Three into two: the third sex in Northern Albania

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ABSTRACT *From the position of a formal sociology, Georg Simmel argued that the introduction of a third element into a pervasive binary system can serve to mitigate the latter's salience. The instance considered here is that of a third sex in Northern Albania. "Sworn virgins" are generally perceived as women who become men (gender crossing) rather than as an additional engendered category (multiple gender). The overarching significance of the Albanian gender system is thereby barely attenuated, and* virgjinesha *do not contribute to a less subdominant position for other women.*

The insistent triumph of Western individualism continues to reshape our shared identity. In the last 10 years, we have seen the further decay of the classic binary metanarratives of erstwhile Western classification: a decline in class opposition in favour of a more individuated personalism; the end of the dual classifications favoured by the Cold War with the emergence of multiform international polities; the replacement of a once apparently clear black/white racial distinction in a variety of syncretisms, creolisations and métissages; and perhaps most evident of all, the decay of a rigid male/female distinction in the areas of sexuality and gender identity—with the addition of variant homosexualities, asexual alternatives, hermaphroditisms, transsexualisms and, at a less strident level, transvestisisms.

I say "with the addition" because, while variants have always been recognised, these have previously been subsumed into the logic of an overarching dual system: homosexual males were once incorporated into the dominant schema as females with masculine bodies (Herdt, 1994) and so on. (But is our apparently "natural" sexual dimorphism in Western societies so very ancient anyway, or is it as Laqueur, 1990, argues essentially a product of the 19th century?) With subsumed rather than additional categories the superordinate binary (male/female) principle is not upset in the way postulation of "a third sex" or "a third gender"[a] would destabilise a double system.

The questions one might want to address here are fourfold:

(i)   Is a third or subsequent gender category (a system henceforth called "multiple gender") locally considered as strongly independent of the first

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two—male and female—or will it be subsumed under the binary system, either formally or informally ("gender crossing"): a question first proposed in the 19th century in the "formal sociology" of Georg Simmel (1951)?

(ii) Does the admission of a third element at any level as opposed to "crossing" serve to "dilute" or mitigate the rigours of a rigorous binary principle?: "… the indirect relation [the triad] does not only strengthen the direct one [the dyad]. It may also disturb it … The appearance of the third party indicates transition, conciliation, and abandonment of absolute contrast" (Simmel, 1951, pp. 135, 145).

(iii) Does a "third sex"—whether in terms of putative morphology, social identity or personal desire—emerge in highly "structuring" societies (such as the apparently symbolising, small-scale communities with rigid gender dichotomisation traditionally studied by anthropologists), or elsewhere where the social order just is less ordered, more voluntaristic and looser (as arguably proposed for an individualised Western Europe and North America)? We might argue the former if the third sex is held to be a crossing over or "intersex" rather than a separate gender: "… the triad is a structure completely different from the dyad but not, on the other hand, specifically distinguished from groups of four or more members" (Simmel, 1951, p. 141).

(iv) Is the decision for an individual to adopt a "third sex" to be considered as personal agency or as derived from the local social structures?

Some general principles

In operating within environmental constraints, using available technical knowledge, and coping with relations with other groups, every society employs an appropriate social organisation and ideology. In doing so it imposes its own set of meanings on the everyday physical world—meanings which are common to all its members. Social concerns are embodied in the raw material of the available experiences of the individual: birth, childhood, sexuality, parenthood and death; the production and consumption of food; the organisation of space and the experience of time; physical and mental illness; dreams and other variant states of consciousness. There are comparatively few sources for such "natural symbols", as Douglas (1970) called them, and it is not surprising that one of the most pervasive is the morphology and functioning of the human body (Durkheim & Mauss, 1903), perhaps because a child is introduced initially into human society by constraints upon its body and also because of the powerful personal resonances of bodily experience.

