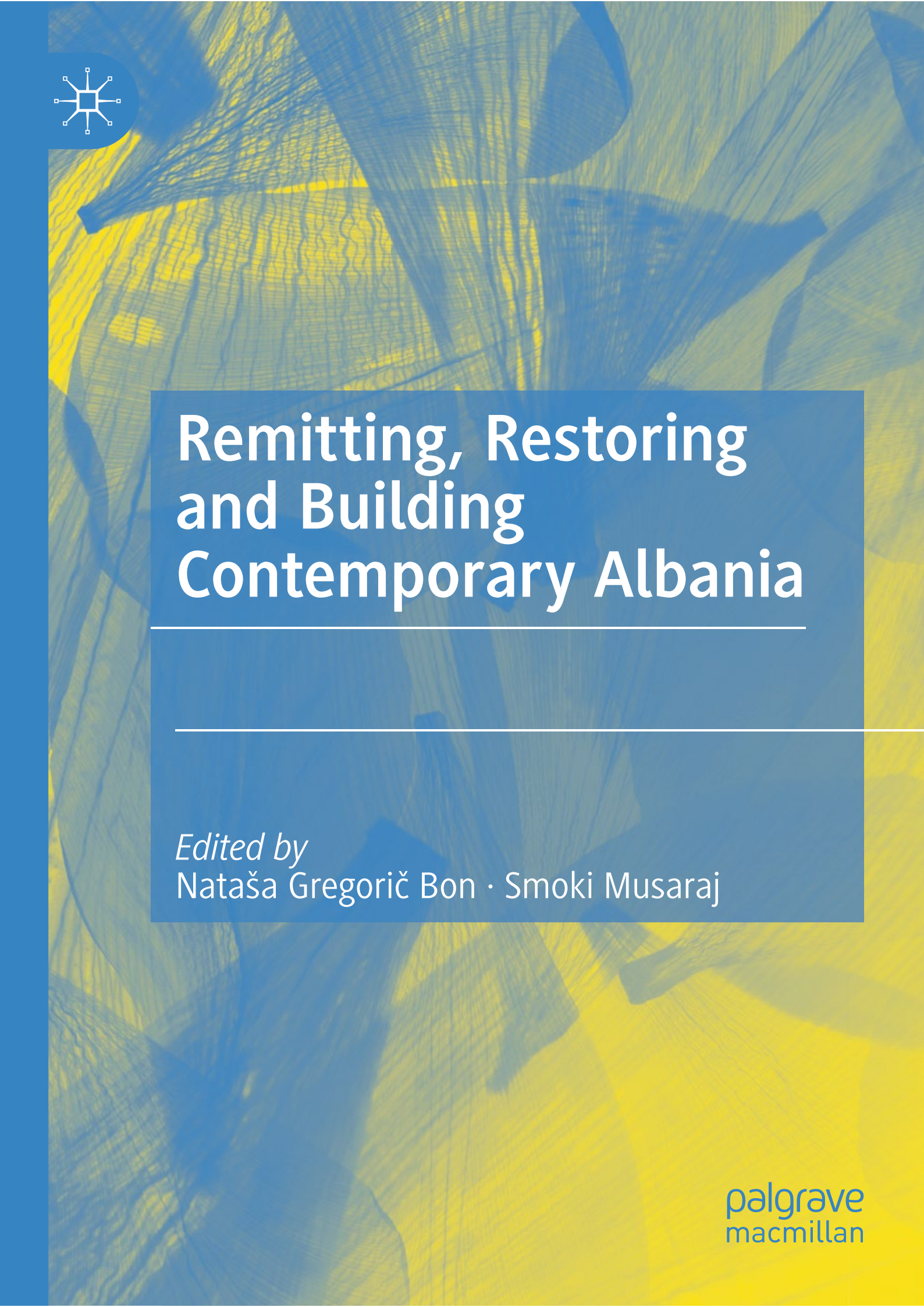

# Remitting, Restoring and Building Contemporary Albania

*Edited by*
Nataša Gregorič Bon · Smoki Musaraj

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CHAPTER 6

# Kuçedra's Waterways: Restoring Authority and Building Vitality

*Nataša Gregorič Bon*

Numerous Albanian myths, legends, and fairy tales speak of three sisters guarded and ruled by a serpent dragon named Kuçedra. The Beauty of the Sea (*E Bukura e Detit*) lives in many Albanian rivers and other water bodies such as lakes, springs, waterfalls, and the sea. The Beauty of the Sky (*E Bukura e Qiellit*) reigns over the sun and the moon, and the Beauty of the Earth and the Underground (*E Bukura e Dheut*) dwells in the mountains and the underworld. In contrast to the beauties, Kuçedra is known for its ugliness and frightening powers. Due to its ambiguous character, on the one hand, it can bring storms, floods, or droughts, while, on the other hand, it is benevolent and protects the celestial, terrestrial, and waterworlds and creates life. Although it seems to be an almost forgotten mythological being in contemporary Albanian society, its authoritative character permeates the relationship with water, rivers, the environment, and sociality as a whole.

N. Gregorič Bon (✉)
Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Ljubljana, Slovenia
e-mail: ngregoric@zrc-sazu.si



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Myths around the world almost universally tell of the importance of water in human and non-human origins, often claiming that the world originated from water, either a river or some other water body. In her extensive study of water and its materiality Veronica Strang (2015) also sets out the universality of the creative water deities. Serpent-like beings are often crucial protagonists in the creation of the world and the procreation and destruction of human and non-human life, frequently embodying the cyclical nature of a river that connects water, sky, and earth to create life.

Myths and myth-like stories, often equated with legends and fairy tales, play an important role in Albanian society,[1] engendering moral and ethical codes that are part of central traditional institutions, such as kinship, the relationship to authority, honor (*nder*), keeping a promise (besa) and trust (shpresa) (see Gregorič Bon 2018a). Although they are gradually eroding due to political, economic, and social changes in recent decades, such codes remain important pillars of contemporary Albanian society (ibid.). By juxtaposing three seemingly unrelated domains—mythological Kuçedra, water, and the state—this chapter reveals the notion of authority that permeates all three dimensions and rejuvenates the vitality of water. What is the role and meaning of Kuçedra? What overflows when it is embodied in floods, water infrastructure, and its policies? In answering these questions, I focus on the significance of water and riverine environments that are subject to irreversible changes due to contemporary national and transnational infrastructural interventions, such as the construction of hydroelectric power plants (HPPs), which can lead to negative impacts and threaten the sustainability of the local and global environment.

