

Kosovo Myths: Karadžić, Njegoš, and the Transformation of Serb Memory¹

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The legend of Serbia's defeat by invading Ottoman forces at the medieval battle of Kosovo on June 28, 1389 has long occupied a special place in Serbian national memory. Overcoming historical details that assign the event a more limited significance,² the battle has come to symbolize a national death: the cataclysmic end to the once glorious medieval Serbian state and the beginning of the 500-year-long Ottoman occupation, a time typically characterized both as an enslavement and as a deep national sleep. But the story also has a generative side. As Alex Dragnich and Slavko Todorovich explain in their popular history of the Kosovo region, "Kosovo is a grave and a grave means death and dust, but it also means rebirth and a source of new life" (6). In the traditional account, memories of Kosovo cemented a collective Serb identity throughout the Ottoman centuries, as the Serb people kept their national spirit alive through the support of the Orthodox Church and the practice of orally transmitted epic song. In this way, Kosovo memory became an organizing principle, an inspirational link to medieval statehood that guided the Serbs through unimaginable hardships until, finally, in the course of the nineteenth century, they threw off the Ottoman shackles, and channeled national memory into a modern nation-state.

At the heart of this national memory stands a highly mythologized account of the battle itself. Drawing on the two historical facts that are known with some certainty – that both the Serbian Prince Lazar and the Ottoman Sultan Murad were killed at the battle – the Kosovo narrative has evolved into a intricate morality play highlighting themes of martyrdom, treachery, and heroic self-sacrifice, and supplying a central symbolic source for modern Serb identity. The legend focuses on three figures. There is the Christ-like Prince Lazar, who chooses a heavenly kingdom over an earthly one and willingly martyrs himself on the Kosovo plain. There is the traitorous Vuk Branković, who withdraws his troops at a crucial moment, leaving the badly outnumbered Serbs overwhelmed by the Ottoman army. And finally there is the hero, Miloš Obilić. At a dramatic last supper on the night before the battle, Lazar, deceived by Branković, predicts that Obilić will betray him. The next morning Obilić heads to the Turkish camp where he does pretend to abandon his prince, but only so as to gain ac-

cess to the Sultan's tent where, leaning to kiss Murad's feet, he unleashes a hidden dagger and fatally wounds the Ottoman emperor. By doing so, he sacrifices his own life as the dying Murad orders Obilić's execution.³

The ideological deployment of this narrative runs throughout modern Serbian history. When Serbia seized the Kosovo region from the Ottomans in the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913, avenging this medieval loss served as a rallying cry. The recollections of a young Serbian soldier captured the euphoria of the campaign:

The single sound of that word – Kosovo – caused indescribable excitement. This one word pointed to the black past – five centuries. ... My God, what awaited us! To see a liberated Kosovo. ... The spirits of Lazar, Miloš, and all the Kosovo martyrs gaze upon us. We feel strong and proud, for we are the generation which will realize the centuries-old dream of the nation. (quoted in Emmert 133)

Soon after, in 1914, the dream of Kosovo vengeance spread to Bosnia, where, on the 515th anniversary of the Kosovo battle, Serb revolutionary Gavrilo Princip consciously emulated Obilić by assassinating the Habsburg Arch-duke Franz Ferdinand on the streets of Sarajevo, thereby igniting World War I, and ultimately leading to the creation of a Yugoslav kingdom.

Ironically, if the Kosovo narrative was a source of inspiration in the founding of the first, monarchist Yugoslavia, it also factored in the destruction of the country in its second, communist rendition. Stoking fears about the perceived persecution of Serbs in the Kosovo region at the hands of the majority ethnic Albanian population, former Serbian president Slobodan Milošević exploited the symbolism of the battle to jump-start his nationalist agenda, most notably in his historic speech on Kosovo Polje on June 28, 1989, the 600th anniversary of the battle. The highlighted themes of persecution by "outside" enemies (particularly Muslim ones), historic injustices, and the ethic of tenacious resistance served as powerful symbols deployed not only in Milošević's suppression of Kosovo's majority Albanian population (once the beneficiaries of substantial autonomy within the Serbian Republic), but also in the gruesome wars of ethnic cleansing fought against the non-Serb populations in the breakaway republics of Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. In 1999, of course, the Kosovo legend took on a new resonance, as NATO bombed Serbia into ceasing its war against Kosovo's Albanians, and effectively severed the region from what remains of Yugoslavia.

