



Exploring the significance of the Kanun in young Albanian people's asylum journeys in the UK

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Executive Summary

This research briefing offers an analysis of the implications of the traditional Albanian Kanun, a form of customary law prevalent among some communities across the country, which may be useful to examine the experiences of young Albanians claiming protection in the UK. The Kanun remains a significant cultural force, shaping the norms and behaviours of some, especially in rural communities. This briefing outlines and explores how the Kanun influences young people seeking asylum and the difficulties they may face in the UK's asylum process.

Key Points

Cultural Impact of the Kanun: The Kanun is instrumental in shaping social norms within some Albanian communities, including rigid gender roles and practices such as blood feuds, which can lead to serious human rights violations. These traditional norms can drive individuals to seek asylum protection due to direct threats to their safety and the social marginalisation they and their families face when they diverge from or violate these norms.

Challenges in the UK Asylum Process: The cultural implications of the Kanun complicate the asylum process for some Albanians in the UK. Applicants must navigate a system that may not fully understand the salience of cultural influences that shape their claims. Misunderstandings among UK asylum caseworkers may result in misinterpretations of the reasons underlying applicants' protection claims, potentially leading to high rejection rates.



Gender-Specific Issues: The Kanun reinforces a patriarchal system where women are subordinated, often leading to gender-based violence and restrictions on their autonomy. The significant way the Kanun imbues some Albanians' lives makes it difficult for women to seek help or escape abusive situations, as doing so can further intensify their vulnerability and dishonour their families.

Impact on Mental Health: Mental health remains a stigmatised issue in Albania, governed by the Kanun, and layers on barriers to applicants disclosing their vulnerability.

Recommendations for Improvement: The briefing suggests that improvements to the UK asylum process need to better accommodate the layered nature of cultural specificities of asylum applicants and the need for enhanced cultural training for Home Office and National Referral Mechanism caseworkers, as well as specific support for gender-based claims, and more comprehensive mental health services.

In conclusion, the research emphasises that understanding the cultural context is vital to comprehend the conditions from which Albanians are seeking protection, to ensure a fair and accurate evaluation of their claims. The persistent influence of the Kanun on these individuals' lives and asylum journeys illustrates the complex interplay between cultural heritage and modern legal systems. By addressing these issues, the UK can improve its asylum processes and better support those seeking refuge from persecution and violence shaped by traditional norms.



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Introduction

For the past five years, there have been increasing political anxieties over the number of Albanian citizens claiming asylum protection in the UK. Yet, unlike many other nationals seeking asylum, Albanians' claims are particularly complex, given they are not fleeing war or conflict. Many projects that concentrate on Albanians focus on interlocking issues of vulnerability, poverty, and criminality, but only scarce research has examined the role that culture plays in these claims. The shaping of norms via Albania's specific oral customary law known as the Kanun may not only contribute to the conditions that force people to flee for safety, but also instil normative barriers to them engaging with legal protection frameworks in the UK. This project seeks to explore the Kanun and how it dictates some of the human rights violations from which some Albanian people are seeking protection, but also how it simultaneously plays a role in regulating social norms that may prevent people from engaging with frameworks to assist in their journeys to protection. This research is exploratory, and its aim is by no means to over concentrate singly on culture, but to expose and examine how the Kanun can be an additional complexity that Albanians bring in their protection claims. This will increase Home Office understanding and a more comprehensive and appropriate assessment of application claims.

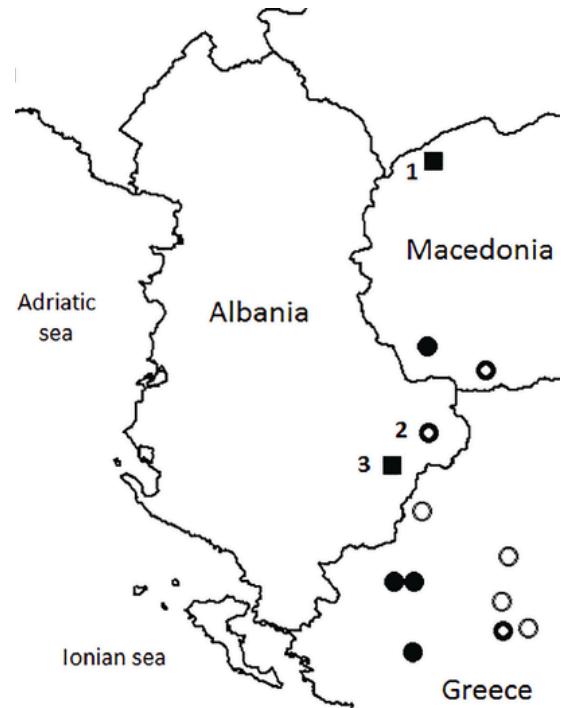


ALBANIA FACTS AND FIGURES

Albania is situated in Southern Europe in the Balkan region. It borders Greece, Montenegro, Kosovo and Macedonia.

Albania has a population size of 2.812 million. Albania is seen as a tourist destination due to its low costs and picturesque landscapes (Hall, 2022).

During 2019–2020, the net migration rate in Albania was about -40,000 individuals, with -5% to 10% over the past two decades (Mone et al., 2022:3).



Map of Albania [3]

2.812 million

people currently live in
Albania

-5% to 10%

net migration over the
past two decades



Background

Historicising the Kanun as a tool for shaping Albanians' norms

The Kanun is a significant aspect of Albanian culture, commonly discussed internally in writings about the country. For many, it is part of the country's history, but for others, it is part of their present and everyday life (Sadiku, 2014). It is a centuries-old system of customary laws that some Albanians, especially those in more rural northern regions, continue to follow. These customary laws shape their norms and values, particularly regarding the roles of men and women in family life and property ownership (Sadiku, 2014). Rather than being a specific written text, the Kanun refers to customary laws passed down through oral tradition (Schwandner-Sievers, 2003) that regulate individual and collective behaviour (Sadiku, 2014:94). The Kanun is based on three main pillars, each of which governs social interactions and determines how people undertake their social life and when they violate these customs, subsequently how honour is maintained, and shame is enforced. The 'honour/shame' model presents a complex, interlocking system of threats, sanctions, reputational considerations, and the internalization of community norms (Wendel, 2001:1992).

The significance and deep-rooted influence of the Kanun on Albanian culture resulted in the long commanding former communist leader Hoxha (1944-1985) describing it as 'a legacy of feudalism' (Sadiku, 2014:90). The importance and visibility of Kanun has fluctuated over the country's history, often in response to changes in governance and leadership. There have been circumstances whereby the government has suppressed it, notably during the Ottoman Empire (c. 1285 - 1923) as well as the communist regime of Hoxha (Vickers, 2011). Nevertheless, despite governments placing restrictions on its position in Albanian society, some citizens have continued to follow it, although covertly, during these periods. The Kanun's suppression was specifically intense during Hoxha's rule, as he perceived it as a direct affront to his leadership and challenged his governance model (Sadiku, 2014:90). For Hoxha, communism reinforced the idea of the collectivization of land and farming, which removed the requirement for people to turn to Kanun to dictate their lives, as the state was placed in a paramount position above the family or individual (Sadiku, 2014).



Although this led to Hoxha outlawing the Kanun and issuing severe punishment, including "very long prison sentences, deportation, and the death penalty" for those who continued to follow the Kanun (Basler, 2021:9), many communities still relied on it to structure their everyday lives.

