

TTO NAME A DAUGHTER IN ALBANIAN TRADITION

Gendered Rituals and Reproduction of Inequality

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This article explores gendered naming practices in Albanian tradition, with a particular focus on Kosovo, where boys were often named with ceremony and public recognition, while girls were typically named quietly and without celebration. It examines how girls were given names such as Shkurte (“to shorten”), Sose (“to extinguish”), Grishe (“to tear”), and Mbarese (“to end”), reflecting the belief that such names could bring an end to the birth of daughters. Beyond a desire for sons, these practices express an intention to interrupt the continuation of female births. Drawing on ethnographic research, interviews, and case studies, the article demonstrates how naming functions as a mechanism and symbol of gender inequality and patriarchal control in Albanian cultural life in Kosovo.

Keywords: name, girl, ritual, inequality, naming practices

Introduction

A name, though at first glance a personal matter, is in fact a deeply cultural act shaped by social structure which plays a significant role in its reproduction. According to Norbert Elias, names constitute a dual form of identification: “the dual construct of the name – the formula noun + adjective – elicits both the ‘I-identity’ and the ‘We-identity’ of the individual.” For Elias, a person’s name is both “a symbol of the individual’s uniqueness” and a “calling card that shows who he is in the eyes of others” (Elias 1991: 184–186). In his philosophical essay “What’s in a Name,” Mladen Dolar argues that, beyond the connection of the name with identity, the name is an

element that includes a person in a social structure, marking their belonging, origin, and symbolic position. “By one’s name one always belongs to a certain social group, a class, a nation, a family, the names pin us down to an origin, a genealogy, a tradition, names classify us and allot us a social place, they distribute social power” (Dolar 2014: 58–59).

This article focuses specifically on the intersection between names and gender, not merely to highlight a long and culturally entrenched history of injustice in Albanian society in Kosovo, but to show how an act as seemingly simple as naming reveals deeper structures of patriarchal and masculine tradition. What appears to be a mere gesture of identification is in fact a culturally loaded act that encodes power, social hierarchy, and gender ideology.

Naming practices reflect gender inequalities through ceremonial rituals that are primarily performed for boys. These practices then extend and reinforce those inequalities through the names given to girls. The article will reveal how these names carry a dual purpose: they express the hope that the next child will be male and aim to halt the birth of girls, thereby perpetuating a preference for sons.

The article is divided into two sections, each addressing issues that may appear independent, but are united by a common analytical denominator: the name is also a reflection of gender order and symbolic power in society. The first section engages with literature from the 1970s and 1980s, particularly research by Albanian scholars (Pirraku 1976; Krasniqi 1979; Murati 1990) that wrote about the naming of children. These authors often implicitly critiqued gender inequality through their analysis of naming practices for newborns. In particular, Muhamet Pirraku (1976) documented dozens of childbirth rituals and ceremonies in traditional families, where naming practices were significantly more elaborate for male births and nearly absent in the case of female births. The second part of the article examines the significance of a son’s presence in the Albanian society of Kosovo, with the analysis being based on the naming convention.

In Albanian society in Kosovo, as in patriarchal societies in general, the son is valued as the bearer of lineage, a moral guardian, a source of labor, and a symbol of continuity and authority. Consequently, daughters have often been less desired or even unwanted. This preference is clearly encoded in naming practices. Girls were given names like Shkurte (“to shorten”), Sose (“to extinguish”), Grishe (“to tear”), and Mbaresë (“to end”), or were named after their mothers; it was believed that this would increase the chances of the next child being male. These naming practices are interpreted here as standing not only as a wish to have a son but also as a desire to stop the birth of girls. This naming strategy is not unique to the Albanian tradition, but is also found across other societies.

Methodologically, this article combines qualitative approaches to trace its central argument: naming, as a social act, is always related to certain power dynamics and social relations, and it also reflects and reproduces gender inequality. Desk

research in archives and early ethnographic literature reveals a consistent gender gap in the practices and rituals of naming in Albanian traditions in Kosovo. Expressions of joy, protective charms, and rituals were overwhelmingly reserved mostly for the birth of boys, reinforcing male-centered cultural norms from the very beginning of life. This does not mean that rituals for girls were absent, but even in practice and in the literature, they are negligible compared to the rituals for boys.