Even this brief sketch of the Kosovo myth and its legacy allows one to see how the legend has played such a central role in the popular imagination of the Balkans. In its broader implications, the myth has figured in the debate concerning the origins of national identity. Observing that "the Kosovo battle became an ineradicable part of Serbian history immediately after 1389" and "inspired the greatest cycle of Serbian epic poetry, which was full of hope for the final victory and deliverance," Aleksa Djilas has thereby argued that "the nineteenth century only revolutionized national identities already formed by language, cul-

ture, religion, and, above all, history" (129). Taken at face value, such insights may seem relatively benign, but they have only served to bolster the widespread perception of the Balkans as a region prisoner to its history, where current conflicts can be explained only by reference to intractable and ancient hatreds whose bloodlust runs deeper than the dictates of reason or self-interest. In recent years, of course, such perceptions have played the greatest role in foreign policy debates, in which the specter of primordial animosities repeatedly raised its head to neutralize incipient outrage at atrocities committed in Bosnia and elsewhere in the region. For those who sought to blame the bloodshed on the historical culture of the Balkan peoples itself, the memory of Kosovo served as proof that the "600-year-long" Balkan conflict was unpreventable, unresolvable, and unworthy of attention.

To be sure, this most stereotypical vision of the Balkans has not gone unchallenged. For many historians and observers of the region, the primary task of the last decade has been to provide a more nuanced version of Balkan history, one that demolishes the many nationalist myths and emphasizes the long tradition of peaceful co-existence and fluid identities (a history that is particularly remarkable when compared to the relatively violent history of Western Europe). Some of this attention has even focused on the history of the Kosovo myth, although not without continued obscurity. Noel Malcolm, for example, has argued that "the idea that this folk-poetic tradition supplied the essence of a special type of historical-national self-consciousness for the Serbs is, in fact, a product of the nineteenth century," when nation-builders, influenced by prevailing European ideologies, "took the elements of the Kosovo tradition and transformed them into a national ideology" (Malcolm 1999, 79). At the same time, however, Malcolm admits somewhat obliquely that "[n]o doubt, during the long centuries of Ottoman rule, there would have been many Serbs who understood these [Kosovo] songs as expressing something about the historical origins of their predicament as subjects of the Turks" (*ibid.*).

By failing to suggest the contours of this pre-modern understanding, Malcolm partly undermines his own position, leaving the reader only to guess at the degree to which later nationalist efforts may have departed from an earlier popular understanding. This omission is an unfortunate one, as a closer look at the Kosovo narrative fully vindicates Malcolm's intuition both that the modern configuration of the myth is a nationalist invention, and that the earlier folk tradition, at least in some versions, did convey a political message to Serbs living in the Ottoman Empire. The nature of that message, however, could not be more different from that which ultimately prevailed in nationalist ideology. In this way, the supposed role of Kosovo memory in Serbian culture is turned on its head. Far from constituting the inherent, rigid core of a timeless Serb consciousness, the Kosovo legend exemplifies the malleability of such narratives of

memory, their deep contingency upon configurations and re-configurations of identity.

As might be expected, the Kosovo legend did not emerge fully formed on the day after the battle, but evolved from disparate strands and appeared in various permutations throughout its history. This fact alone is no surprise. What may be less expected, however, is that many of the legend's most crucial narrative elements appear to have entered the Serbian oral tradition just a generation or so before they were documented by nineteenth-century nationalist intellectuals. In his much-neglected book on the legend's evolution, Miodrag Popović maintains that the stories of Lazar's martyrdom and Branković's treachery are indigenous to Serbian tradition, as soon after the battle a cult centered on Lazar developed in Orthodox religious manuscripts.⁴ Focusing neither on the battle itself, nor on broader themes of Serbian statehood, these writings celebrated the example of Lazar's martyrdom at the hands of the heathen, and reflected on the everlasting life attained by his sacrifice (Popović 13-21).