As previously noted, the Kanun is not universally followed by all Albanians, and this is partly because of the saliency of the rule of law in urban areas and the significant flows of rural-urban migration of people looking for employment opportunities, which diminished its influence (Meçe, 2017). Nonetheless, this pattern of internal migration was not uniform, and communities, especially in the northern rural areas, continued to adhere to the Kanun (Meçe, 2017). In the past thirty years, the power of the Kanun has declined in many Albanians' lives, but it is still prevalent among rural communities in the north, where certain dated cultural practices such as revenge killings or blood feuds persist to remedy disputes between families.

Today, the Kanun is more well-known internationally, due to its role in the continuation of blood feuds in Albania and across the Balkan region (Sadiku, 2014). It also plays an important role in maintaining a patriarchal social system, whereby men are considered superior to women (Lugaj, 2018).





Meçë (2017) explained how this manifests in some places in Albania, whereby "a man with honour" protects , his kinship, his guests, and his property, including women.' Women's honour is linked to their submission and subordination to men, making honour a gendered concept. Women who resist patriarchal authority are viewed as dishonourable. Consequently, the Kanun plays a crucial role in understanding the roles and status of men and women in traditional Albanian culture, relegating women to domestic life and men to public life. The enduring relevance of the Kanun in certain regions, plays an instructive role in explaining why some Albanians seek protection from persecution and travel abroad to countries. including the UK, not least since the end of communism opening the borders and allowing the possibility of international travel for Albanians (Sadiku, 2014).





The Kanun as a significant force that underpins some Albanians claims for protection

Albanians seeking asylum do so, due to persecution features that may not fit neatly into the standard definition of human rights violations outlined in the UN Charter. These violations include, but are not limited to, violence against women and girls, exacerbated by the prevalence of patriarchy and misogyny in the country, as well as the perpetuation of archaic honour killing practices, such as blood feuds, and the discrimination faced by sexual minorities. However, importantly, the cultural bound nature of many of these human rights violations can be linked to the Kanun and how it structures some Albanians lives.

The Kanun, for example, plays a significant role in reinforcing the patriarchy in Albanian society, outlining the roles that men and women expected to play. This, in turn, enforces the dominance of men (and thus the subservience of women) who violate these gender roles. This increases their risk of violence, including gender-based and domestic violence, as well as susceptibility to sexual exploitation (Gjermeni et al., 2008; Bekteshi, Gjermeni & Van Hook, 2012). More specifically, Albanian women, are often expected to conform to the stereotype of 'good girls,' perpetuating expected norms of behaviour (Nixon, 2015). This reinforces patriarchal ideals, requiring women to be 'appropriately submissive toward their parents, maintain an appropriate social distance from males outside the family, prioritize personal and household cleanliness, remain quiet, and respect the woman's role in familial hospitality practices' (Nixon, 2009:117). Additionally, the Kanun outlines rituals such as "marriage, hospitality, and reconciliation" and how they should be practiced and thus how individuals can violate these rituals. The consequence of violating these culturally-bound norms is a loss of respect and integrity, which in Albania is not solely rooted in the individual, but in the family and, in certain communities in northern Albania, a loss of honour, which can be a matter of life and death (e.g., in blood feuds or gender-based violence; Dow and Woolley, 2011).

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While men can also face difficulties if they deviate from gender norms and roles and the associated shame attached, policing gender roles is disproportionately directed at women due to their subordinate position (Nixon, 2015; Rexhai, 2018). Given the saliency of the family in the lives of Albanians, the consequences of violating gender roles extend not only to the individual, but to their families. This is because the family is seen as a unit that safeguards their honour, and by violating it means tarnishing them as well, leading to complex situations around arranged marriages, which tend to be then resolved by prominent members of a girl or woman's family.

The importance of the patriarchy enforced by the Kanun results in the existence of a double standard (by accepted European standards and legal norms) whereby husbands who commit adultery do not face the same repercussions as their wives or brides. Similarly, although not in the same vein, the Kanun permits husbands to shoot their wives with a weapon provided by her father, 'ensuring that the issue of liability is resolved, and the act would not lead to 'blood,' i.e., a feud, between the in-laws' (Schwandner-Sievers, 2003:108)

Additionally, women who undergo divorce are often held responsible for the end of their marriages and subsequently face ostracism from their communities (Bekteshi et al., 2012:484). This ostracism can hinder their employment prospects and in the capitalist labour market render them vulnerable to trafficking. Criminal gangs frequently play on this vulnerability by deceiving girls and women with promises of overseas jobs in restaurants, or as caregivers for children or the elderly in Greece or Italy but then coerce them into prostitution" (Van Hook et al., 2006:30). The lack of legitimate economic opportunities available to some Albanian women leads some of them to find work on the fringe of the labour market and are subsequently steered into unwanted sex work. This is not to discount how some use their agency to participate in sex work as a form of employment. However, despite the implementation of specific anti-trafficking policies (Article 110/a of the Penal Code of the Republic of Albania), human trafficking remains a persistent and significant issue (Meçë, 2016:29). This gender inequality is layered by some Albanian institutions being ill-equipped and ill-prepared to protect these women and girls from further abuse, which is intensified by lenient sentences for perpetrators of trafficking offenses (Vathi et al., 2019; Poole, 2022). As a result, seeking protection abroad becomes one of their few viable options.



Another common reason why Albanians, especially young men, seek asylum in the UK lies in the persistent practice of blood feuds, a form of honour killing predominantly found in the Balkans and rooted in the Kanun (Mustafa and Young, 2008). This practice involves a family seeking to restore their honour by avenging a murder, typically arising from disputes over boundaries and water rights, often reactivating long-standing feuds (Mustafa and Young, 2008:90). Another contributing factor leading to boys being at risk of blood feud include poverty and land disputes resulting from the rapid 'inequitable redistribution of land after 45 years of communism' (Bozgo et al., 2002:342). It becomes the responsibility of male relatives of the deceased to seek revenge to restore the family's honour (Mustafa and Young, 2008; Elsie, 2012).

The continuation of this practice has sparked considerable controversy. While the Kanun outlines the conditions under which blood feuds are deemed legitimate (e.g., action taken against the first son), conflicting reports suggest that certain Albanian communities have extended this practice beyond the eldest son, targeting other male relatives and even women and girls (Joireman, 2014).

This has resulted in many families keeping their children at home to protect them from potential revenge killings. Additionally, there are reports indicating that criminal gangs have co-opted this practice as a cover for extrajudicial killings, further distorting the risks faced by some young individuals (Zhilla, 2011; Ramaj, 2021). This is a significant issue framing the credibility and complexity of Albanian asylum requests in the UK and elsewhere.

The Kanun also contributes to the mistreatment of sexual minorities in Albania as they are seen as violating traditional norms of sexuality and family (Gordon-Orr, 2021).





The Kanun marginalizes their sexuality (Lugaj, 2008) and positions it in opposition to the traditional cultural norms of sexuality and gender prevalent in the country. This contrast is evident in the historical treatment of sexual minorities in Albania, where they were often labelled as deviant and subjected to criminalization, especially during the Hoxha era. Following the Hoxha regime, same-sex relationships were decriminalized in 1995 and made legal under Article 53, which states that everybody has the right to marry and have children (Kadi, 2014). However, despite the decriminalization, related laws such as Article 50 of the Family Code of the Republic of Albania, which explicitly defines marriage as only between a man and a woman (Buda, 2019), continue to reinforce their marginalization and exclusion (Xhaho, 2015; Gordon-Orr, 2021). Many Albanians continue to view sexual minorities with disdain and as shameful, with many sexual minorities reporting feeling that their sexual identities are suppressed (Xhaho, 2015). According to Mai (2013), '[h]omosexuality is still highly stigmatized and rejected at home, and Albanian 'gay' people are forced into silence and invisibility' (Mai, 2013:49).