  Whilst never to be perceived altogether "naturally", that is, outside a particular culture, the relative autonomy of such natural symbols provide a series of formal homologies, and occasionally direct isomorphisms, between the social order and the appearance of physical reality to the individual (Littlewood,

1993). Ethnic minorities such as the Jews, for instance, constantly faced with the threat of assimilation and the need to guard the boundaries and exists of the body politic, seem thus to be concerned with the boundaries, entrances and exits of the body physical, through the prohibition of certain foods, the practice of circumcision or ritual observations and prayers involving washing and excretion (Douglas, 1975): "Blessed be Thou, O Lord Our God, King of the Universe, Who has created us with orifices and openings". The intellectual organisation of such symbols can associate human concerns of quite a varied order. To take an example common to most if not all societies—the physical difference between the two sexes may relate occupations, practices, social groups, foods, clothes, animals, domestic space, and local geography, all of which are perceived as characteristically male or female in some way (e.g. Douglas, 1975). We represent this conventionally as a:b::c:d::e:f and so on, so that, for example, the relationship of man to woman may parallel that of blood to milk, or bush to village. The division of the whole social and physical world into "male and female" domains does not however create an inflexible system: as structuralists argue, the classification of any element in this way always depends on *its relation to other elements* and at times we find inversions of the normal pattern, paradoxes which can only be resolved by relying on concepts of a higher order beyond the dualism at one level, although this may be only implicit for the participants. The world of the Orthodox Jew is perceived as dual so that male:female:: husband:wife:: sacred:profane (Littlewood, 1983); the Sabbath, which we might then expect to be male by opposition to the profane week, is however female by its opposition to the religious community which "embraces" it (Zborowski & Herzog, 1962).

Symbolic representations serve to perpetuate society, as Lévi-Strauss argued, not to explain it. Their daily experience ensures that the social order is perceived as reality, not metaphor. In the early third millennium, we ourselves still find it notoriously difficult to distinguish the biological facts of male and female sex from the social facts of masculinity and femininity: although we usually argue that the latter seem somehow derived from the former, in a given situation we are often uncertain as to which is which, and we often justify the gender distinctions of society by recourse to a rather hypothetical biology.

A structural sociology of this type suggests that the private experiences of individuals themselves can only be realised through the organisation of a public symbolism which the experiences both reflect and legitimate (Douglas, 1973). This is not to suggest that the individual can be reduced to the statistics of a positivist science of society, but that cultural principles are inevitably coded in a symbolic classification that is represented simultaneously in social organisation and personal psychology.

Dual classification

The commonest mode of symbolic classification appears dual—the division of the world into two distinct and opposed spheres. For ethnic minorities like

African Caribbeans or Hasidic Jews in Britain, who are politically dominated by a majority group, or for societies dependent on two distinct modes of production, dual classification seems a persuasive option (Littlewood, 1993; Littlewood & Dein, 1995). Binarism is, however, also prevalent in contemporary political and scientific discourse: church/state, capitalism/communism, particles/waves, mind/body, cognition/affect (or head/heart), individual/society, reality principle/pleasure principle, and so forth. In word association tests antonyms are the most frequent responses (Apter, 1982) and they produce equivalent loadings in personal construct theory (Kelly, 1955). Whilst the tendency to divide the universe into two opposed domains has an undeniable intellectual elegance, its origins may lie in our physical experience of a gravitational field (up/down), in sexual life (male/female), in the bilateral symmetry of the human body (right/left), or in some more universal structuring (Needham, 1977): the same logical structures seem to be present in grammar and social life (Harré & Secord, 1972). Both the psychologist Kelly ("all constructs follow the dichotomous form") and the anthropologist Lévi-Strauss (who adapted his theory of cognitive oppositions from the phonetic oppositions of the linguist Jakobson) point out the similarity between intellectual processes and the logical oppositions (one/zero) of contradictory terms found both in neuronal activity and the cybernetic model based on electronic valves (Kelly, 1955; Lévi-Strauss, 1977).[b]

Thus, although the symbolic system participates in and reflects the social order, it is not simply a function of it. Conversely the social order which we have described almost as if it were independent of the mind must itself follow the possibilities of human thought (Lévi-Strauss, 1977). While the particular natural symbols chosen may vary from one community to another and articulate particular modes of production, their organisation reflects certain universal human abilities such as the recognition of homology, analogy, and binary opposition. As Judah Loew, the "Rabbi of Prague" (whom legend credits with the creation of the Golem), pointed out in the 16th century, "oppositions" may be of various logical types (Sherwin, 1982): they may be contraries (male/female), correlatives (superior/inferior), or simply the presence or absence of some characteristic (light/dark) (cf. Needham, 1977, 1980).

