

## **'SWORN VIRGINS' AS ENHANCERS OF ALBANIAN PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY IN CONTRAST TO EMERGING ROLES FOR ALBANIAN WOMEN<sup>1</sup>**

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*Northern Albania is known for its patriarchal social system - strict traditional oral laws dictate definitive gender roles. As a 'sworn virgin' a woman breaks from societal expectations but also reinforces the traditional culture. The need for the 'sworn virgin' may be reduced as changes in society bring acceptance of non-traditional family groups and roles.*

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In traditional patriarchal society in the southern Balkans, there has long been an option to provide male heirs where none exist: a girl or woman may herself, or her parents – even at her birth – declare that she has become male. In these cases the female thenceforth dresses as a boy/man, performs male tasks and mixes socially as a male. With the change she swears virginity

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<sup>1</sup> This article was written with the assistance of Larenda Twigg but all research and interviews were conducted by Antonia Young. All use of first person in this article refers solely to Antonia Young. Please note: for the sake of uniformity we have used feminine pronouns for the 'sworn virgins', even when this is not always used by the 'sworn virgin' themselves.

and may never revert to her birth gender. This choice assures inheritance of a family home or may allow a girl honourably to refuse to marry the man chosen as her future husband. Historically, a large number of cases were documented in Albania, Montenegro, Bosnia and Serbia starting about 150 years ago. Although for the last 60 years some have believed the tradition had ended, there are currently 'Sworn virgins' still living in Northern Albania.<sup>2</sup> There they are completely respected in their male roles within their tight-knit societies. This phenomenon supports the strict patriarchal system, in place in areas of the Balkans, particularly northern Albania, while also ambiguously allowing subordinated females a way to a freer life.

The importance given for a male to head the family in Northern Albania has been transforming in the last decade and a half, due to the upheaval caused following the fall of Communism. The patriarchal situation had remained in place for centuries, but although suppressed by Communism, traditional patriarchal rural life retains a considerable grip on women's lives. It can even be argued that this traditional patriarchy was strengthened in rural northern areas after the fall of Communism. Those who remain in the mountains of Northern Albania look to the traditional values of the *Kanuni I Lekë Dukagjinit* (*Kanun*).<sup>3</sup> As many men migrate out of the mountains and Albania in search of making a quick fortune, it is usual, following this tradition, for the nearest male relative to incorporate any family left without a male head unless there is a woman prepared to take the role of a man. When a woman takes on this role, the 'sworn virgin' transforms her life from being a female object with no rights or powers, to a life of social empowerment with social, legal and cultural responsibilities and duties.

Historically, the phenomenon of 'sworn virgins' has been documented by several travel writers to the area in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, up to the Second World War; including well-known figures such as Mary Edith Durham and Edward Lear.<sup>4</sup> All these writers referred to the *Kanun*,

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<sup>2</sup> In adjoining rural Western Kosova, there have also been 'sworn virgins'. While I was completing my book *Women Who Become Men: Albanian Sworn Virgins* (Young 2000) at the time of the 1999 Kosova War, speculation was made that because 11,000 men killed or otherwise unaccounted for, it was likely to cause a revival of the tradition in the area adjoining the very patriarchal Albanian region. Evidence of this has been observed, but not yet been researched.

<sup>3</sup> Attributed to Lekë Dukagjinit, the Kanun is customary law developed over centuries, with some origins as far back as the Illyrians. From the fifteenth century, this oral law provided the foundations for social behaviour and government in Northern Albania. See Gjecov 1989.

