the individual to group harmony, but it cannot entirely avoid the dilemma. Indeed, we may say that the fundamental task of an ethical system is to provide a standard means for the resolution of the conflict between individual interests and public welfare; between the self and other beings.

Thus, expecting the presence of conflict in all societies we may turn our attention to exploring its modes of expression, the mechanics of its operation and the variables accompanying it. The mere fact of its existence in no way suggests the function, intensity or significance within the individual cultural and social milieu.

In twentieth century Europe the blood feud has persisted in only a few areas. One of the most spectacular examples is found in the Dinaric highlands east of the Adriatic: in the Dalmatian hinterland (Dalmatinska Zagora), parts of Hercegovina, Montenegro and among the Albanian tribes of northern Albania and Kosmet in Yugoslavia.

Montenegro presents an extreme example of violence as a socially accepted and indeed, at times, desired pattern of behavior. Much fiction and folklore has sprung up outside the area regarding the "heroic" or "barbaric" nature of the people, depending on the viewpoint and prejudice of the source. The heroic image of Montenegro spread throughout nineteenth and twentieth century Europe due chiefly to the fact that this tiny area had managed to successfully resist centuries of Moslem pressure and the Turks were generally poorly regarded in the Western world. Eugene Radovich (1951:9) quotes William Gladstone as stating in 1895: "In my deliberate opinion the traditions of Montenegro exceed in glory those of Marathon and Thermopylae." And, indeed, such opinions have persisted to the present time. William Jovanovich (1958:XI) says in his introduction to Milovan Djilas' "Land Without Justice": "The legend of Montenegro rests on history. One who values a man's courage and a nation's freedom will recognize that the history of Montenegro, in the daring and suffering of its people, generation after generation, is unequalled in Europe." On the other end of the scale and probably no closer to reality, Durham (1928:77), an Albanophile revolted by Montenegrin excesses against Moslems and Catholics, quotes an eighteenth century Austrian envoy to Montenegro who describes an incoherent mass of half savage tribes:

The people live by raiding cattle, etc., from the border-lands. They are led on these raids even by their priests. They are divided into rival families, between whom blood-feuds rage. There is no sort of unity.

During our stay some were with us, others sought our destruction. Some fought the Turks; some were in alliance with them. They have a bishop, serdars, gubernador, and voyvodas. But these are mere names. People obey only so long as they gain by so doing. . . . We even heard a common man say to the Vladika's face: "Holy Bishop, you lie like a dog! I will cut your heart out on the point of my knife." Except that they keep the fasts they have no religion. . . . All is done with the animal impulse of lust, hate, and selfishness. . . .

In spite of their bias and superficiality, such observations contain limited elements of truth that can provide suggestions for possible areas of research. Bohannan (1963:4) has suggested that we look to the native speech for "key terms" allowing the anthropologist to put his ethnography into meaningful folk categories and that such terms can be explained in English without assimilating them to Western concepts "which would destroy them." Certainly such terms inherent to Montenegrin society can easily be picked out; the concept of self-esteem and honor is characterized by the nouns obraz and čast, connected indivisibly with the idea of the hero and heroism, junak and junastvo. These, in turn, spring from events or deeds closely identified with borba (struggle) and krvna osveta (blood revenge). Finally emerges the most all encompassing crystallization, the term čojstvo (manliness), an abstraction carrying some of the impact of the Spanish word machismo but emphasizing male excellence through heroic deeds rather than sexual prowess.

In this paper I propose to describe the blood feud in Montenegro in terms of the historic, geographic and social background and to suggest the possible functions it may serve to the individual, family and society in general. Material available presents numerous problems since nowhere has an inclusive study been done in a single community within a limited expanse of time. Source material used covers the period from the late nineteenth century to the present. Further problems arise from the bias and lack of objectivity of writers combined with an approach which is literary or historic rather than anthropological.

I.

Modern Montenegro is the smallest republic in Yugoslavia with less than 500,000 population. Its sixty miles of coastline stretch from southern Dalmatia to the borders of Albania. The interior is dominated by rugged mountains which rise abruptly from the coast to a maximum altitude of 8,200 feet.