Innovations, if they are to gain legitimacy, can be made only within certain intellectual limits: ultimate validation, however, may depend on social changes which the new symbolic variants reflect or precipitate. Millennial movements like Sabbatianism or the Earth People of Trinidad may start by making external political change meaningful for the individual through an explicit symbolic inversion but the continued dynamic of the movement's thinking and social order offers a potential vehicle for initially transcending or subsuming this initial only cognitive change (Littlewood, 1993). Similarly, additional gender categories nibble away, as it were, at other superordinate principles.

The individual's symbolic classification

The use of an approach deriving from structural social anthropology presents us

with an immediate problem. The study of symbolic classification originated when anthropologists looked at the shared ideology of homogeneous, bounded, small-scale communities with prescriptive marriage systems and, to the ethnographer, a close formal relationship between social and symbolic organisation. Can we apply it to idiosyncratic personal experience in these societies or, indeed, in more urbanised, literate, and pluralistic societies? Does the personal relevance or the common fund of symbols differ for each individual? Individuals can only construct their personal reality in terms of the dominant culture: their "nature" is always a socially appropriated nature. The very idea of a shared public symbolism suggests that they have little room to manoeuvre inside it to explore their private predicament. But even small-scale communities may of course contain more than one organising principle: classically the whole society itself may oscillate over time between two contrasted principles of social organisation, each of which has its own pattern of moral and action, such as democracy versus hierarchy (Leach, 1954). Each set of patterns is, however, always present in the culture, even if one is currently dominant, and it is the relationship between the two which articulates daily life.[c]

The most salient instance of this is the recognition that women may not share the public (male) system, or at least may not perceive it as men do (Ardener, 1978). Even when symbolic elements are tightly enmeshed in distinct biological groups they may offer to the individual (who has fixed membership in one group) some cross-gender flexibility with which to negotiate crises and life-events—but only within certain limits.[d] In some communities a man's wish to have access to female attributes and potentials may result in adoption of a quasi-female status such as the Amerindian *berdache* (Roscoe, 1999; Whitehead, 1981).[e] In a similar way, in early modern Britain, because the masculine/feminine distinction was still articulated most fundamentally by heterosexual coitus, the male homosexual (the "sexual invert" of an older psychiatry) became in some measure feminine. In the traditional schema, we can distinguish between "active" and "passive" homosexual subgroups, a distinction paralleling the customary male/female one (and variously glossed as *insertor/insertee* by sociologists for the gay male, and *butch/fem* in the traditional lesbian argot), and thus approaching "multiple gendering".

In contrast to the situation found in monothetic scientific classification, then, we find that the same differentiating principle (male/female) may articulate different levels of differentiation—a:b::b1:b2. We can expect that in situations such as prisons where women are absent, men who are heterosexual on the outside will be active rather than passive homosexuals on the inside (Babcock, 1978). Similarly, a male transsexual is unlikely to be the "active" sexual partner. However, with Gay Liberation and the Women's Movement we have now attained "a diffuse, polymorphous and non-focused sexuality which transcends the genital definition of male and female roles" (Benthal & Polhemus, 1975). In the last few years it has thus become possible for a European or North American man to be homosexual without being "effeminate". Indeed, in America gay men are now frequently "hypermasculine" and the six "sexes" can be identified
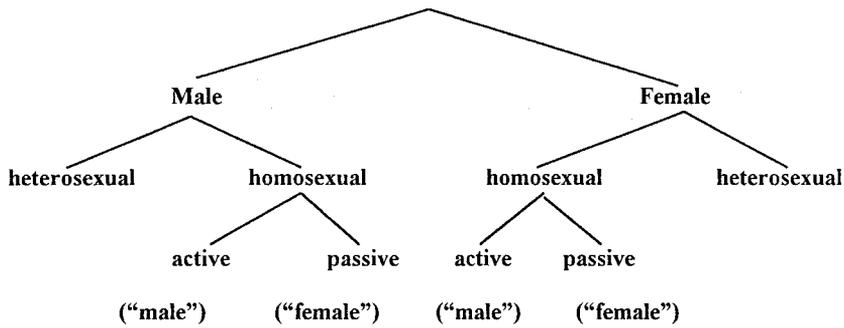
FIG. 1.