<sup>4</sup> For example, see Durham 1928; Gordon and Turner Gordon 1927:238-9; Newman 1936:260-1; Lear 1988.

and many to 'Albanian virgins'.<sup>5</sup> After the Second World War there were few studies of 'sworn virgins' in Albania, as the government attempted to eradicate traditional practices. Albanian anthropologist, Andromaqi Gjergji, was able to document several 'sworn virgins' in the barely changing remote regions of Albania during the 1950s and 1960s by incorporating the rigid Communist dogma of the regime into some of her written work (Gjergji 1963). Gjergji's later work, though, focuses essentially on costume. Ian Whitacker helped to bring attention to the subject with his startlingly titled article "A Sack for Carrying Things: the Traditional Role of Women in Northern Albanian Society" (1981), but was limited to using only published references. This very widely quoted article refers to Article no. 29 of the *Kanuni I Lekë Dukagjinit*: "A woman is a sack, made to endure as long as she lives in her husband's house" (Gjeçov 1993: 38), in other words she is the womb that brings her husband's sons into the world, but she has no rights herself, not even over her own children.

The Norwegian anthropologist, Berit Backer in 2003 completed interesting and insightful research into these issues during the 1970's (written in the 1980's), by focusing on an all-Albanian village in Kosova. Then a part of Yugoslavia, Kosova followed a less authoritarian form of Communism, making it accessible to foreign anthropologists. Backer commented that "'Albanian society' is usually described as one of the most patriarchal in the world" (2003: 197).<sup>6</sup> She goes on to outline a 'patriarchal triangle' pointing out the social elements that kept this structure together: a) patrilineal descent, b) village exogamy and c) inheritance in the male line' (ibid. 228).

In Albania during that same time, the Communist dictatorship (1945-1991) did not permit anyone to leave the country and the only migration was that forced by the state. This commonly happened to workers, either as part of a workforce needed in some other part of the country, or to individuals or families considered enemies of the state and sent into exile to remote villages or one of several prison camps. Many men were executed for their religious or political beliefs. Movement even between towns was only allowed with government permits. Education during that period underwent revolutionary change; illiteracy was reduced from about 95% prior to the Second World War to about 5% at the fall of Communism. The government claimed that traditions such as the swearing of virginity for the sake of leading the life of a

<sup>5</sup> For more information on historical accounts see: Allcock and Young 1994; Duka 1994; Wilder Lane 1923; Mema and Sharrëxhi 1998; Mema 1987.

<sup>6</sup> Although Backer's thesis was written in the 1980's, it was not published until 2003.

man, and following all the articles of the *Kanun*, had been abandoned. It was therefore surprising for me to find when returning to Albania for my research in the early 1990's (Young 2000), that many cases of 'sworn virgins' did exist, some of whom had made the choice after the Second World War. One case I heard of, adapting to the Communist times, was of a woman whose husband was imprisoned for his political views. She was not permitted to visit him and was forced to renounce him. At that point she took on the role and dress of a man, feeling she had no other place in society. The 'sworn virgins' were in fact so fully accepted in northern Albania by the 1990s that inhabitants of that region did not acknowledge the unique character of the phenomenon. At the same time, none in Tirana could accept that a tradition (considered by urban inhabitants as backward) could possibly still exist.

## **GENDER ROLES AND THE DIVISION OF LABOUR**

The *Kanun* gives a detailed description of the rigidly gendered division of labour by which people still live in the Northern Albanian Mountains. Traditional men's work, under the *Kanun*, comprises all heavy manual work (chopping wood, scything, mowing, harvesting, protecting animals and property), talking to visitors, drinking and smoking with visitors, making family decisions, representing the family outside the home, and avenging family honour. Women's tasks include conceiving, bearing and rearing children, cooking, cleaning the house, serving the 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, and embroidering garments and linen. Additionally, women must do men's work at times of feuds or particular harvests, and they may also spin or knit while performing several of the above tasks. In present day rural areas, these roles are culturally ingrained and usually unquestioned. A different way to organize the gender regimes is hard for society members to conceptualize, as everyone knows their intricately specific hierarchical gender-defined place in society and what is (and has always been) expected.

