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Balkan Societies of “Social Men”: Transcending Gender Boundaries

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Abstract

As transgender identities worldwide have begun to receive attention from students of gender and sexuality, a curious Balkan (but more specifically Albanian) tradition of female-to-male transgender (“sworn virgins”) surviving to the present day – an obscure and ambiguous theme until recently – is worthy of sociological attention. The “sworn virgin” phenomenon is studied in a larger, ethno-cultural context, zipping through such complicated – and sociologically contentious – notions as patriarchy, blood-feud, destructive entitlement, etc. It is argued that the “sworn virgins” of the Balkans were forced to become “social men,” assuming masculine social and family roles, due to specific economic and social conditions that have historically prevailed in northern Albania, but also in Kosovo and Montenegro. Because all aspects of human life in northern Albania have been regulated for centuries by customary law, known in its codified form as the “Kanun of Lekë Dukagjini,” the swearing to remain virgin for life may be considered as an escape mechanism for some women who were forced into unwanted marriages and into relations of extreme economic exploitation and social inequality.

Las sociedades balcánicas de “hombres sociales”: trascender los límites del género

Al empezar a recibir atención las identidades transexuales por los estudiosos del género y la sexualidad, es digna de atención sociológica una curiosa tradición Balcánica, más concretamente de Albania, las “vírgenes juramentadas”, un tema oscuro y ambiguo hasta recientemente. El fenómeno de las “vírgenes juramentadas” es analizado en un contexto etno cultural más amplio, surcando los complicados y sociológicamente discutidos temas del patriarcado, las contiendas de sangre, el derecho a la destrucción, etc. Parece que las “vírgenes juramentadas” de los Balcanes fueron forzadas a convertirse en “hombres sociales” asumiendo papeles masculinos en la familia y la sociedad debido a específicas condiciones económicas y sociales que han prevalecido históricamente en el norte de Albania y también en Kosovo y Montenegro. Dado que todos los aspectos de la vida en el norte de Albania han sido secularmente regulados por un código de costumbres, conocido como el “Kanun de Lekë Dukagjini”, el juramento de mantenerse vírgenes de por vida puede ser considerado una fórmula para algunas mujeres forzadas a contraer matrimonios no deseados y relaciones de explotación y desigualdad extremas.

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Sociétés balkaniques “des hommes sociaux” dépassant les frontières de genre

Pendant que les identités de transsexuel dans le monde entier commencent à susciter l'attention des scolaires de genre et de la sexualité, une tradition balkanique curieuse de transsexuel de femelle-à-mâle (“vierges assermentées”) qui survit toujours – un thème obscur et ambigu jusqu'au récemment – est digne d'un regard sociologique. “Le phénomène vierge assermenté” est étudié ici dans un contexte ethnoculturel plus grand, passant comme un éclair par tels notions compliqués – et des notions sociologiques controversables – comme le patriarche, le sang-inimitié, le droit destructif, etc... On discute que “les vierges assermentés” des Balkans ont été forcés de devenir “les hommes sociaux,” prenant des rôles masculins sociaux et de famille, dûs aux conditions économiques et sociales spécifiques qui ont historiquement régné en Albanie nordique, mais également en Kosovo et Montenegro. Puisque tous les aspects de la vie humaine en Albanie nordique ont été réglés pendant des siècles par le droit coutumier, connu sous sa forme codifiée comme “Kanun de Lekë Dukagjini”, le serment à rester vierge pendant la vie peut être considéré comme mécanisme d'évasion pour quelques femmes qui ont été forcées à se marier et entrer dans des relations d'exploitation économique et inégalité sociale extrême.

Keywords

Albania, Balkans, social men, customary law, transgender

In 1855, Milorad Medakovic, a Serbian ethnographer, while carrying out fieldwork among the Rovci tribe on the border of Herzegovina and Montenegro, met with a girl called Milica who, not having any brothers, had vowed to stay unmarried in order to be a surrogate son to her father. Medakovic described her wearing male clothes, carrying arms and accorded the same respect in her community as a man.¹ A few years later, in 1867, Johann Georg von Hahn, an Austrian diplomat in the Balkans and one of the most prominent Albanologists, came across a few young women in the mountain areas of northern Albania who had publicly renounced marriage and had taken an oath to remain virgins. Hahn reported that one of the virgins had taken that decision because she had been in love with a man whom she could not marry. Another one had not wanted to marry a man her parents had chosen for her, because he was not of the same religious faith.² Medakovic's and Hahn's are the first written records known by us about Balkan women sworn to remain sexually chaste.

