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THE KELMENDI TRIBE AND MOVEMENTS OVER THE YEARS (1702-1707)

Abstract: *The Kelmend tribe is one of the most prominent and powerful tribes of Malësi, playing a significant role in the history of the liberation wars against the Ottoman conquerors. During the 16th and 17th centuries, the people of Kelmend rose in open revolt against the Ottoman army, which sought to subdue the mountainous regions of Albania. Due to its extraordinary natural features, Kelmend remained a formidable natural fortress, making it difficult for the Ottoman armies to carry out large-scale and successful operations in the region. The Kelmend tribe bordered the regions of Plavë, Gucia, Pult, Kuç, Gruda, Hoti, and Kastrati. This meant strong protection for this region, which also had an excellent position for it. Throughout the Ottoman period, the mountain tribes, including Kelmend, fought tirelessly for their freedom. Despite numerous Ottoman attempts to subdue the region over the centuries, they were never fully successful due to the harsh terrain and the resilience of the people. A significant moment in Kelmend's history occurred in the early 18th century when Hodo Verdi Pasha, a prominent figure in the Ottoman administration, led a military expedition against the Kelmend tribe.*

The Pasha sought to strengthen Ottoman authority in this well-organized and independent region while subduing Kelmend, which had remained untouched until that point. The Pasha's expedition, which began in the winter, lasted two years and proved to be extremely difficult for the Kelmend people. Despite being hungry and unable to resupply their ammunition, they resisted with great determination. The battles were intense, resulting in the deaths of several Kelmend leaders, including Voivoda. In an unprecedented act, the heads of the slain leaders were sent to the Sublime Porte as proof of the victory, showcasing Ottoman power. In 1702, after enduring food shortages and an epidemic that caused significant damage to both livestock and people, the Kelmend tribe, facing an extremely difficult situation, was forced to enter negotiations with Hodo Verdi Pasha. After extended discussions, an agreement was reached that

required the Kelmend people to move from their ancestral lands to a remote area, Peshter, near Novi Pazar in Serbia. During their years of exile in Peshter, the Kelmend tribe considered themselves displaced and under constant pressure to convert to Islam. They fought with all their strength to regain their lost freedom and return to their homes in Malësi. Their relocation was driven by harsh economic conditions and the oppression of the Ottoman army.

After several years, once they had stabilized their economic situation, the Kelmend people began planning their return to their homeland. The excellent organization and support of 400 armed men enabled the journey of 1,362 individuals toward Malësi. Despite the Ottoman army's efforts to stop them, fierce battles led to a victory for the Kelmend on July 17, 1707, when the Ottoman forces were forced to retreat after a heavy clash, losing around 300 troops. This battle became a symbol of the resistance and loyalty of the Kelmend to their homeland. It was a sacred act of perseverance and bravery by the people of Kelmendi, who, despite their losses, managed to preserve their identity and continue their lives under new conditions. After their relocation from Peshter, the Kelmendi tribe settled in their ancestral lands in Malësi, where life was marked by the restoration of traditional structures and efforts to rebuild their existence according to the ancient customs and culture of the tribe. Despite the challenging conditions they faced, the Kelmendi focused on developing agriculture and livestock farming, both essential for their survival. They also took active steps to protect their territories from external threats, including the continuous pressure from the Ottoman Empire and other dangers posed by neighboring regions.

Their efforts to maintain a stable life and safeguard their cultural identity were crucial. The connections among tribe members were strong, built on solidarity and mutual cooperation. They had a well-organized social structure based on helping one another, ensuring their survival and the preservation of their traditions. Despite economic and social difficulties, the Kelmendi managed to establish a sustainable life, rich in a strong and unique identity, while preserving their ancient customs and culture.

Key words: Kelmendi Tribe, Malësi, Ottoman Empire, Hodo Verdi Pasha, Peshter.

PLEME KELJMENDI I KRETANJA TOKOM GODINA (1702-1707)

Apstrakt: *Pleme Keljmendi jedno je od najistaknutijih i najmoćnijih plemena Malisije (Malësi), koje je odigralo značajnu ulogu u historiji oslobodilačkih ratova protiv osmanskih osvajača. Tokom 16. i 17. vijeka, narod Keljmendija podigao je otvoreni ustanak protiv osmanske vojske koja je nastojala pokoriti planinske regije Albanije. Zahvaljujući izvanrednim prirodnim karakteristikama, Kelmendi je ostao neosvojiva prirodna tvrđava, što je*

osmanskoj vojsci otežavalo izvođenje opsežnih i uspješnih operacija u toj regiji. Pleme Kelmendi graničilo je s regijama Plav, Gusinje, Pult, Kuči, Gruda, Hoti i Kastrati. To je značilo snažnu zaštitu za ovu regiju, koja je imala i odličan strateški položaj. Tokom cijelog osmanskog perioda, planinska plemena, uključujući Kelmendi, neumorno su se borila za svoju slobodu. Uprkos brojnim osmanskim pokušajima da tokom vijekova pokore ovu regiju, nikada nisu bili u potpunosti uspješni zbog surovog terena i otpornosti naroda. Značajan trenutak u historiji Kelmendija dogodio se početkom 18. vijeka kada je Hodo Verdi-paša, istaknuta ličnost u osmanskoj administraciji, predvodio vojnu ekspediciju protiv plemena Kelmendi.