In total, six in-depth interviews were conducted with women who were explicitly given names to prevent the continued birth of daughters. Beyond tracing an identity trajectory, these interviews highlight the women's personal experiences of being given such names. These interviews were conducted over different periods from 2019 to 2025. Their ages range from 18 to 44 years old. Most of them, particularly those whose birth was followed by a son, expressed a sense of pride or relief, feeling that they had "fulfilled their mission." In some cases, our respondents reported feeling shame because of their name. The continued use of the name Shkurte for girls does not necessarily indicate that this traditional practice will endure in the long term. Similarly, the fact that younger women claim they would avoid giving such names to their own daughters to discourage the birth of girls still does not guarantee that this tradition will fade away in the near future.

Rituals and practices of naming

Ethnographic research in Kosovo, particularly from the 1970s and 1980s, was conducted by scholars at the Albanological Institute in Prishtina. Muhamet Pirraku (1976), Mark Krasniqi (1979), Fadil Sylejmani (1983) collected valuable data on the practices of naming newborns, paying close attention to the rituals and superstitions that accompany this cultural act. A common thread in these studies is the rich variety of rituals, ceremonies, and symbolic elements associated exclusively with the birth of male children.

At the very outset, it should be emphasized that, within the context of Albanian society in Kosovo, and drawing on both ethnographic evidence and the authors under review, it appears that these practices have developed in a markedly gender-asymmetric manner, privileging boys. This asymmetry reflects the historically heightened cultural and social value attributed to male offspring. Accordingly, the authors in question did not limit their analyses exclusively to male-related rituals; rather, they found an absence of documented ritual practices about girls. Muhamet Pirraku is one of the scholars who documented the rituals and practices of naming. His research, conducted during the 1970s and 1980s, focused on Drenica, a cultural region in central Kosovo. During this study, he found that traditional rituals were becoming increasingly rare. According to interviews with residents, the last documented instances of such rituals dated back to the 1930s. Since then, such practices have disappeared from the everyday life of the community. He emphasizes that,

according to tradition, the direct heir was considered to be the son, while a household with only daughters was viewed as a “quenched lineage” and therefore, the naming of boys was accompanied by a series of ceremonies and expressions of joy (Pirraku 1976). Below is a more detailed account of one such naming ritual described by Pirraku, steeped in symbolism and folk beliefs: After the birth of a child – a boy – the lady of the house would carry him into the men’s room (*oda e burrave*), where he was to spend the night without his mother’s presence, but accompanied only by the host and hostess of the household. The other men would vacate the room for that night. The lady of the house would bring in a three-legged stool (a *shkëmb*) from the kitchen and place it upside down in the center of the room. On the upturned legs of the stool, she would place a round loaf of bread (*çerep*) in a ‘prosperous’ position. On top of the bread, a pair of white woolen breeches (*tirqi*) would be laid, and the newborn placed atop them. The child was covered with a red scarf decorated with black dots. Beside the baby’s head, another loaf of bread was placed in a similar position, on which three equally sized candles were arranged. The head of the household would ‘name’ each of the candles with the name of an elder he respected: men known for their wisdom, bravery, and ideally their wealth. These could be men known to him personally or figures known only by reputation, but importantly, they had to be alive. After this symbolic naming, the host would light the three candles simultaneously and sit by them as they burned. When two of the candles had extinguished, the procedure ended. The name associated with the candle that continued to burn the longest became the child’s name. However, the naming process was not yet finalized. The chosen name was kept secret for five weeks. After this period, the parents organized a large celebration accompanied by specific ceremonial practices. The first guests invited were the three elders whose names had been used. At the start of the ceremony, the host would greet the guests and deliver a speech. At the height of curiosity, he would formally announce: ‘We have named our son X.’ Upon hearing his name, the elder being honored would rise and exclaim, ‘May you carry my name with health, X!’ This was a source of pride and joy for the elder. The lady of the house was also required to be present during this ceremony (Pirraku 1976: 129).