¹) Medakovic 1860, pp. 23–24.

²) Hahn 1867, pp. 31–33.

Although “sworn virgins” are part of a long tradition of cross-gendered women, living mainly in the uplands of northern Albania, Kosovo, and Montenegro, they have existed in a variety of cultural and religious settings in the western Balkans.

As transgender/transsexual identities worldwide have begun to receive attention from students of gender and sexuality, this traditional Balkan (but more specifically Albanian) female-to-male transgender surviving to the present day – an obscure and ambiguous theme until recently – is worthy of sociological attention.³ This, however, would require situating the “sworn virgin” into a larger, ethno-cultural context, zipping through such complicated – and ethnographically contentious – notions as extra-legal practices, patriarchy, blood-feud, etc.⁴

Among the tribes of northern Albania, where social life was regulated for centuries by customary law, known in its codified form as the *Kanuni of Lekë Dukagjini*⁵ the household (*shtëpi*) formed the basic unit of society. The extended family consisted of several married brothers and their descendants, who would form a single residential and economic unit – sometimes of

³ For the best informed, although very sensitive, account on this issue see Antonia Young’s hard-core ethnographical study *Women Who Become Men: Albanian Sworn Virgins*. Young is one of the very few scholars who has investigated the institution of “sworn virgins” at first hand, interviewing, in the last decade of the twentieth century more than a dozen of them in the villages of northern Albania and Kosovo.

⁴ Blumi 2000.

⁵ The *Kanun of Lekë Dukagjini* was not written and recorded for centuries. It remained in the verbal custody of the village or tribal elders and subject to modification or reinterpretation from time to time by assemblies of clans or villages. It wasn’t until the mid 1930s that the *Kanun*, which until then was transmitted orally from generation to generation for who knows how many hundred of years, was meticulously transcribed in its fullest form and published integrally in Albanian. The author of the text was Shtjefën Konstantin Gjeçov, an ardent patriot and Franciscan priest, born in Kosovo in 1874. He began his labors in 1913 collecting, sifting out and writing ancient stories as preserved in the repository of collective memory of the chieftains and the elderly in northern Albania and Kosovo. He provided the best, the fullest, the most trustworthy and most authoritative version of the customary law as remembered, interpreted and applied in a given community at the time he himself studied it. Indeed, in the form it is compiled, Gjeçov’s work is genuinely a professional piece of ethnographic anthropology. His approach to this “unwritten Torah” is that of the Talmudist: he surrounds quotes from the *Kanun* with his own interpretations, and reconstructs the “ancient law” on the basis of his own empirical observations. In numerous footnotes he draws parallels with the Laws of Manu, Roman Law, Greek Public Law, and the Ten Commandments. By the time of his death

perhaps sixty or seventy members.⁶ In the past, this system was common to much of the Balkans – the south Slav term *zadruga* being generally used in the sociological and anthropological literature to indicate this type of organization. The unity of the household – resulting from patrimonial lineage, common ownership of the means of production, and a perpetual need for common defense in a war-ridden society – was essential for the survival of this large familistic unit.

The north Albanian tribes were strictly exogamous. They invariably took wives from other tribes. Edith Durham, the renowned British anthropologist who was known in her time as “the Queen of the [Albanian] Highlanders,” reports that the rule was so strict that even tribes who traced origin from several brothers would not intermarry. All descendants of a common male ancestor ranked as truly brothers and sisters and their union was looked as incestuous and in the highest degree horrible, hence inexorably forbidden. The offspring, Durham was repeatedly told, would be blind, deaf, dumb, deformed – all kind of misfortunes would befall.⁷

Anthropologically families in northern Albania were strictly *patriarchal*, *patrilineal* (wealth was inherited through a family’s men), and *patrilocal* (upon marriage, the woman moved into the household of her husband’s family). Edith Durham observed that in such society, the genealogies of individual persons would be carefully remembered, showing a link by male descent with the founder of the clan, who might have lived thirteen or fourteen generations earlier.⁸ The clan of Berisha, for example, claimed the longest genealogy, stretching back to 1370, and perhaps 1270 according to estimations provided by Baron Franz Nopcsa.⁹ So strongly patrilineal were

in 1929 the final text was not ready. The document, as it is known to us today (see Gjeçov 1989), was completed by priests from his order, using Gjeçov’s manuscripts and notes, and published in book form under Gjeçov’s name in 1933. The *Kanun of Lekë Dukagjini* was first translated and published in Italian in 1941, than in English in 1989, and in Russian in 1994.