The previous section indicated how the Kanun shaped the norms for some Albanians, particularly regarding gender roles, relations, and honour practices. These norms provide a framework for how individuals should conduct their lives, and as previously explained, the Kanun fulfils this role for some, particularly in the northern regions of the country. While it influences human rights violations such as blood feuds, the treatment and status of women facing gender-based and domestic violence, and the situation of sexual minorities due to their divergent sexuality in contrast to traditional constructs of sexuality and family notions, limited research has examined the cultural basis of these violations.





The Kanun, Albanians norms and their regulation on disclosure

A separate yet related literature finds that norms distinct to people's culture may contribute to how they engage with asylum frameworks and may provide an instructive way for understanding how the Kanun may complicate some Albanians' pathways to asylum. A salient aspect of asylum protection is the extent to which a person is expected to disclose their vulnerability and future risk of persecution at key moments along their UK asylum applications, including their substantive interview, during which they have to detail the events that led them to flee their country and the possible future risks they face upon return. According to Shuman (2005), cultural silences are important in determining whether people disclose their experiences, and in this case, trauma may be integrally linked to norms that are dominant in their culture and regulated by them. While most people who claim asylum detail complex stories, cultural silences may operate as an additional complication to their disclosure as it is intrinsically tied to their culture. For instance, certain cultures highly structured by patriarchy and misogyny may cluster around norms that maintain and reinforce these gender divisions and hierarchies, and thus disclosure based on gender-based violence that threatens these structures may undermine disclosure in a person's effort to mitigate further harm (Stecklov, et al., 2010). Yet, by implication, these cultural silences minimise the possibility of a body of empirical evidence detailing the extent to which they may complicate people seeking asylum protection (Shuman and Bohmer, 2014).

Despite the lack of empirical evidence, cultural silences can be an important yet almost hidden factor in which the Kanun may function in Albanian's asylum journeys. . This is because the Kanun maintains control of many aspects of Albanian society life, from norms and values to the position of men and women in society and how those who violate these practices may affect a family's honour and the subsequent ramifications (e.g., honour practices). According to the Kanun, the family is the principal unit in Albanian society; thus, disclosing experiences of persecution that likely affect perceptions of a person also threaten a family's honour. Therefore, matters like mental health, whereby a person talks openly about their suffering rather than internalizing it, may be discouraged. Dow and Woolley (2011) argue that speaking about mental health openly, for example, leads to "a generalization that the entire family is 'crazy' because mental illness is regarded as being hereditary" (Dow and Woolley, 2011:103).



This may explain why some Albanians may be unwilling to share their mental distress, not only because it is difficult to share individually, but also because it is a matter internal to their families (Dow and Woolley, 2011). Similarly, matters like divorce and blood feuds are likely viewed as internal matters bound in Albanian families or local communities, not broader national institutions, and thus revealing them to external social actors may undermine a person's cultural identity but also threaten honour codes tightly regulated by the Kanun. Yet, to date it seems there has been limited understanding of the cultural silences in the UK's authority's asylum process with respect to Albanians. This increase in understanding is a key aim of this exploratory article.

Albanian asylum and migration

Whilst we know little about how the Kanun may precisely shape Albanians asylum journeys, it is vital we position this phenomenon against patterns of those seeking sanctuary from Albania in the UK. Data suggests an increasing number of Albanians have sought asylum protection in the UK in recent years, with recent Home Office statistics for 2023 indicating that in 2020, 2,882 Albanians claimed asylum protection, followed by a further 4,853 in 2021, and peaking at 15,070 in 2022, before falling to 3,230 in 2023. While these patterns supposedly indicate increasing levels of persecution and vulnerability, they need to be interpreted against broader patterns of movement from the country.

Patterns of Albanians traversing Europe did not occur in a vacuum, but are set against broader flows of emigration that characterized the country's demography after the dissolution of the Hoxha regime in the 1980s (Carletto, 2006; Dimitriadis, 2020). Research indicates that these broader flows were driven by socio-economic and political factors (Carletto, 2006), most notably the collapse of the country's communist regime, which prompted many of its citizens to leave and relocate to neighbouring European countries, especially Italy and Greece. According to Carletto (2006), these migrations were primarily motivated by economic or lifestyle considerations. Albania had been a very poor country compared to Western European countries. Similarly, like other communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe, emigration from Albania was extremely challenging or impossible, during the communist era, with citizens routinely facing extensive bureaucracy when applying for exit visas (Carletto, 2006). Consequently, when the system dissolved, many citizens seized the opportunity to improve their circumstances (Carletto, 2006).



During the 1990s, Greece and Italy acted as the primary destinations for Albanians due to their proximity and the ease of migration to them. According to Cena and Heim (2021:503), it is estimated that around 500,000 Albanians, comprising more than 20 percent of the population at that time, settled in Greece. Additionally, approximately 200,000 Albanians relocated to Italy before the 2008/09 financial crisis. These numbers fluctuated over the years, often reflecting the state of nationalist politics in these host countries, and political opinion towards Albanians oscillated between welcoming them to outright hostility.

Nevertheless, the numbers remained relatively stable until the financial crisis of 2008/09, which led to a significant reduction in available jobs in the labour markets of specifically Greece and Italy in the context of the EU. This resulted in a mass out-migration of workers. Consequently, a significant number of Albanians became unemployed, leading to their departure from Italy. By 2011, “40 percent of Albanian migrants in Greece” were unemployed (Cena and Heim, 2021:504). These conditions prompted many Albanians to either return to Albania or seek alternative opportunities further afield in Western Europe. These events reshaped Albanian migration, making the UK a prominent destination for Albanian migrants. Like Greece and Italy before it, the UK has increasingly become less welcoming to Albanians (Dimitriadis, 2020). While these patterns of movement overwhelmingly do not include those fleeing persecution, they do explain changing political and public attitudes towards Albanians and the extent to which they are viewed as credible. They also show why the UK has become a new centre of Albanian migration certainly for economic but also for protection reasons.



Methodology

Aims of the study

The significant role that the Kanun plays for some young Albanians provide the rationale for exploring how it may intervene at different points along their asylum journeys. This includes how it shapes some of the human rights violations that Albanians are fleeing from but also affects the extent to which they engage with protection frameworks in the UK. To do this, we had to begin by exploring how significant the Kanun was to the lives of young Albanians who claimed asylum in the UK and how they felt it subsequently shaped their engagement with the asylum framework; therefore, this study has two main elements. Firstly, it focuses on data from a post-it note exercise whereby 11 participants (7 women and 4 men) were asked about Albanian culture, how they saw it, and how they felt the Kanun shaped these aspects. Secondly, data was elicited from a focus group and a related creative-voice exercise which questioned the elements of Albanian culture related to the Kanun and then examined how these aspects affected the lived experiences of Albanian people claiming asylum in the UK.