This is only one of the many rituals that were documented in Kosovo until the first quarter of the 20th century. The studies do not indicate that rituals of this kind continued after 1930, although the desire to have more sons than daughters remained a recurring theme in Kosovar Albanian society. Rituals such as these are commonly known as Rites of Passage, a concept developed by the anthropologist Arnold van Gennep. In his work (1909) he observed that ceremonies marking significant life transitions such as birth, adolescence, marriage, or death serve a universal function: they guide individuals as they move from one socially recognized stage of life to another. Although the external forms of these rites differ from one culture to another, their internal structure remains remarkably consistent. Van Gennep identified three phases common to all such rites: separation from a prior social role, a transitional or liminal stage, and finally, incorporation into society with a new status or identity. Applying this framework to the ritual in question, we can observe

a clear progression: the newborn boy is separated from the maternal domain and placed in the men's guest room, a space rich in male-coded symbols. Through this process, the boy is introduced into a system that emphasizes lineage, labor, and masculine authority. The ritual thus constructs him not only as a child, but as a future bearer of the family name and social responsibilities, reinforcing the continuity of traditional power structures.

Based on interviews collected by Pirraku in that region at the time, he concludes that this type of naming ritual was also practiced for girls, but with significant differences. He notes that "in the celebration, the objects used were typically those associated with women" (Pirraku 1976: 136). However, he does not provide descriptive data regarding these rituals, nor about the specific objects he considers typically feminine. While paraphrasing two women he had interviewed at the time, Pirraku states that "they thought that the candle naming of girls lacked broader ceremonial character, as it was believed that girls were not in danger from witches or evil spirits" (ibid.: 137). Nevertheless, his conclusion from this is that "the social position of women in relation to men in this region in the past was unequal" (ibid.: 140). However, this does not absolve these scholars from the fact that, in most cases, their work was largely confined to describing the few ceremonies said to have existed for girls, even though their research also brought them into contact with practices concerning both girls and boys. The fact that ceremonies for boys were more numerous and elaborate, and were given greater significance, is indicative of this historical inequality. "Male children are seen as heirs to the family, as a source of labor, as the 'pillar of the house,' whereas the female is considered a 'servant for another household'" (Xhemaj 2003: 173). Even the position of women was determined by whether they would give birth to sons.¹

This pattern is not unique to Albanian culture, as Eyo Mensah (2023) finds in Bette and Owe societies in Nigeria, where the naming of children is a cultural product and a powerful tool for entrenching patriarchal ideologies that privilege the namer and subdue the named. According to him, the politics of this naming regime entrench inequality and illuminate power and dominance against the girl-child. The choice of names is mainly shaped by cultural influences and existing gender ideologies and practices, where traditional gender roles are clearly defined and practiced (Mensah 2023).

Drawing on Jane Pilcher's (2017) conceptual framework, this process can be understood in light of his argument that, from an everyday, common-sense perspective, personal names are merely labels (naming words or proper nouns in grammatical terms) that serve to identify individuals as such. But he re-purposed evidence to overcome this functional fixedness about the objectives of names by showing that forenames and surnames are, in addition, doing or action words in relation to sex

1 As Tirta states. "A woman who gave birth to many sons would gain a respected position within the family, among acquaintances, friends, and throughout the region. Conversely, a woman who did not give birth to sons was called 'unlucky,' 'unfortunate'." "Often, elderly women who had not borne sons were labeled as witches, sorceresses, or as those who possessed the evil eye – even though they were entirely innocent" (Tirta 2006: 123).

and to gender. “Personal names are key both to the decisive accomplishment of the categorization of sex at birth and, subsequently, in relation to the ongoing management of gender conduct appropriate to sex category” (Pilcher: 812). Pilcher’s insight invites us to see naming not as static identification but as a performative process. Similar rituals marking a child’s early life and social recognition are found in many other societies as well. Across cultures, ceremonies surrounding birth and naming often serve to affirm the infant’s place within the community and to symbolize the family’s hopes for the child’s future, as Rubie Watson (1986) describes in *The Named and the Nameless: Gender and Person in Chinese Society Among the Cantonese*,

a child’s soul is not thought to be firmly attached until at least 30 days after its birth. During the first month of life, the child and mother are secluded from all but the immediate family. After a month has passed, the child is considered less susceptible to soul loss and is introduced into village life. The infant is given a name by his or her father or grandfather at a ceremony called “full month” (man yueh). If the child is a son, the “full month” festivities will be as elaborate as the family can afford; if, on the other hand, a girl is born, there may be little or no celebration (except, perhaps, a special meal for family members). The naming ceremony for a boy normally involves a banquet for neighbors and village elders, along with the distribution of red eggs to members of the community. The first name a child is given is referred to as his or her ming. (1986: 620–621)