Following Strang's notion that water beings are "good to conceptualize" (2015, 40–44), I define the mythological being Kuçedra as a process and a method through and along with which I explore the meaning of water, rivers, and the infrastructure that pertains to them. Rather than focusing on the details of Kuçedra's legend-like narrative, I analyze its role and meaning—generated in political and media discourse as well as in everyday conversation—in discussions of water-related disasters such as floods and infrastructural management interventions. I contend that reference to the mythological figure of Kuçedra continuously brings home the

[1] While the myth of Kuçedra is rarely recounted in everyday language, two other myths—Constantin's Besa (*Besa e Kostandinit*) and Rozafa—are often narrated by people and appear in literature.

meanings and relationship to authority attributed to the realms of culture, nature, and mythology.

## Myth and Mythohistory

The attempt to understand myths and their relation to human thought and cosmology goes back to the classical anthropological studies of the early twentieth century. These studies approached myth from different theoretical standpoints grounded in different ethnographic field sites. A prominent anthropologist, Claude Lévi-Strauss, argues that "men do not think in myths but myths operate in men's minds without their being aware of the fact" (1994[1981], 12). In his essay *When Myth Becomes History* (2001[1978]), he contends that history should be understood as a continuation of mythology. Myth serves the same function as history, which is to "ensure as closely as possible … that the future will remain faithful to the present and to the past" (Lévi-Strauss 2001[1978], 36–37). Yet, he continues, in many parts of Western Europe and America, history has replaced mythology.

The entanglement of myth and history is also discussed in the seminal volume *Albanian Identities*, edited by Stephanie Schwandner-Sievers and Bernd J. Fischer (2002), which examines the reconstruction of nationalist politics and ideology in the period of the communist regime and after its demise. They argue that the mythohistories or the "archetypal structures" (2002, 7) that are grounded in the past continue to percolate the processes of building post-communist national identity and its territory. Although their edited volume does not delve into Kuçedra's waterways, I take their premise as a founding point on which to build the argument of his chapter.

How can mythology help us understand water, rivers, and their environments in Albania? In what ways does the hydrological serpent-dragon Kuçedra dwell in Albanian waters, permeate the meaning of the "state", and generate the relation to authority? By following the waterways of Kuçedra, I delve into the multitude of entanglements between the mythical, social, political, economic, and material realms of water and riverine environments, showing how the hydrological entity of Kuçedra and its agency bring back and restore certain archetypal structures such as the relation to authority.

## Water as a Vital Source

Water is a vital source of human and non-human life and has therefore been part of classical anthropological studies since the early twentieth century.[2] These were primarily concerned with the significance of water and water bodies in social worlds.[3] In the 1960s anthropologists started researching water in its relation to the infrastructure (Leach 1961; Mitchell 1976). More recent anthropological research attempts to conceptualize water itself—its substantiality, movement, scarcity, or excess. Particularly important in this context are the works of Veronica Strang (2015) in which she describes water both as a substance and as an object shared by humans and non-humans who are in a mutual relationship.

Water is a "total social fact" (Orlove and Caton 2010; cf. Mauss 1990[1966]) as it overflows and entangles all the realms of social institutions, such as politics, the economy, infrastructure, mythology, ethics, and morality. $H_2O$ is a polar molecule that invites and binds other water molecules and substances, either human, non-human, or material (Orlove and Caton 2010). Its hydrological nature has always been part of its "sociality" (Krause 2017) and vice versa. During the nineteenth century's industrialization processes, water became an even more indispensable part of material life. By juxtaposing this material meaning of water, on the one hand, with its vital significance, on the other hand, this chapter explores how its ambiguous understanding and practical use permeates the mythological and sociopolitical understandings of water. As Andrea Ballestero (2019, 405) contends, "water is more than itself; its force and material presence constantly frame people's efforts to address the fundamental questions of what it means to live life collectively in a world that is always more than human".

In the past decade, a large body of scholarly work based on Science and Technology Studies (STS) has approached water through its technological and infrastructural becoming (Barnes 2014; Wagner 2013; Robertson 2016; Verbeek 2006), examining how infrastructures undergird

[2] Examples of these early works are those by Franz Boas (1938), Bronislaw Malinowski (1948), E.R. Emerson (1894), R. Firth (1983), and C. Lévi-Strauss (1994) among others.

[3] For example, the studies of its cultural and ecological meaning (Richardson and Hanks 1942; Giblett 1996); analysis of the sensorial and semantic role water had for the Renaissance landscape of Europe (Schama 1995); the role it has in urban surroundings (Illich 1985; Bergua Amores 2008); water's spiritual significance (Shaw and Frances 2008); and its role in religion, cosmology, symbolism, and power (Alley 2002; Tuzin 1977).

contemporary societies and generate everyday lives (Larkin 2013). Consequently, water is often used and thought of as a material, technological, infrastructural, economic, political, and administrative asset, which can be fetched, bounded, blocked, commodified, traversed, legalized, appropriated, and so on (Petrović-Šteger 2016). Despite the prevailing understanding of water as a resource, however, its vital importance as a source of life is continually remitted or brings back its mythological and symbolic significance.

Departing from my long-term ethnographic fieldwork in both rural and urban Albania, I explore how water permeates different realms—mythological, political, economic, material, and social—and how these different realms entangle, seep through, and reshape water, water bodies, and the wider environment. I open the chapter with the hydrological serpent dragon Kuçedra, which in contemporary everyday vernacular, political, and media discourse carries primarily a negative and destructive connotation in relation to floods, water blockages such as HPPs, and the political manipulation of water infrastructures. The destructive and benevolent forces of Kuçedra—materialized in floods, political machinations, wells, and dams—often evoke feelings of fear and insecurity and bring home the meaning of authority. The relationship to authority is one of the important moral values deeply rooted in archetypal structures such as the realms of "nature and culture". I argue that bringing back and restoring the traditional value of authority and building it into the contemporary lifeworld in Albania could lead to a better and more sustainable[4] future.

[4] Here I refer to Brightman and Lewis' (2017) definition of sustainability, which foregrounds the etymological meaning that emerged during the Enlightenment in the forestry *sylviculture oeconomica* as a guide to the cultivation of native trees (2017, 3). They emphasize that sustainability should be in "principle based on the active cultivation of cultural, economic, political and ecological plurality, in order to be more likely to address unpredictability in future. At its core sustainability demands practices that will foster, prize, support, defend and generate diversity at every level" (2017, 17). Thus "sustainability must foreground local voices, and this may demand a cultural and political analysis in conjunction with a willingness to challenge hegemonic ideology and practices, both locally and globally" (2017, 22). Only by promoting, supporting, and cultivating these elements can sustainable presents and futures be secured.