sartorially, although the four homosexual classes have still to define themselves by differing combinations of traditional male and female apparel (Figure 1).[f]

The instance I wish to consider in some more detail is in the mountain villages of Northern Albania (and to a lesser extent Kosova, Serbia and Montenegro) where we find something like a third sex recognised.

The historical setting

Albanian speakers have been settled in what is now Albania and Kosova since at least the early medieval period (Vickers, 1999). Albanians were then among the last to seek a national identity separate from Ottoman Turkey in the late 19th century. When Albania achieved independence from Turkey in 1912, the Albanian speaking area east of the Accursed Mountains, Kosova, was occupied by Serbia in 1913, and remained part of Serbia and thence Yugoslavia. Resistance grew to the Belgrade administration during the 1990s, and after the attempt at reconciliation at Rambouillet in 1999 failed, Kosova was occupied later that year by NATO forces—the current situation. Albania proper, on the Adriatic coast, has remained independent, first as a republic, then as a monarchy under King Zog, was occupied by the Italians and then the Germans in the Second World War, with a period of extreme isolation under the communist Enver Hoxha and his successor which ended with elections in 1992, and now a return to a nominal parliamentary system but with frequent and widespread civil disturbances often approaching civil war and a vacuum of power at the political centre.

"A woman is sack made to endure": gender and death in the customary law

During the 20th century, Kosova and Albania have remained the poorest part of Europe (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2001), isolated from the rest of the continent by geography and politics. Despite attempts at centralisation from Belgrade or Tirana, rural life was dominated by a network of exogamous

patrilineal clans or tribes (*fis*, or at the village level *bajraks* or Banners) especially among the Ghegs of northern Albania and Kosova (Doja, 1999; Saltmarshe, 2001). Without a nationally enforced system of justice, customary law prevailed among the transhumant peasants living in wooded multi-generational family settlements (*shtëpi* or *zadrugas*), which rear small livestock, particularly sheep and goats. Men are generally responsible for feuding, ploughing and irrigation, women for hoeing, sowing, harvesting, fetching water for the household, cooking, childrearing and care of the house. Whilst generally fairly secular in everyday life, the majority of Albanians are nominally Muslim, with a substantial Catholic minority in the north and an Orthodox minority in the south. In spite of the Hoxha regime's opposition to the rural social order and to religion (Albania was the world's first "atheist state"), notions of the customary law remain to adjust personal relations in what is once again a clan based society with limited central authority. Albanians can be described as "traditional" in adhering to the public norms of early modern European peasant communities. The most influential of the codifications of the customary law is the medieval *Kanun* (Canon) of Lekë Dukagjini collected together with 20th century revisions by a Kosovar priest in the 1920s (Gjeçov, 1989), presumably in an attempt to standardise and attenuate more inchoate forms of immediate revenge (Black-Michaud, 1975). "The importance of the Kanun to the ordinary life of the Albanians of Kosova and the Matësi [mountainous northern Albania] can hardly be exaggerated", says the Balkanist historian Noel Malcolm (1999, p. 17). "It still influences life in the entire area ..." (Senechal, 1997, p. 5), and traditionally took precedence over state or church law (Gjeçov, 1989).

