

Book Review

The Tribes of Albania: History, Society and Culture

Caspar ten Dam

Robert Elsie, *The Tribes of Albania: History, Society and Culture* London/New York: I.B. Tauris, 2015, 368 pages. ISBN: 978-1-78453-401-1 (hardback) / 978-0-85773-932-2 (e-book)

In Honour and Memory of Dr Robert Elsie (1950 – 2017)

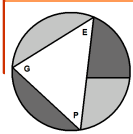
This book review will form part of a broader review essay on several of Robert's Elsie last works on the Albanians, which the peer-reviewed journal Iran and the Caucasus (Brill) intends to publish sometime next year. At the same time, this book review—and perhaps (parts of) the broader review essay as well—will form part of an extensive research note (preliminary) titled 'What We Know about Albanian Tribes', focused on Elsie's Tribes of Albania, (some of) his related works and other sources. The latter manuscript is already near completion and earmarked for one of the next issues of our journal; perhaps it will come out as early as the forthcoming Winter 2018 issue.

NB: citations and other references from the book under review are indicated only by the relevant page numbers of that work, e.g. '(p. 1)', '(p. 100)', etcetera.

The Tribes of Albania: History, Society and Culture forms a remarkable, insightful and sorely needed addition to the field of ethnic studies in general and the oft-neglected field of Albanian studies particular. Indeed, it should help to overcome the “glaring lack of knowledge and scholarly information about the tribes of northern Albania”.¹ This is all the more important once one realises that particularly the region of Northern Albania has contained, like Montenegro, one of the few truly tribal societies on the European subcontinent that survived more or less intact at least up to the mid-twentieth century.

For decades, Dr Robert Elsie has been one of the most prominent specialists on Albanian poetry and literature. His untimely death in late 2017 leaves a gaping hole in the mentioned disciplines for years and even decades to come, that few if any non-native scholars would ever be able to fill given his in-depth knowledge and vaunted mastery of the Albanian language.

As a prolific writer, editor, translator and interpreter, he has in more recent years broadened his studies and publications—and translations, editorships and republications of other works—to Albanian politics and society as well, including the history, structure and saliency of the clans or tribes among the Albanians. His *Tribes of Albania* concerns one of his very last sovereign works of his own before his death; thus this work deserves a highly positive if



occasionally critical review and (re)appraisal, even though the work in question already has come out several years ago, in praise and commemoration of this highly productive scholar.

The book under review primarily deals with the “about 70” (p. 10) mostly ethnic-Albanian tribes in northern Albania who mostly speak the Gheg-dialect (as opposed to the Tosk-dialect spoken mainly in southern Albania), because most of these have been historically concentrated and most salient in that region, even to this day. Still, other Albanian(ised) tribes—and smaller clans, sub-clans and large families however delineated and defined—in other Albanian-inhabited lands in South-Eastern Europe in the Balkans are described in Elsie’s *Tribes of Albania* as well, notably (in) Montenegro, Kosovo and FYR (Former Yugoslav Republic of) Macedonia. Apart from his *Tribes of Albania*, recent studies on Albanian clans or tribes, sub-clans and other kinship groups in and beyond Albania are few and far in between, and typically partial or limited in breadth and scale.

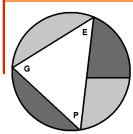
Elsie prefers to translate the primary Albanian patrilineal kinship-group concept of *fis* as ‘tribe’, though he acknowledges that the term also generally is, and can be, translated as ‘clan’ (p. 3; see also p. 5, note 6).² Few if any scholars identify separate Albanian terms for ‘clan’ and ‘tribe’, and rather translate the single Albanian term *fis* as both ‘clan’ and ‘tribe’ (and occasionally just ‘kin’)—and consequently apply the latter English terms interchangeably.³

Elsie himself circumscribes the *fis* or tribe in the strict sense, and in “the northern Albanian context”, as “a patrilineal kin group, i.e. a tribe in which all male members regarded themselves as being of common descent” (pp. 3-4). For each tribe he considers to be or have been as such in the strict sense, he defines the *fis* as a “community that is aware of common blood ties and of a common history reaching back to one [mythical, purported or factual, provable] male ancestor” (e.g. p. 20). Tribes in the broader sense are deemed “ethnographic regions with a distinct history and identity that are not strictly tribes but are often regarded as such” (p. 5; see also his note 6). Apparently, at least according to Elsie, there were and are no (ethnic-)Albanian matrilineal tribes to speak of.

