

A TANGLE OF MULTIPLE TRANSGRESSIONS: THE WESTERN GAZE AND THE TOBELIJA (BALKAN SWORN-VIRGIN-CROSS-DRESSERS) IN THE 19th AND 20th CENTURIES

By Aleksandra Djajic Horváth (Department of History and Civilization, European University Institute, Florence, Italy)

ABSTRACT:

This paper focuses on travelogue representations of tobelija, Balkan sworn-virgin-cross-dressers, from the second half of the nineteenth to the beginning of the twentieth centuries. The tobelija, a socially approved female-to-male cross-dresser, takes centre stage in many of these accounts, epitomising all that is exotic, strange, and primeval about the remote and mountainous regions of the Western Balkans during this period. Under the controlling and classifying gaze of the western European traveller, the tobelija materializes in verbal and visual narrative as a strong, armed, and masculinized single woman. Salient to these accounts is the travellers' mapping of Western understandings of gender onto the local peoples: by categorising them as women, the tobelija are disciplined into binary Western gender discourses.

At the beginning of the second half of the nineteenth century an intriguing phenomenon was registered in the Dinaric mountain belt in the Western Balkan peninsula. In 1855, while carrying out fieldwork among the Rovci tribe on the border of Herzegovina and Montenegro, Milorad Medakovic, a Serbian ethnographer, came across a case of a girl called Milica who, not having any brothers, vowed to stay unmarried in order to be a surrogate son to her father. The girl wore male clothes and arms, and was accorded the same respect in her community as a man (Medakovic 1860:23-24). Almost at the same time Johann Georg von Hahn, an Austrian consul in the Balkans and a distinguished Albanologist, came across a couple of similar cases of *tobelija* among the tribes of northern Albania, which he described in his book, *Reise durch die Gebiete des Drin und Wardar*. Published in Vienna in 1867, his book gives an account of a meeting with four Albanian girls who publicly renounced marriage and decided to change their gender. Hahn describes two of the girls' motives for making such a change, reporting that one decided on this course of action because she had been in love with a man who she could not marry, while the other one had not wanted to marry a man her parents had chosen because he was not of the same religion (Hahn 1867:31-33). This female-to-male transformation, conditional on a denial of sexuality and absolute celibacy, resulted not only in the acquisition of a male name, male clothes and a male haircut, but also of certain male privileges, such as possessing and carrying arms, socializing freely with men, and participating in men's assemblies.

This phenomenon was described by a number of later travellers who visited the Western Balkans in the second half of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. What is particularly striking about these accounts is that a number of the authors mention the existence of *tobelija* and describe their lifestyle, without ever actually having personally encountered any during their travels. This provokes several questions: just how widespread was this phenomenon really, and to what extent was its apparent prevalence the product of the Western "bourgeois vogue of romantic primitivism" (Fussell 1980) to which the Balkans was subjected during this period? What specific image of the Balkans did reports about *tobelija* help to construct in the West? And finally, to what extent did these descriptions of *tobelija* add to the distinctly male appeal of the Balkans? The "Balkanist singularly male discourse", as Maria Todorova labels it in her book *Imagining the Balkans* (1997:15).

Due to the fact that there is a lack of detailed historical material relating to *tobelija*, and that we have no written accounts that predates the above mentioned travel literature, our picture of this phenomenon is destined to remain partial. We can only speculate about its age and diffusion, and offer our own limited interpretations of this socially accepted form of female-to-male transvestism. Bearing these caveats in mind, my own attempt at an interpretation takes as its starting point the analysis of the meaning(s) *tobelija* were ascribed by these European travel writers and missionaries, these proto-ethnographers of the latter half of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. According to Comaroff and Comaroff, "If texts are to be more than literary topoi, scattered shards from which we presume worlds, they have to be anchored in the processes of their production, in the orbits of connection and influence that give them life and force" (1992:34).

