Dr Angelika Ergaver (Institute IRRIS, Slovenia)

*The Deliberative Power of Kmeti in Montenegrin Primordial Society*

Regarding the historical aspects surrounding people with deliberational powers, it is worthwhile investigating the rural Montenegrin societal structure and the way of life of Montenegrin clans and tribes. Particular focus is placed on the patriarchal leaders of houses, clans, and tribes and their chosen representatives, the *kmeti*, who held an important deliberative role in the regular affairs of the community as well as in judicial cases and in arbitrage. It is evident in the Code of Tsar Dušan that the clans and tribes in the Empire enjoyed a substantial amount of autonomy in self-governance and dispute resolution. The Code suggests that the Tsar has supreme jurisdiction over blood feuding and offenses regarding severe physical injuries, whereas minor physical injuries and disputes fall under the jurisdiction of the clan or tribe arbiters, called the *kmeti*. After the dissolution of the Imperial structures of the Nemanjići dynasty, their immediate successors of Hrebeljanovići, Lazarevići, and Brankovići gradually became Ottoman vassals, whereas the territory eventually became divided among the Republic of Venice (the coastal regions and the ancient and medieval towns) and the Ottoman Empire (the immediate hinterlands and the mainland regions). Due to its important geostrategic position, the Montenegrin and Northern Albanian tribes enjoyed undisputed autonomy throughout the early modern age.

The role of the *kmeti* was preserved until the emergence of State law in the Principality of Montenegro in the mid 19th Century. Legal expert Baltazar Bogišić has gathered considerable material about the judicial structures in use among the Montenegrin clans and tribes. Early anthropological works and the collection of oral materials have preserved the legal proverbs of the notorious Kanun or Code of Lekë Dukagjini. The proof of the judicial role of the *kmeti* is also testified to in the Dictionary of Serbian linguist Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, who explains the role of *kmeti* with that of the Latin *arbiter*. 