

**Transcript of the episode of Privacy Studies Podcast: The Mourn and Lament: Women Dwelling Between the Private Torment and the Social Expectations in Rural Albania – Presentation by Dr. Esmeralda Agolli (University of Tirana, Albania)**

Hello, my name is Felicia Fricke and I am Natacha Klein Käfer, and you are listening to the Privacy Studies Podcast.

This season of the Privacy Studies Podcast follows the discussions of the symposium *PRIVACY AND DEATH: Past and Present*, which took place at the University of Copenhagen and online between October 12th and 13th, 2023. This event aimed to bring to the fore the discussions of what kind of privacy, if any, we have given to our dead in different cultural and historical contexts. We will hear presentations by historians, archaeologists, sociologists, and other experts.

Transcriptions of the episodes can be found on the Centre for Privacy Studies' website.

In today's episode, we will hear the presentation 'The Mourn and Lament: Women Dwelling Between the Private Torment and the Social Expectations in Rural Albania' by Dr. Esmeralda Agolli, University of Tirana, Albania.

The photo I've chosen to put here, is a photo that has always, it has always struck me, and it's quite of what happens between our culture and other cultures. These two women are of a similar age. And this photo is taken in 1990s. It was right after communism had collapsed in Albania. The woman dressed in black, is probably in her late forties. And I said they are both of the same age. But she dressed in black in her early 30s, only 32. Her husband passed away. She was left pregnant with three other kids to raise, beside her pregnancy. And she spent the rest of her life with this dressing code. Of course, in my family, I've had other cases. And one of the reasons why, I inspired myself into this topic. This is my grandmother. This is my grandmother during the fifties. She was married in her 30s. She had my father. And when she was 40, her brother died. And actually, this is how I remember her for the rest of her life. She was only 40 here. And she only put her black clothes. And the rest of her life was with this dress code.

In Albania, we have, it's a country of 2.8 or probably 3 million inhabitants, population. Quite dynamic when it comes to religious representation. We have Catholics, mostly based in Northern Albania. Of course, there is a majority of Sunni Muslims. There is Bektashis, or what we call the Sufi Muslims. And the plurality or Orthodox in, in the southern part of the, of the, of the country.

But when it comes to death, and when it comes to our perceptions of death, and especially mourn and lament, religion does not seem to play quite of a.. it doesn't come be very different. And actually, to this understanding by undertaking a research with my students in the Department of Archaeology and Cultural Heritage at Tirana University. I was struck by this because I've, I've, in, in archaeology, I've been, I've been mostly focused on the excavation of prehistoric burials. And of course, that is a passive context, which does not tell you much. So as an archaeologist, you are always challenged to find interpretations, to find explanations to find so much. But when it comes to anthropological data, or better say ethnographic data, then of course, you know, things could be much better explained. You interview, you get to talk to people, you get to have quite of a, you know, a contact with them.

So with my methodology, what I did with, and also my students, I built it up a standard interview. And I chose to actually interview women that are actually mourning, you know, with their black clothes at the moment of the interview. We were allowed, and actually we took photos only when they gave

their own consent. We gave equal attention to religious background. And, you know, everywhere we went, we didn't somehow say that if you are Muslim, we have enough of Muslim interviews so we just moved to Orthodox and things like that. But I must say that we have a lower data quantity from the Bektashi and the Catholic groups, as compared to the Orthodox and the Sunni Muslims. So this is the, in total, we have collected so far 106 interviews, and this is the division according to the different religious groups.

So these are photos of my students. And some of them have actually written their thesis, master's or bachelor's thesis on the topic. And this is, this is a photo of, again, during the project in which we were interviewing a professional Northern Lamentor, a Vaitos, as we call it, in Northern Albania.

What was the interview? The interview was comprised of 10 questions. Actually, the interview was longer. It was longer than 10 questions. But here, focusing only on the women, I chose only these 10 questions. The other 10 questions offer much more a comparison between men and women. But since the focus of this presentation is on women, I only took this into consideration.

So why are you dressed in black?

Why should you be wearing?

Should you also keep a scarf?

How long do you mourn?

How many other times have you mourned previously in your life?

Is this an obligation?

How does mourning affect participation in celebrations?

And how long until you go back to your normal life?

