

The last of Albania's 'sworn virgins'

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The last of the sworn virgins

By Tui McLean

BBC 100 Women

Only a dozen "sworn virgins" are left in the world, as an ancient Balkan tradition where women live as men dies out.

"Albania was a man's world, the only way to survive was to become one," says Gjystina Grishaj.

As a 23-year-old woman living in the mountains of north Albania, she made a decision that would change her life.

She swore a vow of celibacy and promised to live the rest of her life as a man.

Gjystina's family have lived in the Malësi e Madhe region of Lëpushë for more than a century. A valley deeply nestled between craggy mountains, it is one of the few areas where the burrnesha tradition still exists: a centuries old practise in which women swear an oath to village elders, and live as men.

These women are known as the burrneshat, or sworn virgins.

"There are many unmarried people in the world but they are not burrneshat. A burrnesha is dedicated only to her family, to work, to live, to preserve her purity," says Gjystina, now aged 57.



IMAGE SOURCE, VALERJANA GRISHAJ

Image caption, Gjystina was taught to use medicinal herbs by her father

For many women born in earlier times, exchanging their sexual, reproductive and social identities was a way to enjoy freedoms only men could experience.

Becoming a burrneshka allowed women to dress as men, to act as head of the household, to move freely in social situations, and to take on work traditionally open only to men.

As a sporty, active young woman, Gjystina - or Duni, as she is known to those closest to her - was determined to be independent. She never imagined a traditional life for herself of marriage, housework, wearing dresses...

Instead, following the death of her father she decided to become a sworn virgin, in order to lead the family and be able to take on work to support them financially.

"We were extremely poor... my father died, and my mother had six children, so in order to make it easier for her, I decided to become a burrneshka and to work hard," she says.

Gjystina lives in a remote village; mobile phone reception is sparse at best, and harsh winters mean the road to Lepushe is often blocked with snow and the electricity is cut off. She runs a guest house, works the land and tends to her animals. As a burrneshka and head of the household, she also practises the art of medicinal herbs to make healing teas and oils, a skill inherited from her father.

"He cared a lot about medicinal herbs and passed the lessons on to me. And I want my niece Valerjana to inherit this practice, even though she has chosen another path," says Duni.



IMAGE SOURCE, BBC/DERRICK EVANS

Image caption, Valerjana Grishaj says life for women in the city has 'more advantages' than in rural areas

"Today, no one tries to become a sworn virgin," says Valerjana Grishaj. "Young girls are not even thinking about becoming sworn virgins. I'm a real example of that."

Growing up alongside her aunt in Lepushe, Valerjana found that the options for women in the area were minimal, with an expectation to marry young.

"A moment I always remember when I was in sixth grade of primary school. A friend of mine was in the ninth grade and she was getting engaged. She was only 14," she recalls.

"She told me that her husband would not permit her to continue her studies and that she needed to listen to her husband, stay with him and obey him."

Rather than either marrying young or becoming a sworn virgin, Valerjana moved out of the family home aged 16 to study theatre directing and photography in Albania's capital city, Tirana.

"In Tirana, girls and women have more advantages and are more emancipated. While in the village the situation, even now, is still a disaster," she says.

Although there are no exact figures, it is estimated that there are only 12 burrneshat remaining in Northern Albania and Kosovo. Since the fall of Communism in the 1990s, Albania has seen societal changes which mean more rights for women.

Valerjana sees it as a positive that the burrneshat tradition is dying out. "Today we girls don't have to fight to become men," she says. "We have to fight for equal rights, but not by becoming men".

In 2019, women's rights activist Rea Nepravishta protested at the International Women's Day events in Tirana. She took to the streets with a large sign emblazoned with the word "burrneshat" which had been struck through with a large red cross, and the words "strong women" written below it.

"In the Albanian language, when we want to describe a woman as a strong woman, we use the term 'burrneshat'," she says. "It is a word made up of two parts, 'Burre' means man... We shouldn't refer to men to show the strength of women." Rea believes the country is on the way to opening up, and has taken "many steps forward in a short period of time".

According to UN Women, women's participation in Albania's political and economic decision-making has **progressed recently** with improvements in electoral codes and processes, even if it still remains limited, and the pay gap has not been properly addressed. By 2017, women made up 23% of members of parliament, and 35% of local councillors.

But women's rights have some way to go.

"Sexism, gender stereotypes... and gender-based violence is unfortunately still very widespread in Albania," Rea says.

Data from UN Women suggests that almost 60% of Albanian women aged 15-49 have experienced domestic violence. And the UN Treaty Body Database reveals that only eight per cent of women own land, and remain marginalised in matters of inheritance.



IMAGE SOURCE, BBC/DERRICK EVANS

Image caption,

Life in the village can be tough, especially when winter comes

Special status

The roots of the burrnesha tradition originate from the Kanun, an ancient constitution used in Kosovo and northern Albania in the 15th century, upon which Albanian society was organised. Under these patriarchal laws, women were considered their husband's property.

"They didn't have the right to decide their own destiny, or to choose their own lives," says Aferdita Onuzi, an ethnographer who has studied the burrneshat. "If a girl was to be engaged - that was decided without ever asking her; neither the age at which she would be engaged, nor the person to whom she would be engaged."

There are still many misconceptions that swirl around the tradition. Becoming a sworn virgin was not commonly a decision based on sexuality or gender identity, but rather on a special social status it afforded those who took the oath.