## **DYNAMICS OF POWER AND SOCIAL CONTROL AND THE LEGITIMACY OF THE STATUS OF 'SWORN VIRGIN' IN THE PEASANT COMMUNITY**

Under *Kanun* law, women could not inherit, they barely even had a name; for, once married they were (and still commonly are) known first as *nuse* (new bride), later as “the young wife of X”, “the wife of X” and finally “the old woman of X” (Hasluck 1981: 33). All decision-making is completed by household heads (who must be defined as male). Lack of a son of sufficient age and integrity (representing honour for a family) may bring shame. In such case where there is a need for a household head, a woman may swear celibacy and take over that role. For example the journalist Medihan Samardžić writing on the history of the ‘sworn virgin’ Stana; specifically comments that the ‘shame’ brought to her family of five daughters and no sons, was the reason for her change (Samardžić 1991: 13-14). Traditionally, the oath made in front of twelve witnesses (Dickermann 1997: 198) binds the ‘sworn virgin’ to life as a celibate man, though the custom of swearing is now rarely observed. As mentioned above, taking the role of a ‘sworn virgin’ is also a legitimate option for any woman who wishes to refuse her pre-arranged marriage without incurring the dishonour, which in other circumstances would be certain grounds to initiate a bloodfeud.<sup>7</sup>

A father of several daughters and no sons may decide to bring up one of his daughters, typically the youngest, as male from birth in order to prepare her for the necessary future role of household head. One such woman, Medi, interviewed in *Women Who Become Men* (Young 2000: 88-89) was the youngest daughter in a family with three daughters and no sons. At the time of our first meeting, Medi’s father was a retired policeman. Being raised as a boy from the time her parents expected they would not produce more children, meant Medi took the role of a boy/man while her father was living, in preparation to become the household head, the role she would assume at his death. This gave Medi a better foundation than others, who only took on the role when they were unexpectedly found to be needed to take on the position as family head. Having first met Medi when she was twenty-two, it was possible

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<sup>7</sup> Historically, a high proportion of men in Northern Albania suffered early violent death through feuding; Carleton Coon estimated that 30% of men died due to feuds in the 1920s. Although feuding was virtually stopped during the Communist period, it resumed again in the 1990’s, as strong as before (Coon 1950).

to observe how living and working among men gave Medi greater confidence and assurance in male mannerisms and customs. Furthermore, following in her father's footsteps, Medi left her own small town to train as a policeman in Tirana (at a time when there were no women policemen in Albania) (ibid.).

'Sworn virgins' wear men's clothing, smoke and drink alcohol and sometimes carry knives and/or guns (none of which women traditionally do) and take on any responsibility for maintaining honour in time of feud. Others relate to the 'sworn virgins' as men, usually using male pronouns both in addressing and speaking of them. From observations, their adaptations to masculinize their speech and mannerisms make it difficult for many to tell their true sexual identity. The film director, Srdjan Karanović, maker of the film *Virdžina* (1991) asserts that "a 'sworn virgin' is not a man in terms of sexuality, but in terms of social power".

The carefully considered choice to become a man, or to turn a daughter into a son, is viewed as a great tribute, and the subject earns status and respect. There is no concept of denial of sexuality, as this in itself is of little importance. What is at stake is honour: to be a man is honourable, whereas to be a woman is sub-human. Such honourable gender-change is not open to many, for acceptance by men is only given where this change is seen to be needful; usually when there is no man to head a household, or to uphold honour in the case of a woman declining an arranged marriage. In these circumstances the decision is highly commended by the community because the woman is honourably offering her services, or her status, for the good of the family and society. In very recent years this has been changing, as a kind of blurring of roles takes place: some women are asserting their independence by dressing as men. At the same time, in towns, young women are demanding much greater freedom from family control and their own choice of marriage partners.

With the dramatic changes of the early 1990s, there has also been a resurgence of traditional patriarchal roles in Northern Albania. During Communism, for example, men and women both worked equally in the rural cooperatives, but after the collapse of Communism many women found themselves back in only the role of housewife and girls were strictly guarded to protect family honour. In Northern Albania bloodfeuds resumed, some continuing from grudges held over the previous 50 years. Traditions may have been suppressed, but women heading households were as rare as they ever had been with the only exceptions being women who vowed to lead the

life of a man. As 'sworn virgins' they are entitled to greater freedom as they can leave the homes whenever they wish, socialize with the men of the village and even travel at will. With these rights they also fully accept their duties concerning work tasks, such as taking on men's heavy and machine work and running businesses (Young 2000: 69-75).