Paša je nastojao ojačati osmansku vlast u ovoj dobro organizovanoj i nezavisnoj regiji, uz istovremeno pokoravanje Kelmendija koji je do tada ostao netaknut. Pašina ekspedicija, koja je započela zimi, trajala je dvije godine i pokazala se izuzetno teškom za narod Kelmendija. Iako izgladnjeli i bez mogućnosti da dopune zalihe municije, pružali su otpor s velikom odlučnošću. Borbe su bile intenzivne, što je rezultiralo smrću nekoliko vođa Kelmendija, uključujući i vojvodu. U do tada nezapamćenom činu, glave ubijenih vođa poslale su Visokoj porti kao dokaz pobjede i pokazatelj osmanske moći. Godine 1702, nakon što je pretrpjelo nestašicu hrane i epidemiju koja je nanijela značajnu štetu i stoci i ljudima, pleme Kelmendi je, suočeno s izuzetno teškom situacijom, bilo prisiljeno stupiti u pregovore s Hodo Verdi-pašom. Nakon dugotrajnih rasprava, postignut je dogovor koji je zahtijevao da se narod Kelmendija preseli sa svojih pradjedovskih ognjišta u udaljeno područje Peštera, blizu Novog Pazara u današnjoj Srbiji. Tokom godina izgnanstva na Pešteru, pleme Kelmendi se smatralo raseljenim i bilo je pod stalnim pritiskom da pređe na islam. Borili su se svom snagom da povrate izgubljenu slobodu i vrte se svojim kućama u Malisiju. Njihovo preseljenje bilo je uzrokovano teškim ekonomskim uslovima i ugnjetavanjem od strane osmanske vojske.

Nakon nekoliko godina, čim su stabilizovali svoju ekonomsku situaciju, Kelmendiji su počeli planirati povratak u domovinu. Odlična organizacija i podrška 400 naoružanih ljudi omogućili su putovanje 1.362 pojedinca prema Malisiji. Uprkos naporima osmanske vojske da ih zaustavi, žestoke borbe dovele su do pobjede Kelmendija 17. jula 1707. godine, kada su osmanske snage bile prisiljene na povlačenje nakon teškog sukoba, izgubivši oko 300 vojnika. Ova bitka postala je simbol otpora i lojalnosti Kelmendija svojoj domovini. Bio je to sveti čin istrajnosti i hrabrosti naroda Kelmendija, koji je, uprkos gubicima, uspio očuvati svoj identitet i nastaviti život u novim uslovima. Nakon povratka s Peštera, pleme Kelmendi se naselilo na svoju djedovinu u Malisiji, gdje je život bio obilježen obnovom tradicionalnih struktura i naporima da se ponovo izgradi egzistencija prema drevnim običajima i kulturi plemena. Uprkos izazovnim uslovima s kojima su se suočavali, Kelmendiji su se fokusirali na razvoj poljoprivrede i stočarstva, koji su bili ključni za njihov opstanak. Također su poduzeli aktivne korake kako bi zaštitili svoje teritorije od vanjskih prijetnji,

uključujući kontinuirani pritisak Osmanskog carstva i druge opasnosti iz susjednih regija.

Njihovi napori da održe stabilan život i zaštite svoj kulturni identitet bili su od presudne važnosti. Veze među članovima plemena bile su jake, izgrađene na solidarnosti i uzajamnoj saradnji. Imali su dobro organizovanu društvenu strukturu zasnovanu na međusobnom pomaganju, što im je osiguralo opstanak i očuvanje tradicije. Uprkos ekonomskim i društvenim poteškoćama, Keljmendiji su uspjeli uspostaviti održiv život, bogat snažnim i jedinstvenim identitetom, čuvajući svoje drevne običaje i kulturu.

Ključne riječi: *Pleme Keljmendi, Malisija, Osmansko carstvo, Hodo Verdi-paša, Pešter.*

Introduction

The Kelmend Tribe was located in a strategic region of Malësi (the Highlands), in the northern part of Albania and the southern part of Montenegro, within a mountainous area characterized by very high mountains and deep valleys. This difficult terrain made the region hard to access for foreign invading forces, such as the Ottoman army. The Kelmend Tribe, one of the most powerful tribes in Malësi, had a long-standing tradition and significant experience in the struggle for liberation against the Ottoman invaders. During the 16th and 17th centuries, the Kelmend people, united with other mountain tribes, waged open war against the Ottoman army, strongly resisting military expeditions that repeatedly attempted to bring the Kelmend region under their control. The tribe's geographical position played an important role in these wars, as it helped defend the territory from Ottoman invasion.

The French scholar Charles du Fresne, Sieur Du Cange, in his work „Historia Byzantina“, provides important information about the history of the Kelmend tribe, highlighting its influence and role during the Byzantine period. The Kelmend tribe extended from Naronë, located in the Neretva River valley in present-day Croatia. The counts of the Kelmend tribe held influence and estates in the Popovo region of Bosnia and along the coastline, playing a significant role in the political and social developments of the area during the medieval period. In 1241, the Ban of Bosnia, Stefan, conquered the County of Kelmend and brought most of the region's castles under his control, leaving the four brothers of Kelmend—Count Pjetër, the son of Count Ndreu, Pjetër's son Nikolla, and Tolleno—with nothing. As a result, the entire Kelmend region came under the occupation of the Ban of Bosnia. The Kelmend tribe also had its own coat of arms, an important symbol that reflects the tribe's distinct identity. This coat of arms represented not only the authority and strength of its leadership but also the

established order and traditions of the tribe.¹ After the conquest of the Kelmend tribe, and in an effort to preserve their identity from assimilation, the tribe migrated toward Montenegro and Northern Albania. These migrations were forced as a means of escaping assimilation and safeguarding the tribe's identity and continuity.