Whilst much of the Kanun is taken up with issues of gender and marriage, hospitality and the resolution of rights in livestock and property, it is most well-known in Western Europe for its regulation of homicide and a male blood feud (*gjakmarrje*) of the type associated with other Mediterranean societies such as Sicily or Corsica (Peristiany, 1965), particularly since the translation of the Albanian novelist Ismael Kadare's famous *Broken April* (1991). One of the most striking aspects of this ethnographic novel and the Kanun which it illustrates is the location of experience and revenge within the standardised setting of the Kanun itself; as if individual perception and experience are of no real significance in the working out of the process of the local moral economy. However, it starts (quarrels over boundaries or grazing rights, insults to guests or women), its continuation has an almost inexorable public form. One of the aspects noted by commentators on the blood feud (Durham, 1909/1985; Hasluck, 1954; Kadare, 1991; Senechal, 1997) is how little individual motivation to continue the feud is actually determined by feelings of loss or personal revenge: all the commentators note that it is the expected public response to an insult to the "law of blood" (Durham, 1909; Hasluck, 1954): "Till you had taken blood everyone would talk about you. You could not live like that" (Durham, 1909, p. 112); "strangely impersonal, abstract ... the blood feud is a collective concept involving the whole community" (Senechal, 1997, pp. 29, 30). An individual engages in return assassination because he must, as part of

the accepted order: he goes into ambush, shoots a male member of the opposing family (women are exempt), carefully turns him on his back and places his gun by his head (as the Kanun specifies: §3846; Gjeçov, 1989), goes back to his own family stronghold (*kulla*) and sends a neutral messenger to the opposing family (or tribe in the case of inter-tribal feud) stating what he has done and claiming a period of *besa* or pledged truce. During this he attends the funeral and wake of his victim in the latter's house, pays a monetary compensation to the ritual authorities and then awaits his own death (or that of another male family member) on completion of the truce.

The display of expected and permitted grief after a death is clearly specified by the Kanun: "§1235: The men who bewail the dead scratch their faces and beat their clothes. §1236: The women lament, but do not scratch their faces. §1239: Men do not lament over women, except in the case of a son over his mother or a brother over a sister" (Gjeçov, 1989). Women had little voice in the Kanun; they could not be the target of a blood feud, could not inherit, nor refuse their arranged marriage, were assumed to be virgins at their engagement, and must "submit to the husband's domination" (Kanun: §33, §57); "a woman is a sack made to endure" (Gjeçov, 1989)—in other words, perform an essentially childbearing role as the property of her husband (Whitaker, 1981). At her marriage a wife's parents formerly gave their son-in-law a cartridge to kill their daughter should she be adulterous or "betray hospitality" (Hasluck, 1954). The association of men with the blood feud is exemplified by the expression for tracing relationships agnatically (locally recognised descent, through men) "by blood"; through women (uterine relationships, barely proper descent) "by milk". Durham described how everyday interest and occupation are monopolised by the "law of blood", and how sardonically but lightheartedly men pursue its course.

It might be expected that the Kanun refers to a now disappeared past, yet since the early 1990s, with the decline in central authority and the lack of impartial and effective law inforcement, blood feuds and their associated gender relations in Albania and Kosova have proliferated with arguments over the privatisation of communal land (Malcolm, 1988; Schwandner-Sievers, 1999; Young, 2000), increasing "at a remarkable rate" (King, 2000), shading into new urban and rural criminality and now "without order" (Krasztev, 2000). Schwandner-Sievers (1999) discusses the resurgence of various *Kanuns* after communism; their modifications and exploitation, particularly by Sali Berisha (President 1992–1997); and newer "national" attempts at offering processes for reconciliation (see also Miller, 1999). A recent study found that over a hundred young boys in northern Albania were in protected hiding, fearing to go out of their *kulla* because of an ongoing feud (King, 2000). Perhaps a hundred families in Shkoder, a northern town of some 80,000, are "in blood" at the moment (Krasztev, 2000), with over 2000 families in the whole of Albania (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2001). A recent case involved two members of the national parliament. The annual homicide rate in Shkoder in the late 1990s was one per thousand of the population, and 73% of violent deaths in Albania are attributed to feud killings (Saltmarshe, 2001).