Would you be judged if you're pregnant during mourning?

Or do you keep the black clothing? Or are you just, do you, do you want to keep it? Or you keep it because you are afraid that you will be judged?

And in which cases, this is the final one, would you consider taking off the black, the black clothes?

Now, if we think about death in Albania, and if we see the involvement of women in this ceremony, two of the most important aspects to consider.

First is the lament. And the lament usually takes place before the funeral and after the funeral. And it is a duty, mostly is the duty of women. It is only one particular case in which you see men lamenting in Albania. And that happens in north and usually comes known as the Gjama or the men's lament. That is, that is, that has its own specifics and men do this only to men, to honor them, and to, of course, put them in a particular prominence in this moment, in this very tragic and dramatic moment. With women, however, this is a photo that is taken from the death of dictator Hoxha, the widower of Hoxha. Besides other types of ceremonies it took almost a week, the whole death ceremony of our dictator. She also took care on taking some women from south. Probably that actually the town when Hoxha came from and also have him mourned and lamented in the traditional way through this, through these ladies from south. Of course, you know, it's very dramatic. And most cases there is a

gender division. So you have, you have women usually staying with the deceased. And then men staying in another, in another room. The highest expectation for women as mothers, as wives, as a daughter or nieces and so on, is that they have the main role in the lament at the death day. The deceased is surrounded by women. They start the lament with a sunrise, continue and continue until the funeral. The reputation of some women is established by the elaboration of their lament, which is spontaneous and comes out of your spirit. Men, only in North, as I said, we do the so-called Gjama. Women continue the lament during the commemorations, which are, is the third day, is the 14th day, is the six months, the one year and the third year, all these commemorations. And of course, men are no longer expected to lament.

But how is the mourning expressed? After you have all these emotional expressions that continue during, you know, before the funeral and then after the funeral with commemorations, at your home and so on, then what else is expected from you? I've treated this in, in this four, in these five different aspects.

In dressing and attitude, what is expected for a woman that is mourning?

Longevity? How long are you supposed to be dressed in black?

Limitations? What type of limitations design, design your life?

And in the end, is there an end after you, you know, have experienced, you know, mourn and the loss of someone and so on?

What do the Orthodox say about this?

When I asked about, you know, is dressing in black or is mourning an obligation?

They say it's not an obligation. It's an embarrassment. If you do not dress in black. It's a tradition passed over generations. Not an obligation. Mourning is about respect. Mostly it's moral and spiritual obligation.

Sunni Muslims would say it's not an obligation, but it's a way to show sorrow. Not an obligation, but it's a spiritual feeling. So in the end, this seems to be an obligation. Even though, We do not accept it though.

What is the dress and attitude?

These are all women who accepted to be photographed. And I thank them very much. But what do you, why do you dress?

You dress black clothes. You put a headscarf. And of course you are dressed in black from head to toes. And sometimes women who lost their husbands would also put a black ribbon that would be knotted. Which would probably mean that your fate had been just closed and there was no other chance in your life. You are surrounded to your sad fate. You must keep the honor and dignity of yours and that of the lost one. You shouldn't consider any decoration on your dressing coat. No makeup whatsoever. No accessories. And of course. The most common. Outings from the house are the visits you take to the cemeteries. If not, you know, putting flowers or just staying quiet, you are highly expected to start the laments, which in most cases is very loud.

Sunni Muslims have a similar dressing code. But some more devoted Muslims, so those that are devoted, in areas like Kukës and Dibër keep darker clothes, but not exclusively black. It is even said that we are influenced from the Orthodox. In some villages in which we have come across the two communities, some Sunni Muslims would say: We shouldn't dress like this, but because we are so close to the Orthodox. This is a tradition. Or this is a right that we have actually.. It is conveyed. It is given from them. And the Catholics do a similar dressing code.

What I did see with women that were much younger, in the process of data collection, is that there is only a slight difference. And they are in their late 50s or in their early 60s. Despite their religion they just.. They carry the black clothes. And all these women. Have been dressed in black for a decade or so. But they do not put a scarf. So that, you know, their hair is not covered at least in comparison to much older generation women.

When you ask about longevity.

