

Instrumental Borders of Gender and Religious Conversion in the Balkans*

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I look at religious identifications and affiliations in the Balkans as instrumental political resources for ascertaining hierarchical relations among social groups and individuals, with extensive use of gendered metaphors, referring to different categories of people as either effeminate or truly manly, and actual women often used as a currency of exchange.

A Gendered Ethno-Religious Ideology

More than anything else, the Balkans is a place of passages, encounters and contacts, formidable in its capability of hybridising Eastern Orthodoxy, Catholicism and Islam. However, a generalised view on Southeast European cultures and societies, especially in the case of Albania, would underscore regional differences between mountains and plains, between life-worlds shaped by different religious cultures, and between different social and economic settings, urban and rural, especially as far as their impact on gender relations is concerned.

In the Balkans, as elsewhere, religious conversion and politics have normally related to a collective history, which embraced social and cultural communities, or more precisely, members of a family, a lineage, a village or a larger group. Before, during and after the heyday of islamisation in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, one converted either to Islam or to Christianity because of belonging to a social network. Conversion and religious belonging or affiliation are therefore part of a process of socialisation through the pursuit of a collective identity. Collective representations and beliefs, ritual practices and ceremonies are considered part of the official religion – Christianity or Islam accordingly – of a given local community or social network, regardless of whether a particular cultural trait does or does not form part of the world religion in question. They are categorised collectively not as religious features of

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an established world belief system but as part of 'an ancestral legacy of traditions and customs'. Belonging to a religion means belonging to a social group.

In the case of religious differences, however, a discontinuity exists up to the present day between the actual social organisation and the discourses of the actors themselves about society and social behaviour. When one listens to discourses of this kind in Albania, for instance, this discontinuity usually seems to be considerable, and one can sometimes gain the impression of a total rupture between Christians and Muslims. On the other hand, empirical observations at the level of any local community reveal between Christians and Muslims not only a perfectly inclusive community of language, of course, but also a very broad inclusive community of modes of existence and of cultural behaviours. Although an individual may share group prejudices towards other religious groups, the essential group values are defined by a system of kinship and matrimonial alliances, of solidarity and hostility, of status and social position, which is common to many social communities regardless of religion. Being Muslim or Christian is based on the particular family, kinship, territorial or social group, which by tradition relates to religious 'belonging' or adherence. It is not based on a specific belief system or religious conviction; rather it is grounded in the social culture. Religion is a conformity, which is transmitted throughout the community (Doja, 2000).

A consequence of the foregoing is that where many see the opposition between religious groups as a cause or an explanation of certain historical developments in the Balkans, we must on the contrary see it as an effect of those developments. The conceptualisation of the categories of 'Christian' or 'Muslim' is necessarily related to social, political, territorial, ethnic, gender, and many other levels of identification. An important feature of this type of conceptualisation is a dichotomising populist logic in political and cultural discourse which often involves a fallacy of metonymic misrepresentation throughout the Balkans. The oppositional conceptualisation between Christians and Muslims is part of a series of antithetical pairs such as highlander/lowlander, urban/rural, conqueror/conquered, oppressor/oppressed, autochthonous/heterochthonous, moral/immoral, pure/impure, all of which are significantly represented by the categories of masculine/feminine and male/female (Sofos, 1996; Zhivkovic, 1997). These pairs of opposites, a consequence of the existence of sexist, masculinist cultural elements, are available to be pinned conspicuously on different groups of people regardless of the actual ascriptions in order to exalt or debase their identities. This kind of characterisation of whole territorial and religious groups as bearers of one or another mentality may be identified as 'Balkanism' (Todorova, 1997) and partakes in the logic of many 'nesting orientalisms' (Bakic-Hayden, 1995).

Any given dichotomy may, what is more, be refracted recursively, its meaning amplified over and over again to be used in more and more bloody contexts of conflict, as can be seen, for example, in the perception of any conversion to Islam as a betrayal of Christian 'blood' and Christian 'milk', which have entailed a transformation from Slavic to Turkic blood and race.

