

Sworn virgins, male and female *berdaches*: A comparative approach to the so-called ‘third gender’ people

Armela Xhaho

Gender Studies

Central European University, Budapest, Hungary

armelaxhaho@yahoo.com

Abstract

The phenomenon of sworn virgins in Northern Albania applies to women who, by taking a vow of celibacy, dressed and behaved as men (Young 2001). *Berdache* males and females are aboriginal North-American Indians¹ who assumed the dress, occupation and roles of the opposite sex by changing in this way their gender status (Blackwood 1984; Schnarch 1992). This article is based on a comparative approach which looked at different cultural variations of sworn virgins, male and female *berdaches*. The reason for examining such practices is to show how gender and sexuality can be seen as culturally defined phenomena, embedded in society and not necessarily in biological sex. Therefore, it is important to look and think beyond labeling individuals based on Western gendered and sexual prescriptions, as is evident in the terminology. These categories do not fulfil the notion of gender normatively; they can be seen as cross-cultural gender variations that need to be analysed in greater detail.

Keywords: *berdaches*, gender roles, sworn virgins, third gender, transgender

Background history and origin of sworn virgins

Albanian sworn virgins, whose biological sex was that of women, became ‘socially men’² for different social, economic, emotional and cultural reasons (Young 2001, p. 27). There is no exact date for the origin of sworn virgins, although many writers mentioned the sworn virgins of Albania during the 19th and early 20th century, while other cases were reported around 150 years ago (Young and Twigg 2009). The existence of sworn virgins was exacerbated by Albania’s patriarchal society, which established men in a dominant position, while women did not have rights at all (Young 2001, p. 28). The only way for women to be afforded rights, was to take an oath of celibacy or to dress and engage in activities that were considered part of men’s domains (Bilefsky 2008). If women were to break the oath, however, they were punished with death (Spectator 2007, p. 7) while there were also reports of sworn virgins who had sex with men being burned alive (Littlewood 2002, p.47). Thus, it is clear that Albanian patriarchal society has somehow enhanced the phenomenon of sworn virgins, since women could only gain their independence by becoming ‘socially men’. Yet, the cost of such a sacrifice was very high, since they could no longer dress and behave as women after taking the oath to remain virgins and become ‘socially men’ for the rest of their lives.

Young (2001, p. 32) points out that sworn virgins were responsible for all those activities associated with men, including hoeing, chopping wood, harvesting, irrigating crops, and taking

care of animals and property. Moreover, they could smoke, drink and make decisions for their family, which other women were not allowed to do. Sworn virgins dressed in men's traditional clothes such as trousers, jackets and skull caps, but never wore skirts (Young 2001, p.106). One of the sworn virgins, Pashke, revealed that 'to dress as a man earns the respect due to a man' (Young 2001, p. 108). Gender identity can be expressed through external manifestations, such as clothing. Thus, men's clothing had symbolic meaning in terms of being considered masculine. The clothes are a symbol of the respect which was denied women. Therefore, it is safe to assume that cross-dressing among sworn virgins was seen as a way to gain power from the family and society, since it represented the masculine role.

Reasons for changing gender among sworn virgins

In her book *Women who became men: Albanian sworn virgins*, Young (2001) describes different categories of sworn virgins, each with its own reasons for changing gender (p. 60). The first category includes women who were raised as boys, to become the head of the household and allow them to inherit the family wealth, in cases when there were no other males in the family, in line with the patrilineal system in Albania. The second category offered women an escape from arranged marriages, given that it was considered an insult for the clan of a rejected husband if the wife left the home (2001, p. 60). This was the only way for a woman to still be considered respectable after refusing marriage (Doja 2008, p. 61). Another reason why women rejected marriage and assumed the role of a man was to seek revenge, in cases where all the males of the household had been killed (Whitaker 1981, p. 151). A further essential reason relates to Albanian patriarchal society and its oral law, *Kanun*, which positioned women as far inferior to men (Young 2001). Women did not have a voice in the family, nor were they afforded equal respect to their male counterparts. In an interview, Ms. Keqi (a sworn virgin), stated: 'Back then, it was better to be a man because before a woman and an animal were considered the same thing' (Keqi in Bilefsky 2008). As the above arguments make clear, the decision to become a sworn virgin sometimes seemed like a free choice, while in other cases it was an obligation or a social necessity. Apparently, only by taking the oath to 'become a man', could women be more independent and embrace those rights generally denied women. This is one way in which women could gain power and control – privileges that were reserved solely for men.