## Kuçedra the Flood

In February 2015 five days of heavy rain caused excessive runoff and flooding of rivers throughout the country, leading to extreme water-related disasters in numerous places and resulting in the government's declaring a state of emergency in Albania. The worst affected areas were around the cities of Shkodra and Lezha in the north, and Vlora, Fier, and Berat in central and southwest Albania, all of which are important to the country's agriculture. Severe floods also affected the small municipality of Novosele in Vlora district, which is located along the Vjosa River. Due to heavy rains, the river rose more than 20 centimeters in one hour, flooding the fields, streets, and several homes. Fields were transformed into swampy puddles, families were evacuated from their houses, and livestock had to be rescued from their barns. After five days, the heavy rain finally stopped and the rainwater gradually dried up, but traces of the flooding remained in the dirt on the streets and filling the houses. Due to a relatively old and unmaintained sewerage system, water channels were clogged and houses were flooded with sewage. Because of the relatively high percentage of erosion[5] throughout the country, floods can happen extremely quickly, yet their waters can disappear back into the ground with similar rapidity. Thus, more than on the geophysical environment, the traces of the flood were imprinted vividly on the experiences of the inhabitants of flooded areas such as Novosele.

The day after the heavy rain stopped, thirty-year-old Besnik from the village of Bishan, near Novosele, explained, "It was scary … I have three children and I did not sleep all night … I was scared … To be safe, we moved to the upper floor of our house in the middle of the night." When asked why he and his family did not leave the house like the other residents of Novosele when they received emergency warnings on their cell phones,[6]

[5] Almost 20% of the Albanian landscape is subject to excessive erosive processes, with an average intensity of more than 50 tons per hectare per year (Lireza and Lireza 2014). Extensive deforestation and urbanization of the bigger cities in Albania are increasing the level of erosion in the country and the water inundation of its coastal parts (Gregorič Bon et al. 2018).

[6] In recent years, the Ministry of Tourism and Environment, the Ministry of Defence, and the Agency for the Protection of Civil Society have been sending regular text messages during periods of extreme weather conditions, such as heavy rain, to inform residents of water levels in their area. Many residents do not receive this information due to power outages and resulting empty batteries in their cell phones, while others do not follow these recommendations because they do not want to leave their home/house, which reifies social and cultural

Besnik clarified that by leaving he would have risked losing everything: his home/house, which he inherited from his father, and his patriline, which has lived in Novosele for centuries. As I describe elsewhere (Gregorič Bon 2016, 2017), the value of the house supersedes its material and economic value as it is an important part of social relations, which in Albania are still deeply permeated with the kinship system and all the moral and ethical codes associated with it. Thus, the home/house, together with the family, represents one of the core units of Albanian social organization.

In the following days, most of the inhabitants of Novosele and the surrounding villages cleaned their houses, taking out household appliances and other items of value that they could not move to safety during the deluge. Journalists populated the area, repeatedly asking questions about the value of the damage caused by the floods and the help so far received from government agencies and public services. In response, people echoed similar stories, lists of things they had lost, and assessments of the damage that had been done. Besnik's neighbor Mirela, who was around fifty, complained, "We were without electricity, without phone, without any information for three days. We were trapped in our own homes … What could we do (*çfarë do të bëjmë*)? Nothing (*asgjë*)!" Although it was a partly sunny day in February, it felt quite cold and chilly due to the rainwater that still covered the streets and surrounding fields. Like most residents, Mirela and her husband stood in front of their house, which was literally trapped in muddy water. They were cleaning up the yard, surveying the damage. Mirela's husband furiously added, "No one came to help. There was no army, civil defense, fire department, or police. No one! There was no help from the state (*shteti*)!"

Similar sentiments of being forgotten and remote were expressed by the inhabitants of other districts, who were shocked during the first few days after the flood and fearful of a possible repetition of these disastrous events. As many of them indicated, and as was later described in several government reports, similar floods and their devastating consequences became frequent winter companions in the following years. Global as well as local climate changes, together with the current infrastructural interventions of various transnational and national cooperative projects (such

capital and the patriline to which they belong. As mentioned earlier, the meaning of home/house materializes the relationship between them, their descendants, and all their belonging which they believe they can only preserve if they stay and defend their dwelling against the floods on their own.

as the construction of the HPPs), have resulted in severe water-related disasters occurring with increasing frequency and intensity in terms of duration and damage. Together with a relatively inadequate drainage and sewerage system, these weather-related changes have led to severe flooding and related damage in areas throughout Albania. In the first days of excessive flooding, some of the local institutions, such as the State Social Service, local administrations, and civil emergency workers, distributed relief packages with food, clothes, and blankets to households in several villages and towns but due to the lack of human and financial resources, the emergency aid has not reached all the flooded areas, as Mirela and her husband explained.

Unlike the people, who expressed fear, anger, and a sense of powerlessness about the floods and their politics, the politicians and other governmental bodies tried to present the image that they had the situation under control and were trying to mitigate the damage. In light of these events, Prime Minister Edi Rama visited the Novosele community on February 2. As reported by the media,[7] during his visit he inspected the area, met with the fire brigade, the civil service, and some residents, and pointed out that the severe flooding was solely a result of extreme weather conditions; he then promised to invest in infrastructure that would help alleviate the flooding of the Vjosa. Later, in November 2015, he visited Novosele again, this time accompanied by the Minister of Environment and Tourism and an EU representative.[8] Edi Rama publicly announced an EU financial grant of 15.91 million euros to the Flood Recovery Program. A large part of these financial resources, he explained, would be invested in the reconstruction of flood protection infrastructure—drainage systems, dikes, and so on—in Novosele and other places such as Shkodra and Lezha that were most affected by the floods. However, these plans seemed to be only partially implemented as, according to reports and local people's explanations, flood-related disasters continued in the following years.

Building, renewing, and restoring infrastructures that help alleviate flooding and other water-related disasters are thus important state-building (as well as supra-state-building) projects in Albania. As material goods, they are mobilized to promote progress and modernization (see Musaraj, this volume) that generate and secure the authority of the state

[7] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E5WQZGLETVI&t=5s

[8] http://arkiva.ata.gov.al/qeveri-be-15-91-mln-euro-programit-te-rimekembjes-nga-permbytjet/

or the political elite and raise hopes and expectations for a better future. Water and its associated infrastructure are thus a material resource, appropriated and managed by state decision-makers who use their authority and power to alleviate recurring disasters. But infrastructural failure due to poor management and general negligence is accompanied by social insecurity and distrust of the state and its capacity to administer the resource.

