

## Sex and Gender Identity of “Sworn Virgins” in the Balkans

Travelers and researchers able to meet some of the Balkans’ “sworn virgins” (females who dress and act as men)<sup>1</sup> left occasional but rich testimony of their persuasive masculine appearance and behavior. In his report on the famous Montenegrin “sworn virgin” Mikaš Karadžić, doctor Milan Jovanović-Batut comments that he had not noticed anything unusual in the appearance of the “small but vigorous and youthful soldier”<sup>2</sup> during their first meeting. English writer Bernard Newman, living in Albania in the mid-1930s, took a few days to realise his guide was in fact female.<sup>3</sup> Anthropologist Antonia Young had a similarly perplexing experience during her recent fieldwork in northern Albania:

We never would have recognized that Sokol [an Albanian “sworn virgin”] was a woman in her traditional white closely fitting felt “skull cap”, waistcoat, man's shirt and loose brown trousers; we were introduced by locals with whom we were travelling.<sup>4</sup>

It was not only foreign visitors who were deceived by the masculine appearance of the “sworn virgins”. Fatima, an Albanian from Kosovo, had lived as a man named Daljuš (or Fetah) for more than twenty years, during which only her parents and sisters knew that she was biologically female.<sup>5</sup> Meeting for the first time another “sworn virgin” from Kosovo going by the male name of Sali, Muslim women would hide their faces, as in the presence of any unknown man.<sup>6</sup> There is a particularly

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1 Serb. zavetovana devojka, alb. vajzë e betuar; the terms *tobelija* (“person bound by a vow”) and *virdžina* (alb. *virgjinëshë* – “female committed to virginity”), are also used. Geographically, “sworn virgins” are located in Montenegro, Kosovo, Metohija and Northern Albania, in the areas of so-called patriarchal ways of living and a specific kin-tribal social organization. Ethnically, these are Slavic (Serb and Montenegrin) population on the one side, and Albanian on the other. Confessionally, there are reported cases among believers of all three religious denominations in these areas (Orthodox Christians, Catholic Christians, and Muslims). Two main types of “sworn virgins” should be distinguished: the first type comprises the biological woman who is raised as a “boy” from infancy or early childhood; the second type is the biological female who later in life, having been socialized as a woman for many years, reconstructs herself as a “man”.

2 M. Jovanović-Batut, “Čudna prilika (s moga puta po Crnoj Gori)”, in: *Branik*, Dec. 12-24, 1885.

3 B. Newman, *Albanian Backdoor*, London: Herbert Jenkins, 1936, pp. 260-61.

4 A. Young, *Women Who Become Men: Albanian Sworn Virgins*, Oxford and New York: Berg, 2000, p. 86.

5 See T. Vukanović, “Virdžine”, in: *Glasnik Muzeja Kosova i Metohije*, VI, Priština 1961, p. 92; M. Barjaktarović, “Problem *tobelija* (*virdžina*) na Balkanskom poluostrvu”, in: *Glasnik Etnografskog muzeja*, 28-29, Beograd 1966, pp. 274-276. For more details see also B. Marjanović, “Fatimina tajna”, in: *Ilustrovan politika*, no. 175-180, Beograd 1962.

6 Vukanović, *ibid.*, p. 91.

interesting case of a contemporary “sworn virgin” from northern Albania, whose brother’s children were puzzled as to why they should call her “aunt”, knowing that she is a man.<sup>7</sup>

In all cases, the mistaken identification of “sworn virgins” arises from the process of common-sense sex-categorization in everyday life. This process is accurately described in the ethnomethodological works in the study of gender. As Harold Garfinkel states in his classic study “Passing and the managed achievement of sex status in an ‘intersexed’ person,” the universe of human beings in western culture, “naturally” is seen as divided into two, and only two sexes – male and female. Essential insignia, or the essential criteria of their identification, are genitals – penis for men, vagina for women.<sup>8</sup> But he adds that “the possession of a penis or a vagina as a biological event is to be distinguished from the possession of one or the other both as a cultural event”.<sup>9</sup> This idea was developed by Kessler and McKenna:

Genitalia are conventionally hidden from public inspection in everyday life; yet we continue through our social rounds to “observe” a world of two naturally, normally sexed persons. It is the *presumption* that essential criteria exist, and would or should be there if looked for, that provides the basis for sex categorisation. Drawing on Garfinkel, Kessler and McKenna argued that “female” and “male” are cultural events - products of what they term the “gender attribution process” - rather than some collection of traits, behaviours, or even physical attributes. [...] Neither initial sex assignment (pronouncement at birth as a female or male) nor the actual existence of essential criteria for that assignment (possession of a clitoris and vagina or penis and testicles) has much - if anything - to do with the identification of sex category in everyday life. There, Kessler and McKenna note, we operate with a moral certainty of a world of two sexes.<sup>10</sup>

This is sufficient to understand why “sworn virgins” can pass as men in face-to-face interaction. The problem is far more difficult however, since in most known cases it is not possible to positively determine to which degree their “gender display” (to use Goffman’s term)<sup>11</sup> is really supported by

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7 Young, *ibid.*, p. 74.

8 H. Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1967, pp. 117-185.

9 Garfinkel, *ibid.*, p. 23.

10 C. West and D. H. Zimmerman, “Doing Gender”, in: J. Lorber and S. A. Farrell (eds.), *The Social Construction of Gender*, London: Sage, 1991, p. 19; see S. J. Kessler and V. McKenna, *Gender: An ethnomethodological approach*, New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1978, pp. 1-6.

11 He writes: “If gender be defined as the culturally established correlates of sex (whether in consequence of biology or learning), then gender display refers to conventionalized portrayals of these correlates” (E. Goffman, *Gender Advertisements*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979, p. 1).

internalization of the masculine psychosocial identity. Furthermore, in many cases an obvious divergence between the sex and gender role of “sworn virgins” is followed by a divergence in their gender identity and gender display. With this in mind, I would say this phenomenon presupposes a demand on researchers to think more precisely about the theoretical basis of the problem of possible relations between four variables: sex, gender role, gender identity and gender display. That is the primary goal of this paper. However, rather than quoting numerous well-known examples from ethnographic literature, I will use just one case. It concerns Stanica Daga Marinković, a “sworn virgin” from northern Montenegro who I met in 1994 and with whom I am still in touch. Her biography is sufficiently representative of the entire phenomenon of the “sworn virgin”. First however I will outline the most important findings of studies into the sexuality and gender identity of “sworn virgins” so far.

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The majority of studies of the “sworn virgin” phenomenon in the Balkans were, as I have previously written,<sup>12</sup> focused on questions of origin, social function and status. Little attention was paid to their sexuality and gender identity. Exceptions can be found in the works of René Grémaux<sup>13</sup> and to some extent Mildred Dickemann and Antonia Young<sup>14</sup>. Others, particularly older authors, either pass over the problem of gender identity of “sworn virgins,” or are satisfied by stating merely that “sworn virgins” were not only acting like men, but also *felt* like that. All imply a feeble understanding of the logical, social and ideological basics of the dichotomized sex/gender system in which they too live.

The constant “showing-off” of the Balkans’ “sworn virgins” cites the institutional scopes in which their female-to-men transformation is taking place, and in which “sworn virgins” appear as a relatively independent gender category - “social men”. Grémaux emphasizes that female cross-dressing is not characteristic only of traditional Balkan societies, but that here,

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12 See P. Šarčević, “Tobelija: Female-to-Male Cross-Gender Role in the 19th and 20th Century Balkans”, in: M. Jovanović, K. Kaser and S. Naumović (eds.), *Between the Archives and the Field: Dialogue on Historical Anthropology of the Balkans*, Belgrade-Graz 1999, pp. 135-146.