## SEXUALITY

From a viewpoint of contemporary Western ideas of sexuality, the concept that sexuality has little importance to the decision of a 'sworn virgin' may be hard to understand but the choice must be understood in the context of the society's views on sexuality. In rural northern Albania, a women's sexual activity is seen to have a solely procreative function. Western curiosity with sexuality and belief in its universalism can be considered greatly exaggerated, even obsessive. Sexual activity is to be strictly confined within marriage. While boys are given preferential treatment in all matters by their families, girls in remote regions are strictly guarded/chaperoned to protect family honour; they are forbidden to associate with boys upon reaching adolescence, since a girl "could not be trusted 'to guard her own virtue'" (Prifti 1975: 112). The value of the girl traditionally lay in her purity and her willingness and ability to work hard. Ian Whitaker notes of the Northern Albanians that they: "seem to be highly restrained in the overt expression of sexual emotion... indeed chastity provides one the key concepts in the chain of rights which made up the ideal of family honour, on which the bloodfeud rested" (Whitaker 1989: 199). The morality of Northern Albania, governed by the interpretations of the *Kanun*, places honour at the centre of decisions and behaviour viewed as tainting honour places the entire family in shame. In the unusual situation of a single woman bearing a child, it would be hidden either by the child being brought up by relatives or (much less likely) by the mother finding some means to emigrate. The shame brought to a family by a daughter bearing an illegitimate child is so extreme that fathers and brothers may feel compelled to kill the mother.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>This may sound too extreme to merit belief, but it is actually common also in other parts of the world. For a recent example, see Suzanne Goldenberg's report "Crime puts Iraqi women under house arrest" (2003), where she analyses the strength of 'honour' and finds that there had been "50 suspicious deaths of women last month, victims of rape as well as 'honour killings'".

Réné Grémaux comments on these views of sexuality: "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" (Grémaux 1994: 246). While western society views gender changing as a personal, individual decision of identity, this does not hold true in Northern Albania. The female-to-male cross gender role taken on by the people I interviewed (Young 2000) showed the choice has less to do with the individual than the social, economic and cultural situation into which they are born. Therefore 'sworn virgins' should not be confused with lesbians. Ian Whitaker and Tom Parfitt both clarify their conclusions that such a consideration would be quite beyond the comprehension of the societies in which 'sworn virgins' live (Young 2000: 67). Homosexuality for men was illegal in Albania until 1995 and the lack of its mention for women gives credibility to the theory that female homosexuality was not a concept even considered to exist.

## THE CASE OF LULA

On first visiting Lula and her family in 1994, my interpreter and I (Young 2000) were ushered into the *oda* (a room set aside for the males receiving visitors), where we were graciously received and served drinks by Lula's nieces. Lula was in complete command of the situation in keeping with her role as head man of the household. At the time, Lula showed 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, as 'best man'. It was particularly her firm, assertive stance that stood out for me as an observer well accustomed to seeing women wearing trousers. This trait seemed especially exaggerated alongside the comparatively reticent behaviour of the village women and their feminine attire of headscarves, long skirts and aprons.

Lula 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. Lula had behaved as a boy as long as she could remember. She 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 Lula. On the death of their parents only a year after Pjeter had married, Lula naturally took the household leadership. Thus she became head of a household which increased to at least ten persons: her invalid (thus unmarriageable) sister, her brother, his wife and their ten children (though only six of these were still alive in 1994). At the time, besides managing their small-holding, she also ran a small business with her own welding machine.

Asked whether she missed having a sexual relationship and her own children she replied that she never regretted her choice: "I wouldn't have it otherwise ... here I am in control and I have a large family". She assertively dismissed the possible pleasure of a sexual relationship commenting that "five minutes of pleasure is no compensation for the resultant babies and mess".