If we read travelogues and early ethnographic accounts as points of intersection between observers and the observed, as intercultural frontiers, what do we see in the picture of *tobelija*? How is this phenomenon of gender transgression situated in the wider travel narrative of the transgression of national, linguistic, religious and cultural boundaries? What does it reveal about the traveller and the reading audience back home? In his book, *Haunted Journeys*, Dennis Porter – writing about the interplay of desire and transgression in European travel writing – makes the following comments about the fundamental ambiguity of 'representation': "to represent the world is a political as well as an aesthetic-cognitive activity. It is an effort both to put something alien into the words of a shared language for someone else at home and to put oneself in the Other's place abroad in order to speak on its behalf. One is at the same time *representator* and *representative*, reporter and legislator. And in all that one writes one also inevitably (re)presents, however imperfectly, oneself" (1991:14-15). Porter's comments reiterate the importance of exploring the cultural baggage of the traveller/writer when attempting to cast light on the interaction that takes place in the process of representing the Other.

The eye is not neutral, and perspective is not simply a mathematical projection onto external space. Instead, both the eye and perspective cognitively, ideologically and emotionally colour the way one conceptualizes and represents external reality, and positions oneself within it. The analysis of perspective not only reveals a more detailed portrait of the traveller, but also brings into focus the face of the otherwise invisible party of the travelogue – the audience back home, for whom, and in a certain extent even about whom, these texts were written. As Porter suggests, the will to represent the world masks the effort to control it with ideological fixity (1991:20), to impose one's own pattern of order, disciplining and appropriating the exposed – be it a landscape, plants, natives, habits, women or butterflies – to the gaze that scrutinizes and the discourse that represents.

"Being made the object of European curiosity is a process that can tell us something of the nature of modern European states". The question to ask is which Europe was gazing intently at the Balkans in the last decades of the nineteenth century? Briefly, we could say that it is the Europe in which a curiosity towards the human body and how it is to be classified is expressed in physiognomy and anthropometry; it is the period of new techniques of representation and regulation that are crucial to the restructuring of the state in industrialized societies, and to establishing the network of disciplinary institutions – the police, hospitals, asylums, schools, prisons etc.; and it is the Europe in which, in the 1860s, ethnology is transformed by a Darwinian revolution, a Europe that demonstrates a renewed interest in cultures and human bodies different from Western norms and conventions. Evolutionism was, as Stocking says "both the reflection of and the justification for the invasion, appropriation and subjugation of the 'savage', 'barbarian' or 'semi-civilized' regions of the earth" (1991:4). So it is also the period of expanding European colonialism which embodies a wish to control the entire world, and the

period when “photography [invented in 1839] is employed by science and imperial expansion to document glimpses of its margins, be it places, people, plants, trains or ships” (Shohat & Stam 1994:104-105).

Focusing more specifically on issues of gender and family, we can say that it is the Europe in which the myth of matriarchy appears (J.J. Bachofen’s *Das Mutterrecht*, published in 1861); the Europe in which the bourgeoisie is in the process of homogenizing itself thanks to its strong patriarchal ideology (exemplified by Victorian England and its ideology of separated spheres, of respectable femininity, and similar concepts that are combinations of moral, religious, economic and cultural systems applied almost exclusively to middle-class women); the Europe in which the politics of medicine aims at controlling the potentially dangerous zone of sexuality, particularly female sexuality; and the West in which interest in the Rest is also visible – for instance, in the appearance of the early kinship theories based on strong biological dimorphism or the ‘Western folk model of reproduction’ as Yanagisako and Collier would label it these days (Henry L. Morgan’s *Ancient Society* and further works that were inspired by it, such as F. Engels’ *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* published in 1884).