Another major, originally Ottoman concept is *bajrak* (banner, standard), which is also often translated as ‘clan’ or ‘tribe’. Yet actually it “was more of a political[-military] entity, usually entailing a specific geographical territory” (p. 4) headed by a hereditary *bajraktar* (standard bearer) that may concern one or multiple *fis* or part of a *fis*. With the *bajrak-fis* “constructions and constellations sometimes being fluid” (Ibid), major explorers like Karl Steinmetz (?–1910), Baron Franz Nopcsa (1877–1933) and Franz Seiner (1874–1929) circumscribe and apply these terms markedly differently from each other.

Commendably Elsie himself applies a broad concept of the tribe “so as to cover not only the *fis* and the *bajrak*, but also some ethnographic regions of northern Albania with a distinct history and identity that are not strictly tribes but are often regarded as such” (p. 5). True, eventually practically each of these clans came to be called a *bajrak* whereby the *bajraktar* became a hereditary post for the (leading) sub-clan or extended family within the clan concerned, which generally functioned well into the early 20th century.

Elsie’s *Tribes of Albania* distinguishes and describes altogether 74 discrete tribes (rather than



“69 different tribes” according to the book cover), including semi-tribes and sub-tribes, in eleven separate chapters covering distinct areas within Northern Albania, and occasionally bordering areas in Southern Albania within the state of Albania, Montenegro, Kosovo, FYR Macedonia and Greece as well.

For each distinguished (sub-)tribe, Elsie seeks to describe, as succinctly yet at the same time as exhaustively as possible, its historical, demographic and cultural characteristics under at least some of the following sections and headings: Location of Tribal Territory; Population; Tribal Legendry, Ancestry and History; Travel Impressions (by foreign visitors); and (domestic, native) Figures of Note. The characteristics of the better-known and/or documented tribes are described under all or most of these sections and headings, the lesser-known and/or documented ones only under some of them.

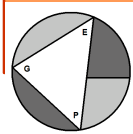
The reviewer counts 77 tribes as actually distinguished and discussed by Elsie, also counting and adding separately the three overarching composite tribes encompassing multiple discrete tribes each: the Mirdita, Mati and Dibra.⁴ For most of the tribes, Elsie consults, refers to and often extensively cites from a relatively limited yet authoritative set of individual and collective sources, which include amongst others:

- the 1671(-2) ecclesiastical report(s) by Pietro Stefano Gaspari, “the apostolic visitor to Albania .. who travelled through the region in 1671–2” (e.g. p. 19);
- the 1688 map of the Venetian cartographer Francesco Maria Coronelli;
- the 1689 map of the Italian cartographer Giacomo Cantelli da Vignola;
- the 1866 and 1868 reports by Emile de Wiet, the French consul at the time in Shkodra (Alb: Shkodër), ‘capital’ and largest town in Northern Albania;
- the 1916-1918 Albanian census reports by the Austrian journalist and scholar Franz Seiner (1874–1929), rapporteur of “the first reliable census taken in Albania in 1918 under Austrian-Hungarian administration” (e.g. p. 19);
- the travel reports, field researches and/or analytical treatises on the Albanians by the Austrian diplomat and scholar Johann Georg von Hahn (1811–1869); the Hungarian-born scholar Baron Franz Nopcsa (1877–1933); the Austrian engineer Karl Steinmetz (?–1910); and the British writer Mary Edith Durham (1863–1944), all of whom frequently travelled through the region in the mid-19th, late 19th and/or early 20th centuries.

More contestable perhaps is the rather rigid dividing line that Elsie applies between the non-Albanian outsiders described in the ‘Travel Impressions’ section for most of the identified tribes, and the often famous, well-known, significant native sons (and sisters) of many of these tribes described in the ‘Figures of Note’ section for these tribes.

In *Tribes of Albania*, Elsie does hardly mention or elaborate on any impressions, ideas and judgments these native Figures of Note might have had about the histories, cultures and traditions of their own tribes, other Albanian tribes or Albanians in general, including particular characteristics like blood-feuds and other manifestations of honour-codes in their customary *Kanun* (lit. law, rule, rod) law.