The Kelmend Tribe had inhabited and operated in their lands long before the Battle of Kosovo (1389). Prior to the battle, Sultan Murat attempted to negotiate with the tribe. During this period, the Kelmend tribe grew stronger and expanded steadily. The tribe had suffered greatly from wars and had decided to remain neutral. Facing an unfavorable position, the Sultan sought allies and made contact with the Kelmend to determine which side they would support. The Kelmend responded that they would side with whoever asked for their help. The Sultan seized the opportunity and, by reaching out to the leaders, tried to win them over to his side with promises. According to this account, the Kelmend tribe played a significant role during the Battle of Kosovo. After the armistice,² the Sultan granted them the promised privileges, which included the right to collect tribute in Malësi and most of Kosovo. They also made several marches to the city of Peja to loot.³ Information about the participation of the Kelmend tribe in the Battle of Kosovo is also provided in the book *Letters and Reports from Franciscan Missionaries Among Albanians*. The Kelmend tribe is well-known and proud of their past military actions. *The last of these actions was the bloody Battle of Kosovo, where, as envoys of Sultan Murad, they sided with him, securing a victory for the Turks and delivering a decisive defeat to the Slavs, who had been victorious until that point. Thus, they were very proud of this.*⁴ During the period of the Battle of Kosovo, the political and military situation in the Balkans, especially in Malësi e Madhe, was highly complex. Alliances and agreements between various parties frequently shifted as they sought to protect their local interests and territories. These alliances were often formed to secure their positions, as it was easier to reach an agreement with a rising superpower like the Ottoman Empire. The Kelmend tribe may have participated in the Battle of Kosovo through a favorable arrangement with the Ottomans, aiming to preserve their autonomy and avoid potential threats from other rivals.

¹ Charles du Fresne Du Cange, *Historia Byzantina, Duplici Mommentario Illustrata*: Prior familias ac Stemmata Imperatorum, Constantinopolitanorum, cum eorundem Augustorum Nomifmatibus, aliquot Iconibus, Venetiis, Ex Typographia Bartholomei Javarina, MDCCXXIX, 266; The Counts of Kelmendi, literary magazine „Leka”, no. II, Shkodër 1930, 9-10.

² Hyacinthe Hecquard, *Histoire et Description de la Haute Albanie ou Guégarie*, Consul de France à Scutari, Chevalier de la Légion d'honneur, etc, Paris Chez Arthus Bertrand, Libraire de la Société de Géographie 23, Rue Hautefeuille, 1858, 183-184; Noel Malcolm, *Kosova një histori e shkurtër*, Koha dhe Shtëpia e Librit Prishtinë-Tiranë 2011, 65.

³ Peter Bartl, Injac Zamputi, Vincenzo Zmajevich, *Relacion i gjendjes se Shqipërisë e Serbisë, Relazione dello stato d'Albania e Serbia*, Faik Konica-Albanjsches Institut, Prishtinë-St. Gallen 2022, 51; H. Hecquard, *Histoire et Description de la Haute Albanie ou Guégarie*, 65.

⁴ *Letra dhe relacione nga misionarët françeskan ndër shqiptarë*, përgjegjës për botime françeskane At Vitor Demaj, OFM, At Mirash Marinaj, OFM, Franciscan Order Shkodër 2019, 78-79.

The Kelmend people derived their name from the leader of their land. According to legend, the first leader of the Kelmend tribe had seven sons, each of whom became the leader of a new tribe. These tribes included: Selcë, Nikaj, Vuklaj, Martinaj, Utaj, Ukaj in Dukagjin, and Labët in Kosovo. The first son of Kelmend was Kola, the head of Selca.⁵ After coming from Kuçi, he settled nearby and established his headquarters in the highest mountain peaks of Albania, two days' journey from the city of Shkodra. To the east, it borders Plavë, Gucë, and Pult; to the west, Kuçi and Gruda; to the south, Hoti and Kastrati; and to the north, Kolashin. All of these natural borders provided strong defenses for the settlement. The Kelmend region was fortified by narrow roads, dominated by rugged mountains with frightening views and steep cliffs that seemed as though they would swallow a traveler. These roads are divided into two main routes, going in opposite directions—one from Shkodra to the west and the other from Gucia to the east—each following the banks of the Cem River, with a distance of less than a day's journey. In the middle of the roads, the slope of the mountains eases and becomes more suitable for possible habitation.⁶ Due to its strategic position and natural advantages, the population of Kelmend remained untouched by the Ottoman invaders for centuries. They preserved their freedom through a system of popular governance, continually fighting to defend their independence against the Ottomans.

In the 1485 Registration Book of the Sanjak of Shkodra, an Ottoman tax register, the Ottoman administration recorded and collected taxes in the „Nahija Kelmenta“ the Kelmend district, which was an Ottoman administrative division consisting of five villages. The „Kelmend Nahija“ included five villages with a total of 152 houses. The Christian inhabitants of these villages were required by the Ottoman authorities to pay the Sanjakebey 1,000 akçe (an Ottoman silver coin used as currency) in tribute (jizya—a tax imposed on non-Muslims) as a tax payment, as well as an additional 1,000 akçe in the form of another tax.⁷ According to this register, both the name and the Nahija of Kelmend were well-known, reflecting the integration of the Kelmend people into the Ottoman system.

