

Eylem Kaftan's aunt was murdered 30 years ago. The filmmaker has set out to show why the killing happened



DAVE SIDAWAY THE GAZETTE

Documentary filmmaker Eylem Kaftan chronicles the "honour killing" of her Kurdish aunt in the film *Vendetta Song*, which premiered last night. She's holding a photo of the two main suspects in the killing about 30 years ago.

Focus on deadly custom

JEFF HEINRICH

THE GAZETTE

As a 17-year-old growing up in Turkey, Eylem Kaftan learned the family secret: Her father had a sister who'd been given up for adoption while still a baby. Digging for details, however, Kaftan discovered something the family didn't know: Her aunt was no longer alive.

In fact, she'd been murdered.

It would take Kaftan more than a decade to piece together the details of her aunt's tragic life and death.

The result is *Vendetta Song*, a documentary film narrated and directed by Kaftan in co-production with the National Film Board of Canada.

The film had its premiere yesterday in Montreal at the Rendez-Vous du Cinéma Québécois.

"I'm not an aggressive person, but my aunt's murder deeply upsets me," said Kaftan, 30, a Kurd who immigrated to Canada six years ago and has lived in Montreal for the last four.

"I would have really loved to have met her. Making this film, unearthing her story, is in a way my little revenge against her killer."

What Kaftan learned, returning to southeastern Turkey where her family originated, was this:

Her aunt, Guzide, was given up because she was the product of a first marriage just as her mother was entering a second. The second husband wanted nothing to do with the child. Adopted by Kurdish villagers and raised communally,

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Guzide grew up into a strong, forceful woman who got married and gave birth to five children.

But tragedy struck. One by one, all her children died, followed by her husband. Under Kurdish tribal tradition, Guzide was ordered to remarry the eldest of her late husband's brothers. Against custom, she chose instead to elope with a different brother.

That sealed her fate. Dishonoured, the spurned brother tracked Guzide down at home. It was before dawn during Ramadan.

According to Guzide's husband, whom Kaftan interviews in one of the film's poignant scenes, the aggrieved brother shot the woman with his shotgun. Guzide later bled to death in the local hospital.

There was no investigation. Another "honour killing," as it's called in some Islamic and Mediterranean countries, went unpunished.

Making her film, Kaftan also discovered not much has changed in Kurdish custom since her aunt's death 30 years ago.

"People are still victimized," she said. "Bride prizes, polygamy, vendettas, blood feuds, honour killings — they're all still a part of life there."

Kaftan's own life choices have been nontraditional. Married outside her community (her husband is Craig Segal, a Reader's Digest researcher and writer who's half-Jewish, half-Italian), and not a practising Muslim (she prefers to call herself "culturally Muslim"), Kaftan is far removed in the West from what her aunt knew in the East.

Or maybe not. A spirit of righteous rebellion seems to link them. Now given a shot at posterity, Guzide, through her niece, is sending a reminder through the ages the bloody tradition continues.

Vendetta Song is to air in May on Vision TV and on Télé-Québec in the fall.