Conversion to Islam has always been a sensitive issue, widely exploited in literature, particularly in epic poetry. Certain infamous masterpieces of Balkan literature, from the work of the early nineteenth-century Montenegrin poet and bishop Petar Njegoš to that of the twentieth-century Yugoslavian Nobel prize-winner Ivo Andrić, have been influential in this regard. As portrayed in such works, this kind of ethno-religious ideology excludes all Slavic Muslims from the 'people' and demonstrates what can be done to those defined as non-people and what, under certain circumstances, is a

religious duty and a sacred, cleansing act. Such nationalist religious discourse, levelled against Slavic Muslims' natal milk and against their procreating faculty, curses them to disappear, not only as 'cowardly and covetous' and the 'heathen element of a young race', but finally as the corrupted 'Orient' that has cut off the Slavic race from the 'civilizing currents' of the West (Sells, 1996).

A number of studies have explored cross-culturally the ways the ethno-religious community has been imagined and legitimated according to gendered metaphors of reproduction and kinship, and the ways religious and nationalist politics have been structured with reference to gender (Mosse, 1985; Yuval-Davis, 1997; Goldstein, 2001; Nagel, 2003). Serbian nationalist populism in particular has emphasised a number of gendered dichotomies which shape social relations by setting 'real Serbs' not only against Bosnian 'traitors' who have converted to Islam in particular, but also against fantasised virile but 'bestial' and 'evil incarnate' Albanians, against 'emasculated' Serbian bureaucrats and communists, against 'effeminate' Serbian peace activists, or against 'hormonally challenged' opponents to the Milošević line (Salecl, 1994). Drawing upon a masculinist definition of the nation, an important discursive strategy has been employed in the positing of the category of the 'feminine' and the 'effeminate' to include virtually everyone not conforming to the accepted 'nationalised' versions of masculinity or to the 'gendered' versions of national identity.

It is the increasing role of traditionalist and nationalist discourses that makes it possible for religion subsequently to get converted into nationalist consciousness, for this consciousness to become organised and for organised nationalism to become militarist, masculinist, misogynist, racist and violent. Nationalist projects may indeed mobilise a traditionalist discourse towards social construction of gender and religion, the result of which is to *en-gender* the war, on the basis of an assumed and reified moral order and gendered ethno-religious ideology.

Instrumentality of Gender and Religious Categories

A further phenomenon is that the discursive valencies of the opposite poles of a pair of terms often get reversed; indeed, the whole range of opposed pairs of terms can be given a whole spectrum of variously shaded valuations. Depending on who is talking to whom, when, under what circumstances, and for what purpose, the permutations and combinations, sometimes seemingly logically inconsistent, of territorial, religious or gendered ethno-psychological distinctions can assume dizzying complexity. Lowlanders and urban people can be seen as rational, pragmatic and cultivated, or obversely as degenerate, soft and submissive; highlanders and rural people can be seen as brave, proud, of superior mettle, or obversely as violent, primitive and arrogant. In this process of identity construction spatial, religious and gendered borders are constantly ethnicised and politicised to express symbolic cultural borders, a process which is particularly amplified in periods of suddenly disruptive social change such as the ethnic wars in former Yugoslavia or the postcommunist turbulence in Albania.

Generally, in Albania one frequently encounters mutual perceptions expressed in dichotomies of 'primitive' versus 'civilised', and 'faithful' or 'honourable' versus 'unfaithful' and 'treacherous'. Southern Albanians would conceive of the northern mountain people as 'primitive' and of themselves as 'civilised'. By contrast, northern Albanians, especially Catholics, would conceive of Albanian Muslims as 'unfaithful', relating this prominently to their religious conversion in history. They would also tend to label all southern Albanians of Orthodox religion as potentially 'unfaithful' because

of prevalent conspiracy theories in which identification with Greek expansionist plans would make them potential traitors (see Schwandner-Sievers, 2002).