Sexuality of sworn virgins

'Homosexual(ity)' is used to describe both lesbian and gay male sexuality, i.e., people who are sexually and emotionally attracted to others of the same sex. 'Lesbian(ism)' is a term preferred by many women who are sexually and emotionally attracted to women (Haxhiymeri and Gjermeni 2003).

Young (2001) points out that the sexuality of sworn virgins was not clear, being deemed a very intimate topic on the basis of the vow sworn virgins took, and also Albanian taboos which did not allow sex to be discussed in public. Young (2001, p. 59) notes that female-to-female sexuality was considered a rare phenomenon or even non-existent among sworn virgins, adding that the issue

of lesbianism was an alien concept to such women. However, in discussing sworn virgins, Young (in Bewerten 2008) notes that ‘this would be a way round for a woman who had homosexual inclinations’. Young (2001, pp. 57–58) argues that the reason why sworn virgins were hesitant to talk about their feelings and emotions, were fears that such secrets could damage their reputation, since they considered themselves as honorary men. These women, in striving to become men and through performing their gender (Butler 1990, 1993), in fact reinforced patriarchy rather than questioning it. This author argues, instead, that Young’s arguments show ambivalence as to whether or not these women may have had homosexual preferences. Young supposes that such preferences may have existed, even though social mores and their status as respectable men may have forced these women to hide their true feelings. However, in contrast with Young, Gremaux (in Young 2001, p. 59) reports on sexual tendencies in couples among the sworn virgins. These couples had a kind of ritual or spiritual kinship that bound them as a ‘blood sisterhood’.³ Similarly, Vukanovic (in Young 2001, p. 59) notes that sworn virgins generally had a bad reputation for having ‘abnormal sexual relations’ with their ‘blood-sisters’.

***Berdache* males**

Berdache males established their social status through a ‘mixture’ of the two genders (Goulet 1996, p. 685). The word *berdache* derives from the Arabic *bardag*, meaning ‘kept boy’ or ‘male prostitute’ (Saundres and Foblets 2002, p. 124) even though the use of the term was criticised for its negative connotations. Here, the term (despite its connotations) is employed since it was most often used by other authors who preferred it to the longer ‘two-spirit persons’ which has more recently been used to define this phenomenon. It is important to avoid blurring the lines between the historical context and the contemporary. However, this does not mean that the term is necessarily the most suited. In this article the term ‘male *berdache*’ is used to refer to biological males (as opposed to ‘female *berdache*’), but in certain cases (i.e., when discussing society’s reaction, current phenomena or misconceptions), *berdache* is used without specifying the sex.

Berdaches are considered to have special powers that mediated between the spiritual and the physical worlds (Schnarch 1992). Moreover, they were involved in women’s activities such as sewing, cooking, raising children and other tasks which made them highly skilled and superior in terms of women’s chores. *Berdaches* had no restrictions in terms of the sexual division of labour, which made them free to combine both men and women’s chores. Male *berdaches* often dressed like women and tried to imitate women’s voices and copy their hairstyles (Schnarch 1992, p. 112). As Callender *et al.* (1983, p. 447) argue, however, the dress-code of *berdaches* varied among different tribes and it was permissible to combine men’s and women’s clothes (Schnarch 1992, p. 112). However, in contrast to the freedom of dress and activities male *berdaches* enjoyed, sworn virgins dressed and performed the activities of the opposite sex in a more rigid way. Thus, male *berdaches* could perform their gender by cross-dressing, imitating women’s voices and hairstyles and engaging in traditional women’s activities such as sewing, cooking and raising children.

Reasons for changing gender among male *berdaches*

Men had various reasons for becoming *berdaches*, ranging from free choice to obligation. In many tribes, if a child behaved like or socialised more with members of the opposite sex, the family would dress and socialise the child in accordance with that gender (Goulet 1996, p. 685). Indeed, as Forgey (1975, p. 10) points out, overprotective parents may have pushed boys to assume the role of *berdache*. Many wars at that time resulted in the death of the husband, therefore mothers would engage in intense relationships with their sons, which would make the children anxious about their masculinity and their future gender role (Forgey 1975, pp. 10–12).