Sample

This briefing is based on data from a workshop conducted on the 8th of June 2023 in London. The workshop included 11 participants, 1 staff member from the associated charity organisation, and the researcher who facilitated the session (Table 1) The focus group lasted approximately 1 hour. The sample consisted of 4 men and 7 women, aged between 20 and 26. All participants had applied for asylum, with only 3 having Leave to Remain, while the others were still awaiting a decision on their asylum claims. Additionally, 5 participants were enrolled in the National Referral Mechanism, with 3 having received a decision from the NRM and 2 still waiting. At the time of the workshop, all participants were living in London or South-East England. All participants were recruited through a local community charity in London, with whom the principal investigator had an established working relationship from a previous research project where the participants served as peer researchers, helping collect and analyse data on the impact of Covid-19 on their asylum applications (*Lives on Hold Our Stories Told*).



Since this workshop was only an initial pilot, we recommend that if this study is expanded in the future, more focus groups should be conducted across different communities to explore cultural differences among asylum groups and cohorts.

Table 1. Participant demographics (pseudonyms)

| | Name | Age | Gender | Asylum Status | NRM status |
|----|-----------|-----|--------|-------------------|------------|
| 1 | Lorenc | 21 | M | Awaiting decision | No |
| 2 | Arjana | 25 | F | Awaiting decision | N/A |
| 3 | Amie | 23 | F | Awaiting decision | No |
| 4 | Qemal | 25 | M | LTR | No |
| 5 | Doni | 25 | M | Awaiting decision | Yes |
| 6 | Koleta | 20 | F | LTR | No |
| 7 | Nida | 24 | F | Awaiting decision | Awaiting |
| 8 | Armandoni | 20 | M | LTR | No |
| 9 | Besmira | 26 | F | Refugee status | Accepted |
| 10 | Jala | 23 | F | Awaiting decision | No |
| 11 | Luna | 25 | F | Awaiting decision | Accepted |

NB: pseudonyms used to maintain confidentiality.



A Trauma-informed Approach to Research

The workshop was designed according to a trauma-informed approach that sought to centre trauma at every aspect of the research process, including in data collection activities. A trauma-informed approach to research centres trauma "framed around five core principles, which include working reflectively with those with lived experience, contextualizing trauma, nurturing trust, showing care, and empowering those involved in and affected by research" (Shankley et al., 2023:1). The workshop extended this model by leveraging research with young people seeking asylum, with whom the researcher had established a longstanding relationship through other ongoing projects. All the research participants had lived experience of claiming asylum and had commonly shared their experience of trauma in other workshops. It was important not to re-traumatize the participants, and therefore it was decided that at no time during the workshop would any of the young people be asked explicitly about their reasons for claiming asylum in the UK. All experiences shared were offered freely and in abstract ways. This also avoided re-traumatizing them and violating the core principle of not showing care. Additionally, participants could leave the activities at any point in the day and could retract their participation, which is a core principle of research ethics. The workshop built on the work the Albanians had done on a related project (*Lives on Hold Our Stories Told*), in which they spoke about the distinct nature of Albanian culture in shaping their reasons for seeking protection abroad, some societal concerns, and their specific difficulties seeking asylum against the current structures. Some felt these issues were sidelined against other equally important concerns, including issues with legal representation and access to support, but they wanted a space in which to share and discuss their culture and how it may have impacted their claims.

Post-it Notes exercise

Incorporating the T-I approach to research required consulting Albanian people seeking asylum to understand their perception of their culture and identify dimensions that may have been influenced by the Kanun and thus shaped their asylum experiences. To achieve this, a post-it note exercise approach was employed to gather their situated understanding of culture, its positive and negative aspects, and the degree to which the Kanun shaped it and thus their asylum journeys.



The researcher provided each participant with a pack of Post-it notes and invited them to write down as many words and phrases as they associated with Albanian culture and its components. This exercise aimed to establish a comprehensive interpretation of their culture that could guide the subsequent stages of the research. The participants then placed these post-it notes on a large sheet of paper, providing the researcher and other participants with a visual representation of the words and phrases associated with Albanian culture, which served as a basis for further discussions and creative activities.

Focus group and creative voice exercises

A significant limitation of existing research has been the scarcity of studies examining the intersection of culture and asylum seeking, as well as the limited involvement of people seeking asylum themselves in the research process. Many studies have primarily collected data from officials or individuals working in the asylum sector, neglecting the perspectives of people seeking asylum. It is only recently that people seeking asylum's voices have started to be included in this type of research, although researchers must remain sensitive to the potential for re-traumatization.

A focus group was conducted with 11 Albanian young people seeking asylum who attended the workshop, following the Post-it note exercise where they conceptualized the distinct dimensions of Albanian culture. The main purpose of the group was to address two key research questions: how Albanian culture (as defined in the first exercise) influences their decision to seek protection abroad, and how Albanian culture may also present additional challenges to Albanian people seeking asylum abroad. The discussions were structured around these two questions and expanded upon the various aspects of Albanian culture that the participants identified in the initial exercise, such as women's rights. Using a focus group for this study, which aimed to understand the nuanced experiences of Albanian young people seeking asylum, offers several valuable benefits. First and foremost, focus groups provide a platform for participants to engage in open and interactive discussions, allowing for a richer exchange of ideas and perspectives (Cameron, 2005). This group dynamic often fosters a sense of comfort and belonging, enabling participants to share their experiences more openly than they might in one-on-one interviews.



Additionally, focus groups facilitate the exploration of complex and multifaceted experiences, especially nuanced cultural experiences, as participants can build upon and respond to each other's narratives, providing a deeper understanding of shared themes and diverse viewpoints (Hughes & DuMont, 1993). The dynamic nature of focus groups also encourages participants to reflect on and articulate experiences they may not have considered on their own. Ultimately, the use of focus groups in such studies enhances the depth and nuance of the data collected, offering a more comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences.

The focus group data were supplemented by a creative voice project, which is a modified version of the photovoice method. This is a participatory method, that unifies creativity and storytelling to empower marginalized communities to voice their experiences and perspectives. As part of this method, participants were asked to create art relating to specific topics and discuss them to raise awareness of the issue to advocate for social change (Sutton-Brown, 2014). One notable limitation of focus groups alone is the reliance on participants' high level of English language proficiency to effectively share their lived experiences. While most of the participants were fluent in both English and Albanian, the creative-voice approach allowed them to express their ideas and thoughts visually and more imaginatively. For this purpose, participants were asked to draw or create collages depicting how they believed their understandings of Albanian culture and the Kanun (as captured in the first exercise) shaped their asylum journeys and created additional obstacles. They were provided with various creative materials, including felt-tip pens, coloured paper, and scissors for cutting newspaper clippings to use in their pieces. After completing their artwork, participants were invited to present them to the rest of the group and explain their ideas. These brief presentations were recorded for audio documentation and to analyse.



Analysis

Data from the various workshop exercises was collated and transcribed, and thematic analysis was used to interpret it. The dominant themes or super themes were interpreted by the researcher and formed the analysis section.

Kanun and Albanian Culture

The initial part of the workshop asked participants to undertake a Post-it note exercise to gather words and phrases they associated with Albanian culture and the extent to which the Kanun shaped these specific facets. Participants wrote down as many words as they could think of, and these were collated and entered in a computer program to generate a word cloud, which documented the frequency of words participants associated with Albanian culture and asylum.