In contrast, the Travel Impressions of generally Victorian and post-Victorian visitors from the



West contain plenty of such often prejudiced, one-sided and blinkered if knowledgeable ideas and judgments on such actual or perceived traits of Albanian tribes or Albanians in general. Elsie does show in some of his other (edited) works some critical views by natives themselves on their own traditions and societies, particularly those by post-WWII and younger generations of Albanian writers. Yet such inward-oriented views by natives are virtually absent in Elsie's *Tribes of Albania*.

Therefore, many of the political, religious, military a/o literary Figures of Note described in Elsie's book may actually have had expressed positive, negative or ambiguous, conflicted viewpoints about their own histories, cultures and traditions—apart from their own 'modern' national(ist) aspirations that are more easily apparent to the outside world then and now. Indeed major native figures may have harbored such views, including those from large, powerful or otherwise well-known predominantly Catholic tribes in northern Albania like the Kelmendi, Shala, Shllaku, Nikaj and Mirdita (composite), and predominantly Muslim tribes like the Krasniqja, Mati (composite) and Luma. Think of:

Prekë Cali (1878–1945) of Kelmendi, Mehmet Shpendi (1851–1915) of Shala; Bernardin Palaj (1894–1946) of Shllaku; Ndoc Nikaj (1864–1951) of Nikaj; Ambroz Marlaskaj (1884–1939) of the Kushnени tribe within the composite Mirdita tribe; Haxhi Zeka (1832–1902) of Krasniqja; Ahmet Zogu (1895–1961) of the Zogolli family within the composite Mati tribe; and Muharrem Bajraktari (1896–1989) of Luma.

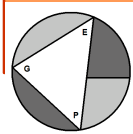
Still, Elsie refers to none or hardly any of these viewpoints by these historical figures in his book (even though all of them are mentioned, cited and/or discussed in his book)—nor do most other available sources for that matter.

The many old and new sources, descriptions, factual details and insights that Elsie does use, refer to and cite in his *Tribes of Albania* largely concord with, confirm and enrich the reviewer's own research findings on Albanian traditional honour, blood-revenge and hospitality codes within their customary *Kanun* laws, kinship groups and other cultural characteristics.

Thus most of the “about 70 northern Albanian tribes” (p. 10) adhered to the honour-centric *Kanun* codes for many decades or even centuries until at least the early 20th century. This adherence may explain the endemic blood-feuds—and often closely related raiding and pillaging, though these often emanated from extreme poverty rather than any other reason—within between many of these tribes at the time.

Incidentally, this honour-bound culture may account for their numerous rebellions against Ottoman, Austrian-Hungarian, Serbian and other conquerors and overlords as well. Rightly or wrongly, “these codes have been linked to ... Albanian blood-feuding (*gjakmarrje*). Whether the kanuns were responsible for institutionalising revenge and promoting the widespread vendettas that caused the extinction of a good portion of the male population a century ago, or whether they simply reflected an already existing tribal mentality, is open to debate” (pp. 9-10).

Whether caused by the *Kanun* honour-codes, wider tribal culture or any other reasons, intra-



and inter-tribal blood-feuds seem certainly to have been quite prevalent among some of the large, powerful and/or otherwise well-known tribes like the Shala and Nikaj, both Catholic tribes who were each other's "hereditary enemies" (p. 151). Whether such feuds have been prevalent among small, marginal and/or otherwise less(er)-known tribes like the Bobi and Gimaj in the Shkodra district, appears to be generally unknown. For none of the 23 'minor tribes' Elsie identifies, he has been able or ready to describe their degree of (blood-)feuding.

The overall extent of blood-feuding in past and present appears to be checkered and partially obtuse. As far as the reviewer has been able to deduce and present in a table of his own ⁵, among the 77 tribes (also counting the three composite tribes) distinguished by Elsie, according to Elsie('s sources) just 4 are or have been fully, mostly or likely characterised by blood-feuding to this day or have been so until fairly recently; 18 are partially or uncertainly characterised by blood-feuding; and just one (sub-)tribe—the Kryezezi—explicitly is hardly ever or never characterised by blood-feuding.