More specifically, against the 'delicacy' and the 'civilised culture' of certain categories of people, the behaviour of people of opposite categories is often taken to be 'fanatical', a mark of their backwardness. Representations of fanaticism often relate to religious matters, but first and foremost they relate to the context of family relations, with a more marked subordination of women to male authority perceived as a feature of fanaticism. Of course, such representations may well have no relations to real practices, and in mixed local communities Christians and Muslims may make the same representations about each other, always with a certain shift in relation to reality. Different communities within one religion may also represent each other as fanatical. The Muslims in southern Albania, for instance, are rather prompt to denounce the fanaticism of certain other groups of Muslims whom they perceive as 'opposite' according to one or another criterion. They often perceive their own coexistence with Christians in southern Albania, for example, as a mark and a cause of their 'cultural finesse' in comparison with the Muslims of the rural or mountain areas of northern Albania, a superiority which they see as also necessarily implied in their gender relations (Rapper, 2002).

Matrimonial relations between Christians and Muslims are often defined by the endogamy of the religious community. In local communities with a large Muslim majority Christians may want to comply with rules on religious endogamy, but they will also be limited by the rules of exogamy which prohibit them to marry cousins up to several distant degrees, either on the father's or the mother's side. This is why many Christian women marry in the cities, which are perceived as 'Christian': they have very little chance of finding a permitted spouse in their village. Young women who leave to pursue graduate studies in the city also tend to remain there and not to return to the village to find a spouse. All this reinforces the bonds that Christians maintain with the cities and contributes to their image of 'culture' and 'modernity': qualities which are attributed, as anywhere, to the large urban centres.

In anthropological terms, religious endogamy manifests itself primarily in a refusal to give wives rather than a refusal to take them. In this sense Christian endogamy in Albania is stricter than Muslim endogamy insofar as Christians are even more resistant than Muslims to being givers, while agreeing to be takers, which marks a relative superiority of Christians in relation to Muslims. In the majority of mixed couples the husband is a Christian and the wife a Muslim. The reverse happens much more rarely, and Christian women married to Muslims are in general from distant mountain areas, and are thus external to local opposition between Christians and Muslims. In this situation, the takers of wives are valorised. Christian men are proud of the fact that they can take Muslim wives, whereas Muslims complain that the Christians take their daughters but refuse to give theirs to them (Rapper, 2002).

The current situation is however the reverse of the situation that prevailed before independence, that is, at the time of the institutional pre-eminence of Muslims within the framework of Ottoman society. For Muslims to take Christian wives was quite a common practice in the Ottoman Empire. Under Islamic law it is permissible for a Muslim man to marry a Christian woman, though not for a Muslim woman to marry a non-Muslim. However, such issues of legalistic religion have never been, and are still not today, of major concern to the religious mind of Albanians. In the quasi-autonomous regions of North Albania, for instance, powerful staunch Catholics are regularly reported to have married Muslim women during the nineteenth century; the women were expected to abandon Islam upon marriage (Whitaker, 1968).

In the pre-modern Balkan highlands in particular, both unmarried males and unmarried females might have found themselves as much the victims of family politics as the hapless members of royal houses in the Middle Ages. Questions of family advantage – not religious affiliation *per se* – were the guiding issues when the time came for a man to be married, and the senior members of his extended family would examine the matter so that the union most advantageous to the group as a whole could be arranged. The rights and interests of women would not be consulted, and many women still describe their arranged marriages and accept them as the norm (see Post, 1998). Among the many things to be negotiated, often the least problematic was to expect that the woman would change her religious faith to conform to that of her husband.

It seems reasonable to assume in any case that the present orientation of matrimonial strategies is rather a recent one, which corresponds to a new political situation and is part of the concept of ‘culture’ that underlies them. At the beginning of the twentieth century, shortly after independence, the tendency was already reversed. Even though religious intermarriages were still relatively low in number, demographic evidence from a sample examination of data from the census carried out in 1918 throughout Austrian-occupied Albanian areas shows that in the majority of cases the husband was Roman Catholic and the wife was Muslim, and only in about 10 per cent of the cases was the husband Muslim and the wife Roman Catholic (Gruber and Pichler, 2002). In the same way conversions to Islam were more frequent than conversions to Christianity until the early years of the twentieth century, whereas the tendency today is rather in the other direction. The relative status of Muslims and Christians is already reversed in local society. The Christians are recognised as the elite and matrimonial behaviour has accompanied this evolution. Thus religious identifications and affiliations cannot be objective criteria for defining groups but rather categories for thinking about groups. They seem essentially to be instrumental political resources for ascertaining hierarchical relations among social groups and individuals, with women often used as a currency of exchange.