"Lezha can only be saved from Kuçedra with the state plan" is the title of a newspaper article by Gjok Vuksani, a hydrologist from the University of Tirana. Referring to the recurrent floods in Lezha and Shkodra, caused by heavy rain and the simultaneous overflow of the Rivers Drin and Buna, he points out that political promises of flood protection programs often lack precise, technically sound state planning on flood relief methods and river defense:

> Whenever it rains in our country, this natural phenomenon is accompanied by severe floods in Lezha and elsewhere. This annual disaster that we experience in Lezha is no longer just an event that fills the media, but is part of the political machinations that have begun to relativize the consequences. Every flood is an extraordinary drama for every resident of Lezha whose house, appliances, utensils, and even children's clothes are caught in the water at least two or three times a year. Moreover, this is also a disaster for agricultural development at the national level, as the areas of Lezha and the neighboring town of Shkodra are responsible for about 18–20% of the total national agricultural production. This production is important not only for farmers, but also for the national economy, as it contributes about $300 million to the national GDP. Almost as great is the damage caused by floods. Flooding in Lezha and Shkodra is not just a problem of some "villagers born in water" as one of the leftist politicians once said, but a national problem. For this reason, this problem must be addressed with a national plan to reduce the damage caused by floods and the related losses in this area. (Lidhja e Prizrenit 2016)[9]

In the rest of his article, Vuksani lists various measures, such as the construction and restoration of drainage systems, dikes, reservoirs, and weirs that would prevent rivers from bursting their banks. All this, he continues, should be addressed in detail in the Flood Recovery Program area of Lezha and Shkodra and elsewhere. As Vuksani points out, the

[9] https://www.ballikombetar.info/lezha-shpeton-nga-kucedra-e-permbytjes-vetem-me-nje-plan-kombetar/

government's flood protection program can only be successful and lead to better, more sustainable river management in the future if these measures, which should always be in accordance with the specific hydrological, geophysical, and infrastructural conditions of the local environment, are addressed and implemented. Similarly, many local residents, as well as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other activists, assign responsibility and authority—to improve flood protection through investment and (re)build infrastructure that would prevent river overflow—to the state or the leading political elite. Only infrastructural interventions, as Vuksani notes, would save Lezha from the devastating forces of Kuçedra or floods.

Infrastructures pertain to material objects as well as to relations between people and these objects (Larkin 2013). Therefore, it is important to examine how they have been formed and mediated in particular historical, political, economic, and social realms (ibid.). As the ethnographic material explains, water infrastructure, such as sewage systems, irrigation canals, bridges, and dikes, became an indispensable part of material life that gradually submerged into the everyday lives of individuals and society. Water infrastructure, along with other infrastructural assets, became part of the built environment. But, as noted already, this material understanding of water and its wider environment are frequently inalienably accompanied by its vital significance, which appears in different forms: symbolic, imaginary, or mythical. This can be read in Vuksani's reference to Kuçedra. Despite it seems that he is using Kuçedra as a metaphor or synonym for flood, I concur that this usage evokes the meaning of metaphor in its strict etymological sense. The latter comes from the Greek word—*meta forai*—for bringing something beyond the actual language into a metalanguage. In Strang's terms (2015), I regard Kuçedra as a subject that is good to "think with". Where can Kuçedra as a *meta forai* take us in terms of its meaning? To what affects and effects does it give rise, and what structural prerequisites emerge?

The floods and their recurring, devastating nature have caused fear, uncertainty, grief, and anger not only among the inhabitants of the flooded areas but also among experts like hydrologists. They all resent the state, on the one hand, for not building adequate control measures that would save them from the annual floods, while, on the other hand, they acknowledge its authority and power to save them from recurring weather and other climate-related disasters. The state and its policies generate a "metalanguage" (cf. Petrović-Šteger 2020) within the parameters of which people

often verbalize their feelings and fears about the frequent floods. Similarly, as Petrović-Šteger (2020) contends, based on her ethnographic research in Serbia, the social as well as the geophysical is often explained within the realm of the political, which generates a metalanguage that people use to express themselves and to act, as well as to define the times in which they live (2016, 2020). But, as will be explained as this chapter progresses, while evolving weather disasters are often expressed within the political "metalanguage", people's practices and the ways in which they deal with water-related devastation often reveal deeper dimensions that pertain to structural domains rooted in the recent (communist) as well as distant (pre-communist) pasts.

## Brief History of Water Management

The availability of and access to water are not just a matter of the quantity of water in a given area, but are highly dependent on the historical, social, political, and economic qualities that make water available and usable (Ballestero 2019, 409). In this section, I explain how various economic, political, and infrastructural interventions in and management of water distribution systems and rivers have generated availability and access as well as the relationship to water and water bodies in Albania. It describes how the power and authority that used to belong to the mythological water heroine Kuçedra has gradually become intertwined with the importance of the state and its power and authority.

The first water distribution system dates back to the period after World War I, when some prosperous families in the capital Tirana and the northern city of Shkodra received water wells (Kera 2008). The first water supply system that provided water directly to households in most Albanian cities was built by Italian companies during the monarchy of King Zog (1928–1939) when Albania became a political and economic protectorate of the Italian government under Mussolini (Zeneli 2017). During this period, some of the economically important cities in the country (e.g. Tirana, Shkodra, Durres, Elbasan, and Berat) received the first water supply network (Capolino 2011), while most rural areas still depended on springs and wells. The first water distribution system to cover the whole country was built in the period of bilateral cooperation between the communist Republic of Albania and the People's Republic of China (1960–1970). This period was characterized by infrastructural development in transport networks, water supply, construction of HPPs and

ensuing electrification, and urban transformation (see Musaraj, this volume). This state-sponsored "development" was one state-building project that aimed to make the country a "modernising force" (Dalakoglou 2017, 49; see also Bejko, Musaraj this volume), meanwhile contributing to the well-being of all citizens. In this way, the communist system and its project of building and developing infrastructure gradually penetrated the daily lives of Albanian citizens.

During the communist regime, the water system's infrastructure was centralized and managed by the Ministry of Construction, but the fall of the regime in 1990 and the subsequent political, economic, and social crisis led to its gradual deterioration. Although the political and economic transition was accompanied by water reform, the latter was only partially implemented in selected locations such as the capital and some other major cities. In the first decade (1990–2000), water tariffs were levied at a flat rate, which meant that individual households paid 30% of the price of consumption, while the rest was covered by the government. According to national and international reports, only 21% of residents paid water tariffs regularly as many Albanian residents considered water a public good to be secured, managed, and provided by the "state" or the leading political party.