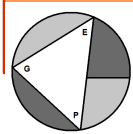
At least according to Karl Steinmetz during a visit in August 1905, the Kryezezi tribe "is the most peaceloving of all the Catholic tribes of northern Albania" (p. 200; quote from Steinmetz 1908, p. 5). ⁶ About as many as 54 tribes it remains unknown or unmentioned in Elsie's book whether they have ever been involved in blood-feuds amongst themselves, against other tribes or against non-Albanian outsiders.

Generally, up-to-date, extensive and exhaustive field research on the (non-)existence and (non-)vitality of tribes or clans among Albanians remains sorely needed. Indeed it is rather telling and worrying that Franz Seiner's 1918 census arguably contains the last exhaustive and reliable demographic study of ethnic-Albanian and other kinship groups in Albania and the larger region inhabited by Albanians to this day.⁷ Even Elsie's *Tribes of Albania* does not fully succeed in determining and clarifying the precise fate of all known Albanian tribes.⁸

Therefore, one must take issue with Elsie's sweeping statement that—due to poverty and instability (collapse of the communist regime in 1990, temporary collapse of the Albanian state in 1997, etc.) and consequent migration to the cities and depopulation in the home regions—the remaining tribes that still had survived Enver Hoxha's Stalinist rule "have been scattered" and that Albanian "tribal identity nowadays involves little more than an awareness of the origin of their families" (p. 11).⁹

The reviewer hesitates to question Elsie's overall assessment of the apparent demise of the Albanian tribal system, given his nearly unique expertise on all matters Albanian. Still one must ask the following: even if poverty, instability (including state collapse and warfare) and consequent migration to cities in and beyond Albania do account for many a tribe's demise, does these and any other factors account for the actual demise of all or even most tribes?

After textual analysis of Elsie's book, the reviewer has found that of 57 of the 77 tribes including the composite tribes distinguished by Elsie ¹⁰, it remains unknown or unmentioned in Elsie's book whether they still exist and function today or when they ceased to exist and function. Perhaps many of these 57 tribes are alive and even thriving today after all—the lack of clarity on their current fate and status makes this at least theoretically possible.



Consequently, one cannot really be sure at this stage that the reviewer's counting of just 5 fully, mostly or likely surviving tribes and 11 partially or uncertainly surviving tribes to this day after carefully going through Elsie's text, presents a true picture and confirmation of Elsie's bleak assessment of the general state of Albanian tribal configuration in and beyond Albania.

Robert Elsie's *The Tribes of Albania: History, Society and Culture* forms a crucial, arguably ground-breaking addition to the field of ethnic studies in general and of Albanian studies particular. Nevertheless, given the limitations described above, even Elsie's comprehensive work does not fully succeed in filling all major, perhaps permanent gaps in knowledge on the Albanians.

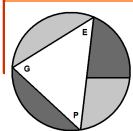
Thus even if some of the better-known (ethnic-)Albanian tribes were and are known for frequent, endemic blood-feuds within the tribe a/o with other tribes based on *Kanun* honour-codes, the extent to which blood-feuds and other tribal norms are still practised by any surviving Albanian kinship and other groups today remains largely unknown. At best such knowledge is known among a small group of experts only, who so far have been unable to disseminate their knowledge to the wider academic community, let alone the general public.

More generally, even Elsie's book does not truly resolve the sad given that the known data on the numbers, denominations, saliencies, other characteristics or even existence of Albanian kinship groups in the recent and more distant past, still remain outdated, fragmented and maybe lost forever to this day.

The data that has survived remains contested and confusing given the triple translations of *fis* as 'tribe', 'clan' or 'kin' by and among scholars in Albanian studies over the last decades and even centuries. As most of the 74 discrete tribes identified and described by Elsie do concur with and occur in Franz Seiner's 1918 classification of 65 discrete tribes (see esp. Seiner 1922, pp. 102, 108-112) ¹¹, we can at least surmise that most Albanian tribes were alive and kicking by the end of WWI.

Yet more often than not Elsie does not specify what precisely (appears to have) happened to these tribes after that world war—and what happened to them specifically after WWII and the establishment of Enver Hoxha's Stalinist regime in Albania which lasted till the early 1990s. Therefore to what extent did any of these tribes or clans manage to survive all these periods full of turmoil, warfare and repression—that of the Communist dictatorship in Albania most of all?

