Small steps and big leaps in an era of cultural transition: A crisis in a traditional Kosovar Albanian family

Carlos E. Sluzki, MD and Ferid N. Agani, MD [1]

This ethnographic vignette details the way a difficult crisis in an extended Kosovar family was managed by its own members within the mandates of that overtly patriarchal culture while creating important avenues for change. The cultural and historic context for these events is provided, and the nuances of this solution-oriented, culturally congruent, "natural" (i.e., not in a therapeutic context) process are discussed.

This ethnographic vignette depicts a complex family problem and the way it evolved toward its resolution. Both problem and solution are tightly framed by a socio-cultural context that, while in rapid change from traditional to westernized, may be quite dissonant with–and even ideologically challenging to—some of the readers. Anthropological journeys frequently are.

It also may offer an opportunity to imagine how we might have worked as hypothetical consultants in such a situation, having to choose between what Monk and Gehart (2003) call conversational partner/ collaborative stances and sociopolitical activist/narrative stances while immersed in a clash of cultures

The events that will be described took place in a small and impoverished countryside village in Kosova[2], a region that is barely emerging from its

---

[1] Dr. Sluzki is Research Professor, Department of Public Policy and Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution, George Mason University, Fairfax VA; and Clinical Professor of Psychiatry, George Washington University School of Medicine, Washington DC. (csluzki@gmu.edu)
Dr. Agani is Director of the Department of Strategic Management, Ministry of Health of Kosova, and Assistant Professor of Neuropsychiatry, University of Prishtina, Kosova (feridag9@hotmail.com).

victimization during a brutal period of "ethnic cleansing." In order to place the story in its proper context, a brief description of the political history of the region will be provided.

Historical background/context[3]

The political instability of the Balkans is legendary. In fact, the word "balkanization" has acquired permanent status in our dictionaries. Its strategic geographic location exposed that crossroads territory to invasions and counter-invasions, massacres and counter-massacres, forced religious conversion and counter-conversions, and unsteady boundaries and alliances. In this process, cultural profiles, norms and identities have sometimes evolved—forced by radical changes in context-- and sometimes consolidated, rooted in and reconstituted by their respective versions of their history. What follows focuses on Kosova, a land-locked territory neighbored by Albania, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia.

In the past 2000 years, that region, inhabited originally by Illyrian tribes, has been occupied and annexed successively by the Roman Empire, the Ottoman Empire, briefly the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Serbian Kingdom and Fascist Italy, to be designated after WWII as a Yugoslavian territory. Each shift was accompanied by massacres of civilians, and mass exodus of one or another ethnic/religious group. In 1981, a year after Tito's death, a bid toward secession of Kosovo by the estimated 90% Kosovar Albanian majority (people of remote native origin, predominantly rural, speaking Albanian, following a moderate version of the Islamic religion and tradition) was followed by an occupation of the region by the (Serb-controlled) Yugoslav Army, granting total control of the regional government to the local estimated 10% minority Serb Kosovar minority

---

[2] The spelling of Kosova with a final "a" is the preference of the 90% Albanian-speaking Kosovar majority, while the spelling with a final "o" is the most frequently international denomination as well as the one used by the Serbian Kosovars.

[3] A region's history has usually as many official versions as there are ethnic/politic groups at play. Once that is acknowledged, this historical background note is based on public domain sources of

(people of recent or remote Serb origin, speaking Serbo-Croatian, following the Orthodox Christian and Catholic religion and tradition). As a result, the Serb language was imposed in bureaucracy and schools, all universities were closed, et cetera. This policy escalated in 1998 into a full "ethnic cleansing", replicating similar actions also displayed by then by Serbia in Bosnia and Croatia: summary execution of thousands of Albanian Kosovar civilian males, rape of women and girls, and looting and destruction of countless homes and mosques. That policy triggered a massive exodus into exile of an estimated 900,000 Albania Kosovars, while 600,000 more became internally displaced homeless. Following futile diplomatic attempts by the United Nations and the European Union, violent bombardment against Serbian targets by NATO air forces convinced the Serbs to accept the principles of a political solution to the Kosova crises. Since June 1999 the peace in the region has been maintained by the very visible presence of an international military force (KFOR) and the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK).

The effect of this history has been an impoverished country with cultures both polarized and destabilized by recurrent violence. Currently Kosova is building its own political infrastructure, but its economy is still meager and public and social services are still scarce. However, it is incrementally evolving from an agriculture-based to industry-based economy, with its predictable pattern of internal migrations toward the cities, increased access to education, and enhanced human rights laws and practices. Cross-generational discontinuities and cultural fractures are increasing and becoming more apparent and complex, as young people shift from rural extended family enclaves that are highly enmeshed, patriarchal, and, indeed, oppressive, especially for women-- with the arguable advantage of the support provided by the enhanced family loyalties-- toward urban isolated nuclear families dwellings and secular equalitarian norms and mores, where autonomy is rewarded at the expense of tight reciprocal support.

---

the US Department of State, including its May and December 1999 reports on Kosovo and related documents. Also used as source was Malcom (1994) as well as recent field visits.