⁶ Durham 1910. As late as 1987, the author encountered a household with 48 members in the village of Dragobi (Tropojë) in northern Albania.

⁷ Durham illustrates this with a conversation she had with “an exceptionally intelligent” old man from Hoti, who was also “a great authority on tribal law.” When asked by her how many generations must pass before Hoti could marry within the tribe, the old man replied that “he hoped it would never be, for even after a thousand years the blood will still be that of Geg Laz (the tribe’s forefather), and they would still be brothers and sisters, and to marry your sister is a great sin” (Durham 1910).

⁸ Durham 1931.

⁹ Nopcsa 1912.

northern Albanian families that a child was believed to have “none of his mother’s blood” and relationships on the mother’s side did not count at all. Only male blood counted.

In such male dominated society, women were subordinated to and oppressed by men. The *Kanun* was stern and merciless. No other region in the Balkans created a more – or equally – oppressive culture for women than northern Albania. The differences were striking even in comparison with the southern part of the country, where in the early twentieth century, some measure of literacy, mostly among men, and the immigration of males to other parts of Europe, but particularly, to the United States, had opened the minds and changed the attitudes of both men and women to a degree similar to neighboring Greece or southern Italy. At that time, as Edith Durham put it, America had become “the Eldorado of the Balkan men” and had “a most fatal effect upon them.”¹⁰ Whereas even in neighboring and mountainous Montenegro in those years the morals of Montenegrin women were becoming lax “in consequence of the number of men who had emigrated to America,”¹¹ the remote highlands of northern Albania remained a desolated world, virtually inaccessible to modern and Western ideas and human behavior and a lockup for its local population that for centuries had clung up to their tribal customs and medieval way of life. Writing for the *Geographical Journal* in 1918, at the end of World War I, J.C. Barnes stated that no people in Europe have proved themselves more resistant to efforts of assimilation or change than northern Albanian mountaineers, and “if in many ways they are still barbarians, it is because they have [been]... cut off during the past five hundred years from all contact with progressive Europe.”¹² In 1910, Edith Durham described the northern highlands of Albania as “the only spot in Europe in which the tribal system has been preserved intact up to the present day and along with it a mass of very ancient customs... and primitive conditions.”¹³

In northern Albania women did not have the right to choose the husband whom they married; neither did they, as mothers, have the right to voice their opinion on any family or other matters. Even the Church had no control over the marriages. Marriages were arranged by the elders, usually before the parties had reached maturity. In point of fact, as soon as a son was born

¹⁰ Durham 1909.

¹¹ Durham 1917.

¹² Barnes 1918.

¹³ Durham 1910.

to a man, the father sought a suitable family with which to be allied – since all marriages were political – and if there were no daughter available, he bespoke the next one born. Indeed women were sold to the families of their future husbands in infancy or in early childhood, some times even before they were born. As Durham put it, the tribesmen “had no mealy-mouthed ideas about bride wealth. *Kam blé* (‘I have bought’) applied to women and other animals.”¹⁴ This author reports that “Throughout the northern tribe groups (Malsia e madhe, Pulati, Dukagjini and Mirdita) wives were obtainable by purchase only. The women of the tribes were the tribesmen’s property, and as saleable as an ox, an ass, or a rifle.”¹⁵

Until very late in the twentieth century, a “romantic marriage,” or “a marriage for love” was a thing unknown in the highlands of northern Albania. Women married the men to whom they had been betrothed by their fathers as infants or even before they were born. Infant sales were so common in the north that, unless a baby were brought in good times, it was impossible to find any wife but a widow. Durham recalls the Bajraktar of Nikaj saying to her that “all the daughters of good families were born betrothed,” adding that, even widows were not easily obtainable. If a widow had children, she and the children belonged to the tribe and she had to stay and rear them and she also became – one month after her husband’s death – the levirate wife of her late husband’s unmarried brother or, if he did not want her, of the next male relative in the house. An unmarried man could thus get a wife without paying for her – a great consideration in a poor family.