Massive migrations within and outside the country, together with the rising phenomenon of remittances and the concomitant urbanization of major cities[10] (see Vullnetari and Musaraj, this volume; Dalakoglou 2010; Gregorič Bon 2017), have led to informal individual interventions in the water distribution system resulting in uncontrolled restructuring of the public water supply. This has made the average per capita water consumption unpredictable and led to frequent water cuts, which were especially common in the first decade after the fall of the regime. The inadequate water infrastructure together with the repeated water cuts generated another infrastructural asset that materialized in rooftop water tanks,

[10]While the first decade after the regime witnessed massive migrations, the number of migrants stabilized after 2000. At the same time, the number of remittances and other material goods sent home sporadically increased. Remittances were often the main source of income for certain households and economies in Albania (Vullnetari and King 2011) and had an impact on the rapid urbanization of the area. The latter also increased due to the return migrations that followed in 2010, a few years after the economic and financial crisis in Greece and Italy. For example, in many larger cities (e.g. Tirana, Durres, Fier, Shkodra, Vlora, and Saranda) the centers spread to the suburbs and the coastal plains became densely urbanized due to tourism development.

which became an inevitable part of Albanian architecture. With the presence of water tanks in this river-rich European country, tap water became undrinkable, especially in urban areas. In the following years, several water companies emerged that bottled spring water and sold it on the Albanian market and partly also on the world market. Water became an important commodity to be purified, bottled, diverted, and used for various economic, infrastructural, as well as political purposes.

The water reform implemented between 1990 and 2003 led to a transformation of the water distribution system. Yet, despite investment in improvements—international organizations such as the World Bank, USAID, and the European Union invested in the rehabilitation of the water system in a number of major cities (Tirana, Fier, Vlora, Saranda, etc.)—sanitation and wastewater systems are still lacking in many cities and towns. All this contributes to the frequency of floods in many parts of the country, especially in places located along rivers (such as Novosele, Lezha, and Shkodra). Meanwhile, flat payments for water were abandoned and in most districts water is now paid for according to the consumption of each household, as well as being marked by huge increases in price: while a cubic meter of water cost 11–15 euros per month in 2002, this tripled six years later to 29–36 euros. This sudden increase in the cost of water was accompanied by conflict in the population which was reflected in media reports comparing Prime Minister Edi Rama with Kuçedra. "Kuçedra raises water price" was the headline for an online news article (55 Online, 27.7.2015), which described the "prime minister's deadly thirst" for increasing the cost of water consumption. As it goes on to say, the increase in water tariff will "hit the pockets of many residents who are already facing a high percentage of unemployment and other problems, which will increase the number of emigrations".

Despite the increase in water charges, water security remains very poor in many smaller towns and villages, some of which still face daily water reductions. These should be scheduled on an hourly basis (4 h–7 h, 12 h–14 h, 16 h–20 h), but in many villages and towns, especially in peripheral regions, these schedules often change, giving rise to a sense of insecurity and unpredictability among local people. The unpredictability, along with power cuts and other infrastructural failures, has gradually penetrated people's intimate lives and their daily parlance, which often revolves around basic infrastructural commodities. The question "Do you have electricity, do you have water (*ka drita, ka uje*)?" often accompanies the greeting of a neighbor or relative.

As with floods, inadequate and unreliable water infrastructure leaves people with traces of insecurity, disappointment, and a sense that the "state" has failed them. The discussion so far has explained how the state system, with its management, control, alleviation of floods, and restoration of the water distribution system, has gradually seeped into people's intimate relationship with water and its associated infrastructure. In their feelings of insecurity and disillusionment and condition of dependency, they claim the "state" as the only entity and authority capable of solving and managing their problems. But what exactly do people mean when they refer to the state? The answer to this should be read in the wider social and historical frame addressed in the following section.

## Restoring Authority

In the period before and during the Ottoman Empire (1503–1912), individual families were organized and governed according to traditional Albanian unwritten customary laws called Kanun(s) (Hasluck 1954; Gregorič Bon 2008, 2018a; Bardhoshi 2012). Although the Ottoman authorities ignored the Kanun system, they did not challenge it, and therefore the core postulates remained in place throughout the period of Ottoman rule and later. This was especially true in remote rural areas and communities that have not adopted Islam. The Kanun laws were formed and managed by particular big men (*cifti, i madhi e shtëpise*), core authorities, and representatives of important patrilines (*fis*), who administered a particular locality, either a group of villages or a specific territory. Kanuns defined core principles of patrilines and their social and spatial organization, such as property issues and heritage system (Bardhoshi 2013), as well as other normative and ethical codes that deeply influenced people's daily lives, practices, and prevailing ways of thinking (*mentalitet*). Although the general norms of Kanuns were widely known and accepted among the big men of each patriline, their specific content was constantly changing and adapting to contemporary social relations based on the kinship system (*sistemi fisnorë*), mythological beliefs, and pagan practices such as the Evil Eye (*Syri Keq*). Ultimately, the decisions and choices of particular big men shaped the daily life and collective mentality of Albanian communities (Gregorič Bon 2008).

With the introduction of the communist regime (1945–1991), the period of planned and systematic uprooting of traditional unwritten laws began. The aim of the autocratic leadership was to eradicate traditional

Kanun laws from everyday life and collective consciousness. The Kanun laws, together with the authority of the big men and related property issues, were promulgated as backward (Bardhoshi 2012) for they were suddenly recognized as a threat to the unity and uniformity of the communist regime. The power and authority that once belonged to individual big men and their patrilines were appropriated by the autocratic leader, Enver Hoxha. The unwritten laws were replaced by written communist norms, and the authority formerly distributed among the big men was centralized in a single person, the communist leader, thus enabling continuity of authority. Although the ideology of the regime attempted to eradicate the social power of big man authority embedded in the kinship system and related property issues, the relationship survived. This is because the new regime retained the role of the sovereign (personified in the communist leader) and a form of power that was centralized and promulgated in the authoritarian model of government, thereby echoing the old ways of governance. However, many other values and ethical codes, such as honor (*nder*), keeping a promise (*besa*), and trust (*shpresa*), were gradually eroded by the fear and paranoia imposed by the surveillance of the communist intelligence agency, Sigurimi, whose system of bugging gradually embedded itself in every pore of the individual and collective psyche. The Foucauldian (1995) model of control and surveillance implanted profound feelings of distrust toward the Other (non-relatives) and the state.

After the fall of the regime and the attendant economic, political, and social crises, which led to massive migrations, the sense of mistrust intensified and permeated the social sphere as well as being directed at the state and political leadership (Gregorič Bon 2018a, b). Along with the process of democratization and the concomitant shift to privatization, the need to restore and strengthen the kinship system and related landownership issues emerged. The latter again became important agents of social organization and key elements in the understanding of authority. As a result of the regime changes—pre-Ottoman, Ottoman, communist—and their associated ruptures, the role of big men gradually diminished whereas their meaning and relation to authority managed to remain. During the post-communist transition and the introduction of the neoliberal market economy, the authority entangled with the kinship system and related property issues became interrelated with the leading political parties, for which people often use the general term "state" (*shteti*). All this strengthened the patronage system and the informal economy (Kera and Hysa

2020), which facilitated their intertwining with public administration, politics, the kinship system, and friendship.