Referring to the 1,684 records, the Kelmend tribe existed long before 1480, as it mentions the ancestors of Vuk Doda with the following names: Kelmendi – Lesh Kelmendi – Mash Leshi – Vul Mashi – Vruja Vuli – Zam Vruja – Dud Zami – Vuk Doda. Logically, this lineage can be traced back to 1405. According to the scholar Franz Nopcza, a very interesting coincidence arises here, as a Kelmendi is mentioned—the son of a certain Gjini (Dzhini), who in

⁵ Dr. Jur. Johan Georg von Hahn, *Studime Shqiptare* 10, Institute of Dialogue and Communication, Tiranë 2007, 251; Јован Радонић, Римска Курија Јужнословенске земље од XVI до XIX Века, Српска Академија Наука, Посејна издања књига CLC, Сдењњ Друштвених Наука нова серија књига 3, Београд 1950, 514.

⁶ *Central State Archive*, Fund 846, file 21.

⁷ Selami Pulaha, *The Register of the Sanjak of Shkodër for the year 1485*, Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Albania, Institute of History, Tiranë 1974, 431.

1330 served as a notary in Shkodra. In the popular tradition of the Kelmend tribe, this geological list is considered very reliable. As mentioned by Windishi, the first of the Kelmends was called Clement, a contemporary of Skanderbeg, who organized the men of the Kelmend tribe in 1465 to fight against the Ottomans.⁸ In the high mountains of Albania and Kosovo, the Kelmend tribe established a free zone and built their defensive homes on all sides. There, they also chose the first leader of the Kelmend tribe, a courageous man. From him, the name „Kelmendi“ originated, and it was adopted by his fellow tribesmen who remained at home and continue to carry it to this day.⁹ In their tradition, for the Kelmendis it was customary not to marry outside their ethnicity, and similarly, women were not allowed to marry outsiders. As a result of these traditions, the Kelmend tribe has remained unique and unmixed to this day.



The Coat of Arms of the Kelmendi tribe „Comitvm Chelmensivm“.¹⁰

The 1638 report by Frang Bardhi provides reliable information that the Kelmendi people, of Albanian ethnicity, spoke both Albanian and Dalmatian and practiced the Roman Catholic belief. At that time, there were approximately 250 households and 2,900 individuals, known for their fierce nature, great courage, military expertise, good looks, and strong physiques.¹¹ While, the report of the Venetian writer Mariano Bolica in 1614 provides information that Kelmendi had

⁸ Karl Gottlieb von Windisch: „Von den Klementinern in Syrmien“ In, *Ungrisches Magazin oder Beyträge zu ungrischen Geschichte, Geographie, Naturwissenschaft und der dahin einschlagenden Litteratur*, Pressburg Bratislava 1782, 77-78; Franc Nopça, Fiset e Malësisë së Shqipërisë Veriore dhe e drejta zakonore e tyre, The Center for Albanian Studies, Institute of History, Tiranë 2013, 184-185.

⁹ Robert Elsie, Texts and Documents of Albanian History, 1782 Karl Gottlieb von Windisch: On the Kelmendi in Syrmia, http://www.albanianhistory.net/1782_Windisch/index.html. Seen on the date August 28, 2024; Karl Gottlieb von Windisch: Von den Klementinern in Syrmien, f. 78.

¹⁰ Charles du Fresne Du Cange, *Historia Byzantina, Duplici Mommentario Illustrata*: Prior familias ac Stemmata Imperatorum, Constantinopolitanorum, 215.

¹¹ *Relacione mbi gjendjen e Shqipërisë Veriore dhe të Mesme në shekullin XVII*, Volume II (1634-1650), University of Tirana, Institute of History and Linguistics, prepared by Injaz Zamputi, Tiranë 1965, 161; *Archive of the Institute of History Tranë, fund: A-III-222*, Dokumente mbi Kosovën nga relatorë të huaj (shek. XV-XVIII), 8.

188 households and around 650 fighters.¹² The 1634 report by Bishop Gjergj Bardhi, following his visit to the mountains of Dukagjin, Pult, and Kelmendi, provides information that the Kelmendi tribe had around 300 households and 3,200 Christian inhabitants. These figures are very close to one another, and importantly, they are quite realistic.¹³

Ottoman military expeditions against Malësia e Madhe, and especially the Kelmendi tribe, began in the 16th century and continued until the 19th century. In 1565, the Kelmendi tribe, along with other Albanian tribes such as the Kuçi and Piperi, rebelled against the Ottoman army. In 1597, the Kelmendi people, in cooperation with other Albanian tribes, rose again in rebellion under the leadership of their voivode (local ruler) Nikshiç Gërdani, to liberate their land from Ottoman control in Malësia.¹⁴

The Kelmendi tribe fought relentlessly for centuries against the Ottoman invaders. In 1613, the Ottoman Empire sent Asllan Pasha to confront the Kelmendi rebels, supported by seven sanjak-beys (a provincial governors) from Prizren, Peja, Dukagjin, Kaçanik, Elbasan, Zadrime, and Shkodra. In 1638, Vuço Pasha, in cooperation with the Beylerbey (a high-ranking Ottoman official) of Bosnia, mobilized an army from his pashalik (an administrative region governed by a Pasha), which included Hercegovina, Albania, and Serbia, to decisively suppress the uprisings of the Kelmendi tribe. During the wars in Kosovo (1689-1690) and the subsequent actions until 1699, the Kelmendi tribe played a central role as a key player, emerging victorious each time.