The narrative that follows unfolds in 2000, the scars of the massive violence that had taken place in the past years still fresh in the mind and daily lives of the population.

<u>A family crisis</u>

This vignette has as point of departure a grief-stricken and economically impoverished extended family of Kosovar peasants, of which two years before some 30 men had been summarily executed or had been "disappeared" by Serb forces (i.e., were taken away and massacred but their bodies have not been recovered).

The family compound—which had been vandalized and burned and was only partially restored after the family returned from exile-- is inhabited by an assortment of women and children – several older widows, their unmarried or widow daughters, and their widowed daughters-in-law with their children. Peripheral male members of the family (uncles and cousins), while living in their own homes, were actively involved in caring for their well being and representing the family interests, fitting the traditional norms and mores of the region[4]. In spite of some agricultural activities, the level of poverty of this family was extreme.

In that context, one of the in-law widows, a 24 year-old woman whose husband had been "disappeared" for already two years and was assumed dead, left the enclave with her 5-year old daughter and 2-year old son and returned to her parents' house in a nearby town. She argued, as a reasonable

---

[4] While extremely intertwined, a differentiation between "traditional" from "religious" dominant value system has merits. "Traditional" values may be defined as "…set of norms and ethics inherited throughout history from various sources. These norms and ethics influence many aspects of lives, such as rituals related to birth, marriage and funerals. They also provide certain values related to strict family traditions (i.e., patriarchy and limitation of women's appearances and choices), and even blood retaliations. These values are not religious in the first place." (Abdalla,

4

explanation for her move, her wish to reduce the economic burden of her in-law family, as her own parents, while also peasants, were in a far better economic situation. It is also possible that she did not get along with her mother in law, and/or that she was uncomfortable in household that was comparatively sparser and less educated than her parents'.

Two years after her move, she informed that she had started courtship with another man and was considering marrying him.

When this new information reached her late husband's family, a group of men who represented that family's voice and interests requested a formal meeting with the woman's father—as family issues are traditionally transacted between patriarchs of each family.

At the appointed time, two uncles and a cousin of the deceased man arrived at the widow's father's house. They were received by the patriarch and two of his sons. No woman was present at the meeting (nor was expected to be, according to tradition). After ritual greetings—the families knew each other for generations--, the visitors proceeded to present their grievances: They did not have any objections with the children living with their mother's family of origin, which they respected; in fact, that situation had worked to everybody's advantage. However, after hearing of the woman's intentions to re-marry, they considered that her son should be returned to his father's family to assure the continuity of the patronymic as well as to provide a masculine presence in a family with so many dead men.

The woman's father answer very ceremoniously: "In front of God I have to be sincere: I don't want for you what I don't want for myself, nor I want for your family what I don't want for mine,"[5] in specific reference to both the loss of family

---

2001) Traditional values may be strongly informed by religion, but a number of traits can be traced to different, non-religious, cultural influences.

[5] Because of the strong, direct relationship of Muslims with Allah, His invocation entails adds not only ceremony but certainty to the patriach's words: he is bound to tell the truth.

members and the risk of losing lineage. In a series of exchanges he added that he also understood another worry of the visitors, namely, that if his daughter remarried, the in-law family would lose any leverage to provide guidance to the rearing of the children, as they would became part of another family.

The woman's brothers (a more westernized pair who had been living and working in Germany) interrupted their father, arguing that the visitors request was unreasonable: "The children have already lost one parent and should not be punished twice by suffering the loss of the other one."

The men from the in-law family responded that it was not them who were taking the child away, but it was the children's mother who was taking herself away. They added "What would happen if your sister dies after she re-marries – we are human beings, nobody knows how long we would live—what would happen with the children in that situation? They would be raised in a family without love, as they would be part of her new husband's family only because of their mother."

The brothers, in turn, begun another counter-argument but were forcefully interrupted by their father, who ordered them not to utter a word more or risk being expelled from the house. And, after several additional friendly exchanges with the visitors, he proceeded to inform them, again rather ceremoniously, that he had made a decision that was respectful to the visitors' grievance and to everybody's best interests, namely, that, if and when his daughter re-married, his grandchildren would remain living in his home. They would be raised with love by himself and his family, as they were also of his blood; the boy –and the girl until her marriage-- would always retain their father's patronymic, to honor his father and his father's family; the father's family would have free access to the children, and so would his mother, who would be able to see them whenever she wanted.

The visitors chatted among themselves to establish consensus and stated that they found the proposed solution wise and acceptable, at list for the time

being. The meeting ended with expressions of reciprocal appreciation. And, when the woman married several months later, things happened according to that plan.

Commentary

The Albanian-Kosovar traditional family organization is strongly patrilineal; men play the main role in the management of major decisions pertaining to the family, honor is a dominant rhetoric, and revenge is a vehicle for redressing shame and humiliation. If it would have been only informed by the mores of the culture, the response of the patriarch should have been to acquiesce with the request of the visitors and give his grandson over for them to rise. However, the solution proposed by him was, in that cultural context, rather unusual and non-traditional—hence the surprise of the visitors—but pragmatically fit –hence their acceptance. It had also very interesting long-term consequences, detailed later in this article.