By contrast Popović maintains that the heart of the Kosovo legend, the story of Miloš Obilić and his assassination of Sultan Murad, developed in entirely different surroundings. He suggests that Turkish sources invented an as yet unnamed assassin employing devious methods as part of an effort to tarnish the image of the opponent (21-22). But whatever the story's origins, the development and transmission of the Obilić narrative among Christians occurred not in Serbia, but to the west, in Venetian and Habsburg territory during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Although scattered references in a few mid-fifteenth century sources suggest (albeit inconclusively) that some basic account of the Sultan's death may have circulated among the Ottoman Empire's Christian population, there is no trace of the incident in any of the sixteenth or seventeenth century Serbo-Slavonic religious sources that served as repositories for the cult of Lazar (Popović 34-35). Instead, the legend traveled west to areas still at war with the Ottoman Empire, where it was cultivated primarily among Catholic intellectuals in the Venetian empire (including Catholic Slavs on the Adriatic coast) and in a western Balkan form of epic poetry known as the *bugarštica*. To be sure, the transmitting population included Serb ancestors in the form of Orthodox Christians on the anti-Ottoman military frontier, but the story clearly was not particular to this population, which for the most part did not even identify itself as Serb until well into the nineteenth century.⁵ More important, while writers seized upon the story as a means to manifest hostility toward the Turkish invaders, there was, for the most part, nothing particularly Serbian in their focus. For example, one late seventeenth-century poem from the Dubrovnik area refers repeatedly to "Hungarian lords," but never once links the Kosovo heroes to Serb nationality or statehood ("The Song of the Battle of Kosovo," in Miletich, 13-31). Rather, during this period, the narrative emphasized larger themes of Christian hostility toward the Ottoman foe and the feu-

dal values of loyalty of serf to lord, all of which served as propaganda (deliberate or otherwise) to further the war effort on the frontier (Popović 32-49).⁶

In Ottoman Serbia, by contrast, Popović claims that the population shunned the oppositional themes of the Kosovo narrative as it developed in the west. Enjoying substantial religious autonomy and less exacting feudal duties, Serbia's Christian population cultivated a "Turkophilic" culture more suited to the general climate of accommodation to Ottoman rule (34-35). Only in the eighteenth century, argues Popović, when anti-Ottoman sentiment grew within Serbia itself, did a more comprehensive Kosovo legend centered on the story of Miloš Obilić become an integral part of that land's oral tradition, implanting itself into the decasyllabic verse for which that tradition is chiefly known. Only then could the Kosovo songs, anational and feudal in their western incarnation, become a grass-roots cry for Serb national liberation, with the famous collection of folk songs collected by Vuk Karadžić documenting the final result of this transformation (46-49).⁷

If Popović is correct, the crux of the Kosovo story as it is told today developed in foreign settings, reaching the Serbian masses just in time to be memorialized by nationalist reformers. This surprising thesis is, of course, difficult to prove, as it employs written documents to speculate on the state of an unwritten oral tradition – and such traditions by their nature do not lend themselves to easy documentation. But perhaps the greatest support for Popović's thesis lies in its central flaw – the undocumented assumption that the accommodationist sentiments of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries did not survive into the eighteenth. It is here that Vuk Karadžić's four volumes of *Serbian National Songs*, published sequentially between 1841 and 1862, and preceded by a slimmer 1815 version, assume central importance. Even accepting all the usual qualifications about the biases of the collector and the impossibility of fully capturing a partly improvisational tradition (factors which, given Karadžić's commitments, would in any case be more likely to reinforce rather than disturb the conventional take on Kosovo memory), this collection represents the first systematic attempt to document the folk tradition. And although the poems are commonly assumed to be the definitive repository of popular Serb nationalism, a close analysis reveals a very different spirit from the one of revolutionary fervor that Popović has identified. Indeed, these fragments of Serb life in the Ottoman Empire depict a world whose identity structures have nothing to do with the modern nation-state ideology.