Our particular case here concerns the potentially controlling and classifying gaze that same Europe directed at the mountainous regions of the Western Balkans, a gaze that tended to label everything it perceived as being different as exotic and strange and primeval, or as savage, barbaric and primitive. The *tobelija*, a socially approved female-to-male cross-dresser, suddenly revealed and objectified by that gaze, materializes in verbal and visual narrative as a strange, strong, almost thoroughly masculinized and armed *single woman*. S/he is seldom, if ever, perceived or referred to as male, except in those cases when a traveller is deceived by his/her male looks and manners. In some cases, in Ferenc Nopcsa’s book on northern Albania called *The Darkest Europe* (1908), for example, s/he is described as an Amazonian, a description which perfectly fits the historical moment that has just produced the romantic myth of matriarchy. For Dr. Schultz, who in 1907 published an article accompanied by several photos in *Die Woche – Moderne Illustrierte Zeitschrift*, s/he is also an Amazonian, but of the type that once existed (or so he believed) among the ancient Germans in the time of the great migration of peoples.



A photo published in 1907 in Die Woche, No. 40, along with the text on *tobelija* written by Dr. E. Schultz.



Another photo accompanying Dr. Schultz's text in Die Woche, No. 40, 1907.

For Schultz, the *tobelija* is the remnant of something primeval, the embodiment of a stage of cultural development that civilized societies have already passed through, part of civilization's early childhood. He portrays the inhabitants of the Balkans as completely uncivilized, adding a romantic flavour to his account by describing how it was only on his third attempt, on horseback and without the Sultan's permission, that he managed to penetrate into the inhospitable region of northern Albania. For Schultz, the institution of female cross-dressing is one of the most peculiar practices he has come across, and he even gives it a special name – *Virtschentums*. His transvestites are said to “shoot like mad”, and are described by him as having renounced “the greatest happiness” - i.e. marriage (1907:1758-63).

In 1881, an Austrian explorer and journalist, Leo Brenner (alias Spiridion Gopcevic), situates the *tobelijas* in the context of a society which makes no sense to him, and in which he describes marriage ceremonies as being farcical comedies full of pretence and falsehoods (Gopcevic 1881:435,442-44). He regards *tobelijas* as women who are determined to avoid unwanted marriages at all costs, but adds the sardonic remark that these ‘men’ should be careful not to get pregnant: “Nur muss sich dieser neue Mann in Acht nehmen, bei seinen Herumstreifereien nicht - schwanger zu werden, denn dies haette seinen Tod zu Folge” (ibid:460).

The *tobelija* described by the Austrian engineer, Karl Steinmetz, is placed within a similar context. Steinmetz describes the morality of the local population as being lax, and provides the additional detail that the particular *tobelija* he met was ugly, which is the reason he gives for why she opted to become a sworn-virgin-cross-dresser: “Unsere Wirtschin war etwa 30 Jahre alt und hässlich, was sie wohl zu ihrem Gelöbnis mitbewogen hat” (1905:50). The early accounts very seldom reflect the ways in which the local population viewed these sworn-virgin female transvestites. Only the Englishwoman, Mary Durham, writing at the beginning of the twentieth

century, reports talking to a local man about the phenomenon of sworn-virgins, asking him if he would eat with one (the local custom, strictly obeyed, was that men and women always ate separately): “he slapped his thigh and said: Of course! She has breeches on just like mine and a revolver!” (1908:63).

The exoticizing of the peripheral, present in almost all early accounts of *tobelijas* and embodied in patronizing, sardonic, and infantilizing narrative strategies, could be viewed as a kind of exclusion, taking place simultaneously with processes of normalization back at the centre. It also opens a discontinuity, dividing the world into *Us* and *Them*, aiming at disciplining *Them* into anthropological and Western discourse. As for the representation of sex and gender in all of these accounts, it could be argued that the gender identity of the *tobelijas* is being ‘normalized’ or ‘disciplined’, in the sense that they are being presented within a strict dimorphic gender system, the same one that reinforced normative heterosexuality and bourgeois marriage values in Western Europe at the time.