The Kelmendi tribe, protected and favored by natural conditions, remained largely untouched by the Ottoman invasion for many centuries. The mountainous terrain made it difficult for Ottoman armies to carry out large and successful operations in the region. The Kelmendi tribe exploited this terrain to organize defense and halt the advance of foreign forces. They built fortifications and established strategic positions in their mountains to protect their territories and hinder the Ottoman army's progress. These fortifications were crucial for maintaining control over key areas and safeguarding the local population. In the heart of the empire, the tribe preserved its freedom and democratic governance, which contrasted sharply with the terror and destruction that the Ottoman Empire brought to most of the Albanian territories under its control.

After a series of consecutive defeats inflicted on the Ottoman army by the Kelmendi tribe, the Ottomans made a firm decision to end the tribe's resistance once and for all. Hodo Verdi Pasha Mahmutbegolli was appointed to lead this highly challenging military expedition. The long-standing conflict between the Kelmendi tribe and his house provided further motivation for the campaign.

¹² Injac Zamputi, *Bashkimi i maleve shqiptare në fillim të shekullit të XVII*, Bulletin of the University of Tirana, Seria shkencat shoqërore 1, Tiranë 1957, 77; *Relacione mbi gjendjen e Shqipërisë Veriore dhe të Mesme në shekullin XVII*, 277.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ Robert Elsie, *Fiset Shqiptare, historia, shoqëria dhe kultura*, Botime Artini, Prishtinë 2017, 57.

Hodo Verdi Pasha is known for his military activities in the region of Malësia e Madhe, including clashes with the Kelmendi tribe. During this period, various Albanian tribes frequently clashed with the Ottoman authorities due to their resistance against Ottoman control and policies.

As an important pasha in the Ottoman administration, Hodo Verdi Pasha played a significant role in managing the Albanian territories, particularly Malësia e Madhe. Controlling this region was difficult due to the presence of many independent tribes, such as the Kelmendi. As a pasha, Hodo Verdi Pasha sought to strengthen Ottoman authority in these areas and address the issues stemming from rebellions and local conflicts.

Hodo Verdi Pasha Mahmutbegolli's appointment to lead this difficult campaign was driven, in part, by the open wounds of his homeland and his house in Peja, which had suffered from the wars with the Kelmendi tribe. This personal motivation for revenge led to his success in 1700, when he emerged victorious over the three cities—Shkodër, Ulqin, and Tivar—that had risen in rebellion. The Ottoman army, under the leadership of Hodo Verdi Pasha, launched a powerful campaign that significantly weakened the Kelmendi army, killing the most important leaders of the rebels. He considered the war with the Kelmendi Highlanders to be the most important victory of his military career. Aware of the threat posed by the Kelmendi rebels, the Pasha implemented repressive measures, conquering all the mountain paths and sealing off the exits from the mountains. Trapped on three sides within their borders, the Kelmendi Highlanders were further confined on the fourth side, which led to Gucia, by the army of Hodo Verdi Pasha, who had personally gone there to be closer to the unfolding events. Within a few days, he established a large garrison in the area.¹⁵ The military expedition against the Kelmendi tribe lasted about two years and was carried out according to the plans devised by the Pasha. The siege of the Kelmendi tribe was conducted meticulously, with the goal of finally subduing a tribe that had never been conquered before, and capturing all of them alive to relocate them from their lands. This is confirmed by a letter from Hodo Verdi Pasha, dated August 14, 1702, addressed to the Venetian provost (administrator, from it.- provveditore) in Kotor, Cavalier Giovanni Bolica.¹⁶

The Pasha's expedition against the Kelmendi tribe began in the middle of winter. Despite suffering from hunger and a lack of ammunition, the brave Highlanders fought back fiercely, defending themselves with desperation. During the military battles against the Ottoman army, Vojvoda and several prominent leaders of the Kelmendi tribe were killed. Their deaths inevitably weakened the tribe. By the Pasha's order, the leaders of the Kelmendi tribe had their heads severed. At the time, the Kelmendi people were known for braiding

¹⁵ *Arkivi Qendror Shtetëror (AQSH), Republic of Albania*, fund. 846, file. 21.

¹⁶ *Il Montenegro de Relazioni dei Provveditori Veneti (1687-1735)*, Roma M.DCCC.XCVI, 117; Kristo Frashëri „Kryengritjet e kelmendasve kundër turqve dhe feudalëve Begollas“, Mësuesi, The Organ of the Ministry of Education and Culture of the People's Republic of Albania, Viti III-no. 6 (76), February 8 1963.

their hair into four braids, tied with silver ribbons around their ears and necks—a symbol derived from the four peaks of their mountain. The Pasha sent the severed heads to the Sublime Porte as proof of his victories, showcasing his triumph over the Kelmendi tribe. Upon seeing the display of the victims' heads, Sultan Murat, addressing the courtiers—among them Albanians who served the Sultan—made a remark that reflected his cruelty: „Look how beautifully the Pasha has decorated the heads of my subjects in Albania“.¹⁷

The Turkish-origin historian Naima provides details and describes the Kelmendi tribe during the Ottoman army's campaign: *They are fierce, disorganized, and aimless. Armed with spears and bows from all directions, their legs are wrapped in crampons, and the blades of their knives gleam on their belts. Accustomed to scaling steep rocks and fearlessly descending into the depths of ravines—where others would surely perish—they are as swift as wild goats. They live in caves, the entrances of which are guarded by armed sentinels carrying rifles.*¹⁸