The word cloud shows that participants consider Albanian culture relating to the Kanun is defined by many facets that revolve around gendered social relations, mental health, rights, traditional practices and honour. Whilst they did not offer a working definition of Albanian culture, many of the traditional themes outlined in the literature review were offered as important aspects that defined the culture and made it distinct from other cultures, for example, when they compare it to the UK where they were all currently living. The enduring influence of the Kanun is evident.



EPISODE 1



Several participants referred to the Kanun laws as underpinning their decision to leave Albania and seek protection abroad. A group of participants, for example, drew a picture depicting their reasons for leaving the country. In the drawing, entitled 'Episode 1', they depicted the dominant role the Kanun played in producing forms of persecution that motivated them to flee the country. In the drawing, the Kanun infiltrated all aspects of Albanian society, leading to problems including domestic violence, blood feuds, and family disputes. This depiction aligns with existing research on Albanian people seeking asylum (Sadiku, 2014; Cara and Margjeka, 2015). Existing research corroborating the significance of the Kanun and its links to persecution is extensively discussed by Arsovská (2013), who explained that it not only structures many aspects of Albanian society but also shapes the culture of crime and violence. Indeed, the Kanun's emphasis on honour and revenge creates a social environment where violence is seen as an acceptable means of resolving disputes (Arsovská, 2013). Further evidence is apparent in one participant's account of the entrenchment of the Kanun and its embeddedness in many aspects of some Albanians' social worlds.



"It [the Kanun] is like law, basically back then because we didn't have other laws [...] They came up with this book of laws. According to tradition, according to elders who decided, okay, this is what we're going to do. This is how we are going to act about certain things. So, it's like a book which has old laws. And one of them, for example, we see which is very common. And it's one of the reasons why people here seek asylum is blood feuds. Blood feuds mean with Kanun if someone kills. If one person kills another person from another family, that family has to take revenge, has to take the blood back, basically, and will have to kill one person from that family. So especially in the North, these rules are still, people still go by these rules. They respect them, and they there's blood feuds, arranged marriages, these kinds of things that emerged from that book. So, it's quite old. But people still respect it."

The central role that the Kanun plays in some participants' lives was expanded on by a female participant who located the potency of the Kanun in the lives of Albanians in the north of the country, "especially in the North... people still go by these rules". Another participant explained that the Kanun and related persecution it inspired were salient in the north "because the North still holds quite tight to the traditions and the culture and things that like have been there for years and generations." While the Kanun's prevalence in the north is widely known, participants also explained that the Kanun's influence was not uniform throughout the region and different versions of the Kanun were important to different Albanian communities.

"We have the Kanun of Lekë Dukagjini which is for the North. And we have the Kanun of Skanderbeg for the central, and then the Kanun of Labe for the South. Now the Kanun of the North was held more tightly. Its issues are more [significant] because the Albanians of the North were the ones to flee Western Europe, or go to Germany, to France, to the UK. Whereas the Albanians of the South more likely went to Greece. The ones in Central Albania go to Italy. That's why we are [in the UK]. There is a larger population of Albanians that come from the North rather than the South because it's the preferred location and because it is closer.

Participants explained the complexity of the Kanun, and its influence was bound in migration patterns and the demographics of Albanians who sought protection in the UK versus other countries, for instance. Sadiku (2014) elaborated that despite the Kanun structuring some communities in the north of the country, migration of people from different areas of the country for employment opportunities in regions like Tirana led to the Kanun impacting citizens from across the country. As stated, the Kanun refers to a variety of customary laws that vary by region and therefore Albanians from various regions are structured by different versions of the Kanun. The participants who predominantly moved from the north of the country shared that the Lekë Dukagjini or the northern version of the Kanun was significant to their asylum journeys.



Other participants described how the Kanun has inadvertently impacted their asylum journeys as they had been corrupted by various criminal organisations to justify criminal activity. One female participant explained, "a vague version of [Kanun laws] has been used as an excuse for organized crime." The consequence is that it narrows the discursive space and reduces the credibility in which Albanians' claims for persecution relating to practices regulated by the Kanun are viewed by the Home Office (see Beddoe, 2021). As such, the applicants' claims are viewed alternatively as a strategy for them to enter the UK using these archaic laws as a cover for easier entry clearance or evidence of their involvement in criminal activity rather than a genuine call for protection or cultural activity.

Additionally, participants discussed how the Kanun provided the cultural framework that offered fertile ground for persecution and abuse by organized crime and pointed to other factors, including economic hardships, a weak state, and political institutions that intensified their precariousness and allowed these practices to occur with impunity. One participant shared, "Drugs, money, political corruption, and stuff like that are the main problems at the moment in Albania." This is commonly discussed in the context of Albania, where the persecution certain citizens encounter sometimes does not meet the threshold of persecution under existing asylum law in the UK. However, Albania's weak rule of law and institutions provide minimal protection for those fleeing gender-based violence or blood feuds (Nasufi and Bruci, 2021).

Kanun and reasons for seeking protection layered by violating honour

Another theme common among the participant's discussions was the saliency and significance of honour and how this shaped Albanians' decision to flee the country, but also their reluctance or partial disclosure of the persecution they faced. First, many of the participants spoke of the role that honour traditions played in shaping their decisions and actions. Honour and how it is regulated was informed by the Kanun. One male participant stated that "a lot of Albanians, if not all, say that we live for honour" and "It's just you have to honour yourself and your family, and you have to take pride in that. If I kill someone, I've done what I had to do. It doesn't matter if I'm risking my life or anything, that's what a man does". Critically, the participant's statement highlighted how honour regulation was not solely an individual matter but extended to one's family. It thus had the power to tarnish the reputation of a family as well as the individual.

Second, for some participants the importance of maintaining honour led them to seek asylum, for example, participants discussed how cohering to blood feuds practices shed light on how they negotiated honour. They explained that blood feuds occur, as outlined by one participant, when "one person kills another person from another family, that family has to take revenge and take the blood back". It involves conflicts between families or clans that escalate into cycles of revenge killings (Mangalakova, 2004).



