

"Sworn Virgins": Cases of Socially Accepted Gender Change

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Abstract

Well documented in the past, the phenomenon known as "sworn virgins" was thought to have been eradicated under the Communist regime.² They are not always recognizable, for once their parents, or they themselves usually as children or adolescents, make the vow to become male they dress and behave accordingly, and as such are totally accepted and even revered within their communities. The reasons for this female-to-male cross-gender role are various. Early records refer predominantly to this as the only acceptable alternative to not marrying the man to whom a woman was betrothed (thereby saving the honor of all involved). Until the 1920s, up to 30% of the male population died violent deaths, putting a specially high value on male descendants. Not infrequently the shortage of boys was redressed by designating a daughter henceforth to become a son. This tradition has remained alive in the Northern Albanian Alps, where bloodfeuds are being revived.

The following paper results from both archival and empirical research over a period of several years.

I first became interested in the subject through my own travel and study in the area since the late 1950s. There is an extensive literature, much written by early foreign travelers to the area in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and up to the Second World War.³ Amongst these visitors were such well-known figures as Lord Byron and Edward Lear. Almost all these writers referred to the Kanun, and many to "Albanian virgins". In this century Albanian anthropologists and ethnographers have also written of the phenomenon. I should particularly mention the English woman traveler and self-trained anthropologist, Mary Edith Durham who spent much of the first quarter of this century in all parts of the Balkans and even influenced British foreign

policy in the area. Durham switched allegiance from her early support of Serbia, to a lifelong concern with Albania. She met several "sworn virgins", some of whom are featured in her book High Albania.⁴ On a visit to Albania in the mid-1930s, it was several days before the travel writer, Bernard Newman discovered that his guide was a woman.⁵ More recently, the well-known Canadian novelist, Alice Munro has informed the world of the traditional phenomenon through her short story "The Albanian Virgin".⁶

Although records from the past 150 years have proved the existence of "sworn virgins" in areas of Montenegro and Kosova adjoining Northern Albania, the present study has concentrated primarily in Northern Albania.

Placing the phenomenon historically

It is in this northern mountainous area that people still live by the Kanun or Laws of Lek Dukagjin. These oral laws were first written down early this century (and translated into Italian in 1941, into English in 1989 and into Russian in 1994). They contain 1263 articles concerned with rural life, including the church, the family, property, land, work, honor and marriage. The Kanun also gives a detailed description of the rigidly gendered division of labor:

Traditionally men's work includes: all heavy manual work (chopping wood, sything, mowing, harvesting, protecting animals and property); talking to visitors, drinking and smoking with visitors, avenging family honor.

Women's tasks include: bearing and rearing children; cooking and cleaning house; serving men and guests (including washing their feet); carrying water and firewood; seeing to dairy production and taking it to market; storing and processing food; processing and weaving wool; washing and mending clothes; manufacturing garments for the family, for trousseaux and for sale; embroidering garments and linen. Additionally they must do men's work at times of feuds or particular harvests, and they may also be seen spinning or knitting at the same time as performing several of the above tasks.

Traditional rural society in Northern Albania

Anthropologically this is a strictly patriarchal, patrilocal, patrilineal society where the social pressure of the fis (tribe) asserts a major influence. Tradition determines the need for household heads (=men, formerly who carried guns). The importance of "honor" is also a determinant of this need for men.

Bloodfeuds are highly ritualized in accordance with the Kanun, so that single killings are not seen as murder, but as the avenger's greatest dignity in saving the honor of his family - even when he knows it will result shortly in his own or his close kin's death.

Reasons for the shortage of men

Violent deaths resulting from the return of bloodfeuds after the fall of Communism (1991), along with the migration of young males in search of work elsewhere have combined to cause the recurrence of a shortage of men.

The need for responsible men

The role of household head is a position of greater prestige even than that of an ordinary man. He is needed to inherit property (although women do now have this right according the state laws, few would dare to demand that right in opposition to the Kanun);⁷ to represent their household at village meetings; to control the family; to manage, maintain and protect the property and any sales or purchases; to make decisions for the whole of their household (which traditionally had 60-100 members; a few such families still exist although 15-20 now is more usual), especially concerning family honor, marriages, education and/or occupation.

Man's prestige - woman's loss of identity

Article XXIX of the Kanun states:

a woman is known as a sack made to endure as long as she lives in her husband's

house. Her parents do not interfere in her affairs, but they bear the responsibility for her and must answer for anything dishonorable that she does.