The traditional gender bipolarity was to an extent mitigated under Hoxha, at least in the public sphere, with his Communist attempts to produce "the new Soviet man". To an extent, distinctions based on gender have returned in rural areas with the resurgence of church marriages (but no longer, as formerly, bride price) and private household economies. One very conservative old lady who served me coffee in the old manner confided that she had once been the leader of the local Communist village council. Islam in Albania is not especially severe, but few outside the capital have much knowledge of the small Albanian women's movement (Young, 2000).

Sworn virgins

It is against this background of re-traditionalisation that, with the frequency of male deaths, women can still elect to become honorary males and, declining marriage altogether, inherit and act as heads of households—as 'sworn virgins' (*vajzë e betuar* or *virgjinesha*: Durham, 1909/1985; Grémaux, 1994): and indeed take part in blood feuds (Young, 2000). Sworn virgins have been reported in the Western Balkans (Albania, Kosovo, Bosnia, Montenegro, Macedonia) since the early 1800s (in Serb they are known as *muskobanja* or "man-like woman"), and Grémaux in 1994 claimed to know of 120 instances, pointing out that they are particularly found among those of peasant origin. In mountainous northern Albania particularly, traditional values of patrilineal descent and inheritance, exogamy and virilocality still persist (the south is to an extent Hellenized and also more cosmopolitan). Female virginity is prized before marriage (or engagement) and the possibility of premarital sexual relations met with incomprehension. Men and women are quite distinct in terms of morphology, lineage, power, social roles, emotion and agency.

"Sworn virgins" generally attain their status in one of two circumstances. An adolescent girl can only avoid her arranged marriage by swearing perpetual virginity (formerly before a group of 12 elders in the church or mosque), or else fathers without a son to whom they leave their property (who in turn would become the *zoti i shtëpies:* "master of the house" or household head) proclaim their daughter a man. "Virgins" now dress as men, with short hair, trousers, wristwatch and gun, work as men, publicly drink *raki* and smoke, and generally socialise as men with male gestures and body language. They may become a *zot i shtëpies* and often take traditionally male labouring or mechanical jobs. They may take a masculine form of their given name, and generally (although not invariably) are referred to by the masculine pronoun. They have no distinctive religious or economic role, nor do they form any kind of corporate group (unlike the *berdache*). Three instances follow.[g]

Xhema, although of rural background, lived in Shkoder in the apartment block where I was staying with a family of the Dibra *fis*. She is now aged 69 and lives together with her younger sister, an ex-schoolteacher who adopts the female role—quieter, calmer, almost subservient, serving coffee to their guests. Xhema, by contrast, is a forceful, almost outrageous woman and dresses in

trousers and a man's short-sleeved shirt. Her hair is cut short. She had six sisters and one brother. Xhema described how when she was a small girl, the neighbours called her a boy because of her behaviour, and at the age of 10 or 12 she started wearing trousers (*panthallona*) and went to the village hairdresser saying "cut it short like a boy" (another version of her story says she became a man only at 16 when her father died, and she then had to hide her new haircut from her angry brother). She worked as a mechanic since leaving her home at 16. Her sister, with whom she now lives, never married but felt no obligation or inclination to become a sworn virgin. Xhema vigorously acts as a man in her household, taking economic decisions, and in the local bar drinks *raki* and officiously lights cigarettes for others, coughing vigorously over her own. Four of her six sisters married (all now widowed) and she acts as the "uncle" to her brother's two daughters living nearby: he died some years ago.