The parts of Montenegro nearest the sea are known as the Karst region, wild stretches of barren limestone full of potholes and caverns where rivers often disappear underground, reissuing, if at all, some distance further on. In the southeast the mountains are somewhat more rounded and wooded in places but, even here, are found areas of bare limestone. In most places the rivers are not navigable and the shortness of the valleys combined with the height and ruggedness of the mountains has made communications difficult. Though the climate is generally Mediterranean extremes of temperature are known in the higher altitudes (Geographical Section, British Naval Intelligence 1920:12-13).

Nature is not bountiful in such a physical environment. Radovich (1951:9) describes the unproductive aspect of the land:

There is some green and wooded country in Montenegro but the part a person sees before entering Cetinje is the rugged, lean, defiant mountains. In this rocky mountain country the natives often lug in earth and set the earth down within hand-made enclosures to grow whatever they can. . . .

A warlike tradition may well be correlated with the difficult and unfertile lands occupied by the Montenegrins. The following tends to substantiate this contention (Geographical Section, British Naval Intelligence 1920:51):

The people live by pasturage and agriculture, as far as they live at all by the labour of their hands; but they prefer to live by other means. In general the field-work is left to the women, and the men keep themselves in readiness for war, which, for Montenegrins, has usually brought richer returns, in the shape either of plunder or subsidies, than anything that could be yielded by their barren native soil.

Erlich (1964:424) further strengthens the correlation between the geographical setting and the warlike tradition:

The Montenegrins are as if built constitutionally for life in the Karst, for maintaining themselves in meagre natural surroundings and for hard struggle. The Karst is desolate, there is little water, still less fertile land but there is something that no other area has, unusual possibilities for defense and attack from the cliffs and rocks.

The tribal societies and warlike traditions of the Dinaric regions of the Balkans have their roots in ancient times. Illyrians were noted in the Roman Empire for their excellence as warriors and were valued as legionaries. Though Slavic in speech the Montenegrins are descendents of this tradition and probably represent racially an amalgamation of invading Slavs and indigenous Balkan peoples. Indeed today great similarities exist both physically and culturally between the Montenegrins and Albanians, enough to suggest common origins (Coon 1939:591).

The invading Turks gave new life to the warlike spirit. The tribes battled stubbornly and were the last Balkan peoples to be subjugated more than a hundred years after the Battle of Kosovo in 1389. In actuality they were never totally dominated and fought continually against the Turks and Islam, often attacking not only Turks but Montenegrins and Albanians not of the Orthodox faith.

Montenegro became a fountain of resistance for all the Slavic south. Through the centuries all feelings were directed toward the goal of liberation from the Turks. That goal dominated and in battles the tribal system drew new strength. The ambitions of individual men and clans centered around glories that could be achieved in battle, battle which meant misfortune but which had become the goal and content of life (Erlich 1964:425).

In the late fifteenth century Ivan Crnojevic, chief of an important clan, established himself in Cetinje. Gradually an independent principality was formed which was more or less successful in defending itself against the Turks, Venetians and later the Austrians. From the beginning of the sixteenth

century the country was governed by Orthodox prince-bishops or vladike. The princes of the Njegoš Dynasty were vladike into the middle of the nineteenth century and later secular princes.

Erlich (1964:426) describes contact with the West and inclusion within the Yugoslav state. Relations with Europe came in the form of political and diplomatic acts and not in the form of economic contact as in other regions. Western states supported the Montenegrin tribes in their fight against the Turks and sent them money and weapons. Such help, over a long period of time, had effects very different from those which would have been brought about by money through commercial channels; neither a higher standard of living nor technical progress resulted.

After World War I Montenegro was united into the Yugoslav state. However, centralization, corruption and bad administration embittered the Montenegrins. The reaction was violent and occurred at a time of world economic crisis. Centuries of poverty turned into famine. While peasants from feudal surroundings bowed to the bureaucracy, members of the patriarchal society did not. Djilas (1958:207-212) describes the period of the twenties and early thirties as one of banditry, excesses and lawlessness. The Moslems became the particular object of vengeance and hostility:

The destruction of Moslem settlements and massacring of Moslems assumed such proportions and forms that the army had to be sent to intervene; the police authorities were passive and unreliable. The incident turned into a small-scale religious war, but one in which only one side was killed. . . .

