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Identity Politics: Gendered Ethno-Religious Ideologies: Southeast Europe

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GENDERED ETHNO-RELIGIOUS IDEOLOGIES

In the Balkans, belonging to a religion means belonging to a social group. Localized collective representations and beliefs, ritual practices, and ceremonies are considered part of the official religion – Christianity or Islam – of a given social network and are perceived as an ancestral legacy of traditions and customs. Although the individual may share group prejudices toward 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 are common to many social communities regardless of religion. Being Muslim or Christian is based on one's 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 that is transmitted throughout the community (Doja 2000). Thus, where many see in the opposition between religious groups a cause or an explanation of certain historical developments, in the Balkans we must on the contrary see an effect. The conceptualization of the categories of "Christian" or "Muslim," for instance, is necessarily related to social, political, territorial, ethnic, gender, and other levels of identification.

An important feature of this type of conceptualization is a dichotomizing populist logic of the political and cultural discourse that often involves a fallacy of metonymic misrepresentation throughout the Balkans. The oppositional conceptualization between Christians and Muslims is part of several other antithetical pairs such as highlander/lowlander, urban/rural, conqueror/conquered, oppressor/oppressed, autochthonous/heterochthonous, moral/immoral, pure/impure, all of which significantly are represented by the categories of masculine/feminine and male/female (Sofos 1996, Zhivkovic 1997). These pairs of opposites may be ascribed arbitrarily to different groups of people in order to exalt or debase their identities. Such a characterization 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 and Hayden 1992).

Cross-cultural studies have explored the ways that ethno-religious communities have 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). Recent Serbian nationalist populism in particular emphasized a number of gendered dichotomies which shaped social relations by setting "real Serbs" not only against Bosnian traitors converted to Islam in particular, but also against fantasized virile but "bestial and evil incarnate" Albanians, against "emasculated" Serbian bureaucrats and Communists, against "effeminate" Serbian peace-activists, or against "hormonally challenged" opponents to Milosevic (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 nationalized versions of masculinity or to the gendered versions of national identity.

The discursive valences of the opposite poles often get reversed, however, and the whole range of opposite terms may be given a 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 could be seen as rational, pragmatic, cultivated on one hand, or degenerate, soft, and submissive on the other; the highlanders and rural people, 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 ethnicized and politicized 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 post-Communist turbulence in Albania.

Against the “delicacy” and the “culture” of certain categories of people, the behavior of people of opposite categories is often taken to be “fanatic,” as a mark of their backwardness. Fanaticism appears sometimes in religious matters, but it is principally located in the context of family relations, with a subordination of women to male authority perceived as more marked. Of course, the representations are far from real practice, whereas in mixed local communities the same representations oppose Christians to Muslims, with always a certain shift in relation to reality.

The Muslims themselves, in the south of Albania for instance, are rather prompt to denounce the Islamic fanaticism of certain categories of people whom they perceive as opposite according to one criterion or another. Often the mark of Islam in the rural or mountain areas of the north, for example, is perceived as deeper, whereas their co-existence with Christians in the south is sometimes perceived as a mark and a cause of finesse, which is also implied necessarily in gender relations.

INTERMARRIAGE AND RELIGIOUS ENDOGAMY

Matrimonial relations between Christians and Muslims are often defined by an endogamy of religious community. In the local communities with a large Muslim majority, if Christians want to comply with religious endogamy, they are more quickly limited by the rules of exogamy prohibiting them from marrying cousins up to distant degrees, on either the father's or the mother's side. This is why many Christian women marry in the cities, which are perceived as “Christian,” when they cannot find a permitted spouse in the village. Young women who leave to pursue graduate studies in the city also tend to remain there and not to return to the village as a result of having married there. All this reinforces the bonds the Christians maintain with the world of the cities and contributes to their image of “culture” and “modernity,” which are attributed to the large urban centers.

In anthropological terms, religious endogamy is mostly the result of a refusal to give wives rather than to take them. One contemporary Christian pattern with regard to Muslims is that Christians are reluctant to be givers, while they agree to be takers. 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, being thus external to any local opposition between Christians and Muslims.