Another hypothesis relies on supernatural validation. During adolescence, some boys had visions or dreams which urged them to become women, and this resulted in the public transformation of their gender (Callender *et al.* 1983, p. 451).⁴ Moreover, another possible reason mentioned by Callender *et al.* (p. 455) was the fact that young boys whose mothers had been very overprotective were later unable to meet the demands of virile and aggressive warriors. So, in order to escape these harsh physical demands they decided to become *berdaches*, which was socially more acceptable (Schnarch 1992, p. 113).⁵ This also relates to Western socialisation processes or myths associated with homosexuality, which place great value on women's role in shaping and transforming children's gender roles and attitudes. According to Haxhiymeri and Gjermani (2003), parents (especially mothers) play a significant role in socialising their children. Therefore, it is argued that boys who have difficulty separating from their mothers will become homosexual later on in life. Freud (1993) argued that if boys failed to identify with the father they would have problems with their sexual orientation later on in life. His theory on homosexuality is based on the idea that boys who are over-attached to their mother, and identify with her and not the father, become homosexual later in life (Freud 1993, p. 42), i.e., an incomplete resolution of the Oedipus complex.⁶ In a similar way, by taking on the role of men, sworn virgins could escape the patriarchal norms of society which located women in an inferior position, and it allowed them to refuse pre-arranged marriages. However, by taking a vow to become 'socially men', these women strongly reinforced the roots of the patriarchal system, which placed men in a powerful position in society.

Sexuality of *berdache* males

Such men could have sex with non-*berdache* women and men (Schnarch 1992, p. 111) but not with each other (Tinker 1989, p. 607). In contrast to Euro-Western societies, where sexuality was considered an important element in the definition of gender, Schnarch (1992) assumes that among *berdaches* spirituality was of primarily importance. Heterosexuality was not strictly compulsory and the choice of sexual partner did not determine gender assignment (Schnarch 1992, p. 111). While William (in Epple 1998, p. 269) writes that homosexual attraction among male *berdaches* was seen as an important aspect of their character, sexual behaviour among different tribes varied from asexuality, bisexuality, promiscuity, long-term sexual relationships to stable marriages (Callender 1983, p. 449): while Santee and Teton Dakota *berdaches* would engage in promiscuity, they were not allowed to establish long-term sexual relationships or to marry. In contrast, long-

term sexual relationships were common among the Hidasta tribes, where *berdaches* could even marry older men (Callender 1983, p. 449). This practice could be related to Ancient Greek, Indian and Japanese culture: the most widespread form of same-sex sexual relations in ancient Greece was between adult men and teenage boys. In Japan, same-sex sexual relations between an older man and an adolescent boy spread from religious circles to the warriors (*samurai*) (Haxhiymeri and Gjermeni 2003). Another example of third genders are the *hijras* of north India who undergo castration (penectomies) to remove their genitals, so that they cannot be considered as men or women. As Gutmann (1997) argues, emasculation was seen as the only source of ritual power, apart from engaging in sexual activity with other males. Certain ritual traditions among tribal societies can serve as a source for constructing masculinity. For example, amongst the Sambia, oral insemination of children, which consists of an initiation ritual to transform 'boys' who are considered feminine persons into masculinised, strong male warriors, by drinking the semen of older men, is seen as a social and sexual practice which is rooted mainly in the culture (Gutmann 1997). As Herdt (in Gutmann 1997, p. 397) points out, this kind of ritual is seen as a possible way to 'create a pool of maleness'. Obviously, this type of insemination ritual should not be mistaken for or confused with the practice of homosexuality. In fact, homosexuality is based on a Western dichotomy,⁷ and it would be inappropriate to refer here to this binary system. The ritual is based on the Sambia's sexual culture, sexual beliefs and ideologies, and is seen as quite natural in the construction what is referred to as 'masculinity'. Thus, as Herdt (in Gutmann 1997, p.394) notes, 'it is no longer useful to think of the Sambia as engaging in "homosexuality", because it will be a quite confused meaning based in the Western sexuality'.