The ritual sobbing of a bride at leaving her parents' home signifies her own loss of identity. Traditionally the bride's parents supply a bullet to the new bridegroom, giving him the encouragement to shoot his new wife should she betray him in one of two ways.⁸

As a nuse (new bride), (the name by which she will now be known until another son marries) she will become the most subordinate (beautifyl/dutiful) person in her husband's family's home and be expected to be up first in the morning and to serve all their needs continuously all day long.⁹ She should not be seen communicating in any way with her husband; if it is essential to speak to him, she should do so in whispers.¹⁰ She has become an acquisition of the family. Only by producing a son, will a nuse gain status, however, although her son is considered to belong to the family, she remains an outsider. Guiseppe Valentini¹¹ spoke to a man who believed there was no way to be allowed into Heaven without a son, essential for life after death.

Rapid social change

Now in some areas where there is not even running water, there is a proliferation of TV - (thanks to Enver Hoxha's many 5-year plans bringing electricity to those remote areas). However, there is much less impact on Northern Albania than other parts of the country, due to very poor infrastructure, leaving remote areas still very little affected (MTV looks like fairy tales from another planet). But changes are certainly taking place.

The confusion over land distribution has not been uniformly resolved. Varying criteria have been applied. Co-operatives were looted and vandalized. Government decree granted everyone a portion of land, but was unable to arrange the apportionment. Some demanded the land they had worked for 50 years, some demanded the land which had been taken from their family during the 50 years. Many have been left landless and forced to migrate. With these difficulties over land distribution and irrigation rights, disputes are erupting and bloodfeuds are re-emerging, said to be involving about 60,000 people in about 2,000 feuds,¹² 5,000 killings in the last five years.¹³

Sworn virgins

There are many different terms used to refer to these women who fill the place for which there is no man, although none of the (approximately fifteen), I have met, seemed aware of any special term, preferring to think of themselves simply as men.

Terms

Vaze e betuar (most common in present-day) where the decision is made in childhood or even at birth by parents lacking sons.

Mashkull (present-day, around Shkodra)

Later decision: Virgjineshe (committed to virginity), Virgjereshë (Shyrock, 1988), verginesa (Gremaux, 1989 - he also uses "Balkan virgin"), virgjin (Gjergi, 1979), verghinesha (Cozzi, 1912), "Albanian virgin" (Durham, 1909), "sworn virgin", "avowed virgin" (US/UK anthropologists), muskobani, muskobanj, ostajnica (Serbian: man-woman, manlike, she who stays), tombelija, basa, harambasa (Montenegrin), tobelija (Bosnian: bound by a vow), zavjetovana djevojka (Croatian), sadik (Stahl, Turkish moslem: honest, just)

Rene Gremaux has identified a variant: semi-religious women who wore black, behaved as nuns, but lived in parental homes (1915-1912) and were known as murgesha or morga. The anthropologist, Mildred Dickemann, has noted that they are: "transgendered individuals who have become social men leading masculine lives".¹⁴ Rene Gremaux comments that: In Balkan virgins we see an inherent ambiguity and ambivalence substantially reduced by their classifications as "social men", as well as by prescriptions and restrictions concerning their sexual behaviour.¹⁵

Once the decision is made, often accompanied by a vow of chastity, social pressures ensure that the change is not reversed. The advantages of "sworn virgin" status are that most remain heads of their own family/kin. It is usually a role they have taken from birth or early childhood. A woman's alternative as a "sworn virgin" allows her to carry on the name and inheritance "to prevent the house, the hearth and the candle from being extinguished" (it may then go to nephews in the next generation). "Sworn virgins" adapt their own speech and

mannerisms such that many would not tell their true sexual identity. Others relate to them as men, usually using male pronouns either in addressing them or in speaking of them.

The anthropologist Andrew Shryock tells us: the essential character of the "Albanian virgin" was her asexuality, her unwillingness to marry ... she was culturally "male".¹⁶

The film director, Srdjan Karanavic, who made the film Virdzina¹⁷ says "a sworn virgin is not a man in terms of sexuality, but in terms of social power". What is of concern is the importance of carrying on the name and inheritance.

Case histories

Of the "sworn virgins" whom I have interviewed, I discuss three below.

Pashke

Orphaned at a year old, Pashke now lives with her invalid uncle in a remote mountain village where she was brought up by her grandmother and this uncle. Shortly after her grandmother's death when Pashke was eighteen, her uncle was taken to hospital in Shkoder, 50 miles away. The petite Pashke made the journey twice each month for seven months to visit her uncle in hospital, walking most of the mountainous way.

Although Pashke had never met a "sworn virgin", she knew of her traditional right according to the Kanun laws under whose influence her people have lived for centuries. In order to make the long journeys, Pashke made the decision to forsake life as a woman: "a girl alone could not undertake such journeys" she said simply, and "to dress as a man earns the respect due to a man".

Pashke had been a Commune worker under Communism. on his return from hospital, her uncle could only respond with gratitude to his niece who now works on their tiny smallholding. Her uncle appreciates her as a son; her neighbors relate to her as a man. She admits to being lonely at times. Social outings are few in the village, but Pashke smokes and drinks with the men at weddings, funerals and occasional village meetings.