Lule works in a lowland village near the River Burrë close to the Adriatic with her brother, his wife and their five children. She is the *zoti i shtëpies* (household head), generally ignoring her brother, Pjetar, when entertaining and publicly sitting with and toasting guests, whilst served by his wife. (Women serve men food and then retire to eat with the children or by themselves.) Pjetar moves around the house unobtrusively, self-deprecating and almost apologetic. The family (his wife included) say he was spoilt as the only boy among 11 children, and has not been able to become a strong household head, only just managing to keep the family livestock (cows and sheep) together. Pjetar's and Lule's parents died in her teens after which she became a public man. She wears a black leather jacket and dungarees, and previously worked as a mechanic in the Communist period, currently looking after a machine in a nearby quarry. She is now in her late 40s and comes over as friendly but fairly forceful.

Pashke is in her early 50s and lives in Theth (some four hours truck ride north of Shkoder) and dresses in dark shirt and trousers with short hair. She lives alone in the mountains after the death of her uncle; offering me *raki* and coffee, she joins in to drink herself. (Normally a woman leaves whilst the men drink.) As a child, the orphaned Pashke lived with this uncle who became ill when she was aged 18. He was taken to hospital in Shkoder and every two weeks Pashke walked over to the town (35 miles away) to visit him, dressed as a man for security. The uncle returned to the village and Pashke continued to live as a man, later inheriting the small house and homestead on his death.

Three into two

To what extent then are sworn virgins seen as a separate category, and to what extent are they subsumed under the overarching categories of male or female (question i)? They share the label of "virgin" with unmarried girls who are certainly regarded as female. When Xhema became ill as a sworn virgin she was offered the choice of the men's or the women's wards in the hospital. She chose the women's ward. (All three said they were female anatomically and physiologically.) Even though the virgins take part in the blood feud, Grémaux (1994)

says there is debate as to whether it is proper to kill them: I found no-one with recollections of such an event but none of the three cases had been involved in a feud themselves, whilst all maintained that they would play a full man's part. Although sworn virgins are buried as men in men's clothing and they sit in on the elders' discussions, unlike other women, they cannot vote on decisions in these assemblies (Gjeçov, 1989, p. 108). In the most fundamental articulation of gender, sexual relations, what is the situation of the virgins? Reportedly, sworn virgins who had sex were once burned alive, and generally virgins now do not have sexual relations: my three denied any history or desire for them, but Grémaux records some in Serbia as having had relations with women. Although parental inheritance of land and property passes through the sworn virgin "agnatically" to her nephews (she has usufruct for life), there is no equivalent to African ghost marriage with, say, the virgin as pater.

Thus there seems some local uncertainty as to how far sworn virgins are to be regarded as fully male: although they may be personally annoyed by being reminded of their female origin, there is no bar to a villager describing them publicly as "really female". Virgins claim no solidarity or identity either with reported lesbians in the West or with its Women's Movement, and are as socially conservative as men. Although Northern Albania was generally opposed to the Hoxha regime, and virgins now too decry it along with others, it seems that in the Communist period they found it relatively easier to obtain men's work and perhaps to be a social man. Albanian communist ideology presented a more equal status for women (Saltmarshe, 2001)—at least in theory: a popular saying recounts that in the Zog period, a woman walked 10 paces behind a man; under Hoxha this became three paces. The end of Communism and the collapse of state owned enterprises resulted in more women than men losing paid employment outside the household (Saltmarshe, 2001).

Whether we take the emergence of phenomena like a "third sex" as more or less likely with traditional binary gender classification (question iii), it neverthe-less appears that they have less classificatory autonomy than lesbians in more pluralistic societies, constantly tending to be represented as "women who have become men" rather than some more independent third category. Nor do they appear to dilute the dichotomy (question ii).[h] Indeed, they seem to support and enhance a rigorous binarism: male and female still appear as powerfully contrasted and determining categories in Northern Albania, as we would expect if "sworn virgins" are "women who become men" rather than some quite separate third sex. *Virgjinesha* are always described in terms of male or female attributes: never in terms of anything altogether "other" (as with multiple gender).