After enduring many hardships in battles with the Ottoman army, the situation of the Kelmendi people worsened significantly in 1702 due to a severe food shortage.¹⁹ Their condition worsened further when an epidemic broke out, severely affecting both livestock and people, as it was highly contagious. Confronted with this dire situation, the Kelmendi tribe was forced to enter negotiations with Hodo Verdi Pasha regarding the terms of their surrender. During the talks, Hodo Verdi Pasha demanded that they be relocated as far as possible from their lands, to the Pillaja of Peshter, near Novi Pazar in Serbia.²⁰ A smaller number of them was forced to move not only to the Peshter Plain but also to other areas, including Rugova, Peja, the mountains of Llap, Gjiilan, the mountains of Gollak, and others.²¹ The Pasha's actions were also well-received by the Ottoman Empire, as he finally broke the century-long resistance of the Kelmendi tribe, placing them under Ottoman rule for the first time. The situation for the Kelmendi people was extremely dire, as they no longer had the strength to continue resisting. On the other hand, they were scattered and divided like never before in the face of the enemy. Under these circumstances, the Kelmendi tribe could not withstand the heavy pressure from the Ottoman army and ultimately accepted their relocation from their ancestral lands. About 274 households, totaling around 2,000 people, along with their valuable possessions, were relocated to Peshter, near the Sanjak of Novi Pazar. Similarly, part of the Kelmendi tribe was sent by the Pasha to the city of Peja, where they were held

¹⁷ Feansoa Lenorman, *Turcs et Monténégrins*, Paris Librairie Académique, Didier & C, Libraires-Éditeurs 34, Ouai des Augustins, 35, 1866, 131.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, 144.

¹⁹ R. Elsie, *Fiset shqiptare, historia, shoqëria dhe kultura*, 63.

²⁰ Kristo Frashëri „Kryengritjet e kelmendasve kundër turqve dhe feudalëve Begollas“, Mësuesi.

²¹ Franc Nopça, *Fiset e Malësisë Shqipërisë Veriore dhe e drejta zakonore e tyre*, The Center of Albanian Studies, Institute of History, Tiranë 2013, 187; R. Elsie, *Fiset shqiptare, historia, shoqëria dhe kultura*, 55.

as war prisoners.²² The wars and clashes with the Ottoman authorities, along with other external factors, likely created immense pressure and insecurity for the Kelmendi tribe, forcing them to seek safer territories. Migration often served as a way to escape hardships and preserve their identity and culture.

Although the pastures of Peshter were fertile, they became an internment camp for the Kelmendi tribe. Upon settling there, the tribe suffered under the supervision and control of the Mahmutbegolli family. The pressure from this family was intense, as the Pasha initiated a process of Islamizing the Kelmendi people, aiming to sever their ties once and for all with their fellow Christians from Malësi e Madhe. Despite the passing of years and continued hardships, the Kelmendi remained resolute. Even under constant Ottoman pressure, they did not yield, for their belief remained clear: one day, they would return to their lands.²³ The military strength of the Kelmendi tribe weakened significantly after a portion of them migrated to Peshter. This loss of strength made them more vulnerable to the intense pressure from the Ottoman authorities. However, the Kelmendi people of Selca, who had remained in their homes, felt regret for the divisions that had occurred. Concerned about their situation, they began inviting their brothers in Peshter to return to their homes in Malesi.

During their years of migration to Peshter, the Kelmendi tribe felt interned and constantly pressured to convert to Islam. Despite the hardships, they worked tirelessly to return to their homeland in Malësi, for the freedom they had lost was more precious to them than the life they were living in Peshter. They never accepted their life there, viewing it as a momentary time until the right moment came to return to their homeland, no matter the consequences they might face. One of the main reasons for the migration of the Kelmendi tribe was the worsening economic conditions, which became increasingly difficult to endure. The Ottoman army had left them without any means of sustenance, prompting them to strike an agreement with the Pasha and move towards Peshter. After a few years, once the Kelmendi tribe had regained some strength, they began to plan concrete actions to leave Peshter and return to their homeland. As their economic situation improved in Peshter, they started taking steps toward their goal. This desire was further fueled by psychological factors, particularly the growing nostalgia for their homeland, which increasingly consumed their thoughts. Their deep connection to their land made the desire to return even stronger. They could no longer find peace and began to view their stay in Peshter as an undesirable and hopeless situation.

The Kelmendi tribe was exceptionally well-organized for this endeavor. About 1,362 men, women, and children were preparing to leave Peshter, under the protection of 400 armed Kelmendi men who secured the caravans and confronted the Ottoman army, which attempted to avert their march and force them back to their previous location. As soon as their journey began, around

²² K. Frashëri „Kryengritjet e kelmendasve kundër turqve dhe feudalëve Begollas“, Mësuesi.

²³ *Ibidem*.