Work has always been the most important thing in Lula's life, though she admitted missing the company of her workmates from the days when she was a tractor driver. Pjeter's wife confirmed the need for Lula to head the household and commented: "I did find the situation odd when I was first married, but I soon got used to it, and now Lula is like a brother to me". Pjeter does little to help in the family, who all look to Lula for both outside income and family decision-making. Lula does all the chopping, planting and mowing to produce the animal feed they sell.

In subsequent years I have visited Lula several times. As the children grow up they are leaving home: one of the boys left for Italy in search of employment. It is a hard time to find suitable marriage partners for the girls as there has been such widespread emigration of young men. On visiting in 2001, Lula complained that her welding business had fallen on bad times; she was taking work outside the home whenever she could find it.

## **THE CASE OF PASHKE**

By comparison, Pashke, a 'sworn virgin' from a much more remote region took to travelling frequently between her home in the magnificent Shala Valley and the livelier environment of the town of Shkodra where she had several relatives and friends, and made a very respected name for herself throughout the region. At eighteen, Pashke began making a mountainous journey twice a month to the hospital to visit her uncle, whose home she was raised in. Although Pashke had never met a 'sworn virgin', she knew of her traditional right from *Kanun* laws and took on the role of a man to travel.

"A girl alone could not undertake such journeys. I did not have long to think through what I did. I took some of my uncle's clothes, my own in any case were only fit for rags. It was a time of such distress that I didn't discuss it with anyone, just acted as I had to, and cannot see now that I could have done otherwise. I have done in my life whatever has been necessary and this has been my fate."

(Pashke, in Young 2000: 78)

After her uncle was released from the hospital Pashke continued in the male role, with her uncle referring to her as the son he never had. Pashke smoked and drank with the men at weddings, funerals, and village meetings but admitted to being lonely spending most of her time with her uncles. Pashke died in 2006.



Sworn virgines, Albania, 1994.

## THE CASE OF SELMAN

While Pashke and Lula were devout Catholics, Sema, one of four daughters in a Muslim family, in the village of Lepurush also made the choice to become a 'sworn virgin'. A son, Elez, was born shortly before her father's death but it would be too long to wait for him to head the household. So Sema masculinized her name to Selman and her family began to treat her as a man.

She learned to play the *fyell* and the *lahutë*, two instruments only played by men. When her brother was old enough to work, her mother suggested that Selman should revert to being a woman and marry; however Selman said that once something is decided, it cannot be changed. Also by that time Selman considered herself a man and so she took the role of the groom's father at her brother's wedding to the bride she chose for him (Young 2000: 85-86).

## THE CASE OF ANILA

In contrast to Selman's stance that the decision to dress and behave as a man cannot be changed is Anila. I met Anila many times in the years between 1999 and 2007. Known by the male name, Rrok, she was featured in director Karin Michalski's documentary film, *Pashke and Sophia* in 2000. In this film, Anila gave several reasons why she dressed as a man, none of them traditional 'sworn virgin' reasons. She had two brothers; there was no traditional social need.

As a very outgoing young woman, she did not conform to the female role, enjoyed going out around the village and surrounds and also claimed the reason she dressed in masculine attire and adopted a male gait and swagger was a protection against kidnapping.

In Anila's village, as in most in Northern Albania, marriage is exogamous – all the men remain in their homes, bringing wives from other villages for fear of offending the rule that there should be no marriage between partners related up to seven generations. Shortly after meeting with Anila in 2007, she left the village to marry a Montenegrin. On asking the Headman of her village how he felt about this, he responded that Anila had taken advantage of using male rites while young, but was now disregarding male duties, by leaving the area as a woman.

## RECENT CHANGES AND ROLE OF WOMEN IN ALBANIA

Recently newspaper reporters have claimed that the phenomenon of 'sworn virgins' is dying out. Nicola Smith of *The Sunday Times* entitled her article "'Sworn virgins' dying out as Albanian girls reject manly role" (2008) quoting the seventy-seven year old Pashke Keqi as regretting "the declining status of sworn virgins in capitalist society". In an article in the *New York*

*Times*, the reporter (Bilefsky 2008) quotes the same Pashke Keqi as saying that "she would not do it today, now that sexual equality and modernity have come even to Albania". Security guard, Diana Rakipi, who became a sworn virgin to take care of her nine sisters, deploras the fact women do not know their place. "Today women go out half naked to the disco," she says. "I was always treated my whole life as a man, always with respect. I can't clean, I can't iron, I can't cook. That is a woman's work." (Bilefsky 2008).