13 R. Grémaux, “Mannish women of the Balkan mountains: Preliminary notes on the ‘sworn virgins’ in male disguise, with special reference to their sexuality and gender-identity”, in: J. Bremmer (Ed.), *From Sappho to De Sade: Moments in the History of sexuality*, London and New York: Routledge, 1991, pp. 143-172; R. Grémaux, “Franciscan Friars and the Sworn Virgins of the North Albanian Tribes”, in: *Religion, State and Society*, vol. 20, no. 3 and 4, 1992, pp. 361-374; R. Grémaux, “Woman becomes Man in the Balkans”, in: G. Herdt (Ed.), *Third Sex, Third Gender: Beyond Sexual Dimorphism in Culture and History*, New York: Zoone Books, 1994, pp. 241-281.

14 M. Dickemann, “The Balkan Sworn-Virgin: A Cross-Gendered Female Role”, in: S. D. Murray and W. Roscoe (Eds.), *Islamic Homosexualities: Culture, History and Literature*, New York: New York University Press, 1997, pp. 197-203, and M. Dickemann, “The Balkan Sworn Virgin: A Traditional European Transperson”, in: B. Bullough, V. Bullough and C. James (Eds.), *Gender Blending*, Prometheus, Amherst 1997, pp. 248-255; A. Young, *ibid.*, pp. 111-122.

the practice enabled a more permanent and institutionalised social crossing or “passing” than elsewhere. It concerned crossing gender identities rather than merely cross-dressing, since the individual assumed the male social identity with the tacit approval of the family and the larger community.<sup>15</sup>

Cross-dressing is not alone in linking “sworn virgins” of the Balkans with the “third sex” and/or “third gender”. Their virginity does the same to an even greater degree:

Virginity is - writes Grémaux - inherently an extremely ambiguous and ambivalent human condition, for it is considered to be neither a masculine nor a feminine quality, but rather a peculiar combination of both. Virginity extending into adulthood constitutes an anomaly within the universe of fecund adults that is divided into men and women. [...] Virgins challenge common concepts of femininity, of which motherhood and dependence on men are basic traits, and moreover they threaten the clear-cut demarcation of both genders. In transvestite Balkan virgins, we see this inherent ambiguity and ambivalence substantially reduced by their classification as “social men,” as well as by prescriptions and restrictions concerning their sexual behaviour.<sup>16</sup>

However, neither cross-dressing nor virginity are necessary conditions for a person to be classified a “social man”. It is known that many “sworn virgins” wear only some parts of the male costume, usually a cap, which is clearly sufficient to symbolize their special status. Some “sworn virgins” do not even do that, but retain female clothing entirely. On the other hand, there are a few examples in which the criterion of virginity is not respected: some women became “social men” as widows or divorcees, having already fulfilled their female potential through marriage and motherhood. Such cases are an additional complication in efforts to discuss female cross-dressing and gender inversion in the Balkans as a unique phenomenon or monolith institution.

The case I put forward on this occasion falls into those in which the social transformation of gender appears to have been conducted consistently. This, on the one hand, means that the “sworn virgin” acts in public as a “real” man and very clearly announces to her surroundings that she wants to be treated as a man. On the other, she wants minimal concordance with public acceptance and respect of her “masculinity” to exist at least at the local community level.

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<sup>15</sup> Grémaux, “Woman becomes Man in the Balkans...”, p. 242.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., pp. 245-246.

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Daga Marinković was born in 1941 in Korita. While she was still a young girl her family moved to a village near Bijelo Polje, fearing a blood-feud. As the fourth daughter she was baptized and given the name Stanica (stop), suggestive of her parents' desire not to have any more female children, invoking the magic of language. The magic name clearly failed as four more daughters were born. Their wish finally came true in 1953 with the birth of Daga's brother, Vučeta. His name, derived from the word *vuk* (wolf), also carries a magical meaning: Serbs, Montenegrins and Albanians would give this name to male children believing it would bring them an easier life. The etymology of the nickname Daga, which this "sworn virgin" had since birth, is different: during her birth her impatient uncle shouted "*Daj ga, daj ga!*" ("Give him, give him!"), eagerly expecting a son to be born. Only the nickname remained.

Daga was already a pensioner by the time I met her. Despite having a small apartment in the centre of Bijelo Polje, given to her by the firm she used to work for, she spends most of her time in her family home in the village. She says she goes to town only to collect her pension. At the moment her family comprises her brother Vučeta, his wife Jelena, their three children (a son Dalibor and two daughters Dragana and Dijana), and Daga's older sister Lena (real name Stanomirka).

