CHAPTER ONE

GENDER PERFORMANCE IN SOUTHEASTERN SERBIA

Concepts of Femininity in Rural Serbia

Želim da ste nam svi živi i zdravi
i veseljaci i mladi i stari.
Ali želim da vam se u kuću
rađaju muška dece
u svako čošence po jedno detence.
(I wish you all good life and health,
Merry fellows, both old and young.
But I wish that male children
Will be born in your house,
In each corner a newborn.
(The drinking song – zdravica, Jelena Mitrović, Malča village)

The organization of family life in Serbian villages was based until the end of World War II on the institution of a large, extended family, called kućna zadruga. The authority of fathers and husbands was pivotal in this type of family as well as the patrilineal inheritance of all real estate (Antonijević 1971a: 113). Women occupied a subordinate position within the family and were under the command of their husbands (or the eldest male in the household) and his kin (Beissinger 2001: 412). These relations of power were expressed through ritualized norms of behavior such as, for example, table seating (women often had to remain standing during the meal), or the traditional obligation of women to kiss the hand of the male head of the family or wash his legs. Sometimes, they were even transmitted into the sphere of judicial practices:

For a woman, it was strictly forbidden to cross a man’s path; they would usually have waited for him to pass (even if he was far away when she spotted him). However, if she had by any chance committed that offence, she would have had to go back. Honoring this tradition, the authorities in Šumadija sometimes punished women who were daring enough to do that. (Bandić 1980: 324)

However, in the specific kind of age-based hierarchy (elder dominance), the mother-housewife,\(^1\) who was subordinate to her husband,

\(^1\) Married women in rural society in pre-WWII Serbia played two main social roles: the role of a mother and that of a housewife.
retained authority over her sons and daughters-in-law. Age was in general crucial for the social status of rural women: “At various stages of their lives, women take different degrees of social status within the family and the community at large” (Petrović A. 1990: 72).

Nevertheless, only in two cases could a woman’s social status be equivalent to that of a man: as a widow, having taken over the role of breadwinner, and as a sworn virgin (tobelija or virdžina) – a woman assuming the role of a man in the absence of male heirs (Gremaux 1996; Pettan 2003: 293). In this regard, in Serbian villages there was a distinct preference for male children who could carry on the family name and inherit the farm. The birth of a daughter was greeted with disappointment, since her presence in the household was considered only temporary (Denich 1974: 261). Many folk maxims attest to this attitude: “Marry your son when you want, your daughter when you can” (Ženi sina kad ‘očeš a udaj ‘ćer kad možeš), “A daughter is another man’s happiness” (Žensko je tuđa sreća). As Vuk Vrčević points out, all of the ritual acts dedicated to fertility were actually directed at securing male descendants (Vrčević 1883: 102). For this reason, on the wedding day, after the bride entered the groom’s household, she took a male baby (nakonjče) into her arms to ensure that she would bear sons (the bride would bring special presents for the child, usually consisting of a shirt, socks and a towel). On the other hand, no particular action was undertaken to procure the birth of female children because, consistent with the patriarchal superstition, “every female being possesses seven souls (like a cat), and she is (in herself ) more than a male child” (Svaka ženska glava ima sedam duša (kao i mačka), ona je više nego muško dete, Đorđević 1938: 93 and 1984: 318). Furthermore, in some areas of Serbia, families avoided having weddings on so-called ‘women’s days,’ such as Wednesday, Saturday, and even Sunday, in order to prevent the birth of female children (Bandić 1980: 346).

In Serbian villages, gender hierarchies were strongly connected to pre-Christian beliefs and pagan concepts of female sexuality. Woman’s connection with the life-cycle rituals and the vital importance of her fertility reflect the special status of the female body in old religious beliefs, being an extremely powerful ritual symbol in rural society. Sexuality, reproduction and menstruation were recognized as phenomena in which women did not have full control over their bodies but considered ‘unclean’ having a special bond with the ‘other world.’ This being so, in the Serbian rural environment a variety of strategies, both practical and ideological, were developed to control female sexu-