The patronage system and concomitant understandings of authority were addressed by the inhabitants of the flooded areas of Novosele and Lezha. For example, in the first hours of the day after the flood, Besnik described the fear he had experienced the moment the sewer water flooded the first floor of his house. Although he knew from past experience that he and his family might not be safe if they moved to a higher floor, he remained in his house and somehow guarded his property. He knew that if he lost the house/home he had built on the land he had inherited from his patriline, he would lose everything—not only his house, but also his home as a reified relationship with his patriline. But a few days after the heavy rains stopped, as the sewage slowly seeped into the ground, leaving dirt on the street, damp houses, and broken appliances, the people of Novosele resorted to political "metalanguage" (cf. Petrović-Šteger 2020) in which they transposed their fear of the powerful forces of the river and its flooding into anger with state power. As Mirela and her husband pointed out, there was no help from the state, as they expected.

The multitude of entanglements between the historical, political, social, geophysical, and mythological meanings that pertain to the river and water, in general, is addressed in the following section.

## Kuçedra the Dam

"The dam is like Kuçedra," noted Zamir, a researcher and lecturer in the Department of Biology at the University of Tirana. "It blocks the water and devastates the river and its surroundings." With this, Zamir was drawing parallels between infrastructure and mythology. In addition to teaching biology, Zamir is an active member of the academic research group at the NGO, EcoAlbania, which aims to preserve natural parks and wild rivers in Albania. In the last ten years, EcoAlbania has been mainly concerned with the Vjosa River, which rises as the Aoös River in the Pindos Mountains in northern Greece, straddles the Greek-Albanian border, and flows into the Adriatic Sea in the south. With the exception of an HPP built in 1984 on its upper catchment in Greece, the Vjosa is considered one of the last "free-flowing rivers", with one of the widest gravel banks in Europe. Its unique waterworld is also known among researchers who have recognized that the Vjosa has not yet been studied in terms of its biohabitat and other hydrological characteristics (Fig. 6.1).

**Fig. 6.1** Vjosa River, 2018. Photo by author

In recent years the transnational campaign, Save the Blue Heart of Europe[11]—linking numerous Albanian and international NGOs, universities, artists, media institutions—has tried to increase research activities on the Vjosa, which has become known as an "open research laboratory". The Blue Heart of Europe campaign, financed and managed by EuroNatur, organizes so-called science weeks on the Vjosa in cooperation with the local NGO EcoAlbania and the Austrian NGO RiversWatch. During the five years of my anthropological research on and along the Vjosa River, I had the opportunity to participate in some of these "science weeks" as well as in other events[12] organized either by the Department of Biology,

[11] The Blue Heart of Europe campaign aims to protect the riverine environment throughout the Balkans where various transnational cooperative enterprises along with local political initiatives plan to build around 3000 HPPs on rivers flowing through Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia, Kosovo, Albania, and Greece (Balkan Rivers 2018).

[12] For example, various visits of diplomats and activists and artistic activities.

University of Tirana, or by EcoAlbania under the auspices of the Save the Blue Heart of Europe campaign.

My conversation with Zamir took place during a "science week" when I accompanied the Biology Department's research group on one of their pioneering research projects on the Vjosa River. During the five-day trip, the biologists collected water samples at designated water stations and sampled larval and another riparian biota, floodplain vegetation, and other features of the riverine landscape. The seven-member research team meticulously noted down the data for reports evaluating environmental hazards and prognosing potential infrastructural interventions such as HPP construction in the near future. It was precisely in this spirit that Zamir explained to me the impact of the HPPs in Poçem and Kalivaç, two designated locations situated on the Vjosa, where transnational construction companies in collaboration with the government were laying the first foundations at the time. The research findings, Zamir explained, would result in a fact sheet that would serve NGOs and the Blue Heart of Europe campaign in their lawsuit against the government. Pointing out the parallels between Kuçedra and HPPs, Zamir highlighted the effects (and affects) of technology and mythology, both acting as blockades (Fig. 6.2).

While Kuçedra blocks water and brings misfortune, hydropower dams prevent sediment transport, an important source of fertilizer for river and marine biota. The blockage created by a hydropower dam will cause significant changes in river morphology in a relatively short period of time (a few years), increase the amount of erosion and, most importantly, flood many villages and agricultural fields. This leads to displacement of local populations which, in Albania, are already facing high levels of migration due to economic and political changes in the country in recent decades. Scientists and environmentalists (Golfieri et al. 2017) warn that in the long run these changes will leave their mark on the environment and lead to the transformation of the entire ecosystem. The damage—ecological, economic, and social—will be much greater than the benefits resulting from electricity production.

Environmental reports by hydrologists, biologists, and other engineers warn that the Vjosa HPP dams will form an artificial lake that will flood numerous agricultural fields and also some villages along the river, whose residents depend mainly on agriculture. These side effects of the HPP construction, as NGO alerts, were shattered by the government's plan to advertise tourism development through the artificial lakes created by the dam. Unlike the government, national and international NGOs under the

**Fig. 6.2** Biologist collecting water samples at the Vjosa River, 2016. Photo by author

auspices of the Blue Heart of Europe campaign began to inform communities along the Vjosa River about these negative impacts. Against this background, the inhabitants of some villages along the Vjosa, whose fields and properties will be flooded by the technical lake to be created after the construction of the HPP, are organizing various protests and trying to make civil society aware of the gravity of the situation (Fig. 6.3).

## Kuçedra Occupies the Well

"E ka zënë Kuçedra (Kuçedra has occupied it)," Rosa remarked, explaining that the expression was often used when, as a little girl, she stood in the long queue of women waiting to fetch water from one of the village wells. Sitting on the sofa bed in the living room, above which hung a painting of a spring flowing peacefully into a river, Rosa, a retired primary school teacher, nostalgically recalled life in the villages along the Vjosa.


**Fig. 6.3** Protest of local people against the construction of HPP, organized in Tirana, 2015. Photo by Andrew Burr©EcoAlbania

One of them is Kutë whose agricultural fields will be flooded if the HPP in Poçem is built. Although Rosa was born in the neighboring village, which also lies along the Vjosa River, she has spent more than half of her life in Kutë where she moved after her marriage. Under communism, a village cooperative was established in 1958, at a time when Kutë was one of the most agriculturally productive and prosperous villages along the Vjosa valley. During our conversation, we were joined by Rosa's sister-in-law Majlinda, who lives next door in a semidetached house and proudly described how it has been recently renovated with remittances from her children, who are migrants living in Italy. They spoke about the village neighborhoods that belong to patrilinear descent groups. Like the majority of the villagers they boasted about their houses/homes and family, lamented the absence of their migrant children, and worried about their agricultural land which will be flooded by a technical lake should the HPP be built (Fig. 6.4).