"The choice of a girl to become a sworn virgin has nothing to do with sexuality, it is simply a choice to have another role, another position in the family," says Aferdita.

But becoming a burrnesha was also a way to escape an arranged marriage, without dishonouring the groom's family. "This decision meant they could avoid a blood feud between two families," says Aferdita.

The rules governing blood feuds have long been codified in the Kanun, which helped to bring order to the lives of tribes in northern Albania, particularly during its incorporation in the Ottoman Empire.

Under Kanun law, blood feuds were a social obligation to safeguard honour. They could begin with an action as small as a threat or an insult, but could sometimes escalate into a killing, after which the victim's family would be expected to seek their own justice by killing the murderer, or another male in the guilty party's family.

For many young women of the era, swearing an oath of celibacy exempted them from blood feuds.

"It was a way for them to escape", says Aferdita.

The tradition has evolved over time, moving away from forced decisions to active choices. "The difference between the classic burrneshat, in the ethnographic sense, and today's burrneshat is very important to note... Today it's a completely personal decision," says Aferdita.



IMAGE SOURCE, BBC/DERRICK EVANS

Image caption,

'I have always felt like a man,' says Drande

Gjystina wasn't forced to become a burrneshat - rather, she chose the life for herself. Growing up in Communist Albania, she felt men at the time had much more freedom.

"There were many moments you were considered unequal," she says. "Women were very isolated, they were limited to house chores and had no right to speak."

Her family - particularly her mother - disapproved of her choice, concerned that she was sacrificing her chance at motherhood and a family of her own.

For Gjystina, the sacrifice was rewarded.

"When I decided to become a burrneshat, I earned more respect," she says.

But for others, they chose to become burrneshat because they felt more like men.

"I have never associated with women but always with men. In bars, smoking..." says Drande, a burrneshat who lives in the coastal town of Shëngjin and refers to himself in the masculine.

"I have always felt like a man."

For Drande, adopting the practise was a way to enjoy the liberties of men such as smoking cigarettes and drinking alcohol, elements which are ingrained in the burrneshat tradition.

This included drinking the traditional Albanian spirit, rakia, historically reserved for men. Now, Drande not only drinks it, but brews his own. When we arrive to interview him, he proudly brandishes a recent batch preserved in a plastic water bottle.

"This will make you stronger," he tells us.

Drande says his choice to become a burrneshat gave him more acceptance in society.

"Wherever I went, I received special respect and it felt good. I was respected as a man and not as a woman... I felt more free this way," he says.

Although Drande is proud of the sacrifices he made to become a burrneshat, he also admits to feelings of loneliness, and says he has experienced doubt.

"I thought for a moment what it would be like to have a child who could look after me... I was very sick and no one was near to help me. But it was just for a moment, a split second."

At the time, facing a society with limited options for women, those who became burrneshat saw their choice as one of empowerment. It was "a kind of protest converted into sacrifice", says Aferdita.

However, in choosing to be men, they were inadvertently strengthening gender norms by accepting the role of women as inferior.



IMAGE SOURCE, BBC/DERRICK EVANS

Image caption,

Even though Valerjana has lead a different life, Gystina still hopes to pass on some of her traditional knowledge to her niece

Even in the capital, life for young women today can be difficult. Valerjana built an online presence through social media, to help advance women's rights. But sending out positive messages invited negative attention.

"I received many messages from men, even life-threatening messages... challenging why I was talking about women's rights," she says.

She has been photographing her aunt and other burrneshat, as a way to document a dwindling tradition.

"I hope that future generations will be interested in this topic, because it is part of our history as a tradition", says Valerjana.

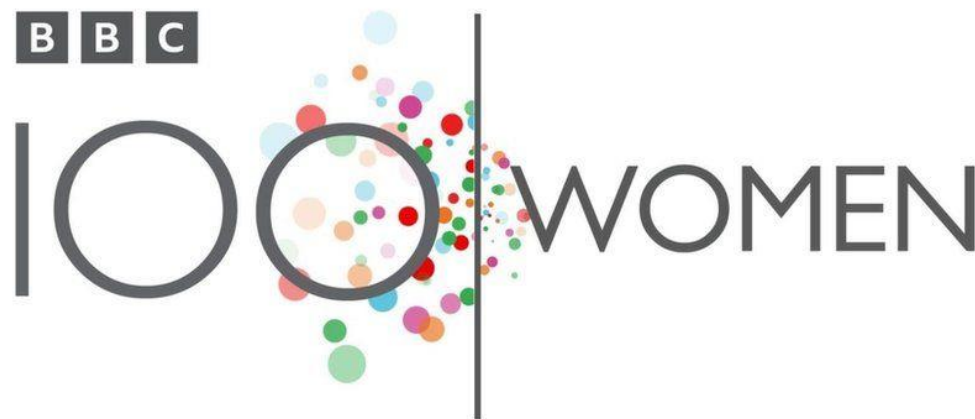
"Now you don't need to be a burrneshat to enjoy freedoms. As a modern woman there's no need to swear an oath".

Gjystina doesn't focus on the price she paid for respect, the sacrificing of her female identity, but rather the freedom her decision afforded her.

"There will be no more burrneshat, I will be the last one", she says.

She admits that while she might not make the same decision today, if she could go back in time she would do it all again.

"I feel proud to be a burrneshat. I have no regrets."



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