Then again, “If the widow was young, and had been married but a short time before her husband was shot, and had not yet born a child, she was regarded as eligible.”¹⁶ Most often a childless widow was sent back to her own parents as no good and the intention was to sell her again, possibly at once. A widow long married and childless was of slight value, as probably incapable

¹⁴) Durham 1935.

¹⁵) Durham 1935. Durham goes on telling the following story: “My first experience was at the house of a well-to-do Catholic of Hoti. He pointed to a swaddled babe in a cradle and said, with pride, that he had just sold her and received about £4 (= 59 Austrian florins) and would have the balance when he handed her over. His price for a girl was 20 napoleons at least. Some would sell a girl for 16 naps: he called that giving her away. He would not send the girl away till she was sixteen. Some did at twelve or thirteen, but it was not healthy. Nor would he let a youth have a wife before eighteen, unless the house needed another woman to do the work” (Durham 1935).

¹⁶) Durham 1910, 1935.

of child-bearing. We cannot cross-examine the authenticity of Durham's assertion that "in the old days marriage did not take place till it was certain that the girl was pregnant; sometimes not until she had born a son."¹⁷ However, one thing is certain that the birth of a girl was always considered a misfortune and very little price was paid for a widow believed to be infertile. She would be sent back to her father to be sold again for what he could get: an old-fashion rifle or something else.

Unless they were from a "good house," women were all the same: inferior human beings born only to please their men and provide for them. Durham refers to "an odd psychological feature of these arranged marriages," saying that "whereas the girls not infrequently resisted strenuously and refused to go to their husbands, I never heard of a case where the young man had refused the bride brought to him. In answer to many inquires, I always received the answer: "But why should I? God made all women alike;" Of the girls, they said cheerfully: "Oh! They get used to it after a week or two."¹⁸

Until well into the mid twentieth century, northern Albanian society was one in which life had always been only a hair's breadth away from death. Indeed, the laws of death had, for most of its history, prevailed over the laws of life. Even marriage, this sublime symbol of life, was often accompanied by a veil of death. In many regions of northern Albania, the bride's parents would give the young husband a "trousseau bullet" – part of her dowry – with which, the bridegroom had the right to kill his wife should she attempt to leave him or if she betrayed him. According to the *Kanun*, if the girl did not submit and marry the husband chosen for her by her father, she had to be handed over to him by force, together with a cartridge; and if the girl tried to flee, her husband could kill her with her parents' cartridge. If this was the case, the girl's blood was "lost"; it remained unavenged because it was with her father's cartridge that she was killed. The cartridge was given to the groom by his wife's father as protection for two acts for which a woman could be shot in the back: for adultery, and for betrayal of hospitality to any guest. For these two acts of infidelity the husband had the right to kill his wife, without incurring a blood feud, since the parents of his killed wife received the price of her blood, gave him a cartridge, and guaranteed her conduct.

The *Kanun* defined the duties of a wife as follows: "to preserve the honor of her husband, to serve her husband in an unblemished manner, to submit

¹⁷) Durham 1935.

¹⁸) Durham 1910, 1935.

to his domination, to fulfill her conjugal duties, to raise and nurture her children with honor, to keep clothes and shoes in good order, and not to interfere in the betrothals of her sons and daughters.”¹⁹ As for her rights, the *Kanun* summarized them all in one sentence: “The wife has the right to ask her husband for sustenance, clothes and shoes.”²⁰ In other words, the *Kanun* defined a woman as “a sack, made to endure as long as she lives in her husband’s house.”²¹ Although the husband did not have the right over the life of his wife, he had the right “to beat and bind her if she scorned his words and orders.”²²

The house was ruled by *Zoti i shtëpisë* – the house-lord – and “all the household obeyed him like dogs. If you asked why, they would tell you it was because he was the head and had the right to rule in his branch of the family – God made him had.”²³ According to the *Kanun*, upon the death of one’s father the domination of the house belonged to the firstborn son. The *Kanun* recognized the son as an heir, but not the daughter.