More specifically, the textured arbitration displayed by the child's grandfather has an array of interesting nuances:

(a) It is framed within, and displays respect for, cultural traditions in regard to family values, lineage, and lines of authority;

(b) It assumes good intent on the part of all the participants –which increases the probabilities that an amiable solution will be enacted by the parties;

(c) It displays respect for the visitor's family wishes to honor the child's disappeared father, assuring for that decimated, grief-stricken family the continuity of their lineage and name;

(d) It builds on the visitors' statement that they did not object that the children lived with his maternal family--hence, his ad hoc proposal was perceived as evolving from their own statement;

(e) It contains a Solomonic flavor of neutrality, as it did not give in to the visitor's family's request but also did not grant them to his own daughter, which would have been perceived as a troublesome biased decision;

(f) It follows crucial guidelines of concern for the "best interest" of the children, artfully carried out without seriously risking the needs of the emotionally involved adults, as it maintains easy access between the late father's family and the children, while assuring easy access between the mother and the children—otherwise potentially at risk, as it will be discussed below;

(g) It maintains the full family protection for the mother. In traditional Muslim Kosovar families, when a woman marries, while she moves to her husband's (frequently extended) family household, she is under the close protection and vigilant eye of her family of origin to avert any mistreatment, abuse or inequity. The traditional statement uttered by a woman's father upon "delivering" her to her new husband's house coveys all this: "Her service is yours; her blood is ours." However –and that may explain in part the patriarch's leverage over his daughter--, a woman who dishonors, and/or is disowned by, her family is totally unprotected and at serious risk of abuse;

(h) It opens up a brighter future for the child than returning to his late father's household, as his maternal grandfather's better economic position allows him to guarantee him education (an argument that, while not stated openly, was clear to all the participants).

(i) It protects the members of his family against possible acts of revenge by the child late father's family—a tradition that sometimes cripples families for many generations of reciprocal vendettas; and

(j) It allowed everybody to save face and left everybody satisfied, including the patriarch's chastised sons: their father's public admonishment was culturally appropriate as they had both contradicted him in the presence of "outsiders' and were disrespectful to his guests. In fact, his sons' behavior allowed him to enact the principle that to join effectively with those members of a consultative system who are potentially more distant may require distancing and differentiating from those who are perceived as natural allies.

The authors of this note don't know whether the father had previously reached some consensus about his decision/proposal with his daughter, or even whether he informed her about it—a far-from-trivial matter. However, a conversation on the subject would have been a culturally appropriate process, as in the intimacy of the household overt displays of patriarchal hierarchy are tamed by a more supple intra-family interaction. It should also be noted that the woman, a rather cultivated person with a completed high-school education, was fully aware that in Kosova there is currently in place a "westernized" legal system that would have supported her if she would have requested custody of her children, that is, that she could have taken both of them with her in spite of her father's dictum. However, as mentioned above, in that cultural context an open disobedience to the mandates of her father would have been equivalent to a "social suicide."

Coda

What happened next? The women married that man, but spend time with her children on a daily basis at her father's house and in outings. The children were also visited occasionally by members of his late father's family. Not to long after her marriage, the body of her late husband and other male members of that family were found and buried, and on that occasion and several times later the mother and her two children visited her former in-law's family without any problems. The patriarch, in obvious better financial situation, provided occasional economic help to his former in-laws family, an act of support expected in that close-knit culture but also one that allowed him to signal some leverage over them. As time passed everybody ended up knowing everybody, the new husband "passed all the necessarily exams" according to unspoken criteria of respect, responsibility and kindness to the children, and, a year later, with everybody's agreement and the patriarch's blessing, both children were able to rejoin their mother into their current household, coinciding with the birth of a child from the new couple.

This story provides a glimpse of the tenacity of cultural traits and norms, in this era of changes in which that tenacity (perhaps made more apparent if not enhanced by accelerated societal changes) tends to be overlooked— especially in international politics!--, with the resulting dangerous escalation of cultural clashes and intolerance for diversity. It also shows how what appears as minimal change in an otherwise culturally normative process allowed this family to reach a culturally novel outcome, adaptive to both old and new mandates, inching, if not to the 21st, at least to the 20th Century.

In closing, an overall awareness settled on us, the authors, while revisiting this story, namely, that practical wisdom, when properly displayed in action, may rival the best of mediations and of therapies. And, as an added epistemological rumination, we muse, as we hope the reader will also do, on the socially constructed nature of political correctness.

-----OOOOO------

REFERENCES

Abdalla, Amr (2001): "Inter-Personal Conflict Patters in Egypt: Themes and Solutions." Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, George Mason University (p.119)

Malcom N. (1994): Bosnia: A Short Story. New York, NYU Press.

Monk, G., & Gerhart, D. R. (2003): Sociopolitical activist or conversational partner? Family Process, 42(1), 19-30.