In this situation, the takers of wives are valorized: Christian men pride themselves that they can take Muslim wives, whereas Muslims complain that the Christians take their daughters but refuse to give theirs to them (DeRapper 2002).

The current situation is the reverse of what prevailed at the time of the institutional pre-eminence of Muslims within the framework of Ottoman society. For Muslim men 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, although not for a Muslim woman to marry a non-Muslim. But such issues of legalistic religion have never been, as they are not up to the present day, of major concern for the religious mind of Albanians. In the quasi-autonomous regions of north Albania, for instance, the powerful staunch Catholics are regularly reported to have married Muslim women who were expected to abandon Islam upon marriage (Whitaker 1968).

In the premodern Balkan highlands, both unmarried males and females might have found themselves as much the victim of family politics as the hapless members of European 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, with women often used as a currency of exchange. The rights and interests of women would not be consulted, and today many women still describe their arranged marriages, which they accept as the norm (Post 1998). Among many things, the least to expect of a woman was that she would change her religious faith to conform to that of her husband.

WOMEN'S AGENCY

In the Balkans, 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). Obviously, in the seventeenth century, when the Catholic population began to diminish rapidly because of mass conversions to Islam, crypto-Christianity expanded among the Albanians. However, travelers' reports frequently describe cases of whole Catholic communities engaging in men-only conversion, reflecting the

fact that the main motive for conversion was to escape the additional taxes on Christians, levied by the Ottoman administration only on the male members of the family. In some cases the new converts are reported to have taken Christian and not Muslim women as their wives, saying that they did not want the name Christian to vanish from their homes.

Another practice became a common expedient regarding the education of male children as Muslims, at the father's request, and the females often as Christians, at the mother's request. Apparently, this system of religious differentiation by gender could be continued down the generations. It may thus have been an important mechanism in making crypto-Christianity possible. With women in the family who were publicly Christian, it became possible for priests to enter homes in order to minister in secret to the men 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 evidenced as an unintended side effect of ethno-religious affiliations. The relatively frequent celibacy of women in the northern Albanian mountains – the phenomenon of “sworn virgins” – is believed to have been introduced by Franciscan missionaries in the first half of the seventeenth century (Zamputi 1961, Dojaka 1986, Gremaux 1992). It is probable 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 these circumstances virginity as a perpetual state lost most of its ascetic Christian character, and took on a secularized, active character. The sworn virgin encountered in local 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.

Leaving aside customary rules of male succession and property rights, becoming a sworn virgin was the only respectable option for a girl who refused to get married and offered a strategy for avoiding a subsequent blood-feud between the families involved. It is likely that the Balkans, especially the mountain areas, have for centuries produced some young women who have refused to submit to imposed marriages. Those who did not manage

to avoid an imposed marriage were often believed to deceive their husbands. The resulting bloodshed, especially in its north Albanian and Montenegrin forms of escalating feuding between male family members, was an unintended side effect of prevailing nuptial practices which failed to account for female self-determination (Gremaux 1992), since 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 northern Albanians and Montenegrins probably came into being as a result of a Franciscan “break-in” to native customary practice on behalf of women's agency, 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 entail enormous pressures to conform to conventional gender roles. The association of gender with certain tasks, behavior 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*, the “social veil” that confined women to the shelter of the house and courtyard (Backer 2003), a seclusion which has been still expected from ordinary housewives until recently, despite changes in the position of women.

In this context, the word *havale*, etymologically related to “veil,” is not perceived as such in Albanian, but used in the meaning of “fret, worry, and trouble.” The distinction is important in the expression *nuk kam havale*, only used in the social sense for “I don't care,” often rather demonstratively by younger females, among both Christian and Muslim Albanians, as the unofficial declaration of women's liberation. Actually, among Muslim Albanians, the real veil was seldom an urban exception, even though since the 1990s, with the critical turbulent changes of post-Communist transition, there has been a rebirth of religion in Albania, including the following of Islam and the return of the veil, in particular for some young women.

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