In the context of this article, we show that names play a particularly active role in revealing gender injustice. Building on this perspective, we argue that the historical inequality experienced by girls and women in Albanian tradition, particularly in Kosovo, can also be explained through naming practices. Moreover, the fact that many more ceremonies and rituals were not only described by early Albanian scholars of the field, but also occurred more frequently for boys than for girls, reflects the greater importance that families attached to sons over daughters. Beyond the mere desire to have a son, tradition also produced practices that functioned as strategies aimed at reducing the birth of girls.

Naming daughters to halt further female births

Across patriarchal societies, family structures and reproductive expectations are deeply shaped by entrenched gender hierarchies and the desire to have male offspring, where sons are often associated with lineage continuation, economic security, and social status (Chao et al.: 2019; Fors and Lindskog 2023; Bugden et al. 2021).

One striking manifestation of gender bias within these contexts is the practice of assigning symbolic names to newborn girls that implicitly express the parents’ desire to halt further female births. This naming practice serves not only as a cultural

expression of a preference for sons, but also as a performative act that encodes reproductive frustration into the child's identity. Ana Svetel's (2016) concept of the "double nature" of names that both individualize a person and embed them in broader social relations can also illuminate gendered naming practices in Kosovo. Svetel shows that names are not only personal choices, but also cultural statements shaped by social norms and collective values. As her ethnographic work was based on Iceland, parents in mixed families negotiate between creativity and convention, using names to express both individuality and belonging.

Son-preference remains a pervasive socio-cultural phenomenon in various parts of the world, rooted in patriarchal inheritance systems and patrilineal descent systems, the preference for male children often manifests itself through practices like sex-selective abortion, unequal investment in early childhood care, and fertility behaviors that continue until a male child is born (Kiščenko 2021; Kashyap 2018; Myck et. al. 2024). In this light, symbolic naming practices may be interpreted as part of a broader repertoire of gendered reproductive strategies, embedded within social norms that value boys over girls.

Ethnographic evidence from Montenegro reveals how familial and social pressures to bear male offspring can lead to women undergoing multiple pregnancies and terminations until a son is born, often driven by expectations of lineage continuation and economic security in old age (Kiščenko 2021). Broader cross-national research in Central and Eastern Europe shows subtle but persistent gender preferences influencing family planning and resource allocation, with girls facing measurable early life disadvantages (Myck et al.: 2024).

As mentioned earlier, this is connected to many factors, such as the guardian of morality, the heir, and a source of labor and power for the family. In Albanian tradition, the desire for a male child is also projected through the naming of newborn girls. It is still believed that by giving a newborn girl a name like *Shkurtë* (Short – implying the shortening of the birth of girls), *Mbaresë* (literally End – from *mbaru*, meaning to stop or to be finished), *Sose* (Cease or Let it end), *Grisha* (Halt it or Cut it off), or by naming her after her mother, or in some cases her maternal aunt, it would practically bring about the end of female births and ensure that the next child would be a boy. This can be elaborated through the concept of sympathy magic (Frazer 1890), where people attempt to control events by technical acts based upon faulty reasoning.

Mark Krasniqi wrote that it was not uncommon for a child to be given such a name from birth, or to have it changed later, not only in hopes of ensuring good health but also with the desire to prevent the birth of more daughters, as he states that "this is the meaning behind names like *Shkurtë* (Short), *Sose* (Cease), *Mjaftime* (Enough), *Mbarime* (The End), *Mërzi* (Grief), etc." (1979: 107). Drawing from this, it can be understood that names given to girls may express despair or resignation, revealing societal preferences for sons and the burdens placed on daughters. According to Albert Doja (2006), the choice of a name can thus take into account exceptional or previous events, such as the birth of a series of girls in the family, or illnesses, deaths or other

misfortunes in the family. The practice was spread in situations where, after naming a daughter with one of these names, the following child born was a boy, and thus this was seen as a successful formula, passed by word of mouth throughout the area. In some of our interviews, we found that women who themselves were given such names, and then a boy was born after them in the family, felt very happy that they had fulfilled the will of their parents or extended family. In fact, the case of a girl named Shkurte, the fourth daughter in her family, born in 1982, is more extreme. She recounts that her father wanted to kill her, but her mother resisted. And since a brother was born after her, she says her father loved her the most among all his daughters. She herself says she feels happy and proud. This suggests how women may become both reproducers and sustainers of an oppressive social order and structure.