Independent her whole life, Daga considers herself a "joined" member of this household. Vučeta is an agricultural worker. He previously worked as a registrar in Bijelo Polje, but lost his job. Jelena is his second wife: he divorced his first because they had no children. With the exception of Daga, Lena is the most interesting member of the household. When Vučeta was born she swore not to marry until he had grown up, a promise she kept.

Lena later married and moved to Serbia. She had no children and when her husband died she came back to her family home. She inherited her husband's pension and gave the house and other real estate where they lived in Kraljevo to her husband's sons from his first marriage.

Daga is the lawful owner of the house and property in the village. Although Vučeta was an adult by the time their parents died (father in 1972, mother in 1974) and had the right of inheritance, Daga was clearly considered more suitable to be head of the household. Vučeta explains that he was in secondary school at that time and felt that ownership of real estate would be a problem in obtaining a scholarship for further education. According to common law, the sisters could not be considered heirs since they had already been married or were going to get married. Daga was the only "logical choice". While her father was alive she helped him with the maintenance of the household, and so, according to

the rest of the family, she was the logical heir.<sup>17</sup> After her death, Vučeta and his children, most likely little Dalibor, will inherit the property.

The Marinković family owns some four hectares of land. Their house is situated on the slope above the road, next to the River Lim. They have a garden and a meadow and live off agriculture as well as Daga's and Lena's pensions.

Daga was raised as a son. Her father was a severe man and everyone in the family was afraid of him. Yet, he was not cruel. Daga recalls that her father beat her only once, when the stock she was supposed to guard went to somebody else's field. Daga always helped her father in the farming work, plowing and mowing, encouraged by her mother who regretted the fact her husband did not have "a son to take his place and to help him". (Vučeta however was spared from work even when growing up.) Besides agricultural work, from the age of thirteen or fourteen, Daga began doing difficult jobs for money, first road construction and then at the brick plant. In 1958 she "desperately" wanted to find a job and so traveled to Sarajevo with a group of construction workers from her homeland. There she worked with a big cement mixer. Her predecessor had been a drunkard, "sloppy at the job" and there was no one to replace him. It turned out that she was "born" for the job. Daga says she has always liked hard "men's" jobs. As a joke, she says she has never wanted to work with a shovel, but only a pickax.

The next (unpaid) job took her to Slovenia, for the building of the Ljubljana-Zagreb highway. The principal of the village school often came to her father to ask him to let Daga take part in such voluntary mass action. Initially her father objected, explaining that she was the only "labour" in the house. He eventually consented, having been persuaded it would be easier for Daga to find a job after taking part in the voluntary mass action. As a young worker on the highway, Daga was taken in by the Communist League of Yugoslavia.

Photo

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<sup>17</sup> After all, Daga is not the heir to all the property. According to the common law model of inheritance, besides material property, there is spiritual inheritance, for example slava (family holyday). Taking over the role of the head of the family, "sworn virgins" also take over an obligation to maintain the cult of patron saint. But Daga did not take over this obligation, and today Vučeta celebrates the Marinković's slava, St Nicolas, and Daga is only a "guest". Even when she lived in her apartment in the town, she did not celebrate this event; if she did not have to work, she would have come home, where the family gathered. Even though her father was a member of the Communist Party, besides slava, other Christian holy days were celebrated, especially Christmas and Easter.

Whether membership of the Party played a part or not, in 1961 Daga got a job at the local textile factory. She first worked on the production line but later, because the job was not “manly” enough, she became part of the machine maintenance team.<sup>18</sup>

For a long time, Daga was the only employed member of the family and was the primary money earner. Since she had a regular income, she bought the household necessities. This contributed to her status, as she became the second head of the family behind her father. Although she no longer lived with the family, but alone in the town, she was still very active in helping the household. She helped them in terms of work and in taking care of them. Her father was not happy with the fact Daga lived out of the house, but finally had to accept it. When the father died, Daga took care of the funeral alone and paid for all expenses, as a true son and heir. After her brother left for the army, Daga did the most of the agricultural work herself. For other tasks, such as plowing and sowing the fields, she paid the neighbours.