At first glance, readers may be more struck by what Karadžić's Kosovo songs do not contain than by what they do. The Kosovo "cycle" as it is commonly called, consists of a mere handful of poems, a small fraction of Vuk's four-volume collection. Some are labeled as fragments, as portions of a larger song or group of songs that Vuk never published. Noticeably absent, except through brief reference and allusion, is the account of Miloš Obilić's famous deed. The

actual battle is barely described. If there is one central theme that connects these scattered fragments, it is loyalty, loyalty to Lazar and to the “honorable cross” even at the price of sure death.⁸ But apart from such general appeals, the meaning of the songs is obscure.⁹ Is there any deeper evidence of a more robust political identity, particularly one dedicated to a pitched battle to avenge medieval loss and establish an independent national state? An answer begins to emerge in one of Vuk’s fragments, which reads as follows:

Tzar Murad on Kosovo descends
 As he descends, he writes a note
 And sends it to Kruševac city
 To the knee of the Serbian Prince Lazar:
 “Oh Lazar, of Serbia the head
 Never has there been nor can there be;
 One land, and two rulers;
 One flock, paying two taxes.
 We cannot both rule,
 So send me the keys and taxes already,
 The golden keys of all the cities,
 And the taxes of seven years,
 If you will not send these to me
 Then go to the Kosovo plain
 So that we may divide this land by swords.”
 When this note reaches Lazar,
 He reads it, and weeps terrible tears.¹⁰

(“Komadi od razliĉnijeh Kosovskijeh pjesama,” in Karadžić, vol. 2, 229).

Two themes stand out here. The first is the issue of who will rule and collect the taxes. The second is related but more subtle, and concerns the people who pay the taxes. The Serbo-Croat word “*raja*” is often translated simply as the “people,” but in its Turkish derivation (“*reaya*”), it literally means flock, and this is the translation that I have used.¹¹ In its origins, the term referred broadly to the empire’s tax-paying subjects, although by the time of Karadžić’s collection it had come primarily to refer more narrowly to the Christian peasants. The concept of the *raja* was integral to the Ottoman system, which posited its lowest caste subjects to be the flock and the Sultan, by implication, to be their shepherd.¹² This symbolism conveyed a two-way system of duty, whereby the peasantry contributed its share in taxes and produce and the Sultan strove to keep his subjects pacified. Part and parcel of this imperial strategy was a system of religious classification which further subdivided the peasantry along sectarian grounds, and placed the administration of non-Muslim subjects, provided they were “people of the book” (i.e. Christians or Jews), in the hands of their respective religious authorities. Given the autocephalous nature of the Orthodox patriarchate of Peć, and its roots in the medieval Serbian kingdom, historians have often maintained that Ottoman preservation of this institution contributed to a proto-national Serb identity.¹³ But the symmetry between flock and modern

nation is far from exact. In the case of the epic tradition, the focus on the raja mirrors in part the concerns of the Ottoman system, focusing not so much on the inevitability of collective political self-determination as on the conditions that justify the stewardship (and thus the political legitimacy) of any particular shepherd.

This theme is developed in another of Vuk's poems, "The Start of the Revolt against the Dahis," which concerns the First Serbian Uprising of 1804-1813. To explain the revolt that set the stage for eventual Serbian independence, the poem brings Kosovo into play, but not in the way that one might expect. Indeed, the very man who conquered Serbia receives the remarkably positive depiction of a Serb protector. We discover that after being stabbed by Miloš Obilić, Sultan Murad gave the following command to his Turkish subjects:

Turks, brothers, lale [lower court officials] and vezirs
 I die, and the empire falls to you!
 So that your empire may endure long,
 Do not be cruel to the flock,
 But be very good to the flock.
 Let the head tax be 15 dinars;
 Even let it be 30 dinars.
 But do not levy fines or special taxes.
 Do not impose grief upon the flock.
 Do not touch their church;
 Neither its law nor its observation.
 Do not take revenge upon the flock,
 Just because Miloš has cut me.
 That was military fortune.
 One cannot win an empire
 While smoking tobacco on a mattress,
 You must not chase the flock away
 Into the forests so that they will abhor you,
 But watch over the flock as if they were your own sons;
 In that way the empire will last you long.
 But if you begin to oppress the flock,
 You will then lose the empire.
 ("Početak bune protiv Dahija," Karadžić, vol. 4., 109)

Kosovo emerges not as a loss to be avenged, not as a wound to be licked, but as a pledge to be remembered. The carefully balanced trust is then betrayed, not by the office of the Sultan, but by a third force, the renegade dahis, the Jannissary leaders against whom the Serbs must now revolt. Even Miloš's deed emerges not so much as a die-hard rebuke to Ottoman rule, as it does an exercise in heroic honor, an honor which he and the Sultan share. Neither figure, to use the Sultan's words, remains on the mattress smoking tobacco. Each obeys the warrior code and accepts the sacrifices entailed.

Interestingly, Vuk's manuscripts contain another more extensive Kosovo song, but Vuk left it unpublished. In this version, the themes I have outlined are even more pronounced. Recalling the scene presented in "The Start of the Revolt against the Dahis," the captured Prince Lazar concedes his kingdom to Murad, who in turn demands that Lazar's people be treated "the same as the prince treated them" and thereby forbids his vezirs to drive them from their homes, destroy their church, or forcibly convert them to Islam ("O boju Kosovskom," reprinted in Mladenović & Nedić, vol. 2, 111). Next, the poem takes a surprising turn as its subjects dispute how the bodies of the dying Murad and the condemned Lazar and Miloš will be arranged in burial.

In the generally terse version of the burial scene that circulated in Venetian and Habsburg territory in the 16th and 17th centuries, Murad commands that Miloš's soon-to-be decapitated head be buried at the Sultan's own right side, with Lazar at their feet.¹⁴ Miloš then protests that, having served Lazar throughout his life, he would like to serve him in death as well. The Sultan agrees and the bodies are arranged according to Miloš's request, with the warrior's head at Lazar's feet. This placement is generally consistent with Popović's theory that the earlier western versions of the Kosovo legend reinforced the hierarchical values of the feudal system, encouraging loyalty of servant to master. The episode might also have sought to deter soldiers from deserting to the Ottoman side of the frontier, which for centuries was, just like the western side of the frontier, manned by Orthodox and Catholic Slavs (albeit many of them Slavicized descendants of Romance-speaking "Vlachs").

In the Karadžić version, by contrast, the outcome is dramatically altered. Heaping praise upon Obilić, the Sultan proclaims that were he able to overcome his wounds, he would let Miloš live, so that the faithful hero might prove his loyalty to a new master. Because he cannot survive, the Sultan suggests burial next to Miloš as a means of honoring the Serb hero (112). Miloš protests, not because he prefers Lazar to the Sultan, but rather because "it would be a sin for me to lie next to an emperor." He then continues:

So put the two emperors next to each other,
And my head beside their feet
So that my head may serve the emperors. (112-13).

This request is granted, and Lazar and Murad come to be buried side by side, with Miloš's head serving, not Lazar alone, but both masters at their feet. It is the perfect image of dual loyalty, of an agreement to co-exist. It is a pact signed in blood, but also in mutual respect.

The contrast with the modern Kosovo myth could hardly be greater, yet there are several reasons to suspect that the Karadžić version may well have reflected popular sentiments of many Serbs living in the Ottoman Empire at the turn of the nineteenth century. As the very title "The Start of the Revolt against