When I was born, my angry father wanted to shoot me. My mother didn't allow it. But when my mother later became pregnant and gave birth to my brother, that's when my father loved me the most. He said: "She is my daughter with a good foot who gave us a son after her." My mother never told me this event, but my uncle told me when I was growing up. My father had died when my brother was six months old ... I understood the meaning of my name when I was 7 years old, when I heard my mother talking about someone who was just born that they want to name her Shkurtë to stop the birth of girls. I felt very good in those moments, even though I never liked my name. (Interview with Shkurtë K., 43 years old, 19 March 2019)

This is not the only case in which women who were given such names feel good, as in a way, they perceived themselves to have fulfilled the will of their parents and extended family to have male heirs. In the case of Shkurtë K., we see a form of conditional love from her father when she says: "He loved me more when my brother was born". Her father loved her more because he believed that, in some way, she was the reason for the arrival of the much-desired son. In this way, we can understand a combination of emotions that is essentially paradoxical. On one hand, she says that "she never liked her name", and in the same sentence, she also says that when she learned the meaning of that name, "she felt very good". This can also be interpreted with the idea of Joao de Pina-Cabral, when in his article "The Truth of Personal Names" he says that the "truth of the name" – its ontological weight – indissolubly ties the person's constitution to the hegemonic order that establishes it: thus, seen as essences, persons are unitary and attached to a political and religious order and a socio-cultural tradition. "By responding to the name that is given to us at birth (or near it), we signal our docility before a pre-ordained world that establishes not only what can be true to us, but, most importantly, our own trueness" (Pina-Cabral 2010: 309).

Another interview with a girl named Shkurtë, born in 2007, gives us a different perspective regarding the desire to have more sons in the family. Shkurtë Rr. tells us that she is the fifth child in the family; however, after the first two daughters, a son was born, followed by two more daughters, including this respondent. After her, yet another daughter was born.

I like my name and I'm satisfied with it, even though the purpose for which I was named wasn't achieved, because after me there's another sister. (Interview with Shkurtë Rr., 18 years old, 13 October 2025)

This allows us to understand that the desire for a son, even for more than one son remains strong within Albanian tradition in Kosovo. Yet, Shkurtë's story also gives room for a more subjective analysis.

When I was in the sixth grade, the teacher, who already knew my family, said loudly in front of the whole class: "Do you know why you have that name?" I said: "Why?" He replied: "To shorten the birth of girls in your family." I said: "Ah, yes, I know that, I thought you meant something else." I pretended not to care, but in fact, I felt really bad, because he said it in front of everyone. I felt very bad at that moment. But now it doesn't bother me anymore. (Interview with Shkurtë Rr., 18 years old, 13 October 2025)

Without prejudging the teacher's intention, here we see a clash between the symbolic meaning that the name carries and the sense of shame that she experiences as a subjective feeling. Using Erving Goffman's language (1986), she experiences a stigmatizing blow and public humiliation because she carries a stigmatic marker that ties her identity to an unequal social expectation. Nevertheless, Goffman also helps us interpret this as a reclaiming of control over the stigma and a reformulation of identity when she says, "I pretended not to care".

According to Susan Benson (2006), naming practices reveal complex processes of disavowal and recuperation, and she argues that naming can become a site where recognition and denial coexist. When a girl receives a name that signals her family's desire for a son, her personhood is shaped by an absence, and she becomes both present and negated within the same act. Benson reminds us that names "bear the burden of their histories", they cannot be entirely purified of the social and emotional conditions under which they were first spoken.

Another interviewee had an experience that contradicts this narrative. V. G. was born in 2002 in Gjilan, and her maternal grandmother insisted that she should be given the same name as her mother. Her name belongs to a different generation, and she considers herself a victim of tradition, saying she never felt comfortable socially with the name she has, with the belief that this would stop the birth of further female children.