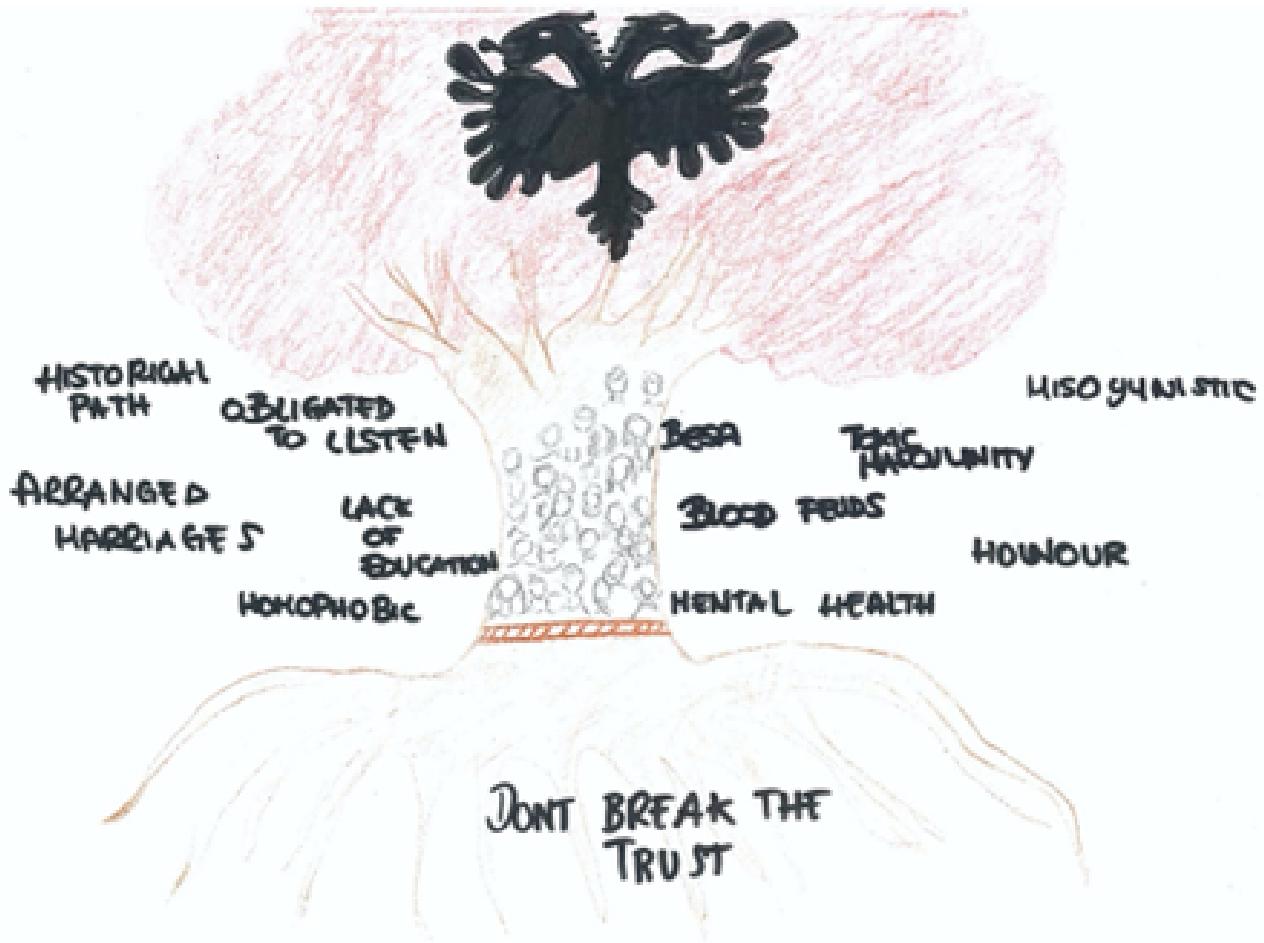
These feuds continue over the importance of families maintaining and protecting their honour and can often result in extended violence, sometimes over generations. Fearful for their safety and the safety of their loved ones, those affected may seek asylum as the only viable option for escape. Others sought protection abroad because of violating honour codes either by refusing to participate in blood feuds or reporting perpetrators of the practice and thus risking family retribution. The importance of honour is corroborated by multiple existing studies that discuss the distinct honour practices and persecution Albanians face and claim asylum for (Meçe, 2017).

Fear of violating honour acting as a barrier to disclosure

Participants indicated that honour was important to their asylum journeys as some felt that upholding many of the norms and values outlined in the Kanun shaped their individual but also family status within their community. As such, honour or violating honour codes created a significant barrier to some Albanians' engagement with the legal asylum processes and procedures, such as disclosing information during their asylum interviews. Participants explained that a reason that honour codes were followed was because it not only impacted them but also their broader family units. They stated that social problems were seen as an issue for the private realm, to be sorted out by the family rather than outsiders, regardless of the problem. One participant explained the saliency of honour in the context of blood feud.

"I've written honour and protected it at all costs. No matter what happens, no matter if you have to kill, you have to protect your family's honour."

The cultural importance of upholding honour among Albanians was also clear in the drawing a group of participants created. They drew a tree and represented all the social problems rife in Albania, but how honour underlined all of them and prevented them from moving from the individual and family realm into the broader social realm. Problems, such as domestic violence and blood feud, were problems to be dealt with at home and under the surface and not in the broader community context. The Kanun was used to structure some Albanians socialisation of norms and subsequently imprinted on them how to maintain their honour through reproducing these norms. In this way, Albanians may have shaped their behaviour as a strategy to uphold their honour and deployed a form of cultural silence that when performed restricted them divulging the experiences they went though. The pervasive role of Kanun imbuing some of their communities provides empirical evidence for Shumans (2005) cultural silences about whether people disclose their trauma and thus may be a paramount feature of some Albanians' asylum journeys.



The gendered nature of honour among Albanians seeking asylum

The participants explained how honour and the impact it had on shaping their asylum journeys were gendered. One participant explained:

It's also that even in honour, there's a difference between men and women. For women, it's more personal to protect their honour, which is more like being pure and this kind of stuff. For men, it is more asking them to take action to protect their honour, or their family's honour mostly. So, there's a difference. Women should be prohibited from doing certain stuff to protect their honour and men should take certain actions to do some things or certain measures, to protect the family. So there, there's a difference in us. And women are judged and, what's the word, persecuted more than men for the honour stuff.



Similarly, another participant suggested:

"One of those notes was traditions that affect women's rights. Generally, people's rights, humans' rights, but specifically, women's rights in Albania. So, traditions were said about that some old people. Maybe they are even dead now. and men or families especially in North Albania, they continue respecting traditions and following them and how they affect women's rights."

Another participant explained that:

"For women, it's more personal to protect their honour, which is more like being pure and this kind of stuff. For men, it is more asking them to take action to protect their honour, or their family's honour mostly. So, there's a difference. Women should be prohibited from doing certain stuff to protect their honour and men should take certain actions to do some things or certain measures, to protect the family. So there, there's a difference in us. And women are judged and, what's the word, persecuted more than men for the honour stuff."

Albanian men and women's honour and the impact of violating honour codes had significant and gendered impacts on their lives. For example, for some Albanian women, respecting honour codes derived from the Kanun involves abiding by their family's choice in whom they marry (Mangalakova, 2014). Arranged marriages, though not unique to Albania, can contribute to the decision to seek asylum abroad. What is culturally distinct is the saliency of honour practices on Albanian women and the rights and position of Albanian men in the country. Some women and girls are forced into marriages against their will (McCabe & Eglan, 2022). These marriages often result in a loss of personal freedom, limited educational and economic opportunities, and exposure to abuse and exploitation. Escaping such situations may lead individuals to seek asylum in countries where they can assert their right to choose their partners and build a life free from coercion and oppression.

Domestic violence within the region has been linked to the legacy of war within the area, such as the Kosovar and Albanian-Yugoslav wars and incidents from 1995–1999, and how this has created poverty, trauma, and substance abuse (Browne, 2017; Kienzler, 2011). These conditions, coupled with ongoing cultural expectations of women to 'keep families' together, have created a prevalence and acceptance of domestic violence in the region. Hence, women from Albania may seek safety from gender-based violence and protection elsewhere.



Dizardi's (2016) research confirms the saliency of patriarchy among adolescent Albanian men from interviews with 30 high-school-aged boys. He found that the participants viewed men and women in a more traditional sense and that they conformed to the idea of traditional gender roles: men were seen as responsible for the economic sustainability of their families, which connected to ideas of honour, and women's roles were reserved within the household. These rigid ideas of the roles of men and women were further cemented when Dizardi highlighted how men were perceived in a multitude of ways, on social, familial, and personal levels, whilst women were perceived more singularly, mostly concerning their relationships with others. Ramaj (2021) suggested that Kanun intensified restrictions on women's rights by outlining that it subordinated women and the dominance of men in the region. Ramaj also cited how the Kanun permits husbands to punish wives for disobedience in ways that range from public humiliation to killing. These deeply ingrained and harmful cultural ideologies, coupled with weak legal provisions and protections, can lead women to seek asylum in the UK and other countries.

