

Summary

The Enigma of Sworn Virgins — Ethnological and Cultural Anthropological Study is a book that transports readers from everyday life to a world where different laws apply and time passes much more slowly. This otherness is also manifested in an intriguing phenomenon endemic to the Dinaric region of the western Balkans, hidden from public view until recent times: the traditional common law institution of sworn virgins unique not only in Europe but in the world. Sworn virgins are women who, in the absence of adult males needed to perpetuate family lineage, renounce marital life and take a vow of chastity, thereby becoming entitled to inherit both property and privileges in a patrilineal society. They dress and comb their hair like men, bear arms, go to war if required and participate in masculine public gatherings, behaving like men in every respect, with nearly all the rights afforded to men in a highly patriarchal society. By assuming such a role to meet the needs of the family and society, they gain special acceptance and respect. What is interesting about the phenomenon of sworn virgins is the fact that it exists to this day, particularly in northern Albania but also in Montenegro. In the book it is therefore possible to follow the phenomenon through a cross-section of time that spans more than a century and a half and includes the present.

The title of the introductory chapter, *In Search of Sworn Virgins*, refers to an investigative journey in time and space to find sworn virgins. My interest in this subject was sparked but also made possible by the comprehensive archival material in the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Zagreb, where I worked for twenty years. At my disposal were more than 1.5 million slips of paper with responses to four volumes of questionnaires collected during the 1960s and 1970s at approximately 3,000 locations for the compilation of *The Ethnological Atlas of Yugoslavia*, part of *The Ethnological Atlas of Europe and Neighbouring Countries* (Asia Minor and North Africa). Among the 157 thematic categories with sub-questions, I was particularly intrigued by those on sworn virgins, whom ethnological researchers had not recorded on the territory of Croatia. However, perhaps in a way this search began much earlier, on the balcony of my parents' apartment, where, even as a child I asked myself why the female figure came out of our little wooden weather house to indicate rain and bad weather, while the male figure came out when it was sunny and nice. Years later, I began studying the position of women in society, especially in traditional cultures, as one of my scientific fields of interest. This book asks what leads a woman to alter the most deeply rooted aspect of her identity, subordinating it to the imperative of the survival of the community, relinquish the exter-

nal attributes of being a woman and symbolically become a *social male*. What socio-historical circumstances and living conditions were conducive to the development of such an institution? Who and what are sworn virgins?

The second chapter, *The Geographical Distribution of the Phenomenon*, is based on material gleaned from questionnaires of the *Ethnological Atlas* as well as from testimonies about sworn virgins in reliable textual sources dated 1860 to 2014 by approximately fifty authors writing in the Croatian, Serbian, Albanian, English, German and Italian languages. The chapter also contains two ethnological maps: the first based on responses to questionnaires and the second according to written sources, which together confirm the existence of nearly 300 sworn virgins. These two maps, the second one in particular, were used in later chapters for comparisons and interpretations of the phenomenon, not as practiced in ethnographic cartography, a methodological means in historically oriented ethnology. In the section entitled »*Amazons*« from *Istria*, the credibility of a reference in a questionnaire on sworn virgins in Istria is investigated through fieldwork. Despite a number of identical attributes, it turned out that the reference to the testimony that there were sworn virgins in the westernmost part of Croatia (which over the centuries had been the destination of numerous Dinaric migrants) was unfounded. The territorial and temporal coordinates are expanded in the last two sections, in an attempt to discover sworn virgins among the Albanian population on the Apennine Peninsula who fled from the Ottomans, as well as among the Illyrians.

In the chapter entitled *The Many Faces of Sworn Virgins*, we encounter the diversity offered by the phenomenon of sworn virgins as well as the different levels of their identification with the male role. We become acquainted with aspects that define the phenomenon in numerous ways: names, motives, attitudes in their surroundings, various degrees of dressing like men, music — one of the sworn virgins' favorite activities, marriage, oath, business and other activities in which they engage.