Among some tribal *berdaches*, notably the Cheyenne, the men assumed the role of the second wife in another man's household (Forgey 1975, p. 4). Some *berdaches* were asexual (Pratt 2007, p. 60) or abstained, since in cases of war, abstinence supposedly heightened men's strength and virility (Forgey 1975, p. 4).

Furthermore, modes of intercourse among male *berdaches* varied from tribe to tribe. For example, among the Arpaho anal intercourse was practised in homosexual relationships (Kroeber in Callender *et al.* 1983, p. 450) while among the Crow sexual intercourse was limited to fellatio, regardless of the heterosexual or homosexual context (Holder in Callender *et al.* 1983, p. 450). Devereux reported that among Mohave, sexual intercourse was limited to the manipulation of the sexual partner using different techniques, and in certain cases they insisted that female terms be used for sexual organs. Sometimes they would engage in such stimulation during menstruation, pregnancy and child-birth (in Callender *et al.* 1983, p.450). Williams (1986, p. 2) writes that *berdaches* would frequently take on non-masculine roles during sexual intercourse.

***Berdache* females**

Schnarch (1992) and Trexler (2002) concur that *berdache* females assume the role and dress of the opposite sex, and they were known as 'manly-hearted women' (Goulet 1996, p. 682). In many cases, certain rituals followed during a ceremony allowed female *berdache* to transform girls into boys. The purpose of such ceremonies was to prohibit the girls' menstruation, prevent

pregnancy, change girls' 'erotic orientation' and give them strength for hunting (Goulet 1996, p. 690).⁸ By contrast, sworn virgins did not follow any kind of ritual to change their gender or 'erotic orientation'. The rituals used for these female *berdaches* can be interpreted as an overlap of gender and sexual categories. This point is important for understanding perceptions around gender and sexuality, as well as erotic orientation: gender cross-dressing was not considered sufficient for transforming female *berdaches* into men – sexuality mattered as well.

Female *berdache* performed the behaviours and duties of the opposite sex, such as hunting, trapping, cultivating crops, working the fields and fighting in battle (Blackwood 1984, pp. 29–31)⁹ and sometimes outperformed their male counterparts in terms of hunting (Callender *et al.* 1983, p. 447). In a similar way, sworn virgins engaged in 'masculine' activities.

Reasons for changing gender among female *berdaches*

Trexler (2002, p. 629) points out that among American Indian females, becoming a *berdache* was not necessarily an act of free will, but was highly predetermined by political and familial conditions. Thus, Honigmann (in Jacobs, Wand and Lang 1997) argues that parents without sons would, during their infancy or early childhood, select one of their daughters to dress and treat as a boy, so that the girl could be strong enough to hunt for food for the clan.¹⁰ Another possible reason for becoming a *berdache* was to inherit property, in cases where there were no men in the family (Trexler 2002, p. 628) – a similar reason applies to the sworn virgins. Thayer concurs that visions in dreams may have prompted women to assume the role of the opposite sex (Thayer 1980, p. 289).¹¹ Likewise, the same reason applied to male *berdaches*. However, there are no reports of sworn virgins changing their gender based on dreams.

Sexuality of *berdache* females

Berdache girls avoided sexual contact with boys but not with other girls (Goulet 1996). The sexuality of cross-gendered females was recognised as homosexual or lesbian (Blackwood 1984). Holder (in Callender *et al.* 1983, p. 449) notes that even though among Crow *berdaches* marriage was not forbidden, the women would seldom marry. During sexual intercourse female *berdaches* would sometimes imitate male sexual behavior. For example, among the Kutenai tribes, female *berdaches* would use an artificial phallus to create the perception that they were males (Holder in Callender *et al.* 1983, p. 449). Goulet (1996, p. 690) states that among the Kaska tribes, female *berdaches* could have sexual relations only with other women, and adds that there were reports of female homosexual relationships among different tribes. While a variety of sexual behaviour among *berdache* men relates to the intermediate nature of their gender status, in *berdache* females and sworn virgins such variety of sexual relations does not exist.

Society's reaction

All three gender categories – sworn virgins, and male and female *berdaches* – were highly respected and accepted in their societies. Sworn virgins were fully accepted and respected (Young 2001, p.