In keeping with her role as son, the parents always dressed her and cut her hair in the style of a boy. Daga nevertheless claims that she wears “men’s” clothes because she likes it. She denies anyone forced her to dress in such a way. She admits she once agreed (under her friend’s influence) to make a female suit. She never wore it, giving the dress away but keeping the blazer, which she still has. Neighbours and friends tried to convince her it was not good to dress in such a way, but to no avail. Her constant insistence on men’s clothes won public approval. At that time, on March 8 – Women’s Day – all employed women in the factory were given skirts as presents, only Daga was given material for trousers. Still, she was deprived this privilege on the celebration of twenty years of work when she was given a female watch. Insulted, Daga has never worn it, giving it instead to her sister-in-law.

In photographs of Daga when she was very young, to an uninformed observer it would be almost impossible to recognize a girl. Today it is much more noticeable, besides the male clothing she wears. Her face can still deceive the observer (particularly with the wrinkles), but her chest and pelvis are clearly notable.

As she tries to free her parents from the responsibility of forcing male habits upon her, she persistently strives to convince people that she alone had taken the decision to live in celibacy. Only after much persuasion, holding back tears, she agreed to relate the following:

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<sup>18</sup> Daga completed the regular four grades of primary school, but later she went to part-time school and completed all eight grades. She also earned a diploma for a qualified spinner. It is interesting that she and her best friend finished a tailoring course, too; but she has never been interested in this “women’s” job so she gave her sew-machine to her sister-in-law.

Maybe, three, four or five days, or, I don't know how many, when my father was about to die, he invited me alone to his room and said: 'Do not leave your only brother'. And I said: 'I won't. I can't, now... just like that... I could never violate my oath.

Proudly, Daga says she has always strived to set Vučeta on the right track, to help him to become an honorable man and to establish his own family. She was occasionally strict (such as when she caught him smoking while he was still in primary school), but Vučeta knew that she had the best intentions, for which he respects her. Daga is clearly also fond of Vučeta's children. She says she loves them equally, but it seems she is particularly fond of little Dragana. The two of them often speak about the future.

The family, neighbours and friends call her simply Daga. Vučeta's children also call her Daga or "Aunt Daga". Due of her strange appearance, neighbours would call her Dragić, and her work colleagues, Stanko or Stanoje.

Daga likes to smoke. She began when she was young, encouraged by her uncle, and would smoke in front of her father. She also began drinking brandy and other spirits at an early age. Whenever she visited her family to help them with work, they offered her drinks. During the winter her mother would prepare boiled brandy for when Daga came home from the third shift.

Like some other "sworn virgins", Daga plays the *gusle*, a traditionally male instrument still popular in this region. She no longer plays since her voice and memory "betrayed" her, despite the fact her relatives and friends say she is very good. Besides the *gusle*, she taught herself to play the accordion. She even played at weddings and other celebrations for money, but stopped a long time ago.

She enjoys playing chess and cards, having taught herself how to play. She used to take part in different amateur contests (in female competition) and won several prizes. She still occasionally goes to the local chess club, where she plays against men, since women do not generally go there. She always played cards for fun rather than for money. She despises gambling, considering it a dangerous vice. She explains she sometimes gambled not because it gave her pleasure, but to keep eye on Vučeta so he would not lose his money.

When she was a child, Daga played football with other boys, a sport she is still very fond of. She supports "Partizan," one of the most popular football teams in Yugoslavia. She used to go to matches in Bijelo Polje, Nikšić or Podgorica (formerly Titograd). But she dislikes the rude, rowdy behavior of people in the stadium. She never swears, not even when annoyed.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> She actually dislikes "immorality" of any kind: alcoholism, gambling, swearing, dirty jokes, etc. She has always reminded her friends to behave decently and not to become addicted to vice. Once, when we were sitting and talking in a

Daga's last "affection" I will mention is reading. She has read the novel *Daleko je sunce*, a novel by the famous Yugoslav writer Dobrica Ćosić. Her favorite is *Hajduk Stanko* by Janko Veselinović. Despite reading it a long time ago she can still remember the plot and the names of all the characters. She even appeared in the play based on the book in the local amateur theatre. She took the role of the gusle player.