At the beginning of the 21st century, women's roles everywhere are changing dramatically. International influences can clearly be observed in Tirana, and increasingly even in the northern Albanian town of Shkodra. But feminist writers in Albania explain that the exemplary Law on an Equal Gender Society, approved by the Albanian Parliament in February, 2004, is simply on paper and has barely affected the population. As the contemporary Albanian sociologists Ines Murzaku and Zyhdi Dervishi (2002) comment, "Women's status is made more vulnerable under the contradictory pressures of traditional, communist and 'Western-style' value systems". They even go so far as to say that women's lives now are harder than they were under Communism; "in contemporary Albania, the majority of the adult population, especially young women, considers marriage as their main focus in life ... and ... the main function of marriage to be reproduction" (Murzaku and Dervishi 2003: 231).

Currently in Albania, more than a decade and a half after the fall of Communism, besides those headed by 'sworn virgins', there are female-headed-households, but these do not receive the same community respect that is so strongly sought and nurtured in the society generally. Massive emigration, primarily of men seeking work abroad, has drastically affected the situation for women staying in Albania. However, this generally has not led to a proportional increase in women living alone, or even of females heading families. Not only would they be flouting tradition, but they would face the very real danger of being kidnapped and taken for prostitution. Due to this same, very real fear, many young girls are being prevented from attending school (Quin 2003).

Enkeleida Tahiraj (2007) discusses the feminisation of poverty in Albania, the situation whereby women have had the burden and are continuing to bear the burden of the cost of changes more than men. In her investigations, and in particular in a specific study of women and poverty, she finds that since 1990, heavier burdens have fallen to women than men and they are

proportionately poorer than prior to 1990, due to the fact that there is less support than previously. With the break-up of multi-generational families, women can no longer rely on grandparents to participate in childrearing. Rising unemployment together with less provision of childcare have forced women back into the home, but without financial support, whereas the employment situation for men remains barely changed (*ibid.*).

Also of particular concern is how gender is included into the civil, social and political aspects of citizenship with which Albania is currently wrestling. Elona Dhëmbo (2007) finds that women's civil rights are even less guaranteed now than under the Communist regime. Albania, along with Romania, has the lowest participation of women in parliament (in 1991), down to 4% from 44% just one year earlier. Although less obvious, Dhëmbo finds the gap between women's and men's social rights is widening due to the lack of benefits allowed to women, who are thus prevented from employment while taking care of children and the elderly (*ibid.*).

Since marriage and the family have such a high importance in Albania an added strain on women can be seen with expectations in the home and in employment.<sup>9</sup> There had been a belief that the move to democracy would bring greater gender equality; however, in reality that situation is only just starting to be addressed and employers in both the private and public sector show a preference to hire men (Metani and Omari 2006: 19). Although some women are gaining independence through employment, those who are not employed are even more dependent than ever on their husbands. Saemira Pino, an activist in Albanian women's movements, points out the very large difference in the living situation between urban and rural families, noting that women in rural areas have more work (collecting water, firewood for heating, etc) than women in the towns (Pino 2007: 43-50).

Social attitudes towards women have changed little, despite work to promote public awareness on issues such as domestic violence (Haxhiymeri et al. 2006: 7). Poorly trained and prepared professionals (judges, police, childcare workers, etc.) exacerbate an already difficult situation for women in Albania, particularly in relation to domestic violence. Many women refrain from complaining about abuse, first because honour serves as a strong force for the woman to shield her husband/family/community from shame; secondly due to fears that others will place the blame on her; and thirdly because she

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<sup>9</sup> A 2000 survey of a cross-section of the Albanian population by the Faculty of Social Science of the University of Tirana found 88% placed family as the highest importance (Pino 2007: 43).

feels she will gain nothing, and could even make the situation worse by drawing attention to it (Bozo 2007). Murzaku and Dervishi (2002: 9-10) also note that "many Albanian women continue living with their abusive husbands for fear of retribution on the part of the public", and that "there is a tendency in Albanian society to discriminate against divorced women. Traditional Albanian thinking considered it to be a grave insult to a man if his wife filed for divorce" (Murzaku and Dervishi 2002: 9-10).