Perhaps Elsie could have added for each identified tribe in his *Tribes of Albania* a section titled like 'Extant Saliency (to this day or last known date or period)' on which sufficient information can be given about the latter. Such a section would have helped to consistently specify the degree of vibrancy and longevity of each tribe on which there is enough reliable data to do so, and whether it has survived partially or wholly intact to this day—at least as a cultural entity if it has moved or scattered away from its ancestral homeland or traditional area of geographic concentration.

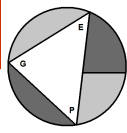


A concluding section at the end of the book would also have helped to summarise the main characteristics, histories and saliencies of the identified Albanian tribes in and beyond Northern Albania for far as these can be deduced from available sources (including some of Elsie's other works)—preferably ending with a 'to-do list' of required additional research. Such research Elsie unfortunately will no longer be able to do himself, given his untimely death.

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Endnotes—References

1. Citation from http://books.elsie.de/bo86_tribes-of-albania (last acc. 4-11-2018). The reviewer once did approach Elsie on the subject of such sorely lacking research on the Albanians; at the time he responded as follows: "I am currently working on a book about the Mountain Tribes of Northern Albania It should be, in your words, the first "systematic nationwide research on Albanian clan-culture" " (email-communication, 20-07-2013).
2. In note 6 of his Introduction, Elsie writes: "One can also speak of Albanian 'clans' instead of 'tribes'. We regard these two terms as largely synonymous and interchangeable here in the Balkan context" (p. 329).
3. There appear to be no separate Albanian terms for 'tribe', 'clan' or 'kin', apart perhaps from e.g. *gjin(i)* being translated as 'kinship group(s)'; yet *gjini* it is more often translated as 'gender' and *gjin* as 'male/clan(nish) (sur)name'.
4. See the reviewer's table 'Major Characteristics of Albanian Tribes in Elsie's Tribes of Albania (2015)' at www.ctdamconsultancy.com/other-projects/; see [robertelsietribesalbaniafeatureslist2018](#).
5. Ibid. This table shows separate columns on e.g. saliency of blood-feuds and miscellaneous facts.
6. See Karl Steinmetz, *Von der Adria zum Schwarzen Drin* (From the Adriatic to the Black Drin) Sarajevo: Daniel A. Kajon, 1908.
7. See Franz Seiner, *Ergebnisse der Volkszählung in Albanien in dem von Österr.-Ungarischen Truppen 1916-1918 besetzten Gebiete*, mit Anhang *Die Gliederung der Albanischen Stämme* (Results of the Census in Albania in the Areas Occupied by Austro-Hungarian Troops in 1916-1918, with annex Classification of the Albanian Tribes), Vol. 13 in: Akademie der Wissenschaften in Wien, *Schriften der Balkankommission—Linguistische Abteilung* (Academy of Science in Vienna, Reports/Documents of the Balkans Commission—Linguistic Department) Vienna/Leipzig: Hölder-Pichler-Tempsky, 1922.
8. Elsie admits as much: his book is "admittedly, a motley collection of information and texts with many lacunae of which the author is painfully aware" (p. 12).
9. Elsie observes that the "old clan or tribal structures ... don't really exist anymore anyway. I believe one could speak of extended family loyalties (which are strong among Albanians), but I doubt very much if these have anything to do with the old clans or tribes. People in northern Albania and in Kosovo do have a vague sense of "belonging" to a tribe—Kelmendi, Krasniqi, Gashi, Berisha, Thaci, Shala etc.—but I do not think it amounts to much more. The infighting between the tribes one hundred years ago no longer exists, as far as I know" (email



-communication, 21-07-2013). “Also be aware that the Kosovo Albanians with clan names (Berisha, Gashi, Krasniqi, Thaci, Kelmendi, Shala etc.) are not living on Tradition tribal land. They are descendants who emigrated to Kosovo from the northern Albanian mountains long ago, many of them to escape feuding. So there are not really any clan territories in Kosovo” (email-communication, 22-07-2013).

10. See note 4.
11. See note 7.

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After nearly ten years since its inception, the new owner of the Mayflower Bookshop in Leiden (www.themayflowerbookshop.nl) decided to move the nicest bookstore in town from its original premise at Hogewoerd 107 to Breestraat 65 during 2015 in order to expand its size and repository. During late 2016, the bookshop moved again, to the current address Breestraat 142.



Breestraat 142, Leiden, the Netherlands (© Mayflower 2016)



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