Daga's characteristics are clearly much closer to those of a man than a woman. After all, she spent most of her time with men and as a young girl she played with boys rather than other girls. Of course, as a child she knew she was not allowed to sit with grown men, but she later gained the right and still uses it today. At weddings, funerals, *slava* and other public gatherings with a clear special division according to gender, Daga is always on the male side. In the bar or when visiting homes she sits with men. However, in her relations with women there is no sign of the misogyny that is clearly apparent among "sworn virgins". This is most likely due to Daga's close friendship with a woman for many years. For more than twenty years she shared an apartment with her colleague and best friend Manja.

Their life during this long period was much like a "marriage," not in the sense of erotic love but in terms of the organization of everyday life and the division of work in the house. Although they never stuck to the division of work according to sex, Daga took on most of the "man's" work while Manja would do the "woman's" work. Manja had relationships with men during this period but did not get married. She moved away from Bijelo Polje when she did eventually marry. Daga speaks reluctantly of this period of her life, aware that some people interpret their closeness as an expression of lesbian tendencies. She feels insulted by this. Of course, people who knew them well did not draw such conclusions. Based on just a part of the material I gathered on this part of Daga's life, I am ready to testify that their relationship was much more like that of a sister and brother in this region rather than that of sexual partners.

I will end this description with an anecdote. I once spoke to Daga about Daljuš, whom she read about in the press. Her comment on this "sworn virgin" who never accepted an imposed masculine role was: "She suffered a lot. Poor woman".

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local bar, she was warning her brother, who likes to drink a lot, that they have a lot of work at home and that they should have left. Even before, when she used to go to a bar with her colleagues more often, she was always the one who reminded them it was time to go home, and everyone would obey her.

The case described is a good illustration of the divergence discussed in the introduction to this text – the divergence of the female sex and male gender role of "sworn virgins" on one hand, and the divergence of female gender identity and male gender display, on the other. These four aspects of personality and/or social behavior are in harmony in most people. Because of this, as Clifford Geertz observed in his study "Common Sense as a Cultural System", individuals with divergent characteristics, who resist being placed in any category of either sex or gender, represent »an offense against reason«.<sup>20</sup>

At the same time, however, such cases are *bons à penser*. According to Mary Douglas: »Any given system of classification must give rise to anomalies, and any given culture must confront events which seem to defy its assumptions.«<sup>21</sup> In other words, such events confront individual or collective reasoning with the challenge of a dialectic nature. In the negative form, anomalies have a destructive effect on the established systems of classification, by exposing their faults. However, in the positive form, these anomalies possess a creative potential to reconstruct or re-conceptualize the existing system of classification.

With this in mind, it becomes clear that cases such as the "sworn virgins" of the Balkans – representing an anomaly in the world of "normal" men and women – provide us with an excellent opportunity to observe the process of social and/or cultural gender construction in almost experimental conditions. The case described here, and many others which I did not manage to mention on this occasion, »makes visible what culture has made invisible – the accomplishment of gender«.<sup>22</sup>

Over the past few decades, many social analysts have vested significant effort in avoiding simple biological determinism in their analyses and interpretations of human sexuality. Within this context, analytical difference between sex, as a biological, and gender as a cultural category, became an important tool of methodology. Recognizing sex and gender as different categories, however, did not put an end to confrontations between biologists (or essentialists) and culturalists (or constructionists). Extremists on both sides hold views so different they can never be reconciled. For example, certain medical experts consider not only sex, but also gender to be a biological category. On the other hand, we could take Goffman's idea that »What the human nature of males and females really consist of then is a capacity to learn to provide and to read depictions of masculinity and femininity and a willingness to adhere to a schedule for presenting these pictures, and this capacity they have by virtue of being persons,

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<sup>20</sup> C. Geertz, *Local Knowledge*, New York: Basic Books, 1984, p. 85.