1,000 Ottoman soldiers attempted to obstruct their march from the very first day. The Ottoman commanders, with all their forces, attempted to persuade the Kelmendi to turn back and halt their journey, but the Kelmendi rejected these demands. As a result, the fighting became inevitable. The Kelmendi tribe was determined to fight and clear the way at any cost, ultimately defeating the Ottoman army. During their march, on July 17, 1707, the Kelmendi caravan was caught in a location between Rozhajë and Plavë, near the mountains. After a day of intense fighting, the clash between the Kelmendi and the Ottoman army was fierce and uneven.²⁴ The men of Kelmendi, with the support of their women—about 300 armed women—fought together with more determination than ever.²⁵ The Ottoman army, significantly larger in number with around 6,000 troops, engaged in the battle to stop the march of the Kelmendi tribe. After several days of attempts to reach an agreement, it was the Ottoman army that launched a fierce attack on the Kelmendi. However, after a fierce battle, the Ottoman army was forced to retreat with heavy losses and return to its trenches. During the fighting, both sides suffered casualties and injuries. According to some sources, the Ottoman army incurred around 300 casualties, while the Kelmendi lost 21 lives, along with 65 soldiers of the Pasha.²⁶

On September 16, 1707, a letter from the Venetian proveditor reported that the Kelmendi tribe, which had been relocated to Peshter, had gathered to fight for their homeland after being forced by Hodë Verdi Pasha to leave their homes. The Kelmendi tribe had lived in Peshter for many years, enduring great anxiety during this time. The pressure to convert to Islam had become more intense than under previous rule. Spiritually broken and restricted in their movements, they struggled to preserve their identity and uphold their traditional customs. While marching to leave Peshter and return to their homeland in Malësi, the Kelmendi faced fierce battles against Ottoman forces. During these clashes, the Ottoman army suffered significant losses, with around 65 Ottoman soldiers killed and many others injured. However, there were also losses and many injuries among the Kelmendi tribe. Despite this, they fought fiercely and managed to free the hostages held by the Ottoman army in Peja. Upon returning to their homeland, they gathered and, with great love and loyalty, swore an oath with the other members of the tribe to fight for and care for one another whenever necessary.²⁷ With every attack by the Ottoman army, the Kelmendi tribe was forced to respond with military actions to protect their families and sacred land. The tribe's leaders and people were deeply angered by the Ottoman rulers and

²⁴ *Arkivi Qendror Shtetëror (AQSH), Republic of Albania*, fund, 846, file, 21 Docs. on the facts and circumstances that led to the migration of the Kelmend people to Peshter in 1970 and their return to their homeland in 1707.

²⁵ *History Institute Archives (AIH), Republic of Albania*, fondi, p. 46, dok. Materials for the history of Upper Albania, presented by Jovan Tomić.

²⁶ *Arkivi Qendror Shtetëror (AQSH), Republic of Albania*, fund, 846, file, 21.

²⁷ *Il Montenegro de Relazioni dei Proveditori Veneti (1687-1735)*, Roma M.DCCC.XCVI, doc. „1707, Settembre 16, Castelnovo-Il Proveditore Straordinario al Senato“, 124.

were determined never to surrender, vowing to defend their land no matter the consequences. The organized departure of the Kelmendi tribe from Peshter, through battles with the Ottoman army, resonated profoundly in the public awareness of the time. It was seen as an event that, until then, had seemed impossible to achieve.

This moment, however, became a heroic and extraordinary act. The news of the Kelmendi tribe's migration from Peshter spread quickly, described not only as a historical legend but also as a legendary tale, filled with vivid imagery and intense emotions. The migration of the Kelmendi from Peshter to their ancient homelands occurred in July 1707. The details of this migration are captured in a letter dated August 31st, sent to Rome by Vincent Zmajeviqi, who provides full information about the event.²⁸ Still fresh in the collective memory, this event spread rapidly and resonated within Albanian and Balkan circles, becoming one of the most significant and discussed events of the time.

The return of the Kelmendi people to their homelands in Malësi in 1707 marks an important chapter in the history of the tribe. It is closely tied to the period of instability and tensions in the Balkans during the 18th century. Many members of the tribe were forced to leave Peshter due to immense pressure from the Ottoman authorities, which included high taxes, demands for military service, political constraints, changes in living conditions, and difficult economic circumstances. These pressures ultimately led the Kelmendi to return to their homeland and restart their traditional way of life in Malësi.

After their migration from Peshter, life for the Kelmendi tribe in their homesteads in Malësi was centered on the restoration of traditional structures and efforts to rebuild their lives according to ancient customs and culture. They focused on developing agriculture, livestock farming, and protecting their territories. Despite the challenging economic circumstances, the tribe organized itself to defend against external threats, including Ottoman pressures and other risks from neighboring regions. The bonds among tribe members were strong, maintaining an organized social structure based on cooperation and mutual support. Furthermore, they preserved their culture and traditions, creating a sustainable life deeply rooted in their unique identity.

Summary

The Ottoman military expeditions against Malësi e Madhe (Greater Malësia), and especially the Kelmendi tribe, began in the 16th century and continued into the 19th century. In 1613, the Ottoman Empire sent a large military expedition to suppress the Kelmendi uprisings, led by Asllan Pasha, who

²⁸ *Central State Archives (AQSH)*, fund, 846, file, 21, Document on the facts and circumstances that caused the relocation of the Kelmend people to Peshter in 1970 and their return to their homeland in 1707.