Of course, for parents you are supposed to dress in black from one to three years. This is a natural six months to one year. A mother and father-in-law, three to six months. But what is actually so tragic, dramatic and actually sets quite of a heavy rock on your life is the loss of your son or daughter. And of course the loss of your husband.

I've made this table to show just some data. I mean, there are many other interviews, but here what I put and what I would like to draw your attention is for instance:

We have the current age of the woman: 58.

How long is she wearing, you know, the black clothes. And this is for 10 years.

And the age mourn, I mean she started to dress in black when she was only 48.

And if you see this and go here, 38 and she has been dressed in black for 26 years. Okay.

If you go. 57. Is there a pointer? Is it? So here you see, age of morning is 57, she's been dressed in black for 21 years and now she is 78 years old. So it is quite dramatic

So 55 years old now, 10 years of mourning. 55 when she dressed in black, 10 years, and now she is 65.

So if you look at these number it is quite interesting what you see when it comes to longevity.

And then of course you see for instance with women that keep it black or dress in black for.. the strongest and the easiest for them to be emotional is when they have lost their sons.

One of them said: For my son I keep it until the hair of Raven whitens.

Until my eyes shut down and I join him.

These are all women who lost their sons.

Another one she has been for 22 years in black: not much constellation is found even so your grief is compared to other with similar.. in similar fate.

What are the expectations though? I mean, it seems like they do accept their fate. And there is no other effort for them to see.. to consider a different scenario with their life. So mourning the husband defines your status as widow into the care of a patrilocal household. Not showing whatsoever any will

or intention even to consider another path in life. And with this I consider can I be married, re-married? Or taking care of your child, but not set up on such limitations.

Constrained in your black clothes you lose your inner self becoming the mirror in which the life, honor and legacy of your husband is kept in time. Beyond the dress code your social status as a wife without a husband implies no participation in celebration or happy occasion, carrying a household that is yet identifies as your husband's name, limited movements at most cases only in the cemeteries, and above all prudent behavior that defines your boundaries at work and at social connections or social service. And if anything this can be called to be dead while still breathing or living.

I will bring just an example of the son who spoke about his mother. She was not interviewed, it was her son. And what she was told at the moment, two days after her husband had died and she was left with two children: Your husband is dead and life will be difficult - this is what she was told – what are you going to do? Will you remarry or not? If you decide to get married your children will stay with us uncles. She said sharply: no, I will raise my children. It was the wish of my husband. And what they say: be careful what you say. If we hear words of a potential lover... this was.. we will kill you with our hands. And she says: if you hear anything, feel free to kill me, but I will not lose the head scarf and raise the kids I had with my husband. And then he said: she only took off her scarf when her son was getting married. Only her scarf. And of course, for husband and children, I mean, in terms, when it was asked in the interview, when the question was, is there an end? In most cases, they would say that we would probably consider to take off or probably lighten up a little bit for a marriage of son or a daughter. But that, of course, would happen after decades, first of all. And the second, which I've mostly come across, was that sometimes they would consider to, again lighten up a little bit when they were afraid that something even worse would happen to them. So they would have prayed. For instance, their son would get sick and they would, they would be like, this is bringing so much of bad luck, so much misfortune. So let's just, let's just lighten up a little bit. This is in the hands of God and we shouldn't mess much with it.

So mourning and demand beyond the extreme cases of husband and children actually decides our status and reputation even in other cases in which you are not supposed to keep the black clothes and the mourning for your entire life. In the house of the deceased is kept in silence. Sometimes with lights shut down a very little conversations and much lament, not much is cooked for a year, sometimes for two, uh, mourning established your intimate life too.

Yeah, I'm done.

Uh, no sexual intimacy is to be expected three months or a year during the mourn time.

At cases when pregnancy occurs it's so much of prejudice that interferes if you've fallen pregnant during the mourn.

And this is, this is the summary. I mean, to also go back to privacy. Death and the passing does mark a determinant boundary in women's life. Uh, and all this is due to the social cultural expectations that are imposed to them. Experiencing grief and loss in your own private way is just not an option, not only, but even when with the heavy burden of the lament and the black loss, you are in a constant process of losing yourself and conveying in the narrowest boundaries, only what is expected from you, a living image of your lost ones. Thank you.

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Thank you so much for listening.