<sup>21</sup> M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, London: Ark Paperbacks, 1984, p. 39.

<sup>22</sup> C. West and D. H. Zimmerman, *ibid.*, p. 18.

not females or males. One might just as well say there is no gender identity. There is only a schedule for the portrayal of gender”<sup>23</sup>.

At first glance, and seemingly paradoxically, the cases of “sworn virgins” in the Balkans appear to back the essentialist approach. Among more than one hundred registered from the mid-19th century to date, only two appear to be cases of possible biological inter-sexuality, and even these observations rely on testimonies of persons who were either not well acquainted, or not particularly friendly with the “sworn virgins” in question. Thus, we might conclude that the biological characteristics of “sworn virgins” are unquestionably female. The only problem I know of is absence of the menses, as mentioned by Mikaš Karadžić. But even in this case, it is a physiological disorder, and not an inherited anatomic anomaly.

Just as in the question of the biological sex of sworn virgins, the question of their »continuous feeling of belonging to a certain sex« (which, in the language of essentialists, is synonymous with personal identity) seems beyond doubt. Their intimate perception of themselves is undoubtedly female. We can see that Daga never vested a great deal of effort in conceiving of her »true« sex; her relatives, friends and acquaintances are keenly aware (and they were aware even in the past, when her appearance and behaviour did not give it away) that she is a woman. Her identificatory display as a man has always been modified by referring to herself as a woman. Finally, her moral satisfaction sprung not from being able to deceive others with her looks, but from the fact that socially she was treated as a man despite her sex .

Naturally, the feeling of belonging to the female sex does not necessarily imply that every »sworn virgin« is content with this. Some of them, just like contemporary western transsexuals, perceive their female genitals as a »fault of nature«. However, what makes them different from transsexuals is the absence of desire to change this. The other Montenegrin »sworn virgin« I have met, Stana Cerović, says she has the »soul of a man«, but considers undergoing surgery to change sex to be an act »against nature« and believes that people whose sex has been changed by medical intervention can never be »normal«.

For essentialists these observations might suggest that anatomy, in the end, shapes the »destiny« of every individual and that facts of sexual biology are more important than those determined by society or culture when it comes to the creation of personal identity. A logical consequence of this conclusion is that the social construction of the masculinity of »sworn virgins« can only be interpreted as »a forgery«.

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23 E. Goffman, *ibid.*, p. 8.

It is known today, however, that relations between biological and cultural processes are more complex and reflexive than once thought. Candace West and Don Zimmerman agree that the analytical differentiation between concepts of »sex« and »gender« should be applied to what is known as »sex category«. They argue that:

*Sex* is a determination made through the application of socially agreed upon biological criteria for classifying persons as females or males. The criteria for classification can be genitalia at birth or chromosomal typing before birth, and they do not necessarily agree with one another. Placement in a *sex category* is achieved through application of the sex criteria, but in everyday life, categorisation is established and sustained by the socially required identificatory displays that proclaim one's membership in one or the other category. In this sense, one's sex category presumes one's sex and stands as proxy for it in many situations, but sex and sex category can vary independently; that is, it is possible to claim membership in a sex category even when the sex criteria are lacking. *Gender*, in contrast, is the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one's sex category.<sup>24</sup>

Based on this definition, it is possible to formulate a concept of identity more flexible than the one used in essentialist, or even constructionist analyses. In this new light, the identity of "sworn virgins" which seems to depend on their sex, would actually prove to be dependent on their sex category. But sex-categorization is not a biological or natural process, but a cultural one. The self-perception and self-experience of "sworn virgins", being that of women, is still not a product of the powers of Nature, but rather of a cultural convention according to which Nature is omnipotent.

Once we agree with this explanation, we open up the possibility of treating the masculinity of "sworn virgins" as a "mask" rather than a "forgery". As is well known among anthropologists, a person wearing a mask during a ceremony takes on the identity represented by the mask. I would say this is exactly what the "sworn virgins" of the Balkans are doing.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 14.