Attempting to find their bearings and to conquer the new times, these men seemed only to become all the more lost, more violent, and more embittered.

Montenegro had reached a period of quickening social and political change unaccompanied by economic reforms or material progress. Old ways continued and struggled against the new, unbalanced by the innovations of changing times. Former values persisted in a world which made their functions obsolete. They would perhaps have died more quickly had not World War II again reaffirmed the Montenegrin system of folk values providing new enemies and the possibility of personal and tribal aggrandizement through battle.

The period since World War II has been one of rapid economic development and has seen the establishment of a degree of centralized political control unknown in the past. This period falls generally outside the scope of this paper and little is available regarding changes in the traditional social system and its accompanying mores and values.

II.

Montenegro and Albania were among the last regions in Europe where a tribal system persisted into the twentieth century. With the tribal system were concepts of law and political organization which differed substantially from those organized bodies of law and politics found in most of the Western world. Bohannan (1963:281) states: "The political organization based on the extended family can be found in any society composed of bands or hordes. . . ." Gluckman (1955) further points out the existence all over the world of

societies that have no governmental institutions and that lack officers to judge quarrels, to legislate or to lead wars. These are societies in which private vengeance and self-help are the main overt sanctions against injury by others, and where the exercise of self-help is likely to lead to the waging of feuds.

The Dinaric peoples lacked central authority in the past and had no protection against aggressive conduct. The principle of self-reliance was generally accepted and was even endorsed in written law (Tomašić 1948:34).

Durham (1928:78-88) quotes from the first written code of laws drawn up by Vladika Petar I in 1796:

A man who strikes another with his hand, foot, or chibouk, shall pay him a fine of fifty sequins. If the man struck at once kills his aggressor, he shall not be punished. Nor shall a man be punished for killing a thief caught in the act. . . .

If a Montenegrin in self-defence kills a man who has insulted him, after having vainly called upon him in God's name to cease his insults, it shall be considered that the killing was involuntary.

Continual attempts to impose a centralized government were in conflict with tribal loyalty. The efforts of the governments of Montenegro, and later Yugoslavia, were directed towards the elimination of tribal authority and the establishment of a unified system of law. In 1905 when King Nikola gave his people a constitution and parliament tribal feeling was still strong and the deputies were in actuality tribal representatives (Durham 1928:52). While the prestige and power of the tribal groups declined steadily in the twentieth century and the blood feud became rarer the tribal mentality lingered on. Changes resulted from both internal stresses inherent in a system out of key with the times and as the result of conscious efforts on the part of central governments to bring about standardization and consolidation of power.

The Orthodox Church did not represent a central authority but rather reflected the value system of Montenegrin society. The people are not deeply religious in the Western sense and the church tends to be an expression of narrow national interest. Religion could not be expected to exert a force towards pacifism since it had so actively been involved in the struggle against the Turks (Mijatovich 1908:50-52). Djilas (1958:300) states: "The cross was a good omen for driving away evil spirits and a standard for exterminating the faith and people that were called Turkish."

The blood feud too had in fact become closely associated with religious percepts and vengeance was considered a holy duty (Brkić 1961). Mata Vulj (1902:16), in his novel "Uskok" (The Insurgent), calls attention to the religious context of revenge: "He held that revenge was pleasing to God, because, he says, it is stated in prayer 'holy revenge'" (sveta osveta).¹ Brkić (1961: 147) further cites the Montenegrin proverb: "Only the avenger can be consecrated (Ko se ne osveta, taj se ne posveta)."

III.

The patriarchal system does not belong to the distant past in the Slavic south but is still a part of life today (Erllich 1964:343). Within historical times the tribal system was known over much of Europe but only in the Balkan Peninsula did such a society survive into the twentieth century (Durham 1928:13). Montenegro is the last example of the development of a wholly tribal nation into a European state. Until recent times the functions of law and government, the economy, inheritance, marriage and the regulation of blood feuds had been determined by criteria of consanguinity. Thus, it is to the kinship structure that we must look for the roots of the heroic tradition and the basis of the feud.