Discussing honour among Albanian women who claim asylum, one participant explained how honour resulted in an intense feeling of shame relating to violating the gendered order set out in Albanian society and the subordinate position women compared to men. For instance, one participant explained how honour manifested in women who escaped arranged marriages and sought asylum abroad:

"Arranged marriages [which] don't allow women to go and study, and they end up marrying at a very early age, and they don't have the right and the guts to express their feelings and their opinion. They are not allowed to express what they feel of what they want to do with their life. So, the other one is like not feeling free to express feelings and opinions. All these cultural things affect all people and humans in Albania to not feeling free to express their sexuality, to express their opinions about being free to marry or not to marry, study or travel the world. Or even to leave wherever they want in their life."

Women's status in Albania not only shaped their decision to flee but also how they would be viewed if they disclosed the persecution they faced, especially when it was associated with marriage. One of the female participants drew a picture of an Albanian woman with plasters across her lips with accompanying text stating "Help me" and "I wish I was a boy." The participant explained it was trying to show the multiple barriers Albanian women faced when applying for asylum and their unequal footing compared to men. The account supports existing research on Albanian women whereby there was widespread domestic violence in the country but minimal protections for women and girls and this was explained by the women's unequal rights, rigid gender roles, male dominance and a society that rewards 'toughness' or 'strength' (Heise, 1994; Russo & Pirlott, 2006).



By comparison, some of the male participants discussed how honour and the associated concept of shame created social barriers to discussing their persecution and trauma as it created friction with constructs of masculinity they had been socialized with in Albania. For example, one participant stated:

"It is even more difficult for men because they are told since childhood, oh you should not cry, you are a man be strong. And for them it's more difficult to express their problems. So, they should appear strong because they are the head of the family."

Another participant exclaimed: "Yeah, you're the man of the house. You can't cry, don't cry." Indeed, these dominant constructions reinforced how men were expected to show no weakness or disclose their suffering; thus, when they moved to the UK, they were expected to detail the persecution they had felt. Another participant explained the extent that honour and gender were embedded within Albanian context when he explained:



"[Y]ou have to honour yourself and your family, and you have to take pride in that. If I kill someone, I've done what I had to do. It doesn't matter if I'm risking my life or anything, that's what a man does. If I don't allow my wife to go somewhere, that's what a man does as well."

Albanian men were not only socialized to uphold honour as part of traditional constructs of masculinity outlined by the Kanun, but this meant they were positioned as the arbiters of honour in their communities. Again, the way that gender structured how some Albanians maintained honour corroborated work on cultural silences that suggests that the reasons why some people fail to disclose complex details about their trauma and persecution may be rooted in intersectional and complex ways (see Stecklov, et al., 2010).

The Kanun, violations of cultural norms and mental health

Participants shared how the cultural dynamics of shame and silence surrounding mental health, combined with an idea of familial and individual honour found within Albanian society, can present significant challenges for Albanian individuals seeking asylum and interacting with the asylum system in the UK, which often requires a level of openness and disclosure that may be unfamiliar or uncomfortable for them (Bögner, Brewin, and Herlihy, 2010). One participant explained:

"With other stuff such as sharing about mental health for example, I still follow that because that's how I was raised, that's how I'm used to. It's not something that I can just change because I changed the country, it's something that's ingrained in me since I was a baby. And from that, it's a whole process. And that's why we fight quite a lot with the asylum system because that process is not easy".

The participants expressed that mental health was a significant aspect mediated by Albanian culture and the Kanun and many of the themes previously discussed, such as the saliency of the family in Albanian communities. Most participants shared how they often felt a pervasive sense of shame associated with sharing and disclosing information about mental health issues. The issues of an individual's shame surrounding their mental health, and a wider issue of familial honour, and how disclosing mental health issues can violate established cultural codes within Albanian society. Mental illnesses are often stigmatized, and individuals experiencing such challenges may face social ostracism or discrimination (Dow & Woolley, 2011; Jupe et al., 2017), as outlined by one participant: "It's because it is shameful to speak about the problem. So, within your family, speak about your mental health. You're considered crazy, and that brings shame to your family, which links to honour again."



Another participant stated that in Albania, "Even the psychiatrists will judge you." Consequently, Albanians may be hesitant to openly discuss their mental health status, both within their communities and with external authorities. One participant specifically points this out, saying, "So you're kind of like talking about it and complaining that it to other people or authorities or to organisations whatever, that is shameful. There is dishonour for your family". The resulting shame creates a barrier making it difficult for individuals with mental health issues causing their asylum claims or because of persecution to disclose or articulate their experiences necessary for support.

Sharing details of mental health issues and how these issues led an individual to seek asylum is important in receiving protection and the receiving the appropriate interventions that are needed. The asylum-seeking system in the UK expects openness from people seeking asylum whom Albanians may have difficulty interacting with (Bögner, Brewin, and Herlihy, 2010). One participant explored the saliency of disclosing these critical mental health experiences to their stories of asylum.

"Even through the asylum systems going through be granted asylum but is that a successful handling of a vulnerable person. Because through this asylum process, we received little to no support."

Indeed, Dow and Woolley's (2011) research underscored why applicants' disclosure of mental health experiences and status may be so difficult given its state within the Albanian context. Their study found that the Albanians they interviewed rarely had knowledge or vocabulary to discuss mental health, often considering it to include only the most severe disorders or deviant behaviour rather than a normalized dimension of health; thus, when applicants relocated to the British context whereby mental health discussion and disclosure is more normalized and considered within the same vein as wellbeing, Albanians often found it difficult to express their embodied experience, including anxiety and depression they experienced. These cultural barriers routinely led to Albanians being unwilling to seek help, especially as disclosing their struggles undermined honour codes and keeping it within their family.

Participants in the current study described their shame about struggling with their mental health made it difficult to talk about their issues. In the drawings participants created, mental health was a significant barrier to asylum. The drawing below and the accompanying description highlighted the complexity of mental health and how it was ingrained in honour codes and the difficulties participants found in leaving the country.



Their aesthetic conveyed not only the strong desire to conform to ideas brought from Albania (i.e., Kanun and norms) as well as the sadness of leaving their country coupled with the loss of their identity, but the drawing also shows how they felt it was necessary to remove their mask and disclose the intricate details of the experiences they had faced. But again, this was mediated by norms and honour codes exported from Albania. The person in the picture draped with the Albanian flag represented the central role that aspects of Albanian culture had to their daily lives and identity and how their departure was involuntary and a form of abandoning some of the traditions and cultural values. Additionally, the participants described what the person in the picture wore as it symbolized the necessity to conform and act in a certain manner to be accepted and escape from their circumstances. This sentiment was clear in the way the participants superimposed the person in front of the outline of Albania. The participants explained that the man in the drawing is depicted "holding himself to tradition" as it emerges from his hand, while he gazes back at his country and heritage.