Lule

Lule showed me photographs of herself as a young man: driving tractors and trucks - her occupation since the age of fourteen - and attending weddings in smart masculine attire. It was particularly her firm, assertive stance that stood out for me, as an observer well accustomed to seeing women in trousers. This trait seemed especially exaggerated alongside the feminine attire and comparatively reticent behavior of the village women - to all around, Lule is certainly seen as a man.

Lule was the tenth child in a family of eleven. After seven daughters, her mother gave birth to twin boys, one of whom died shortly after. Pjeter, the surviving twin, was thoroughly spoiled and would not accept his responsibilities as the only son in a family with nine daughters. Lule had always behaved as a boy as long as she can remember. Her older sister, Drane, who never married due to ill health, says "we tried to dress Lule in skirts, but she always refused. And we made such a fuss of Pjeter when he was little he became incapable of doing anything for himself". Lule always knew she didn't want to marry: "I used to run away when I was a child if I heard that anyone was coming to try to arrange my marriage". It became increasingly obvious that Pjeter was incompetent to become the head of the household and representative at village meetings "and in any case he had always accepted me as an older brother", said Lule. On the death of their parents only a year after Pjeter married, Lule naturally took the household leadership. Now she runs a small business with her own welding machine. She never regretted her choice: "I wouldn't have it otherwise ... here I am in control, I have a large family. We have enough land for us all to live from when it is properly managed, I enjoy taking charge of going to market and trading our produce for household necessities. Work is the most important thing in my life, though I do miss the company of my workmates from the days when I was a tractor driver". Pjeter's wife confirmed the need for Lule as head of a household of ten: "I did find the situation odd when I was first married" she admitted "but I soon got used to it, and now Lule is like a brother to me". Pjeter does little to help in the family, who all look to Lule for both outside income and family decision-making. Lule does all the chopping, planting and mowing to produce the animal feed they sell. There are now six children in the household - some of them have asked why they call Lule "aunt" when she's a man.

Dilor

In another small village, outside Bajram Curri, the 84-year-old Dilor presided over the Bujari household. When I met her in 1994, her nephew Gjoke told me "He still commands extraordinary respect from all around, though no longer able to take the active role he fulfilled during most of his life".

At the age of six, while walking in the woods, Dile met a herbal doctor from whom she learnt the properties of the local plants. She applied herbal remedies ever after, and doctors from the local hospital came to seek her advice. By the age of eight, with two sisters and no brothers, Dile added the neuter ending to her name (forming Dilor) and made the decision to become a boy, never to marry, but to gain the advantages of a man's life. She called a meeting of all her relatives, and despite their lack of enthusiasm concerning her choice, Dilor stood by it and soon earned respect both of her family and of all their neighbors. On the death of her mother, Dilor's father remarried and had a son, Nikoll, but this did not affect Dilor's decision. Later when their parents died, Dilor and Nikoll built their own house. Nikoll married, his son also married, and although the household now consisted of seven, Dilor was still the representative at village meetings. During the Communist era this family was one of the last to relinquish their land, which was eventually taken by force. Dilor, a devout Catholic, often received police visits on this account, but held her own in these potential confrontations: "I knew how to talk to these men, sometimes I bribed them; I made sure my family gave them traditional hospitality but in the end it was officials from further afield who implemented confiscation of our land". Nikoll recalls: "they didn't dare arrest Dilor, he was held in such high regard by the whole village".

She was frequently asked to represent the village as "headman" in the dasmor (traditional custom of fetching a bride to her wedding), for which Dilor would wear a xhamadan (embroidered ceremonial marriage waistcoat worn by men on these occasions).

Gjoke's wife found it strange when she first married into the household, but acquiesced: "it's my responsibility to work for Dilor, even if she is at times whimsical". Many comment on her use of strong swear words, deemed appropriate only for men. Dilor (whose male attire was always of traditional style, including "skull cap") frequently walked considerable distances to visit people in surrounding areas.

Dilor told a story of a man who once challenged what might be uncovered below her belt: "I pointed my gun at him and threatened to kill him; he finished up pleading for his life!" She used to enjoy amusing her friends by making advances towards outsider girls who didn't know her true sex but revealed the truth as they became uneasy at her advances. Her greatest regret is that: "the Communists took away my horse and my gun".

* * *

Clarification should be made that the "sworn virgin" phenomenon is not to be confused with homosexuality. I never met a "sworn virgin" who took any partner (either male or female). However, in Serbia, Rene Gremaux found reports of very occasional cases.

It was only in 1995 that the law was repealed which formerly punished even those with a homosexual tendency with a prison sentence of up to ten years (for men only - it has not been imagined that women could have such a tendency). Lesbianism is barely discussed or understood even in Albania's capital. On pursuing the topic I found incomprehension and a reminder that the laws of the kanun are strictly monitored.