For me, this name only matters because it is the same as the person I love most in the world – my mother. In my extended family, there were cases where there was no son, and after several daughters, one was given the mother's name, being very naive and believing in this myth, if I may call it that. So, my grandmother decided to give me my mother's name, despite my father opposing it, but unfortunately his opinion was not taken into account. (Interview with V. G., 23 years old, 7 January 2022)

In Vaxhide's case, superstition did not work. "I am the fourth daughter. After me, another daughter was born. After her, my parents did not try to have more children". In the context of naming practices in Kosovo, it is not common for close relatives to be given the same names. The case with Shkurtë is an exception.

Both at my aunt's and uncle's houses, they had many girls. They said that whoever has 3 or 4 daughters should name one Shkurtë so the birth of girls will shorten and after them boys will be born. It turned out to be true, as both my uncle's daughter and my aunt's daughter are named Shkurtë, and after both, boys were born. (Interview with Shkurtë K., 22 years old, 20 March 2022)

In the Prishtina region, another renaming ritual has been noted, carried out with the intention of stopping the birth of girls. A respondent recounts that in her family she had heard about

an aunt who had no sons and went out on the street with her daughter. There, they waited for the first woman to pass by. That woman would be asked for her name, and after that, her name would be given to the newborn daughter, with the belief that this would stop the birth of girls. (Interview with F. T., 44 years old, 20 June 2024)

It should be emphasized that, based on our interviews and casual observations of these cases, these types of names have never been used for the first or second daughters born. They are most often used for the third, fourth, or fifth daughter in the family since this tradition is known to be passed from generation to generation. The question asked of respondents was whether they would act similarly with their own children. Shkurtë K., who is now a mother of a daughter and a son, says she would do the same.

Maybe it's not all about the name, since it's God's business, but even today I feel proud that after me a brother was born. I have a son, but even if I didn't have one, I would have given the name to my third daughter. Likewise, if my daughter tomorrow only has daughters, I will insist that the third daughter be named Shkurtë. (Interview with Shkurtë K., 43 years old, 19 March 2019)

Two others who have their mothers' names are against this. The first says,

No, because even if I only had daughters, I would be happy. (Interview with Sade H., 19 years old, 20 January 2022)

The second is even more categorical, emphasizing,

Even if my husband suggested it, I would have asked for a divorce from him. (Interview with V. G., 23 years old, 7 January 2022)

This suggests that the desire for male offspring continues to persist, along *with* the belief that such outcomes can be influenced through naming practices. These views are characteristic of a middle-aged generation, although interviews with two younger

women imply that a sociocultural transformation is gradually redefining the very notion of valuing sons.

The connection between the name of the mother or father and the idea of a successor as a girl or boy was also expressed in Serbian tradition. According to Vukanović (1940 as cited in Murati 2022), in some Serbian regions such as Timok and Bačka, there was a symbolic practice in choosing children's names: "If a woman gave birth only to daughters but wished to have a son, she would give the last child her own personal name, hoping that after this a boy would be born. And if she had sons but wished for a daughter, she would give the last male child her husband's name, hoping that a girl would be born" (Murati 2022). It is worth re-emphasizing that neither our empirical findings nor a review of the literature provides evidence that, within Albanian tradition, this naming strategy has ever been used with the intention of promoting the birth of daughters in the family.

Kosovo does not have a list of forbidden names. Nevertheless, based on the current legislation, a civil status official may refuse a proposed name for registration if it is considered offensive or degrading. Article 4 of the Law on Civil Status,² which regulates the characteristics of personal data, including names, states that such data must be accurate and preserve integrity. Article 36.3.4 specifies that the birth certificate must contain "the personal name assigned according to the legal provisions in force". There are also two Administrative Instructions: one on the conditions and procedures for changing personal names³ and another on the general procedure for registering birth, marriage, and death certificates,⁴ which grant municipal officials the right to refuse names deemed offensive, vulgar, or inappropriate in symbolism, and allow citizens to change their names if they feel their current name contains such elements.

Despite this, the names Shkurtë, Sose, and Grishë are not considered forbidden or offensive by institutions in Kosovo. According to the Kosovo Agency of Statistics,⁵ the name Shkurtë was given to a girl as recently as 2025, Sose to another girl in 2023, and Grishë to a girl in 2011, among others. Amid the names that carry the idea of stopping the birth of girls, the most widespread is *Shkurtë*.