65), while male and female *berdaches* were not only accepted in society but were viewed and respected as saints and inspired beings (Lewis in Thayer 1980, p. 288). Such acceptance is not always mirrored in contemporary society, which is often closed and individuals ‘come out’ of the closet to reveal that they are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender.

As Wilson (in Opheim 2010) notes: ‘Two-spirited identity is about the Aboriginal concept of “coming into yourself”... an empowered identity that integrates their sexuality, culture, gender and all other aspects of who they understand and know themselves to be ... as opposed to just “coming out”.’ Antonia Young (2001, p. 113) adds that ‘to become a sworn virgin ... is putting on a role ... rather than an occasion on which some inner self is permitted to come out’. Although Sedgwick (1993, p. 46) assumes that ‘the closet is the defining structure for gay oppression in this century’, the above categories (LGBT) are highly respected and recognised in society, therefore the concept of a “closet” cannot apply to them. Thus, it is no longer useful to think of these people as “coming out of the closet” if they have never been in it. Therefore, while two-spirit people value their attachment to the inner self, sworn virgins, as Young (2001, p. 36) notes, ‘put on a role’ to alienate themselves from their inner self. This is a very important point to consider, since it clarifies the larger theoretical concepts of gender and sexuality, and how they are shaped by different cultures and societies.

The present existence of these phenomena

The phenomenon of sworn virgins is becoming obsolete due to dramatic changes in Albanian society post-1991, which transformed women’s role in the family and the community. Nowadays men are no longer the breadwinners in their households, and women have gained a more respectable status¹² (Young and Twigg 2009). One argument is that the role and visibility of *berdaches* began to disappear soon after European or American control was established (Forgey 1975, p. 67).¹³ However, *berdaches* still exist and are recognised today, particularly by the queer community.¹⁴ Although, whether the term ‘two spirit’ can be used to refer to Native-American gays and lesbians is still controversial. While some might identify with the traditional *berdache* identity, others reject such identification (Lang 1997, pp. 109–115). Lang (1997, pp. 109–115) argues that identification is seen as a way to preserve old traditions that go far beyond sexuality. At the same time it makes them different from white gays and lesbians who define themselves according to their sexual preferences. It is therefore clear that some contemporary gays and lesbians may view any identification with historical *berdaches* as a powerful tool to legitimate their status and as necessary when it comes to recognising their roots within an ancient heritage. Affirming their identity with that of the ancient *berdaches* might be a source of power and pride, and may enable these people to fight homophobia. The same point can be made for women and gay men, or even as regards discrimination within and between minorities. Consider, for example, Gayle Rubin’s explanation to Judith Butler in *Gender deviations* of the origin of her oft-cited ‘charmed circle’ which had, ironically, very little to do with the hetero/homosexual binary, but rather focused on internal divisions within homosexuality itself.

By contrast, Williams (1986) argues that some modern gays and lesbians find the old historical *berdaches* too feminine or mystical to represent them, insisting that their distinct form of identity is different from the historical one. These arguments reveal that while identification with ancient *berdaches* is seen as a unifying factor for modern gays and lesbians, non-identification is seen as a way to assert a unique identity that differs from the ancient one.

Misconception and critiques of labeling sworn virgins and *berdache*

There are misconceptions when it comes to the use of inappropriate terminology which different authors and anthropologists employ when defining sworn virgins, and male and female *berdaches*. Some employ Western terminology related to cross-gender behaviour, such as transvestism, homosexuality, intersexes, transsexuals, gender mixing, transgender or 'third sex' (Callender *et al.* 1983; Roscoe 1998; Schnarch 1992; Young 2001). For instance, Shryock (1998 p. 113) writes of sworn virgins as 'virginal transvestites'. However, there is another implication which makes transvestism a non-relevant category: in psychiatric terms, cross-dressing or 'transvestic fetishism' is used to explain a heterosexual man, who is usually married and cross-dressed to gain erotic pleasure, while at the same time expressing a distinct inner self (Valentine 2007, p. 88).