How much does the move to become a sworn virgin depend on local structural dynamics, and how much on individual personality (question iv)? All three virgins demonstrated male Albanian body language and a self-confident, almost arrogant, style. Xhema's choice seems the most personal, although I know little about her younger brother's capacity, but in the cases of Lule and Pashke, the decision lies partly in external circumstances (a weak brother, an old

ill uncle with no children). None of the three expressed or demonstrated publicly any lesbian tendencies.

I have considered the question in fairly abstract terms without considering the extent to which women may resent ritualised female deference and a subdominant position (Denich, 1974): marrying into a male controlled household, often being known only by the husband's first name, childbirth and child rearing, carrying out heavy domestic and agricultural duties, washing the feet of male guests, always deferring to their husband in public, and so on. "A man has blood [kin] … and a woman is anybody's daughter" (Hasluck, 1954, p. 33). The extent to which this is currently perceived and resented by women depends perhaps on a knowledge of contemporary Western European and American society (television with its extensive diet of Italian films is now commonly available in towns if not the poorer countryside). None of my informants expressed such resentment but then my relations with them were quite public and formal. All three sworn virgins certainly did express a satisfaction with their having greater autonomy and public responsibility than other women. But there is little indication that the *virgjenesha* serve to mitigate a superordinate sexual binarism.

Notes

(a) Herdt (1994) argues that "sex" and "gender" have recently become elided categories, just as have "disease" and "illness" under the influence of new biomedical technologies.

(b) In other words, the structuring of the intellect parallels the structuring of the natural world, perhaps not surprisingly if the natural world can only be conceived of through the intellect, itself dependent on that world (Sahlins, 1976). Women have been associated with the left of the body and men with the right, both by scientific reasoning (which is typically metonymic) and by symbolic reasoning (metaphoric): it has been suggested that women are characteristically skilled at the functions represented in the right cerebral hemisphere and men with those of the left (Ornstein, 1974), whilst communities which employ a system of binary classification generally associate woman, the "non-logical" partner, with the left of the body (Needham, 1977). As the right hemisphere and thus the left side of the body are particularly associated with paralogical (metaphoric) modes of thought and the left hemisphere with logical (metonymic) modes, we find that the origin of our metaphor–metonym distinction may itself be either metaphoric or metonymic …

(c) There are a multitude of familiar ethnographic instances. Among the West African Yako there were simultaneously two quite different principles of social organisation and inheritance; one passed through the father and was concerned with residence while the other was traced through the mother and was concerned with property and with the settlement of disputes: a system unified as the anthropologist's double descent (Forde, 1950). In a similar way the dual organisation of certain South American Indian societies seems to be cut across by a series of linear age-grades but these are integrated into dual structure through serial oppositions, alternate years aligning with one or another of the two social divisions (Maybury-Lewis, 1979). In both communities, the individual is a member of the two available systems at the same time, and can employ either pragmatically, playing off his role in one against his role in the other.

(d) The leader or *zadik* of a Jewish Hasidic group is male. One group, unusually, had a female *zadik*: as Hasidic life rigidly separates male and female domains she had to become a "classificatory" male and, alone of the women in the community, was in most respects treated

as a man (Mintz, 1968; Zborowski & Herzog, 1962). As the customary male/female distinction was embodied principally in the natural symbols of sexual relationships, however, she was unable to continue as *zadik* after she married.

(e) Or women become "male". Roscoe (1994) argues that Whitehead's earlier (1981) suggestion of Amerindian "sexual crossing" is mistaken, and that both the male and female *berdache* actually occupy third and fourth genders.

(f) The attempt to signal various sexual preferences for gay males by the positioning and colour of a pocket handkerchief has been abandoned because the code was apparently too complex to recall.

(g) I am indebted to Antonia Young both for her introduction to the subject of this paper and to these women in 2001. I interviewed the three with her and Elena Von Lukovitz, who made with us a short film on them. Xhema has since died. I also use here commentary on them from Ms Young's book (2001).

(h) "[T]he sociological situation between the superordinate and the subordinate is completely changed as soon as a third element is added" (Simmel, 1951, p. 141).

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