the Dahis” reflects, the First Serbian Uprising began not as an independence struggle against the Sultan, but rather as a revolt against the excesses of the local dahis, leaders of the Jannisary military class that had grown to increasing prominence as the Ottoman Empire slowly declined in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.¹⁵ Himself struggling to reign in the renegade Muslim lords, the reforming Sultan Selim III had in fact armed the Serbs in the hope that they might aid his efforts, and his appointed governor in Belgrade, Hadji Mustafa Pasha, was popularly known as the “mother of the Serbs” (Jelavich 28). In 1801, jannisaries assassinated Hadji Mustafa Pasha, and soon after four dahis assumed control of the Belgrade *paşalık*, instituting a reign of terror in the countryside. Consequently, when the Serbs rose up in 1804, they did so in explicit loyalty to the Sultan, and with the express aim of restoring rights previously enjoyed, including lower taxes. The transformation of the revolt into a broader independence struggle is a more complicated story, but Selim’s inability to reign in the opposing forces, his subsequent decision to treat the Serbs as rebels, and his ultimate overthrow in a Jannisary-supported revolt in 1807 all played a crucial role in raising the stakes. It is in any case not surprising that Serb poets adopted a relatively sympathetic view of the Sultan, portraying him as a protector and champion. The revolt against the Empire is justified not because of any essential opposition to Ottoman rule, but rather because the Kosovo promise, that of protection and fair treatment, has been broken by the local lords.

In addition, the burial account suggests a reconciliation between the general Kosovo narrative and what has always been one of its oddest components: the story of Lazar’s choosing the heavenly kingdom.¹⁶ As one of Karadžić’s most famous poems relates, St. Elijah visits Lazar before the battle and tells him he must choose between ruling a heavenly kingdom and ruling an earthly one. Selecting the former, Lazar seals the destiny of both himself and Serbia. Contemporary accounts generally view Lazar’s martyrdom as merely one aspect of a broader ethic of protecting Serbdom to the death. But such treatments ignore the fact that Lazar actually relinquishes the earthly Serbian kingdom, preferring instead martyrdom in a losing battle against the Sultan. When counterposed against the burial narrative, however, Lazar’s decision assumes a less conflicted meaning. Taking the repudiation of the earthly kingdom at its word, one can see Lazar’s choice as cementing a foundation myth not of Serb independence, but rather of the Ottoman system itself, which gave the Sultan rule over temporal affairs (the earthly kingdom), but afforded the Orthodox Church authorities substantial religious autonomy, including governance over matters particular to the Christian community (the heavenly kingdom). Like Christ’s call to give unto Caesar what is Caesar’s, Lazar’s choice may serve to justify the dual loyalty instantiated in the burial scene.

Finally, looking beyond the Kosovo Cycle, it is telling that the single most frequently depicted Serbian hero of Vuk's "ancient songs" is neither Miloš, nor Lazar, nor any of the Kosovo martyrs. It is the great Prince Marko. But Marko is an Ottoman vassal, the Sultan's favorite fighter. Moreover, according to one tradition, his best friend is Alil-aga, a Muslim warrior. Their relationship (and loyalty to the Sultan) is memorialized in the following lines:

They guarded the frontier for the bright emperor
 And wherever a frontier was to be secured,
 Alil-aga and Marko secured it together,
 Wherever cities were to be sacked;
 Alil-aga and Marko sacked them together.
 ("Marko Kraljević i Alil-aga," Karadžić, vol II 265;)"

This is not to say that Marko's existence is frictionless. The songs portray the hero constantly brokering a complex network of conflicting loyalties and ideals. They depict the pitfalls inherent in maintaining a Christian identity in a Muslim world, in reconciling an autonomous heroic spirit with duty to the Empire. In the opening verses of the song "Prince Marko and Mina of Kostur," for example, Marko faces a dilemma. He is called to appear at the same time at three different places to participate in three different events. Unable to decide where to go, he asks his mother for advice. The passage reads as follows:

Marko and his mother sat for supper
 With dry bread, with red wine;
 The three letters came to him,
 One from Stamboul, from Sultan Bajazet,
 One from Boudin, from the king of Budim
 And one from John Hunyadi of Sibin.
 And in his letter from Stamboul
 The Sultan calls him to a regiment,
 To the Arabs in their savage country;
 And in his letter from Budim
 The King calls him to bring home the bride,
 To bring her and to hold the wedding crown,
 To marry the King to a lady Queen;
 And in his letter from Sibin
 John calls him to be his godfather,
 To christen two slender sons.
 So Marko says to his old mother:
 "Advise me, my old mother:
 Where shall I agree to go?"
 ... Marko's mother to Marko the Prince:
 "Marko Prince, my dear son,
 Bringing home the bride is pleasure,
 Christening is the law of God,
 But soldiering is hard necessity,
 Go, my son, go to the regiment:

God will forgive us, my dear son,
The Turks will not understand.