Dickemann (in Young 2001, p. 117) calls sworn virgins 'transgendered individuals who have become social men leading masculine lives enjoying the traditional status role and identity of social men'. Antonia Young (in Lopasic 2001, p. 405) refuses to use the term 'third sex' or transsexuals, transgendered or cross-dressers to label sworn virgins, but rather considers them to be women who became 'socially men' for different reasons. In a similar way, Schnarch (1992 pp. 114–115) points out that many writers and ethnographers have somehow failed to explain the institution of *berdache* because they relied on the rigid distinction of sex and gender, in accordance with Western conceptions. By contrast, Schnarch assumes that the institution of homosexuality does not apply to male *berdaches*, because their sexuality was highly variable among different tribes (they could have sex not only with other *berdaches*, but also with other non-*berdaches*, male and female). Moreover, in his view male *berdaches* cannot be considered transvestites because of instances of weak men dressing in women's clothes in order to avoid having to fight. Their dress was also highly variable (Schnarch 1992, p. 115). Furthermore, Forgey (1975, p. 2) writes that the term *berdache* should be not mistaken for transvestism or cross-dressing, because their social status and gender were institutionalised changes, accepted by others. Another error on the part of non-natives and anthropologists is to assign *berdaches* the concept of intersex, because their genitalia have been proved. The misconception might rely in the terminology or the linguistic, as *berdaches* were considered half woman, half man (Callender *et al.* 1983; Schnarch 1992).

Finally, it is also inappropriate to categorise *berdache* males as transgendered (Schnarch 1992), since the term has been used to refer to 'any variance from imagined gender norms' (see also Valentine 2007, p. 14). Valentine (2007, p. 132) writes that 'identity categories such as gay or transgender cannot account for the complexity of people's desires, understanding of self, and experiences'. It seems that labeling is merely a way to categorise those people who have been left out of the binary system of male/female. According to Foucault (in Halperin 1993, p. 416), 'sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given power ... it is the name that can be given to a historic construct'. Consequently, making categorisations and assigning labels to such categories can restrict our possibilities of understanding gender variances and diversities, as well as human experiences within different cultures and societies. In the same way, Valentine (2007) agrees this does not mean such labels are wrong and should not be used, despite the fact that such terms fail to explain the complexity of gender categories. He further argues that 'complicated topics

require complicated language' (Valentine 2007, p. 27). Therefore, it is important to understand clearly what the terms stand for, or what consequences their use might have.

A queer dilemma

Queer activists argue that sexual and gender identities are not fixed, solid, politically grounded and natural, but rather fluid and always changing, thus identities are not given or naturally divided into distinct groups such as man/woman, gay/straight. For example, gay discourse argues that people are not 100 per cent gay or straight, feminine or masculine, but rather, that they are ambiguous. They advocate for a re-examination of what constitutes a man or a woman. Therefore, it is obvious that binary categories are oppressive and inaccurate, if neither biological differences nor gender (which is socially assigned) account for being a man or a woman. For instance, transgender people or people with ambiguous sexual desires in particular subvert those binary categories that are supposed to be fixed and natural (Gamson 1995).

On the other hand, essentialist concepts about sexual minorities are very important for both resistance and political gain. In fact, collective identities are deemed very important for bringing about successful collective action and awareness, as far as a number of movements are concerned. The problem is that if membership of a certain group is highly ambiguous and unclear, it is quite difficult to claim rights and protection for a group with minority status. It is also difficult to make claims without a solid group identity. Thus, collective identity is used to gain legal benefits and state protection. Therefore, clear identity categories are dangerous, but they are nevertheless important (Gamson 1995).

In a similar way to queer activists, many authors have critiqued the supposed naturalness of sexual and gender categories. Wittig (1993), for instance, points out that what we consider to be 'woman' is in fact a myth: being a woman is something which is performed and constituted through the reinforcement of compulsory heterosexuality, but it is also accompanied by given natural characteristics. Wittig (1993, p. 104) asserts that by 'admitting that there is a natural division between women and men, we naturalize history, we assume that men and women have always existed and will always exist'. However, while queer theory aims to deconstruct all identity categories, Wittig sees the deconstruction of the class of 'woman' and particularly the deconstruction of heterosexuality, as possibly enabling lesbian survival. Furthermore, gender and sexuality are seen to be in constant change, and as the products of imitation. Butler (1991, p. 21), for example, notes that 'gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original', whereas Foucault (1997, p. 168) asserts that sexuality is a social construct – because gender and sexual identities are constantly evolving and therefore do not have clear boundaries.