Women’s Agency

If Lévi-Strauss is to be taken seriously, we must agree that women are assumed to be not merely exchange objects linked in a formal power structure but subjects in history and everyday social life as well. In his kinship theory women are exchanged between groups of men on the basis of rules of exogamy and prohibition of incest. This form of matrimonial alliance is assumed to provide communication between separate social groups and ultimately to ensure the integration of human society as a whole. In this kind of elementary structure of kinship women are seen as being part of a certain type of communication, like a ‘speech’ that is misused when they are not exchanged and ‘communicated’. Even though Lévi-Strauss does not denounce what kinship systems do to women, there is here something of a contradiction, which amounts to a recognition of women’s agency, since women ‘speak’ at the same time as they are ‘spoken’, insofar as they are ‘communicated’ in their value quality of signs and they ‘communicate’ in their value quality of producers of signs. To quote Lévi-Strauss,

... A woman could never become just a sign and nothing more, since even in a man’s world she is still a person, and since insofar as she is defined as a sign she must be recognized as a generator of signs. In the matrimonial dialogue of men, a woman is never purely what is spoken about; for if

women in general represent a certain category of signs, destined to a certain kind of communication, each woman preserves a particular value arising from her talent, before and after marriage, for taking her part in a duet. In contrast to words, which have wholly become signs, woman has remained at once a sign and a value. This explains why the relations between the sexes have preserved that affective richness, ardour and mystery which doubtless originally permeated the entire universe of human communications. (Lévi-Strauss, 1967, p. 569; 1969, p. 496)

In the Balkans during Ottoman times, women married to Muslims often retained their Christian religion and were a factor in creating good feeling between the members of the two faiths. In Albania in particular, a significant role in the preservation of secret Christianity has been attributed to women (Skendi, 1967; Malcolm, 2001). In the seventeenth century, when the Catholic population began to diminish rapidly because of mass conversions to Islam, crypto-Christianity correspondingly expanded among the Albanians. Missionary reports frequently describe cases of whole Catholic communities engaging in men-only conversion. This reflects the fact that the main motive for conversion was not at all religious but simply to escape the additional taxes on Christians, levied by the Ottoman administration only on the male members of the family. Often the motivation for conversion was not only financial, economic and social but even sheer survival.¹ In some cases the new converts are reported to have taken Christian rather than Muslim women as their wives, on the grounds that they did not want Christianity to vanish from their homes.

All kinship systems organise kin relations on both the mother's and the father's side, but group membership, names and symbolic resources of identity, including religion, frequently give priority to one side. However, in a kind of parallel descent principle for the transmission of group membership and other resources from parents to children, at this time another common expedient among Albanians was to educate male children as Muslims, at the father's request, and female children as Christians, at the mother's request. Apparently, this system of religious differentiation by gender might be continued over generations, and may thus have been an important mechanism for maintaining crypto-Christianity. If women in a family were publicly Christian, it became possible for priests to enter their homes, and there the priests might minister in secret to the menfolk as well. If gender differentiation was one key mechanism in the development of crypto-Christianity, then the other most important mechanism was priestly complicity.

Women's agency in eschewing marriage is likewise cited as an unintended side-effect of ethno-religious affiliations. The relatively frequent phenomenon of female celibacy in the northern Albanian mountains is considered to have been introduced by Franciscan missionaries in the first half of the seventeenth century (Zamputi, 1961; Dojaka, 1986; Grémaux, 1992). A report of 1638 by one of the founding fathers of the Franciscan order in northern Albania reflects missionary enthusiasm over what has been achieved since their arrival in 1635 regarding the chaste or continent marriage and virginity as a way of life for local people.

It is not impossible that the missionaries' success in persuading females to embrace Christian virginity and to remain unattached and chaste throughout their lifetimes was preconditioned by an existing postponed-marriage system, which allowed females to experience years of freedom beyond the realms of family and matrimony. In another, earlier source of 1617 related to Catholic clans in northern Albania, men are reported to not marry before they are 30 years old and women not before they are 25.