Among the tribes of northern Albania custom prohibited women from appearing before men who visited their families. Until very recently, no woman ate with her husband. Eating with a woman was considered to be very degrading for a tribesman. The men ate first and the women ate up the bits left over afterwards at the other end of the room, or, if Moslems, in their own quarters.²⁴ Imprisoned within the four walls of her home a woman had no idea what was going on in the outside world. In a house with thirty or forty human beings of all ages and both sexes crowded together there could be no privacy whatsoever for the men and their new bought brides. For a woman the world was the size of her house or her village. The average woman had never been beyond the boundaries of the village where she was born or the village of her husband, to whom she was sold.²⁵

Under such economic and social conditions, the only possible way for a woman to escape an unwanted marriage was to swear perpetual virginity. This practice of swearing virginity to avoid marriage with a man disliked

¹⁹⁾ Book 3, XIII, § 33.

²⁰⁾ Book 3, XIII, § 34.

²¹⁾ Book 3, XXXIV, § 61.

²²⁾ Book 3, XXXIV, § 58.

²³⁾ Durham 1910.

²⁴⁾ Durham 1910.

²⁵⁾ Tarifa 1998.

prevailed among Moslems as well as the Christian tribes.²⁶ The oath was taken in the church, if Christian, or in the mosque, if Moslem, but only after very severe measures had been taken to compel her – tying up, beating and starving. For a family to refuse to surrender a girl, even if the bridegroom had grown up to be a thorough bad lot, entailed a blood feud. Twelve witnesses, members of the same village or tribe, would take an oath at the same time with the “sworn virgin” as guarantors.²⁷ After the ceremony had been performed, the girl left the rank of young girls and assumed a position which came closer to that of a man.

Once the oath was taken, there was no way that a woman could change her mind to assume female roles again. The oath was taken very seriously; breaking it would bring shame onto the entire family and clan. Coon evokes the eventuality where a virgin broke her oath and married, for which she was to be burned alive; but he immediately notes that no such cases were known to exist.²⁸ Breaking the oath could instead initiate a blood feud and place the “sworn virgin” and male members of her family at risk of being killed. This could happen in case the “sworn virgin” broke her oath and married. Her previous (rejected) fiancée, with whom the engagement was usually arranged at her birth (and his entire family) were thus dishonored and were obligated to avenge the dishonor.

There is little doubt that the Balkan “sworn virgins” – the standard definition used in sociological and anthropological literature – became such by virtue of economic and social necessity. While many sociologists and anthropologists concur in this judgment, one should be reminded of the part that blood feud played in instituting this transgender phenomenon in northern Albania. In a country where endemic fighting often led to situations in which every male member of a family was either stuck hiding in their own house or dead, “sworn virgins” were called to fulfill important masculine roles doing men’s work and assuming male roles. The institution and a long tradition of the “sworn virgins” thus was born of necessity in this barren land racked by war, blood feuds and intense poverty. In times past, when the male line of a family was wiped out, a “sworn virgin” was entitled to take over as the head of the family.²⁹

²⁶ Durham 1910.

²⁷ Durham 1910, 1928, p. 194, 1935; Coon 1950, p. 24; Gjergji 1963, p. 290.

²⁸ Coon 1950, p. 24.

²⁹ Strauss 1997.

The death-toll exacted by the blood feud has historically been heavy for men in northern Albania. By the turn of the twentieth century, August Degrand, the French Consul (1893-1899) in the city of Shkodër, northern Albania, reported that there were forty two murders in one month in a single village in the region of Mirditë.³⁰ Don Ernesto Cozzi, on his part, writing in 1910, estimated that the percentage of Albanian males dying in the feud ranged from five percent of the total male deaths in Reç to forty two percent in Toptanaj.³¹ The same year, one of the Franciscan priests of Shoshi told Ludwig Edlinger that as many as eighty percent of male deaths there were from the feud.³² Noel Malcolm claims that by 1912, the year that marked the end of the Ottoman domination in Albania, nineteen percent of all adult male deaths in the highlands of northern Albania were blood-feud murders and that in an area of western Kosovo with 50,000 inhabitants, 600 died in blood feuds every year.³³ So fatal were these feuds in some remote areas that an old man was seldom to be encountered, in spite of the traditional longevity of the Albanian mountaineers. The men were killed off before they attained patriarchal years.³⁴ According to Matthews, in 1934 only thirty percent of the men in the highlands of northern Albania died in their beds,³⁵ whereas during the first forty years of the twentieth century forty percent of male deaths in those regions were attributed to homicide.³⁶ Pietro Quaroni, an Italian diplomat who served in Albania in the inter-war period, reports that vendetta, together with malaria, were the principal causes of the falling birthrate in upland Albania before World War II.³⁷

Antonia Young suggests, as one possible explanation, that the numerous fatalities among men, resulting in a negative male/female ratio, at times required households to “convert” a female member (who vowed not to marry) to a male in order to survive. This observation, even if it were true, does not amount to a satisfactory explanation on why certain women would choose to become “men.”