The fourth chapter, *The Enigma of the Sworn Virgins*, is the central and longest chapter of the book, in which the phenomenon is viewed from a historical perspective in order to establish the causes and time of its origin. An independent interpretation is gradually reached through a critical assessment of contributions by various authors. After an introduction, the following three sections deal with the two most frequent and divergent approaches to trying to understand the phenomenon of sworn virgins on the basis of simplified and even mythical analytical binary categories: 1) a historically never proven matriarchy (in which the sworn virgin would be a social relict, a prototype of a formerly different status of women in the assumed development of the family) or 2) a stereotypical simplified vision of a unique Balkan type of patriarchy. In the key research section, *Toward the Solution by a Different Path*, divided into four sections, it is demonstrated that the scientific interpretations of the phenomenon cannot be reduced to the selection of one of two conceptually opposing views merely because it is stipulated by a predetermined research model and, in the case of the first, also by the theoretical-ethnological guidelines of unilinear evolutionism. This chapter analyzes the cultural, social, economic and historical premises that have given rise to the appearance of sworn virgins as a unique phenomenon in the world. It also deals with blood feuds, which, like

sworn virgins, correct social imbalances, common law and the imperative desire for male descendants, which sworn virgins satisfy very well. A specific type of Balkan tribal patriarchy is analyzed, including a comparison of a particular old form of tribal organization. The nuclear region of the territorial distribution of sworn virgins is determined in the area of ancient tribal organizations, with roots in a specific type of Balkan patriarchy of the secondary (in terms of time) tribal organizations established after the collapse of the national feudal states in the wake of Ottoman incursions. The section entitled *Base or Tip of the Iceberg?*, preceded by three sections with defined premises, solves the enigma referred to in the title of the book. The fourth chapter concludes with the solution of another enigma in a comprehensive discussion on the so-called romantic and neo-romantic interpretations of the sworn virgin phenomenon. The point is made that the romantic myth of a matriarchy is in essence similar to today's neo-romantically tinged feminist desire to interpret the phenomenon of sworn virgins, given that in both cases, by ideologically contesting the dominant patriarchal ideologies, they attempt to spot elements of feminine independence, power and emancipation. In the contemporary Western world, the re-examination of traditional dichotomous gender categories enters the area of individual freedoms, which are in relation to sworn virgins unfoundedly projected upon a significantly different milieu within the framework of the Orientalist myth of the Balkans as a kind of peripheral and petrified *alter ego* of Europe. The questions of what Europe (travelers, missionaries, diplomats, natural scientists etc.) was looking for in the regions at the end of the world in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and what the West is seeking now are answered. It is vividly demonstrated, as evident from insights provided by the testimonies of today's sworn virgins, that the neo-romantic interpretation of the institution of sworn virgins is acquiring the form of a contemporary myth. It is romantic only on the surface as merely another face of Western paternalism, the same superiorly experienced civilizational mission of enlightening exotic »others« who are still considered to be in an »infantile« state.

The fifth and final chapter, *Ethnogram — A Chronological Series of Testimonies*, is conceived as a chronologically structured reader intended for more interested individuals. It provides detailed information about individual sworn virgins, including biographies in some instances. The numbers in the margins of the *Ethnogram* correspond to those on the *List of Sworn Virgins, Locations and Authors* and *Ethnological Map 2*. This chapter also contains numerous photographs of sworn virgins, taken from 1907 until the present.

This book is based on ethnological, cultural-historical and cultural-anthropological studies on the phenomenon of sworn virgins. In addition to the strictly defined scientific and academic objectives, due attention has been given to the anthropological code of ethics with regard to one's own experience of the culture of »the other«. Therefore, this book should also be considered as a humanistic contribution to the recognition of the »invisible women in history« who have, with varied degree of self-abnegation, unnoticeably and without leaving any record, participated in creating history too.

Prevela: Mirjana Čepuh