These and similar accounts represent not only the exotic, peripheral, appropriated and objectified Other, but also the ordinary reader, back home at the centre, a visitor of exotic exhibitions and various anthropological spectacles popular in Europe at the time, a citizen of the industrial state who is the living material on which all such questions of difference – social, racial, sexual and moral – are performatively inscribed during the late nineteenth century. As Comaroff and Comaroff remark, colonialism, either narrative or political and economic, was not only about forming the periphery but also about forming the centre (1992). The cultural ideology of the centre was modelled and reinforced through the narrative incorporation of the wild and primitive.

The above mentioned travel accounts of the western Balkans not only point to the “prevalence of the male gaze across cultures” (Kaplan 1997), but also testify to the interplay of male and imperial gazes within western patriarchal cultures. As Philippa Levine says in her book on Victorian England, “the language of class, the language of sex and the language of imperialism by the end of the nineteenth century show some common features – tendency towards domination, control and power, as well as fear of contagion and disease” (1990:86). The nineteenth and early twentieth century travellers and ethnographers I have discussed above were particularly fixated on the position of women, as women clearly epitomized the most exotic manifestation of “the Other” in the written accounts of their travels. But it was not only the exotic woman that was exposed to the classifying and controlling gaze of these male proto-ethnographers. Back home, Western European women were subject to an equivalent scrutiny by that same disciplinary gaze.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Comaroff J. and J. Comaroff. 1992. *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination*. Boulder/San Francisco/Oxford: Westview Press.

Durham, M. E. 1985 [1908]. *High Albania*. London: Virago.

Fussell, Paul. 1980. *Abroad: British Literary Travelling Between the Wars*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Gopcevic, Spiridon. 1881. *Oberalbanien und seine Liga*. Leipzig: Verlag von Duncker & Humblot.
- Hahn, J. G. 1867. *Reise durch die Gebiete des Drin und Wardar*. Wien: Denkschriften der kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften, XV.
- Kaplan, E. Ann. 1997. *Looking for the Other: Feminism, Film and the Imperial Gaze*. London: Routledge.
- Levine, Philippa. 1990. *Feminist Lives in Victorian England: Private Lives and Public Commitment*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Medakovic, J. M. G. 1860. *Zivot i obicaji Crnogoraca*. Novi Sad: Matica Srpska.
- Nopcsa, Ferenc baro dr. 1908. *A katolikus Eszak-Albania*. Budapest.
- Nopcsa, Ferenc baro dr. 1911. *A legsötetebb Europa. (Vandorlasok Albaniaban)*. Budapest.
- Porter, Dennis. 1991. *Haunted Journeys: Desire and Transgression in European Travel Writing*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Schultz, Dr. E. 1907. "Albanisches Mannweibertum". *Die Woche – Moderne Illustrierte Zeitschrift*, vol. IV (40-52), no. 40. Berlin: 1758-1763.
- Shohat, Ella and Robert Stam. 1994. *Unthinking Eurocentrism*. London: Routledge.
- Steinmetz, K. 1905. *Ein Vorstoss in die Nordalbanischen Alpen*. Wien-Leipzig.
- Stocking, George W. 1991 [1987]. *Victorian Anthropology*. New York: The Free Press.
- Todorova, Maria. 1997. *Imagining the Balkans*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Yanagisako, S. and J. Collier (edited). 1987. *Gender and Kinship: Essays Toward a Unified Analysis*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
-

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR:

Aleksandra Djajic Horvath completed her MA in socio-cultural anthropology at the University of Belgrade, Yugoslavia. With the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia, she moved to Budapest, Hungary, where from 1999 till 2001 she worked as a lecturer at Western Maryland College, teaching English and Introduction to Cultural Anthropology. She is currently a Ph.D. researcher at the Department of History and Civilization of the European University Institute (IUE) in Florence, Italy. Her doctoral thesis is titled, "Tobelija or woman in man's costume - socially approved female transvestism in the patriarchal Balkans in the 19th and 20th centuries".