Although domestic violence is a major concern of the Women's Movement in the West; in Albania, a more crucial concern is building understanding for newlyweds' wishes to form their own living unit, breaking from tradition where a new bride is brought into her husband's paternal home and expected to perform the whole family's menial tasks. In the urban areas, it is also not uncommon for young couples to live together before marriage, though usually managed in secret and seen as a "pre-marriage arrangement, as time needed by both partners to get to know each other, or as a preparatory period for marriage, when people get to know the private life of the person to whom they are going to commit for life" (Murzaku and Dervishi 2003: 246-247). There is still considerable resistance to the youthful desire to move out of the extended family home, as it results in the disruption of traditional care for the elderly and the continuation of their home and family - the family structure supported by and central to the tradition of the 'sworn virgin'.

## CONCLUSION

The mountainous regions of Northern Albania, southern Montenegro, Kosovo/a and Western Macedonia are still home to a very traditional way of life. Although Westernizing transformations are rapidly affecting the major towns, they are far less intrusive in the remote rural areas where there is a strong resistance to condoning women as household heads, unless they take the life-changing step of declaring themselves to be men. Economic hardship and strength of character are among the factors shared by all the 'sworn virgins' I have met (Young 2000). Most live without contact with other 'sworn virgins' and all observe the *Kanun's* demand that an honourable home is headed by a man. Living in a strict patriarchal society, they have made a break from subservient women's roles in dress, behaviour and self-assertion without breaking from their culture of patriarchy; rather they support that system.

Currently, in the towns there is an idealization of Western ways; young people are demanding more freedom. This in turn is likely to bring greater acceptance to non-traditional family groupings, although it is likely to be a long time before single mothers will be considered acceptable in Albanian society. The change in the role of women from that of extreme subservience to one of a little more importance is due mainly to the dramatic transformations unfolding in Albanian society since 1991. The social belief in the idea that only a man may head a household is slowly losing its predominance. If female-headed houses gain the same status and respect as those headed by men, then the need for a woman to become a 'sworn virgin' lessens as their very existence is rooted in the patriarchal traditions of Northern Albanian society.

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## VIRDŽINE KAO UNAPRJEDITELJICE PATRIJARHALNOG ŽIVOTA U ALBANIJI NASUPROT NOVIM ULOGAMA ŽENA U ALBANIJI

### Sažetak

Kultura patrijarhata ugrađena u tradicionalni život planinskih područja sjeverne Albanije, južne Crne Gore, Kosova i zapadne Makedonije i dalje prevladava u tim područjima. Ta kultura zahtijeva prisutnost muškog nasljednika ili, ako ga nema, zahtijeva transformaciju žene u ulogu muškarca. Kao virdžina, žena se otima podređenoj ulozi žene u društvu, ali i učvršćuje i održava kulturu patrijarhata i tradicionalne rodne uloge u društvu. Razgovori s virdžinama od 1990-ih do danas pokazuju njihovu neprekinutu podršku tradicionalnom

sustavu rodnih uloga u Albaniji. Promjene koje su se u albanskom društvu počele događati 1991., najviše u većim gradovima, pomažu u prihvaćanju netradicionalnih obiteljskih skupina i rodnih uloga. S obzirom na to da se smanjuje potreba za muškom glavom obitelji i počinje se razgovarati o pitanjima rodne jednakosti, društveni fenomen virdžina i njegova podrška patrijarhatu se smanjuju.

Ključne riječi: Albanija, rod, virdžine, patrijarhat, uloge žena, urbano / ruralno, *Kanun*