The basic unit in Dinaric society is the household. The family group may consist of grandparents, their unmarried children and the families of their married sons. The large agricultural zadruga (extended households) found in other parts of Yugoslavia generally do not exist in the western mountains. Occasionally households are composed only of a nuclear family while some may consist of twenty or more people (Tomasić 1948:16, 149-204).

The family hierarchy is strictly structured and the position of the father is a key to understanding the patriarchal system which is based on sex and age. The male has priority in all things, men are higher in rank than women regardless of age. The household is ruled by the starješina (elder), in most cases the oldest male, who enjoys the greatest respect, is a source of pride and self-esteem, carries the weight of responsibility and has the right to command. Many formal signs of respect are given to the starješina; the youngsters kiss his hand and the members of the household conform to his authority which for the most part is maintained without force. The mother has a second-class position but dominates as a mother-in-law. She is closely bound to her children, especially to daughters. Sexual morality is strict and marriage is firm with faithfulness the norm. In patriarchal areas the woman is valued since she represents a work force. Outside of linen, bedding and personal effects the woman brings no dowry and receives no inheritance from her father (Erllich 1964:31-173).

Erllich (1964:366) stresses the collective nature of the patriarchal family: "In these surroundings personal freedom is limited by a strict code of behavior, especially severe for women and for the younger members of the family. It leaves very little room for individual wishes, actions and reactions."

After the actual household unit the social unit most important to the Montenegrin is the bratstvo (clan--brotherhood). The bratstvo is composed of a group of households agnatically related and tracing their ancestry to a common male regarded as the founder of the clan. Such a line of descent is known as debela krv (thick blood). The uterine line is regarded as tanka krv (thin blood) and descent is not reckoned through it. The law of exogamy is strictly observed. The bratstvo possesses common pasture grounds or other property and its main function is to protect these collective possessions as well as the life, honor, and private property of each of its members. The members owe loyalty to each other and to the bratstvo as a whole and this is manifested, among other ways, in the institution of the blood feud (Tomasić 1948:99-101).

The pleme (tribe) is composed of several bratstva occupying contiguous territory and generally utilizing common lands. The pleme is usually a unit based on territoriality rather than kinship, but a tribe may contain several bratstva agnatically related to each other. The influence of a bratstvo on the tribe is dependent upon its size and physical strength. Tribes are often torn by blood feuds and warfare when not involved in external battles. When a conflict of loyalties develops, blood relationships determine allegiance. While agnatic kinship is highly developed, other relationships are limited for the most part to several institutionalized forms: marriage, kumstvo (god-fatherhood and sponsorship at marriage) and pobratimstvo (blood brotherhood). Such relationships often imply the consolidation of power for offense or defense. They also represent a means of resolving blood feuds. (Durham 1928: 88-159; Hammel 1964:11-12; Tomasić 1948:100-101.)

The structure I have described represents that of the turn of the century and there has been a constant change in progress to the present time with the tribes being the first element lost due principally to the consolidation of political and military power in the hands of a centralized government. In spite of such changes much of the mentality associated with the former way of life has survived even to the present time.

The concept of honor (čast) and self-esteem (obraz) is the expressed collective responsibility of every member of the clan or family and depends not only upon his actions but also those of his ancestors and descendants. Djilas (1958:3-4) states:

The story of any Montenegrin family is made up of traditions about the lives of ancestors who distinguished themselves in some special way, most frequently through heroism. These traditions . . . reach back into the remote past, to legendary founders of clan and tribe. And since there are no unheroic tribes and clans, particularly in the eyes of their members, there is no family without its renowned heroes and leaders.