The Kosovo Agency of Statistics provides an online service to see how many people share the same name. Based on this service, the first recorded registration of the name Shkurtë in Kosovo was in 1886 and the last in 2025. In its various forms – Shkurt/a/ë⁶ – 2448 girls currently bear this name in Kosovo. Following it is the name Fanë/a, first registered in 1897 and last in 2021, currently held by 246 girls and

2 Republic of Kosovo. Law No. 04/L-003 on Civil Status. Official Gazette <https://gzk.rks-gov.net/ActDetail.aspx?ActID=2743> (accessed 26 June 2025).

3 Republic of Kosovo. Administrative Instruction No. 10/2015 on the conditions and procedures for personal name change – Official Gazette <https://gzk.rks-gov.net/ActDetail.aspx?ActID=11168> (accessed 26 June 2025)

4 Republic of Kosovo. Administrative Instruction No. 06/2015 on the general registration procedures of the fact of birth, marriage, and death – Official Gazette <https://gzk.rks-gov.net/ActDetail.aspx?ActID=11020> (accessed 26 June 2025).

5 <https://ask.rks-gov.net/NameSearch> Kosovo Agency of Statistics (KAS).

6 Shkurta – 2096; Shkurtë – 291; Shkurt – 61.

women.⁷ The name Pakize/a, first recorded in 1927 and last in 2016, has been given to 172 girls.⁸ The name Grish/a/ë is borne by 167 girls and women,⁹ with the first registered in 1889 and the last in 2011. Sose/a/ë is held by 134 girls, first registered in 1927 and last in 2023.¹⁰ Two more recent names used for the same purpose are Funda – Finish (give an end),¹¹ first registered in 1970 and last in 2022, and Mbares/a/ë – to be over/to come to an end,¹² first registered in 1982 and last in 2020.¹³

In Albanian tradition in Kosovo, the practice of killing female infants because of their gender is not known. However, the practice of assigning names with the intention of preventing the future birth of daughters can be interpreted not only as a desire for the birth of a son in the family, but also as a form of protest or an expression of resentment toward the birth of a female child. In this context, naming practices in Kosovo reveal a form of symbolic violence, particularly toward girls. We approach this phenomenon through “symbolic violence”, the conceptual framework of Pierre Bourdieu. When a newborn girl is named Shkurtë, Sose, Mbaresa, etc., these names are not merely cultural expressions or family preferences, they are symbolic gestures that express disappointment, social anxiety, or a desire for daughters to stop arriving. In many cases, these names were chosen in the hope that the next child would be a boy, effectively turning the act of naming into a tool of gender-based rejection. Such names carry with them the heavy weight of being born into a world where female life is undervalued and unwanted. Drawing from Bourdieu’s (1979) concept of symbolic violence, this practice can be seen as a form of domination that operates through cultural meaning and internalized structures. The violence here is not physical, but it is no less real: it is a form of harm embedded in language, one that quietly marks girls from the moment of birth as less desirable, less worthy, or even as obstacles to the family’s hopes for a son. Because these practices are often wrapped in tradition and repeated across generations, they are rarely questioned. Indeed, they are often reinforced even by women themselves, who, according to their own accounts, have internalized and perpetuated them. And yet, they shaped how girls see themselves and how they are seen by others: not as subjects with potential, but as symbols of misfortune, burden, or shortfall.

Sometimes the looks from my classmates made me feel confused and angry about my name. (Interview with Shkurtë K., 22 years old, 20 March 2022)

7 Fana – 188; Fanë – 58.

8 Pakize – 169; Pakiza – 3.

9 Grisha – 142; Grishë – 21; Grish – 4.

10 Sose – 122; Sosa – 8; Sosë – 4.

11 Funda 54.

12 Mbaresa – 51; Mbaresë – 3; Mbares – 1.

13 Although the name Mbaresë can also be linked to the idea of the end of the war, since some girls with this name, 17 of them, were registered in the first years after the end of the war in Kosovo, as well as opposing names of this word such as Fillese and Fillojetë, nevertheless, a girl with the name Mbaresë from this generation admitted that she was named as the third daughter in the family with the idea to stop the birth of girls, but hesitated to respond further in the interview.