³⁰) Degrand 1901, p. 159n.

³¹) Cozzi 1910.

³²) Edlinger 1910, p. 84.

³³) Malcolm 1998, p. 20.

³⁴) Scriven 1918.

³⁵) Matthews 1937.

³⁶) Sestini 1943, p. 274.

³⁷) Quaroni 1966.

Young is not justified in assuming a shortage of men in northern Albania, a claim that remains unsubstantiated. In the early twentieth century, Durham, on the contrary, reported a dearth of women in northern Albania, for despite the number of men that were shot in blood feuds, there was “a cruelly high death-rate in child-bearing,” owing to the very young age at which girls were married. In some of the tribes where church registers of baptisms and deaths had been carefully kept for years, Durham encountered “a considerable excess of males” that were born and reached maturity. Then because male death rate from gunshot wounds was high, this thinned them off a bit.³⁸

The reasons which prompted girls to make this type of decision varied. One such reason was, for example, the desire to avoid a marriage arranged by her parents which did not suit her. As said earlier, according to the *Kanun*, marriages of young girls were arranged often at birth – if not before – or in early childhood. The *Kanun* was unambiguous in its dictum: “The girl who is betrothed may not reject the young man, even if she does not like him. If the girl refuses to submit her fate under any circumstances, and her parents support her, she may never marry another man.”³⁹

Most often, women who were sworn virgins did so due to the death of their parents and the responsibility which fell to them to take care of their sisters and younger brothers, or in the absence of boys and in fulfillment of their parent’s desire to have a helper live with them.⁴⁰ Because social and gender relationships were inextricably bound up with the preservation of the family name, with property rights and with the division of labor, “sworn virgins” were presumed to fulfill the functions of the head of the household and therefore even expected to die in the blood feud.

This said, one should not rule out an explanation from the exchange theory perspective, which has at its core the concept of reciprocity. Kingsley Davis’s assumption that sex can be “exchanged for something equally valuable”⁴¹ deserves some attention. For, contrary to all other women,⁴² one who

³⁸) Durham 1910.

³⁹) Book 3, XVII, § 43.

⁴⁰) Valentini 1945, p. 28, 1954; Garnett 1917, p. 24; Coon 1950, p. 25.

⁴¹) Davis 1949, p. 33.

⁴²) Article 1227 (Book 12) of the *Kanun* rules: “Women are unacceptable a) as Elders; b) as informers; c) as jurors or as observers of an oath; d) they have no voice or place in an assembly; e) they do not inherit from either their parents or their husbands; f) they do not incur the blood-feud...”

took an oath to remain virgin did so in exchange of certain economic and social benefits, that is to say, to perform certain social functions in their male-dominated society.

Specifically, we suggest that the very act of vowing to virginity could be understood as a “compensatory mechanism.” A “sworn virgin” gave away her gender, the privilege of motherhood and family and social roles related to it for compensation in social roles and entitlements that were assigned only to men. As a “sworn virgin” she could keep her paternal property during her lifetime. If she was the only child, she kept the entire property; if not, she shared it with her brothers.⁴³ A “sworn virgin” could be the mistress of the household;⁴⁴ she could participate in men’s assemblies,⁴⁵ although she did not have the right to vote. “Sworn virgins” dressed differently, either wearing men’s clothing or only changing a part of their dress to resemble that of a man’s.⁴⁶ They could carry weapons, and they could eat their meals together with men and smoke in their company.⁴⁷ A “sworn virgin” could participate in war and also in vendettas,⁴⁸ sometimes under a man’s cap, sometimes shaving her head like a man.

This is how Edith Durham, in her *High Albania*, describes a “sworn virgin” she met in the first decade of the twentieth century: “Here we found one of the Albanian virgins, who wear male attire. While we halted to water the horses, she came up – a lean, wiry, active woman of forty-seven, clad in very ragged garments, breeches and coat. She was highly amused at being photographed, and the men chaffed her about her ‘beauty.’ Had dressed as a boy, she said, ever since she was quite a child because she had wanted to, and her father had let her. Of matrimony she was very derisive – all her sisters were married, but she had known better . . . She treated me with the contempt she appeared to think all petticoats deserved – turned her back on me, and exchanged cigarettes with the men, with whom she was hail-fellow-well met. In a land where each man wears a moustache, her little, hairless wizened face looked very odd above masculine garb.”⁴⁹

⁴³) Durham 1910.