A letter from Radivoje Janičić, written in 1965, to a relative in California provides both an intimate and contemporary example of family continuity and pride:

Forgetfulness creates separation not time and space, the passage of time has not succeeded in tearing one leaf from the tree of the Janičić bratstvo. The Janičići date from the year 1700 when the Turks killed Miloš Bakoča in battle. His wife Janica with children settled in Broćanac this village in which we live today. She was, as the old Montenegrins said, a čovjekžena [man-woman]. She reared three sons. One of them was Radule. Our family is descended from Radule's son, Djuro. Your grandfather, Rade, the son of Djuro, was a famous, revered and noble hajdučki harambaša [bandit or insurgent chieftain] and a brave Montenegrin junak. Many legends, stories and songs about him remain with the people as a monument to his life and work, and this is the most beautiful tribute the people can pay to their worthy son.

The collective and individualistic components of the heroic milieu are in delicate balance. The individual is completely immersed in his kinship group and he cannot ignore their opinion or reputation. At the same time, a

man wishes to establish that he is worthy and brave. He is extremely conscious of his personal responsibility and through the fulfillment of it realizes self-esteem and an expression of masculinity.

IV.

Bohannan (1963:290) states that, "Feud occurs when the principle or self-help gets out of hand." Linton (1960:542) further elaborates: "Where blood revenge is a culture pattern, it may serve as a deterrent to initial acts of violence, but once the act has been committed the consequences are an increasing number of violent acts."

Once initiated the feud does not contain the seeds for its own settlement. The taking of blood, though it may in the eyes of the avenger retrieve honor and reestablish balance, requires reinitiation by the most recently injured party. Thus an endless chain of events may be started bringing about the ruin and possible decimation of both families. Djilas (1958:9-17) dramatically illustrates the mechanics of the feud in the following example taken from his own experience and clan:

Though the life of my family is not completely typical of my homeland, Montenegro, it is typical in one respect: the men of several generations have died at the hands of Montenegrins, men of the same faith. . . . My father's grandfather, my own two grandfathers, my father, and my uncle were killed, as though a dread curse lay upon them. My father and his brother and my brothers were killed even though all of them yearned to die peacefully in their beds beside their wives. Generation after generation, and the bloody chain was not broken. . . .

Djilas relates that his grandfather's uncle, Marko Djilas, was a renowned outlaw who spent most of his life fighting the Turks in the Nikšić district. Bishop Njegoš, however, demanded not only war against the Turks but obedience within his state and Marko was unable to conform and came into conflict with the authorities. One morning Marko found his cave surrounded and he was lured out by a pledge of truce but was felled by a volley of shots. The attackers were led by Captain Akica Ćorović of the powerful Ćorović clan. The Djilas family at that time consisted of a few households and was comparatively weak. There was nobody to immediately avenge the death of Marko but the deed had not been forgotten. Two or three years later Akica Ćorović rode with several soldiers across a field being plowed by Marko's young nephew, Aleksa. The Captain called out a greeting to the young man but his salutation was answered with sullen silence. The boy left his plow, ran home and obtained a rifle from his mother on the pretext of shooting wolves. Aleksa intercepted Akica Ćorović and fired into his chest and then carved out pieces of his heart with a dagger. Subsequently Aleksa's own godfather invited him to a feast prepared for his death. They killed him with a wooden mallet and threw his body into a field. The murderers had decided to kill off all of the male members of the Djilas family. They surrounded the house and called out Aleksa's younger brother, Veljko. Unsuspecting, he was met with rifle shots and though wounded, was able to slip away. Aleksa's father, Marinko, then an old man, was warming himself by the fireplace when the murderers broke in and killed him. No one touched the women because it was not the custom.

In conclusion, Djilas states (1958:17):

In his day the handsome, dark, and blue-eyed Aleksa had been in all things a man of renown. The killing of Akica Ćorović had promoted him to the company of notable Montenegrins. Though the authorities campaigned against blood revenge as a national vice, the people esteemed it highly, especially when it was heroically done.

"Krvna osveta" is the expression of communal responsibility and must not be seen in terms of revenge or punishment in any personalized sense. It may be regarded as an institutionalized social duty and through it is realized and crystallized group and self-esteem. Tomasić (1948:45) views the feud in the following way: "Because of the tremendous importance of blood revenge as a means of protection and as a display of honor, self-respect, strength, and dominance, this institution has acquired a sacramental character among the people."