A "sworn virgin" has sworn herself to celibacy and is under extreme pressure to conform. This is consistent with the traditional laws (the Kanun). Whataker writes of the northern Albanians that they:

seem to be highly restrained in the overt expression of sexual emotion ... indeed chastity provides one of the key concepts in the chain of rights which made up the ideal of family honor, on which the bloodfeud rested.¹⁸

As a very rough estimation of present numbers of "sworn virgins", based purely on subjective observation, I would make a guess of up to one hundred in existence - I have not yet met any child who is being brought up to be the next generation's "sworn virgin". The youngest I met was 22 when I first met her and seemed quite disoriented, living in a small town; however, on meeting her a year later she had fully accepted her role (the youngest of 3 daughters, training to follow in her father's footsteps, she had already spent a year living in the men's police dormitory in Tirana).

My prediction is that due to rapid social changes, this traditional gender role change will probably die out within a generation or two.

Notes

1. Paper delivered to the XVIII Seminar on Albanian language, literature and culture, Tirana, Albania 19 August -1st September, 1996 under the title "The phenomenon of Sworn Virgins".
 2. Even Albania's eminent anthropologist, Andromaqi Gjergji, writing in 1963 about "virgjina", described the phenomenon as a tradition no longer in existence: "Gjurme te matriarkatit ne disa doke te dikurshme te jetes familjare", Buletini i Universiteti Shteteror te Tiranes (Shkencat Shoqerore), no. 2, 1963, pp. 284-92.
 3. See Shpetim Mema: Albanica I, Albanica II, Tirana: Biblioteka Kombetare, Sektori i Albanologjise, 1987; J. Allcock and A. Young (eds.): Black Lambs and Grey Falcons: women travellers in the Balkans, Bradford University Press, 1991; Valentina Duka: "Albania as viewed by English travellers of the nineteenth century" in Bradford Studies on South Eastern Europe, Occasional paper no. 2, University of Bradford, Bradford.
 4. First published by Edward Arnold, London, 1900; republished by Virago Press, London, 1985; Bacon Press, Boston, 1987.
 5. Albanian Back-door, Herbert Jenkins, London, 1936.
 6. First published in the New Yorker, 27 June-4 July, 1994; also in her book of short stories, Open Secrets, Chatto, 1994.
 7. Article XX: "The Albanian woman does not inherit anything from her parents-neither possessions nor house; the Kanun considers a woman as a superfluity in the household"; and Article XXXVI.88: "The Kanun recognizes the son as an heir, but not the daughter".
 8. Article XXI of the Kanun: "the parents of his...wife...give him (the groom) a cartridge" as protection for "two acts (for which) a woman may be shot in the back...a) for adultery; b) for betrayal of hospitality" (to any guest).
 9. Rose Wilder Lane: "When the bride arrives at her husband's house she takes a humble place in the corner, standing, her hands folded on her breast, her eyes downcast, and for three days and nights she is required to remain in that position, without lifting her eyes, without moving, and without eating or drinking. On the second day...she goes about the household, obeying the commands of the elders, always standing until they tell her to it, and for six months, not speaking unless they address her", Peaks of Shala, Harper, New York, 1993, p. 25.
- Berit Backer: "The new bride does not move freely among the other women in the new village, until years later. As a young bride (nnuse), a stage that lasts for some three to five years, she is on constant trial. She cannot take many liberties and has to be subservient and constantly at the

beck and call of the rest of the household. She is permanently performing in order to win the approval of her new family, "Behind stone walls", Ph.D dissertation, Oslo, 1979, p. 147.

10. Francois-Charles-Hugues-Laurent Pouqueville, Travels through the Morea, Albania and several other parts of the Ottoman Empire, London, Richard Philips, 1806.

11. Quoted by Paul H. Stahl in Household, village and village confederation in southeastern Europe, New York: East European Monographs, 1986, p. 107.

12. Cited in the Albanian parliament (1995).

13. Branko Jolis, "Honour killing makes a comeback", Buardian, 14 Aug. 1996, translated from Delo, a Slovenian weekly.

14. Chapter in Bullough Ver, Bullough and Bonnue, 1997.

15. "Woman becomes a man in the Balkans", in Gilbert Herdt, ed. Third Sex, Third Gender, New York, Zone Books, 1994.

16. Autonomy, Entanglement, and the feud: prestige structures and gender values in highland Albania", Anthropological Quarterly, vol. 61, no. 1, January 1988.

17. 1991. This was the last official Yugoslav film to be made as a co-production between Croatian, Serbian and French companies. The Story was based on one which the Director read in a newspaper concerning a woman in 1944. Karanovic believed this to be the last existing case.

18. Ian Whitaker, "A sack for carrying things: the traditional role of women in northern Albanian society" in Anthropological Quarterly, vol. 54, 1981.

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