Seventy-year-old Fatjon with whom I conversed during many of my visits to the village narrated similar issues. Accompanied by his two friends

**Fig. 6.4** Kutë village and the land which will be flooded by a technical lake should the HPP be built, 2016. Photo by author

(of similar age), he proudly recounted the history of the village and its surroundings, which he claimed dated back to ancient times. According to Fatjon, due to its position in the river valley, the village prospered in the pre-Ottoman and Ottoman periods when it was important for its agriculture. Fatjon and his friends enumerated the surnames of the village's important patrilines, who still possess important social and cultural capital despite the current economic precariousness. According to Fatjon, Kutë retained an important agricultural role until the fall of the communist regime, when, due to the collapse of the cooperative system, most of the villagers migrated either to larger cities or abroad. Fatjon nostalgically recalled the time when he worked with the pioneer brigades in the fields, building irrigation canals, cutting back the Mediterranean shrubs along the Vjosa, and transforming the riverine landscape into a productive area. His memories, however, soon turned to the current problems and those that will arise when the HPP is built and the technical lake floods their

fields. Besides remittances from children living abroad, the land is the only wealth they have, Fatjon explained. Although they are supposed to receive compensation of 50 cents per square meter of land if the HPP is built—as part of the privatization process that has been underway since the fall of the communist regime—legally, most villagers still do not possess ownership of a particular plot of land. This implies that they will not receive any compensation and create additional distrust of the "state" and the government authority.

During our conversation, I asked Fatjon and his friends about the river. But instead of the river, they talked about the agricultural fields and olive groves located along the irrigation canals where the river and the land meet and connect. They described the fields that provide food for their families and households and the annual floods that inundate the fields. "But as the river takes, so it gives," they stressed. In the winter period with its heavy rains, the Vjosa takes minerals from the soil, but in the other seasons, it brings water and irrigates the fields and orchards, bringing life and vitality.

The Vjosa River has been a vital source of the village's fertility, agriculture, and economy. In the first years after the regime, when Albania was characterized by massive migrations, the irrigation canals and the road leading to the village gradually deteriorated. The once central and prosperous village turned into a remote periphery. The two-kilometer road leading to the village is now littered with holes and it takes almost an hour to reach it by car from the main road Fier-Gjirokastër. With the passage of time, the village has gradually been transformed into a remote place on the Albanian map.

These feelings of remoteness, similar to those of the inhabitants of flooded Novosele, were also shared with me by younger villagers. I sat with Drini, a thirty-year-old teacher at the village's primary school, and his colleagues on a terrace of the village cafeteria and looked out over the wide gravel banks of the Vjosa River, its azure hues gleaming in the distance (Fig. 6.5).

Drini is from the neighboring village of Fratar which, unlike Kutë, will not be affected by the material damage caused by the HPP construction in Poçem. In our conversation, Drini repeatedly pointed out the high rate of migration faced by villages along the Vjosa after the fall of the regime.

**Fig. 6.5** Vjosa and its wide gravel banks, 2016. Photo by author

> There is no life in the village. Many are unemployed. Where can we go? What can we do [*qfarë do të bëjmë*]! The state [*shteti*] does not help us. Right now from here [Kutë] about forty to fifty young people are living abroad. … Mostly in Great Britain.

When I asked where he sees the future of the Vjosa Valley villages, Drini replied:

> There is no future here … What future? There are no jobs … The village needs infrastructure, a road, water that runs twenty-four hours a day. Now we only have water for one hour a day, that is not enough to fill the water tanks … As I said before, the only hope is migration. There is no other hope. … To be honest, although the majority here disagree with me [he smiles slightly sheepishly], I hope they will build the HPP. At least the people will get something out of it [land compensation] and they will be able to pay to get their papers in order and emigrate.

As Drini explained his point of view, the majority of the young men seated next to us loudly disagreed with his opinion. One of them, Fatmir, remarked angrily:

> No, no, no! He [pointing to Drini] is from Fratar, the village above the dam. Therefore he does not care. Here [in Kutë] we have our property and our land where we grow wheat, corn, and other crops. We have our cattle, our home/house (*shtëpi*), and our wealth. Why should we leave all this to the capitalist needs of some Turks [a Turkish construction company will build the dam] or to the interests of Sali Berisha [the Albanian prime minister between 2005 and 2013] or Edi Rama [prime minister from 2013 until the present]? Why should we give up our homes because of their interests? This is the place where we were born and this is the place where we will die and be buried. Just like our ancestors. This is where our *fis* [patriline] belongs. Here we have land, home, and wealth. I do not see why we should leave all that for a few kilowatts of electricity. We could be more productive in agriculture than we are now.

"Surely we can do all that," remarked Drini, in a very calm voice, and continued:

> But the cost of living is rising, and it's impossible to support ourselves. So people will move out one by one. These are the problems of most villages in Albania. People have land [agricultural fields and pastures], but they cannot live on it. If we want to develop and improve agriculture, we need investment and help from the state. People have land, but they live in poverty. The only hope is to invest in agriculture. … But first we need to rebuild the village road and clean the irrigation canals. That is a start. But for that we need organization and state investment. There is no hope here, the only hope is migration.

In a somewhat calmer voice, Fatmir replied:

> Yes indeed, we need infrastructure like roads, and irrigation canals should be cleaned. Only then would we be able to develop and sell our products in the city. But here we have everything: land, river, our houses. Why should we move? The problem is that the state does not help. It should invest in infrastructure and clean the irrigation canals.

I wondered aloud why they are waiting for the "state" to do all this and why they do not do it themselves. Fatmir explained:

> The mentality of the people here is very superficial [*mentaliteti këtu eshtë pak i dobët*]. It is part of this place. For example, if I were to ask my neighbor, whose land is next to mine … to clean the irrigation canals, he would ask me why he should do it when no one else cleans them. Why should I be the one? Since he does not plan to stay in the village, he does not care. Therefore, the state should organize it. It should call a meeting and form a small cooperative, manage the tasks and everything would be solved.

I persisted in my question, why do not they organize the meeting themselves, form a small cooperative, and distribute the tasks. Why do they wait for the state?

> The people here are negligent. Because they do not care about the problems they have to deal with. What you can do, nothing! [*Qfare do të bësh, asgjë!*] Here it cannot go through [*këtu nuk bëhët*, here it cannot be done].