⁴⁴) Han 1854, p. 183; Gjergji 1963, p. 290.

⁴⁵) Degrand 1901, p. 155.

⁴⁶) Degrand 1901, p. 155; Durham 1928, p. 211; Çabej 1934/35, p. 223; Coon 1950, p. 24.

⁴⁷) Durham 1910; Cozzi 1912.

⁴⁸) Bourcast 1921, p. 205; Gjergji 1963, p. 290.

⁴⁹) Durham 1985, p. 80.

It was not uncommon for a “sworn virgin” to also change her name to a man’s name. Bernard Newman, a British journalist who traveled through northern Albania in the 1930s, reports on a trip he made through Albania at that time trekking along with an Albania guide. At one point in the journey Newman inquired about the fellow’s name so that he might include it in his journal. His name was Sabri. It turned out that Sabri was a “sworn virgin” and “to prove a point, Sabri tore open the youth’s shirt to reveal unmistakably female breasts.”⁵⁰

Be that as it may, taking an oath to remain virgin was not in fact functionless. It was a purposeful and functional social act with remedies for both the “sworn virgins” and the community in which they lived. For a westerner it should be hard to believe that a cruel and unforgiving social system with blood feuds that was laid down centuries ago in the *Kanun of Lekë Dukagjini* could produce such an escape mechanism for women forced into unwanted marriages and into relations of extreme economic exploitation and social inequality.

Rene Gremaux, who coined the term “social men,” is not alone in seeing in the institution of “sworn virgins” an inherent ambiguity and ambivalence substantially reduced by their classification as “social men,” as well as by prescriptions and restrictions concerning their sexual behavior.⁵¹ Mildred Dickemann, too, portrays “sworn virgins” as “transgendered individuals who have become *social men* leading masculine lives.”⁵² Anthropologist Andrew Shryock, on his part, assumes that the essential characteristic of the Albanian “virgins” was their “asexuality;” he considers them to be “culturally male.”⁵³

Having said this, “sworn virgins” are generally perceived as women who deliberately choose to become “men” rather than as an additional engendered category.⁵⁴ Also, no one has questioned the fact that these women are neither transsexuals nor lesbians as per Western definition. As Young demonstrates, her subjects never succumbed to the trends of the trade that would hastily label “sworn virgins” as “transsexuals,” “transgendered,” or even “cross-dressers.” Speaking of this, Young effectively explains that these largely Western and urban terms are all inadequate and would be out of context, concepts

⁵⁰ Quoted in King 2000, p. 27.

⁵¹ Gremaux 1989.

⁵² Dickemann 1997a, 1997b.

⁵³ Shryock 1988.

⁵⁴ Littlewood 2002.

which many Albanians, not least the “virgins” themselves, would certainly not subscribe.⁵⁵

From the position of a formal sociology, Georg Simmel argued that the introduction of a third element into a pervasive binary system can serve to mitigate the latter’s salience. In this regard, the occurrence of “sworn virgins” is a very interesting situation vis-à-vis the conventional reading of gender as a culturally informed response to a biological imperative. This notion seems to be overturned by the sheer presence of these “sworn virgins” – whom Littlewood wrongfully perceives as a “third sex”⁵⁶ – in a few remote regions of the Balkans, particularly in northern Albania, Kosovo, and Montenegro, who under certain conditions, by taking a public oath to remain virgins, are known to have “become” men.

There are a host of terms for the phenomenon in most Balkan languages: *muzana*, *muskobani*, *muskobanj*, or *ostajnica* (man-woman, manlike, she who stays) in Serbian; *tobelija* (bound by a vow) in Bosnian; *tombelija*, *basa*, or *harambasa* in Monenegro; *zavjetovana djevojka* in Croatian; *tybeli* in Kosovar Albanian. In the northern dialect of Albanian the “sworn virgins” were usually called *virgjinesha* (virgins, or committed to virginity). Whereas Rene Gremaux refers to them as “Balkan virgins,” Edith Durham used the term “Albanian virgins.” Most generally American and British anthropologists and sociologists have used either the term “sworn virgin” or “avowed virgin.” Among the Muslims in northern Albania and Kosovo a “sworn virgin” was usually called “*sadik*,” a word of Turkish origin, which means “just,” or “honest.”⁵⁷