Again, given the fluidity of sexual and gender categories, it seems (according to queer activists) that individuals can shift from one identity category to another, and that such movement is merely a matter of choice or preference. Dugan (1994) compares queerness to religion, in which people can freely choose whether or not to convert. However, by contrast, identity is not totally fluid and shapeless: there are specific representations that shape identity, such as power, social relations and cultural representations.

Finally, from the above arguments it can be deduced that sexual and gender categories are proven to be socially and historically constructed by hegemonic social discourses. Therefore, queerness is offered as an alternative to non-heteronormative identities and lifestyles. It aims to deconstruct and denaturalise an identity which is, in fact, another problematic issue for gay and lesbian activism. The problem is the particular notions of a 'collective identity' and 'shared oppression' that encourage a range of political and social actors to empower certain 'minority' groups such as gays and lesbians. What is interesting about the queer social movement is its solidarity and sense of being united by the idea of 'sameness' and similarity, while at the same time reinforcing the distinctions that exist between them and others.¹⁶

My concern in labeling same-sex practices as homosexual is that it becomes very difficult to understand whether sexual relationships between two persons of the same sex, but of different genders, can be referred to as homosexual. Given the above arguments it is clearly difficult to break away from dichotomous notions of female/male in analysing gender and sexuality. As noted, even within the so-called 'homosexual relationships' among *berdaches*, it was important for ethnographers and writers to determine which was the passive and which the active role, in order to make such sexual practices fit into Western categorisations. Much emphasis is still placed on the idea that those who do not behave in accordance with their biological sex (assigned at birth) and who fall outside socially constructed gender roles, are regarded as somehow 'different'. Many scholars therefore see it as their duty to find suitable names and labels to categorise such individuals or groups. However, this is a problematic situation, given that such categorisations narrow the variety of gender categories in keeping with our binary system. It is therefore vital to understand gender and sexuality as culturally constructed concepts, and as Gamson (1998, p. 590) argues, 'historical and social products, not as natural or intrapsychic ones'.

Conclusion

In this article the author attempted to compare and contrast various accounts of gender categories, including sworn virgins, and male and female *berdaches*, that do not rely on Western terminology. It is important to recognise that a single term, *berdache*, was used to define both males and females among native tribes. This may be attributed to the individuals' intermediate status, i.e., between woman and man.¹⁵ Most importantly, what makes all these gender categories fit within the same family of 'third gender' is the adoption of the gender roles, manners, dress and activities of the opposite sex. These can be understood as 'non-normative gender' (Valentine 2007) categories that go beyond Western notions of gender and sexuality. These gender categories showed many similarities, but also differed in many respects. Reasons for choosing to assume the identity of the opposite sex varied, and depended on social, economic, political, emotional and cultural factors. Individuals in all these categories engaged in at least one activity normally associated with the opposite sex. While sworn virgins and female *berdaches* would dress, behave and perform activities associated with males in a rigid way, male *berdaches* were less rigid in following the same path. Their behaviour was freer and also varied among different tribes. One condition for becoming 'socially men' was that a sworn virgin had to take a vow of celibacy, whereas no such

condition was set for male and female *berdaches*. While sexuality among *berdache* men varied from asexuality, bisexuality, homosexuality, promiscuity and marriage, the sexuality of *berdache* women was limited to bisexuality, homosexuality and heterosexuality. Even though same-sex relations were reported among sworn virgins, the author found no mention of their sexuality. All sworn virgins, and male and female *berdaches* were fully accepted in their societies.

Finally, while the number of sworn virgins decreased due to women's empowerment in Albanian society, *berdache* males and females began to disappear due to American colonisation. Some say sworn virgins still exist (Young 2001), while *berdaches* seem to be recognised within the queer community.