commanded a significant army composed of regional sanjak beys from areas such as Prizren, Peja, Dukagjin, and others. Again, in 1638, Vuço Pasha, with the help of the beys from Bosnia, formed a powerful army to defeat the Kelmendi. During the period of wars in Kosovo (1689-1690), the Kelmendi tribe played a crucial role and continued to be one of the main factors preventing the Ottoman army from advancing in this region. The Kelmendis achieved great victories against the invaders during this period, becoming a symbol of national resistance and independence. The Kelmendi tribe built and maintained strong fortifications that helped them defend against occupying forces, providing effective protection for the local population. During this long period of resistance, the Kelmendi tribe preserved its freedom and a democratic form of governance, which gave strength and cohesion to the population in the face of the Ottoman Empire. However, in 1700, the Ottoman Empire appointed Hodo Verdi Pasha to lead a new expedition against the Kelmendis, following the previous defeats that the Ottoman army had suffered from this tribe. Hodo Verdi Pasha, known for his military activities, was determined to carry out the task of subduing the Kelmendis once and for all. The Pasha launched a powerful expedition and managed to suppress the Kelmendi resistance, defeating several of the tribe's most prominent leaders, as well as employing repressive measures to halt any form of rebellion.

He regarded this war as one of the most important victories of his military career, completely destroying a significant portion of the Kelmendi forces. Hodo Verdi Pasha initiated a brutal campaign, surrounding the Kelmendi territories and engaging in combat with the mountain people under harsh conditions, including shortages of food and ammunition. The battles ended with the deaths of many Kelmendi leaders, while those who survived were displaced to other regions, such as the Pllaja of Peshter, near Novi Pazar in Serbia. For many Kelmendis, this displacement became an internment camp, where they were subjected to pressure to convert to Islam and lost their traditional identity. Despite these difficult conditions, the Kelmendis kept hope alive that one day they would return to their homeland. After years of suffering, the Kelmendi tribe resolved to take action and return home. They organized themselves and set out on a journey back to Malësi, fighting through a route filled with intense battles against the Ottoman forces. The fighting was fierce, but the Kelmendis, with the help of their women, fought bravely and resolutely to reclaim their lands. After a decisive clash, the Ottoman army was forced to retreat with heavy losses.

Zaključak

Osmanske vojne ekspedicije protiv Velike Malisije (Malësi e Madhe), a posebno protiv plemena Keljmendi, počele su u 16. vijeku i nastavile su se do 19. vijeka. Godine 1613, Osmansko carstvo poslalo je veliku vojnu ekspediciju da uguši ustanke Keljmendija, pod vodstvom Asllan-paše, koji je komandovao značajnom vojskom sastavljenom od regionalnih sandžak-begova iz područja

kao što su Prizren, Peć (Peja), Dukadın i drugi. Ponovo, 1638. godine, Vučo-paša je, uz pomoć begova iz Bosne, formirao moćnu vojsku kako bi porazio Keljmendije. Tokom perioda ratova na Kosovu (1689–1690), pleme Kelmendi igralo je ključnu ulogu i nastavilo biti jedan od glavnih faktora koji su sprečavali osmansku vojsku da napreduje u ovoj regiji. Keljmendiji su u ovom periodu ostvarili velike pobjede protiv osvajača, postajući simbol nacionalnog otpora i nezavisnosti. Pleme Keljmendi gradilo je i održavalo snažna utvrđenja koja su im pomogla u odbrani od okupacionih snaga, pružajući efikasnu zaštitu lokalnom stanovništvu.

Tokom ovog dugog perioda otpora, pleme Keljmendi je očuvalo svoju slobodu i demokratski oblik upravljanja, što je stanovništvu dalo snagu i koheziju u suočavanju s Osmanskim carstvom. Međutim, 1700. godine, Osmansko carstvo imenovalo je Hodo Verdi-pašu da predvodi novu ekspediciju protiv Keljmendija, nakon prethodnih poraza koje je osmanska vojska pretrpjela od ovog plemena. Hodo Verdi-paša, poznat po svojim vojnim aktivnostima, bio je odlučan da izvrši zadatak pokoravanja Keljmendija jednom zauvijek. Paša je pokrenuo moćnu ekspediciju i uspio ugušiti otpor Keljmendija, porazivši nekoliko najistaknutijih vođa plemena, te primjenjujući represivne mjere kako bi zaustavio bilo koji oblik pobune.

Smatrao je ovaj rat jednom od najvažnijih pobjeda u svojoj vojnoj karijeri, potpuno uništivši značajan dio snaga Keljmendija. Hodo Verdi-paša je pokrenuo brutalnu kampanju, opkolivši teritorije Keljmendija i upuštajući se u borbu s gorštacima pod surovim uslovima, uključujući nestašicu hrane i municije. Borbe su završile smrću mnogih vođa Kelmendija, dok su oni koji su preživjeli bili raseljeni u druge regije, poput Pešterske visoravni, blizu Novog Pazara u Srbiji. Za mnoge Keljmendije ovo raseljavanje postalo je poput boravka u internacijskom kampu, gdje su bili izloženi pritisku da pređu na islam i gdje su gubili svoj tradicionalni identitet. Uprkos ovim teškim uslovima, Keljmendiji su održavali nadu da će se jednog dana vratiti u svoju domovinu. Nakon godina patnje, pleme Keljmendi odlučilo je poduzeti korake i vratiti se kući. Organizovali su se i krenuli na put povratka u Malisiju, boreći se duž rute ispunjene intenzivnim bitkama protiv osmanskih snaga. Borbe su bile žestoke, ali su se Keljmendiji, uz pomoć svojih žena, borili hrabro i odlučno da povrate svoju zemlju. Nakon odlučujućeg sukoba, osmanska vojska bila je prisiljena na povlačenje uz teške gubitke.

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