All of the above terms mix linguistic gender in the same way that sometimes the “sworn virgins” themselves cross *social* gender lines. The common feature of “sworn virgins” in all these cultures is that a woman took an oath to remain sexually chaste and to live as a man, donning male attire and forsaking the dress, activities and speech that would distinguish her as a female. Then she occupied male positions within the local social order. She could become the head of a household; she could own and inherit property and she commanded the same respect that would normally be accorded to an elderly, biological male.

“Sworn virgins” were recognized in their communities in the role of a distinct gender status, similar to what modern anthropologists describe as “third

⁵⁵) Young 2000, p. 124.

⁵⁶) Littlewood 2002.

⁵⁷) Stahl 1986; Young 1996.

gender,” a term apparently introduced in 1975 by feminist anthropologists M. Key Martin and Barbara Voorhies. Once regarded by most Western readers as exotica, with little relevance to our “modern” societies, sociological and anthropological accounts of “third gender” roles and practices are used frequently nowadays to draw attention to the empirical evidence that gender categories in some cultures can not be adequately explained within the traditional dichotomous gender system.⁵⁸ Today, the term “third gender” – which should not, however be taken too literally – is applied most generally to behaviors (in Western societies) that transcend or challenge dyadic male-female codes or norms of behavior, as well as to non-Western traditional societies that seemed to provide institutionalized “intermediate” gender concepts and practices such as the Balkan “sworn virgins”.

What is interesting, however, is that in the western Balkans, simply vowing to remain sexually chaste, dressing as a man and behaving as a man earned these women the same respect accorded a man.⁵⁹ It is essential to understand, however, that “sworn virgins” were not men in terms of sexuality, that is to say they were not persons of one sex trying to be the opposite sex. Neither were they something like a *tertium sexus* (“third sex”).⁶⁰ They were men only in terms of *social role* and *social power* in the context of their societies; hence they were “social men.” In other words, they were “almost men” – men in all capacity but being able to have sex – for as “not-women” they mimicked men and were treated as men. To paraphrase St. Augustine in his *De Civitate Dei* (The City of God), a “sworn virgin” was neither changed into a man nor did she remain a woman,⁶¹ for being a female she was a man and by assuming male’s roles she was no longer a woman.

Dave King argues that gender reassignment – as in the case of the “sworn virgins” – is best conceptualized for sociological purposes as gender migration. Drawing parallels with the process of geographical migration, this

⁵⁸ See Jacobs 1983; Bullough & Bullough 1993; Herdt 1996. Towle and Morgan (2002) emphasize that the “third gender” is a uniquely Western concept produced by a society just beginning to tussle with the theoretical, social, political, and personal consequences of nondichotomous gender variability. It is thus an apt rhetorical and analytical device for the current historical.

⁵⁹ Young 2000.

⁶⁰ The term “tertium sexus” was first used by Tertullian in *Ad nationes* (To the Nations), Book 1, Chapter 20.4: “You [pagans] too have your “third race”, not indeed third in the way of religious rite, but a third race in sex, and, made up as it is of male and female in one.”

⁶¹ See St. Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* (On the City of God), Book 7, Chapter XXIV).

author points out that both gender and geographical migrants often see themselves as beginning a new life; “social membership and identity has to be reworked and negotiated; a new way of life has to be learnt; the old one has to be left behind.”⁶²

Certainly “sworn virgins” still exist, although in far fewer numbers than in the past. They are, however, not just sexual curiosities for the naive Western fascination. The “sworn virgins” of the western Balkans are a salutary reminder of the fluid nature of personal identity. The assumption that gender can be chosen and refashioned by its bearer thus is not simply a product of the tolerant and multicultural West. As Charles King points out, “even in (perhaps especially in) traditional societies, the multiplicity and mutability of gender roles can be striking.”⁶³

Finally, it should be stressed that the “sworn virgins” in northern Albania and in other parts of the Western Balkans today are quickly becoming a dying cultural phenomenon. This traditional gender role change will probably die out within a generation or two given the rapid economic, social and cultural transformation that is taking place in the Balkans.

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⁶²) King 2003.

⁶³) King 2000.

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