Like many people throughout Albania, the villagers of Kutë devoted a lot of attention to the issue of migration, which, according to Drini, is their only hope for a better future. As described in the chapter by Julie Vullnetari (this volume), migrations are not only typical of the post-communist period, but part of the structural continuity that has been sporadically present in the area of present-day Albania for centuries (Gregorič Bon 2017). However, besides migrations, the villagers of Kutë, like the inhabitants of flooded areas such as Novosele, Shkodra, and Lezha, emphasize the importance of the state. On the one hand, they assign full responsibility to the state with regard to solving current problems related to floods and flood protection programs, the renovation and cleaning of irrigation canals, and the renewal of water infrastructure; on the other hand, they blame the state for any failures in infrastructure and for the ecologically risky construction of the HPP on the as yet "untamed" Vjosa River. This attitude concedes full authority and power to the "state", which is seen as the culprit for all the problems people face in their daily lives. It seems that they are somehow caught in the "jaws" of the "state" (cf. Navaro-Yashin 2002), in which the social, geophysical, and material is deeply entangled with the political. The latter generates the dominant "metalanguage" (cf. Petrović-Šteger 2020) in Kutë, Novosele, and elsewhere. But inherent to this political metalanguage is the meaning of authority, which, as Fatmir points out, is ascribed to traditional institutions such as kinship, family, and their home/house which are trying to

preserve and restore. As I explain above, patriline, family, land, and home/ house are important structural residues of the past that still generate the social and moral values of contemporary Albania and permeate the meaning of and relation to authority.

Although the inhabitants of the Vjosa River attributed the role of authority to the state at the level of discourse, which often resorted to political metalanguage, at the level of practice, or what is accessible through *longue duree* of their social organization (kinship), the inhabitants indirectly ascribed this authority to the kinship system and mythology. This can be read in their listing of the important patrilines populating the Kutë village, in their feelings of belonging to their house/ home, and their references to the mythological Kuçedra.

In peoples' discourse, the state is often implicitly described as the unchallengeable authority that should take care of its citizens, whereby the individual is conceptualized as the passive subject of authority—whether that of the state, communist dictator, patriarch, natural disaster, or mythological Kuçedra. Yet the constant complaints about the dysfunctional contemporary state, mainly from the younger generation, such as Fatmir and his friends, indicate a goal of improving the situation and raising the awareness of the older generation that it is up to them to obstruct the building of the hydropower plant in order to contribute to a better future of their families and the village in general. In collaboration with the environmental activists, they have so far organized numerous protests in which they aim to raise awareness of the vulnerability of Vjosa riverine environment and its people, many of whom will be displaced due to the loss of their agricultural fields—their main source of income. By organizing different concerts and art camps, the villagers along with the local NGOs aim to mobilize the passive attitude of the majority of the Vjosa River's inhabitants, who often fall back on the common belief that "nothing can be done about it" ("What can we do*/qfarë do të bëjmë*?"). Indeed, as a result of their active collaboration with the Albanian and international environmental activists, they succeeded in legally halting the construction of the HPP in Poçem and Kalivaç and declaring the Vjosa a national park.

## Toward Vitality of Water

By juxtaposing the myth, history, and present of water, its infrastructure and particular water bodies like the Vjosa River, this chapter shows how specific moral values, such as the relationship to authority, are crucial to

understanding the realms of nature, culture, and society. Here, the mythological hero Kuçedra plays a crucial role, as its character—either discursively or metaphorically—engenders archetypal structures that generate the relationship to authority.

Although Kuçedra seems to be referred to as a metaphor—designating either the state, nature/culture, or infrastructure—in political, media, and social discourse, its metaphorical meaning should be read in its strict etymological sense of *meta forai*, which transcends its actual meaning and points out the relationship with the wider environment in Albania. The relationship to authority attributed to Kuçedra constantly seeps into political discourse and people's talk, but at the same time, it also permeates peoples' practices and their social organization—to return to Lévi-Strauss' argument that "myths operate in men's minds without their being aware of the fact" (Lévi-Strauss 2001[1978], 36–37). The myth of Kuçedra or the meaning of authority that this myth embeds constantly brings back the archetypal structures such as the patriline, the meaning of home/ house, and belonging. But as explained above, this continuity is not so much inherent in peoples' narratives as it is intrinsic to their practices and their way of social organization (kinship system, land ownership). From the perspective of temporality (see Musaraj, de Rapper, this volume), the past thus spills over into the present and the future, while the present is continuously bounced back to the past.

Water is a vital source of life in the wider environment. It is often considered and used as a material, infrastructural, economic, political, and administrative good that can be managed and appropriated, thus bringing water as a resource to the fore (see also Petrović-Šteger 2016). However, the winding routes of Kuçedra and its ambiguous power always manage to spill over and depose the authority of water and its vitality. In this view, water is both a source (of life) and a resource (for management and appropriation).

To transgress its material meaning, this chapter takes the reader through and along the multitude of entanglements between mythological, social, political, economic, and infrastructural domains. Starting from the premise that water is a total social fact, it describes how water in its various phenomenal forms, like floods, rivers, wells, and water policy, permeates the domains listed above. In order to get closer to the vital meaning of water, this chapter aimed to disentangle these multiple relationships. "Water is always more than itself," as Ballestero contends (2019, 405). It is both a "force" and "material presence" which, in the case of Albania,

continuously spill over archetypal structures such as the relationship to authority.

The multitude of entanglements between mythological, social, political, economic, and infrastructural realms shows that the meaning of water and rivers should be approached along the paths, materials, and ideas through which it flows, springs, dams, seeps, and floods. Water is a dynamic force and substance that flows through and floods the ambiguities between nature (floods) and culture (flood protection infrastructure), between the source (springs and tributaries) and resource (sewerage system). Its power and ability to, seep into, spillover, and flood accords it authority, which arouses in people a sense of powerlessness to prevent or to protect themselves from recurring floods, other natural disasters, and infrastructural interventions. But after a while, as the chapter describes, the power and authority attributed to water-related phenomena gradually trickle down into political domains such as the state. But what does this state authority mean in the context of future HPP construction in Poçem and Kalivaç? Will the actions and warnings of the environmental activists and NGOs succeed in mobilizing the passive mindset of the majority of the river population and encourage them in the belief that their actions can stop the construction of the HHP? Will the environmental activists and NGO workers succeed in restoring the primal relationship with the water and the river as the vital source of local lifeworlds, agricultural fields, and homes? Will they manage to "disenchant" the destructive forces of Kuçedra and restore its role as the guardian of the river and water cycle? In their personal approach to the local population, expressed in various actions such as "science week" or in their support to local protest they are opening a potential to change things and improve the life in the village and contribute to a sustainable environment. It seems that with these collective environmental actions they are trying to awaken archetypal structures, such as authority which, as the myth of Kuçedra tells us, are attributed to the realm of nature (environment), culture, and society (patriarchs). Only by restoring these structural prerequisites embodied in Kuçedra will river dwellers, together with environmental activists, succeed in building a sustainable future.

This chapter has approached water, its infrastructure and the Vjosa River through the mythological meaning of Kuçedra, which is defined as a process and method that transcends its mythical object and restores archetypal structures such as authority. The latter is crucial in reviving the

relationship to water and rivers as unconditional authorities and a vital source of life.

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