

BOOK REVIEW: WOMEN WHO BECOME MEN: ALBANIAN SWORN VIRGINS

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Antonia Young, *Women Who Become Men: Albanian Sworn Virgins*. Oxford-New York: Berg, 2000. 168 pp.

In the summer of 1993, the author -- an anthropologist at Colgate University and the Research Unit in South East European Studies at the University of Bradford - met the first Albanian sworn virgin in Northern Albania near the regional capital of Shkodra. She estimates there are about 100 living ones, most of them in the mountainous areas of the country's north. She met several of them and conducted interviews. Along with the pertinent sections of Albanian customary law and the small available literature on sworn virgins, these interviews provide the empirical basis for the first book ever written on this fascinating topic.

Young organizes her book into 8 chapters. In the introduction, she warns the reader to consider the institution of the sworn virgin an exotic and archaic phenomenon. In her opinion, it is the result of an extremely patriarchal society, shaped by patrilineality and patrilocality upon marriage. This is why the ethnographic evidence for sworn virgins is confined to the core regions of Balkan patriarchy, namely Albania, Kosovo, and Montenegro. To have male successors who continue the blood line and take over paternal responsibilities was, and continues to be, a priority. One of the possible solutions is the marriage of a daughter and the subsequent installation of the son-in-law as patriarch. But this is extremely undesirable for both sides.

The other solution is to change the gender of one of the daughters. She cuts her hair and takes on male clothing in order to act as the male successor in a family without male children. When one of the daughters decides to change gender, she has to swear eternal virginity; and the community controls the fulfillment of the oath. She is then acknowledged by the community as a man and acts as such: she smokes, visits the *taverna*, prefers male society, and makes dirty jokes. Thus, the institution of sworn virgin has nothing to do with transvestitism or transsexuality.

In the third chapter, Young discusses the so-called customary law of Leke Dukagjin which concerns the duties and rights of the sworn virgin. The fourth chapter investigates theories on the origin of the sworn virgin without being able to find plausible explanations, however, except for the general explanatory framework of Balkan patriarchy. The author differentiates three types of sworn virgins: firstly those whose choice was made in childhood by her parents, secondly those whose

choice came after puberty, and thirdly those who had religious reasons. The third type does not exist any longer.

In chapter five ("living as men"), the author differentiates between rural and urban sworn virgins and presents biographies of 9 rural and 7 urban virgins from the cities of Shkodra and Bairam Curri in Northern Albania. To take over the role of household head is the predominant reason for changing gender in rural Albania, whereas for urban virgins this is less obvious. In general, the common reason for all of these women becoming men was the need to fill a male role when no biological man was available. In the last chapter, the author asks about the future of this institution in a rapidly changing world. She predicts the breakdown of this social custom: improved education, massive emigration, and modernization have made it less likely for women to become men.

Three appendices (on customary law, the bloodfeud, and the history of the women's movement in Albania), a bibliography, and an index complete the book.

The topic is fascinating and the author mentions that many questions are still open. I would state on the contrary: most of the questions linked to the sworn virgins have already been solved as the social reasons and individual motives for the phenomenon have become clear. The interviewed women did not regret their decision, even concerning their sexual lives (although the interviewees are rather silent on this question). Antonia Young's book is doubtless a very great contribution to the knowledge of historical and contemporary Balkan cultures.

The only thing that could be criticized is the author's insistence on the impact of the customary law of Leke Dukagjin -- characteristic of the Catholic tribal region of Mirdita and disseminated in printed form for the first time in 1933. Young devotes an entire chapter to the issue, as well as one of the appendices; and she states that "many of northern Albania's people still live by the strict laws of the *Kanun*, whose 1,262 Articles, set out in the twelve 'books,' cover all aspects of mountain life..." (page 41). The problem is that this codex represents only one of many regional versions of the customary law. It is therefore doubtful to generalize the articles of this version and the sections on the sworn virgins to the whole region of Northern Albania. Another question arises in this context: Because Leke Dukagjin initially collected the customary law in the 15th century, Young concludes that the institution of the sworn virgin must have already existed at that time.

This, however, presupposes that an orally transmitted customary law has not changed over time and never reacted to new situations and challenges.

But this issue has yet to be fully discussed. In any case, these critical remarks should not detract from the impressive and convincing presentation of a difficult matter that has often been sensationalized in order to construct an image of Albania and Albanian society as an unchanged and archaic remnant of Balkan prehistory.