As Dolar would say, the name as a kind of marker of fate translates to us as a symbolic burden on the individual with which they have to live. “We can arbitrarily mark [our children], and they will have to make do with that fateful mark, live up to it, revolt against it, love it or hate it, but there can be no indifference; names inspire passions that one cannot escape” (Dolar 2014: 35–36).

This tradition also exists in other societies. In Kazakhstan, some girls are named “Ulboldyn” (“Let it be a boy”), which means a preference or wish for the birth of a son. “That is, assigning such special, speaking names to daughters should have become the reason for the birth of sons in the future” (Kindirova, 2019).

In the Bette and Owe communities of Nigeria, giving names to girls is more than tradition; it is a means through which patriarchal values are reinforced, favoring those who name while limiting those who are named (Mensah 2023). Another research indicates that “names play a role in shaping gender expectations and socialization from an early age” (Alexander et al.: 2021), effectively establishing the framework for how gender is performed. This enactment of gender roles often results in discrimination against girls, reflecting ongoing gender inequalities and neglect (Shijith and Sekher 2017).

Additionally, names are used to express the hope and belief that a social practice can influence a biological order. Through this, we argue that the naming, especially of girls with the intention of stopping the birth of more daughters, not only describes gender inequality but also reproduces it.

Conclusion

The naming practices analyzed and explored in this article reveal much more than cultural acts or linguistic traditions, they are windows into the historical and ongoing processes of gender-based discrimination. The rituals described and the evidence from ethnographic research show the inequality toward girls. Most naming rituals were carried out only for boys, and they were events that showed the family’s pride and joy in having a son. This was a way of expressing the value and importance given to boys, showing how much meaning and hope were placed on them. Even though there were some rituals for girls, they were few and not the same in character. They were smaller, quieter, and not seen as important. This difference clearly shows the unfairness and how girls were not given the same place or celebration. The naming of girls with the belief that this could shorten the birth of other girls, and beyond that, lead to the birth of a boy afterward, as Frazer helps us to understand and interpret, represents a symbolic act that aims to dictate a natural order in this case, the order of birth among a family’s descendants. Alongside this, the patriarchal anxiety over having male heirs places the girl in an instrumental, rather than an ontological position; that is, she serves as a bridge toward the hoped-for sons who are expected to come.

Names like Shkurte, Sose and Grishe are not inherently offensive in a legal or institutional sense, yet they carry symbolic weight that reflects a deeply patriarchal worldview, one where the birth of a girl is met with disappointment, and her very name becomes a marker of societal frustration or a plea to end the cycle of female births. These names, registered from the late 19th century to the present, continue to encode a cultural logic where female existence is seen as less valuable or even burdensome. The fact that the naming of girls as Shkurte continues does not make it easy to conclude that this traditional practice will persist for a long time. Likewise, the fact that young female respondents say they would not give such names to their own children with the intention of stopping the birth of girls does not allow us to conclude with certainty that this traditional practice will disappear in the coming years.

Understanding naming as a social act thus allows us to trace the contours of historical and ongoing gender inequality where language becomes both a mirror and a mechanism of oppression.

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Imenovanje kćeri u albanskoj tradiciji. Rodno obilježeni rituali i reprodukcija nejednakosti

Ovaj se članak bavi rodno obilježenim imenovanjem u albanskoj tradiciji, s posebnim naglaskom na Kosovo, gdje su se dječacima imena davala uz ceremoniju i javno priznanje, dok su djevojčice najčešće imenovane tiho i bez slavlja. Analizira se kako su djevojčicama davana imena poput Shkurte ("skratiti"), Sose ("ugasiti"), Grishe ("poderati") i Mbaresë ("okončati"), što je odražavalo vjerovanje da takva imena mogu "okončati" rađanje kćeri. Osim želje za sinovima, te prakse izražavaju namjeru prekidanja daljnjeg rađanja djevojčica. Na temelju etnografskih istraživanja, intervjuja i studija slučaja, članak pokazuje kako imenovanje funkcionira kao mehanizam i simbol rodne nejednakosti i patrijarhalne kontrole u albanskoj kulturnoj praksi na Kosovu.

Ključne riječi: ime, djevojčica, ritual, nejednakost, prakse imenovanja