Discussion

The aim of this research was to explore the role that aspects of Albanian culture (e.g., the Kanun), as defined by participants, may play in their asylum journeys, and thus, be instructive regarding some of the challenges Albanians experience in obtaining asylum protection in the UK. It is also intended to increase understanding and comprehension amongst UK officials involved in reviewing Albanian asylum-seeking cases.

The research was designed in response to the increasing number of Albanian asylum and modern slavery applicants in the UK, as well as their high rejection rate (Beddoe, 2021; Home Office, 2022). Although some research has begun to investigate the difficulties, they have faced in obtaining protection (e.g., Iusmen et al., working paper, which investigates the politicisation of safety and vulnerability in Albanian asylum outcomes), scarce research has examined how aspects of culture (e.g., the Kanun) have contributed not only to the human rights violations Albanians escape from but also the extent to which they engage with legal protection frameworks. The context for Albanians continues to present challenges to their protection; for example, their cases have a high rejection rate and are commonly certified, meaning applicants cannot appeal the decision. More recently, various EU countries (for example, Italy) along with the UK have tried to forge bilateral agreements with the Albanian government to deport people whose asylum claim has failed and irregular migrants, thus undermining claims of persecution and vulnerability to meet political ends (Fontana and Rosina, 2024). Yet, this briefing has contributed to the case that some Albanians do face persecution and thus vulnerability that is partially shaped by culture dictated somewhat by the Kanun and this also affects their unwillingness to engage with protection frameworks after arriving in the UK.

Our findings suggest that for some Albanians, the Kanun is considered a central feature of their everyday lives, including what shapes and regulates their norms, values, and the practices they deploy to respond to violations of them. This is significant, as Albania has been and still is undergoing a transition from a collectivist to an individualistic culture (Nixon 2009), whereby many young people claiming asylum in the UK have fled from regions still regulated by a traditional and collectivist cultural framework where the family is foremost, and the individual is secondary.



As such, notions such as women's rights and their position in certain communities are strongly in-keeping with these oral traditions. Matters such as divorce are thus regulated by men and when women seek divorce this is considered violation of gender norms and tarnish not only the woman but also their broader family, bringing about dishonour.

Whilst human rights violations and how they are structured have been incorporated into the asylum framework, a significant problem is that these practices are no longer strictly archaic practices relating to honour but have been co-opted by criminal gangs and organisations as a justifiable cover for their extrajudicial behaviours, thus diluting the severity of them as human rights violations and being misunderstood in applicant's pathways to protection.

Participants revealed in their accounts the extensive reach of the Kanun, which regulated or policed their disclosure of sensitive information about their persecution to Home Office officials. Some participants saw disclosing this information as violating culturally bound honour codes shaped by the Kanun, which placed importance on keeping sensitive information within the confines of the family rather than divulging it to broader society, thus making it a private rather than a public matter and providing empirical evidence for cultural silences. The asylum framework requires applicants to reveal their persecution and trauma to others, and this action was viewed by some in this research as directly violating these intrinsic honour codes, as doing so would bring dishonour to their family. Problematically, the asylum regime is fundamentally built on the expected performativity of vulnerability and victimhood in the requisite ways to secure protection. Applicants who do not perform in an expected way at significant points along their asylum journeys (e.g., substantive interview) are potentially viewed as undermining their credibility and thus the likelihood of Home Office caseworkers granting them asylum protection. Yet, by failing to consider how culture layers on to the challenges that Albanian applicant's engagement with procedures and practices is shaped by honour and how it manifests as an invisible and almost intractable barrier is a missed opportunity.



While not examined thoroughly, several participants shared how gender mediated their engagement with asylum procedures and violated honour codes; thus, not only did the Kanun and honour infiltrate applicants' engagement with these frameworks, but these may also be gendered. For example, one male participant shared that disclosing his feelings of vulnerability and persecution violated his masculinity, rendering him weak, and thus he felt he could not do this. He shared experiences that we interpreted as Albanian men being socialised by their parents and community with hegemonic and traditional masculine norms that sat at odds with expectations latent in the asylum regime, thus when they sought asylum, the very nature of disclosure was directly confronting to their sense of self.

This is an avenue that could be examined further in future research, bringing together concepts of cultural silences and how they operate at specific points of the asylum journey (e.g., initial interview).

Importantly, a main finding from this research is the significant role that honour plays in negatively affecting young Albanians' asylum journeys. Nevertheless, participants conveyed positive aspects of the Kanun, which include 'Besa,' referring to the idea of keeping one's word and fostering strong unity amongst Albanian people. Participants spoke candidly about how Besa was central to the Albanian organisation's work and the strong network of people that supported and cared for them as they navigated their asylum claims. While the notion of Besa is not specifically unpacked in this report, it offers fruitful ground for further research into how the Kanun, and its moral teachings could be harnessed and understood as a form of capacity building or slow resistance to the sinister aspects of the asylum regime in the UK among Albanians and the diasporic community. Additionally, building on this research is vital given that the Nationality and Borders Act 2023 has raised the thresholds on trauma reporting and thus requires applicants to provide more extensive evidence in a timelier manner. More evidence is needed on the precise ways in which aspects of applicants' culture layers onto challenges or complications they face in applying for protection, as the Kanun has shown in the Albanians' case to be a potent force in structuring whether some Albanians engage and shapes the very reasons many seek protection in the first place.



Finally, a significant aspect of this report was the use of participatory exercises to elicit information from young people who claimed asylum. Rather than imposing a strict and immutable construct of culture on participants, this approach allowed participants to ground their understanding of culture and aspects of it that are salient to their asylum journeys. This approach was iterative and was then carried throughout the investigation. It continues to be the cornerstone of asylum research and is at odds with Home Office practices that tend to construct vulnerability and remedies to asylum via desk-based fact-finding work rather than participatory approaches or engaging approaches.

Conclusion

This report has begun to unpack the significant role that the Kanun plays in structuring elements of these young Albanians' lives and affects their pre- and post-asylum trajectories (e.g., Albanian cultural silences). While matters of culturally bound and traditional norms are distinct across people's cultures, the importance of the Kanun is that it structures society based on oral customary laws that represent an archaic link to Albanians' cultural past and can, in many ways, affect and imbue the present via the experiences of those claiming asylum. This report has begun to examine the cultural dimensions and the methodological ways of examining the phenomenon and its challenges for those in the asylum regime presently. Additionally, this article calls for greater attention to be placed on cultural matters shaping individuals' asylum journeys or layering onto them, but this is by no means to essentialise culture. Instead, it offers culture as one dimension of the difficulties that people may find when claiming protection in the UK.

Policy Recommendations

1. Develop training programs for asylum officers and legal personnel to enhance understanding of Albanian cultural contexts, especially the influence of the Kanun and its implications on asylum claims.
2. Implement culturally sensitive mental health support services for Albanian people seeking asylum, recognising the unique stigmas and challenges they face in discussing mental health issues.
3. Create asylum policies that acknowledge and address the specific challenges faced by Albanian women and girls, such as forced marriages, gender-based violence, and trafficking.
4. Revise asylum criteria to recognise non-traditional forms of persecution, such as blood feuds and honour-based violence, which are significant in the Albanian context.
5. Implement a trauma-informed approach in asylum procedures to minimise the risk of re-traumatisation for Albanian people seeking asylum, especially given their potentially traumatic experiences related to cultural norms and practices.
6. Provide specialised legal representation and support for Albanian people seeking asylum, focusing on the complexities of their cases, including cultural factors and the impact on their asylum claims.

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