Again, it is worth emphasising that sworn virgins, and male and female *berdaches* are considered unique categories, and should not be interpreted as homosexuals, transsexuals, transvestites, lesbians, cross-dressers or transgender. It is relevant to refer here to queer theory, which is based on different sets of political movements, mobilisations and academic activities working against conventional lesbian and gay identity politics (Gamson 1995). In terms of queer theory, fixed identity categories that produce binaries such as gay/straight, man/woman are 'both the basis for oppression and the basis for political power' (Gamson 1995, p. 391). 'Queer' has been used as an umbrella term to highlight differences between people, but also membership of one family that shares a common identity. Thus, GLBT people can be included in the category of 'queer', as can people of colour. Therefore, 'queer' has been used as an identity category based, on the one hand, on the struggles between assimilation and sameness, and on the other hand on ideas on separation and difference (Gamson 1995).

It is important to look and think beyond the Western dichotomy, rather than labeling with Western terminology. It may be prudent to refer to 'alternative varieties' in terms of gender roles. These categories break apart the notion of gender normatively; they can be seen as cross-cultural gender variations that need to be analysed in more detail. It is vital to recognise the difficulties in understanding gender variables that do not necessarily fit into a Western binary gender system. Without names, categories and labels it would be hard to understand such gender variety. The idea of anxiety stemming from an inability to label such categories appears in Valentine's book *The logic of inclusion: Transgender activism* (2008), where the author states that upon labeling such categories, the anxiety disappears. Numerous self-identified transgender persons constantly repeated: 'I know what I am' (Valentine 2008, p. 108), and in a similar way these gender categories 'know what they are'. The problem may lie in the way we perceive things and try to interpret them, which is somehow different from what these 'others' think of themselves. Valentine (2007, p. 135) notes in regard to self-identified transgender persons: 'They were exactly what they were. Rather, a powerful system of binary gender and sexed bodies produced them as ambiguous.' It is therefore important to avoid labeling variant gender categories, especially when referring to historical and non-Western phenomena. Defining and labeling certain categories with Western concepts erases the possibility and complexity of such categories in different cultures.

Notes

- 1 Sworn virgins from Northern Albania and *Berdache* Native-American Indians are chosen for comparison since they have more similarities than 'third gender people' and since both categories are now extinct.
- 2 The term is used to refer to those women whose anatomical sex was female but would change their gender roles from female to male, thus meaning that they would behave and adopt the activities of the opposite sex (Young 2001).
- 3 This term, although not explained in detail, is used by Gremaux in his book *Women become men in Balkans* (1994).
- 4 This practice was reported among Pawnee and Yankton *berdaches*, prairie and plains tribes, the Hidatsa and Algonquian.
- 5 This practice is found among the Teton Dakota, the northern Plains and the Mohave (Schnarch 1992).
- 6 The Oedipus complex sees boys and girls experiencing intense yet unconscious feelings for the parent of the opposite sex. The boy experiences the fear of castration and his object of love is the mother, whereas the girl blames the mother for not having a penis. Moreover, in girls, the object of love changes from the mother to the father (Freud 2003).
- 7 Western dichotomy refers to the rigid division as male/female, homosexual/heterosexual.
- 8 Cases were reported among the Kaska Indians. According to Williams (1986), during the ritual of transformation parents tied the dried ovaries of a bear to a girl's belt to wear for life, as protection against conception.
- 9 For example, Mohave *hwamewere* are known as excellent providers, hunting for meat, working in the fields and caring for the children of their wives; Cocopa *warrhameh* established households just like men did and fought in battles, while Kaska males allocated tasks (Blackwood 1984, p. 31).
- 10 This is most often the case with Kaska tribes (Goulet 1996, p. 685).
- 11 This practice was reported among the Southwestern tribes, Mohave *hwame* and Maricopa *kwiraxame* (Blackwood 1984, p. 29).
- 12 Antonia Young (2001, p. 65) points out that sworn virgins still exist, but are less likely to be recognised.
- 13 The oldest documentations on *berdaches* date from the 17th century, from European travellers in North America. More detailed records appeared during the late-19th century, although recent studies into the phenomenon have continued. Many North-American cultures disappeared before they could be studied by anthropologists, which makes it difficult to interpret their history and life experiences (Roscoe 1998).
- 14 See Tully, M., n.d.
- 15 Blackwood (1984) uses 'intermediate gender roles' and 'gender mixing' between male and female, to refer to the status of *berdaches*.
- 16 'Others' here refers to the rest of the population.

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