Actually, young girls did not distinguish themselves from the men, kept their hair cut short, and used to take an active part in warfare and raiding like men (Zamputi, 1961, p. 119). In these circumstances virginity as a perpetual state must have lost most of its ascetic Christian character, and taken on a secularised, active character. The 'sworn virgin' we encounter in customary law, who to some extent was supposed to share equality with males (Young, 2000), was by no means restricted to Albanian and Montenegrin Catholics, but was also found among Albanian Muslims and Serbian Orthodox.

It is argued that customary rules of male succession and property rights have been the main rationale for women becoming 'sworn virgins' in the Balkans. Without at this time entering into that discussion, one can say that becoming a 'sworn virgin' was the only respectable option for a girl who refused to get married, and the only way of avoiding a subsequent blood-feud between the families concerned. It is most likely that throughout the Balkans, especially in the mountain areas, there was for centuries a minority of females who refused to submit themselves to imposed marriages. Those who did not manage to avoid an imposed marriage often had extra-marital affairs. The resulting bloodshed, in its especially North Albanian and Montenegrin forms of feuding between the male members of the families and larger social units involved, was often an unintended side-effect of prevailing nuptial practices that failed to account for female self-determination (Grémaux, 1992), because much of the internal violence was provoked by females who refused to submit to the rigid customs concerning engagement and marriage. In fact, it was in matters of marriage that, according to North Albanian men, women were most threatening to the social order, and the negative valuations attributed to women must necessarily reflect, in large part, the trepidation with which men entered affinal relationships (Shryock, 1988).

Female celibacy among North Albanians and Montenegrins probably came into being as a result of a Franciscan 'break-in' to native customary practice in order to empower women, while receiving its particular character by adaptation to the local customs of swearing oneself to virginity and of cross-dressing. In the traditional setting, any change in dress would put the individual involved under enormous pressures to conform to conventional gender roles expected of his or her original sex. The association of gender with certain tasks, behaviour patterns and social appearance was so strong that anyone switching somehow between the two spheres would be socially defined as a member of the opposite gender. A woman would reject her ascribed gender roles in cases where she chose to do a man's work, manage her own household, and move freely without *havale*, here meaning without the 'social veil' that confined women to the shelter of the house and courtyard (Backer, 2003), a seclusion that has still been expected from ordinary housewives until recently despite changes in the position of women.

Among Muslim Albanians since independence in 1912 the Muslim veil has seldom been worn by women in the towns, even though it has been more widely worn by women in rural Kosova than in Albania, perhaps because Muslim Kosovars adhere more to Islam than their counterparts in Albania. Since the 1990s, however, with the critical turbulent changes of postcommunist transition, there has been a rebirth of religion in Albania, including adherence to Islam and the return of the veil, in particular for some young women. However, the word *havale*, etymologically related to 'veil', is actually not perceived as such in Albanian, but used in the meaning of 'worry, trouble'. The distinction is important in the expression *nuk kam havale*, which means 'I don't care' in a social sense, and is often used rather demonstratively by younger females, among both Christian and Muslim Albanians, in Kosova and in Albania, as the unofficial declaration of women's liberation.

Along with the rapid social transformations from the middle of twentieth century onwards, the daily life of Albanians has undergone dramatic changes, especially in urban settings where westernised families have been rapidly changing their values. In particular the situation of women is already rapidly changing, even though for certain categories of women old rules may still be in practice. Whereas present-day Albanian society is a mixture of modern practices and traditional customs, the price for giving women their rights is nevertheless much smaller, and today women's rights are increasingly acknowledged.

Note

1 In fact, as one of the anonymous peer-reviewers of this paper mentioned, there were also two big waves of conversions following wars. When Russia went to war against the Ottoman Empire and the Sublime Porte prevailed, local Orthodox Albanians who had risen up in revolt against their Ottoman overlords were given the choice between conversion to Islam and execution. Similarly, when, in the late seventeenth century, local Catholic Albanians rose up against Istanbul when Austria went to war against the Ottoman Empire, those Catholics faced the same choice when the Ottomans restored order.

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