In spite of the apparent endless chain involved in the feud there are mechanisms within the society which can be brought into play to prevent or to halt the process of vengeance. Krvna osveta is only part of a larger ethical system and other institutions act as counterbalances to the apparent excesses and disfunction of the feud.

The clan could be relieved of responsibility for one or more of its members if it formally excluded them, this meant both renouncing responsibility for their conduct as well as the right and duty to protect them by means of blood vengeance. In the case of murder a reconciliation (umir) could be initiated by the offending party and agreed to by the aggrieved party. Community pressure was often exerted through the intervention of clan starješine in the form of an informal jural committee or moot which acted in an advisory capacity but without the power to resolve the conflict, which required the approval of the feuding families. Often the payment of wergeld (krvnina) was involved in the reconciliation (Karadžić 1957). Other institutions, brought into play through ritual and ceremony, created fictive kinship and contributed to the peace (Brkić 1961:148-149). I have already mentioned the existence of pobratimstvo and kumstvo in this respect.

Tomasić (1948:45) sees the blood feud as an instrument for attaining power and economic goals:

The institution of blood feud in the Dinaric area helps strengthen the numerically stronger clans at the expense of the weaker ones. It is only the weak clans that accept the humiliation and the economic burden of the blood pacification ceremony. It is also only the weak clans that would publicly renounce responsibility for one of their members. In this way, the strong clans may not only terrorize the small ones, but they may always profit economically if they want to accept the blood-money.

Conclusion

The tribal system and the custom of blood vengeance appear to be very old in the Balkans. A number of factors have influenced the development of this particular type of society in Montenegro. Geography isolated the people in small groups working unfertile lands. It also provided the possibility for defense and offense. We may presume that, at least in part, the segmented nature of the social structure developed as a result of isolation and poor communications. To some degree the ethical system placing high value on heroism and family honor may be the result of nature's inability to yield material rewards.

The bratstva provided the necessary units which made the waging of the feud possible and historical accident supplied external antagonists. Political conditions under the Ottoman Empire inhibited the growth of central authority and a uniform code of law. Individual families became the basic political and economic unit and their relations with other clans were regulated on the basis of self-help and unwritten custom. Thus, lacking courts, police and other legally constituted apparatus disputes often generated blood feuds. The principle of self-help represented a deterrent but, more often, became a destructive force in the society causing economic ruin and decimating the male members of the bratstva.

Mechanisms were present which could exert a balancing force to the blood feud and these institutions in the form of ties created through marriage, kumstvo and pobratimstvo together with the moot created a degree of equilibrium.

To the individual and family krvna osveta became a means to economic gain and power. Just as the church reflected the values of the society the blood feud manifested and strengthened the ties of kinship. It embodied those ethics based on communal action, rights and responsibility. A man expressed his masculinity through the fulfillment of these duties. At times the carrying out of such obligations required the personal commitment to hazardous tasks which might well mean the sacrifice of life. The culture decreed the ideal manner in which such deeds should be fulfilled and created the abstraction čojstvo. Though an idea greatly admired and revered, most probably, outside of legend, it was seldom realized in its entirety.

Today Montenegro is a changing society with centralized political power, police, courts and an economy expanding along modern lines. Though elements of the tribal mentality linger on the society appears to be in a state of rapid transition.

Gluckman (1955) has described the mechanics of the feud among the Nuer, a people living in unproductive natural surroundings, lacking officials with established powers and whose society is based on agnatic clans tracing ancestry to a common founding male. The feud is waged under very similar rules and conditions as in Montenegro. Further research into the institution of blood revenge in other parts of the world should indicate if the variables mentioned in this paper have any universal application.

ENDNOTE

¹Sveta osveta is probably a confusion of svjata ja svjatym [old Church Slavonic], "Holy Things are for the holy"--from the liturgy of St. John Chrysostom (refer to Časoslov, YMCA Press, Paris, 1930; Service Book, Holy Eastern Orthodox Church, Syrian Antiochian Orthodox Archdiocese of New York, 1949).

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