(“Marko Kraljević i Mina od Koštura” in Karadžić, vol II, 265-66)¹⁷

Taken in its entirety, Vuk's collection presents a world wrought with ambiguity and tension, but also marked by co-habitation and accommodation.

So where can we see the beginnings of the Kosovo recognizable to the contemporary world? Where is the ethic of uncompromising drive towards national freedom, the ancient memory burning to be avenged? The answer must be seen in a confluence of forces. Although the First Serbian Uprising may have begun with modest goals, the eventual establishment of a semi-autonomous Serbian state in 1812, which was followed by expanded borders and complete independence formally recognized at the 1878 Congress of Berlin, produced a logic of its own. Given the new imperatives of emerging statehood, it is not particularly surprising that Serbs, like nationalists across the globe, would seek to redefine their historical identity accordingly, in a way that emphasized the inevitability, rather than the contingency, of independence. More broadly, the importation from Europe of Romantic ideology imbued the Kosovo songs with an entirely new understanding. The key figure, once again, is Vuk Karadžić, the “founder of modern Serbian culture,”¹⁸ although his ultimate importance in the construction of the modern Kosovo myth lies not in the actual poems he collected but rather in the process that that collection represented.

Although Vuk's acquaintance with oral verse went back to his earliest childhood in Ottoman Serbia, it was not this experience that provoked his life-long documentation of Serb peasant traditions.¹⁹ The pivotal inspiration was his encounter with Jernej Kopitar, the Austrian censor for South-Slavic literature, whom Vuk met after moving to Vienna in 1813. A Slovene by birth, Kopitar was a chief exponent of Austro-Slavism, a movement which sought to elevate and empower Slavic culture within the Hapsburg Empire. Kopitar's ideology was rooted in Herder's world-vision of distinct peoples, the idea that each group possesses a unique and organic culture whose deepest expression emanates from the language and traditions of the common folk. By publishing a Slovene grammar, Kopitar promoted a Herder-inspired Slovene revival. He saw in Vuk an opportunity to do the same among the Serbs. Kopitar shared with Vuk the vocabulary of early Romantic nationalism, introduced him to the Europe-wide vogue for folk-poetry, and proposed those projects which would become Vuk's life's work. Kopitar gave Vuk a crucial entrance into the European intellectual scene. And when Vuk's dedication to both the anti-clerical and populist dimensions of the folk movement brought him into conflict with the more conservative Vojvodina Serb elite, the support of luminaries like Goethe and Jakob Grimm sustained his career.

Suffused in the ideological climate of his time, Vuk saw the Kosovo poems as the fruit of an uncorrupted and centuries-long process of transmission that began in the Middle Ages. For him, they were literally ancient songs. This memory needed to be harnessed and transformed into a national literature, so as to provide the foundation, indeed the very justification, for a Serb state free from the shackles of Ottoman rule. It had a simple logic. Vuk would provide the mouthpiece, the enabling structures, and the timeless Serbian soul would speak for itself. And if Vuk's archival structures did not adequately embrace the actual material he collected, this was largely beside the point, as a generation of nationalist writers would fill in the gaps and inscribe a newer, cleaner memory.

The poet Petar Petrović Njegoš figured most prominently in this project. In addition to being a writer, Njegoš was both the bishop and nominal ruler of Montenegro, a mountainous province whose remoteness afforded centuries of effective independence from Ottoman rule, but which paid the doubly cruel price of facing continued Turkish incursions and the internally destabilizing bloodletting of its clan system, whose syncretistic jumble of languages, religions and cultural traditions defied the logic of both national uniformity and centralized administration.²⁰ Njegoš's frustrated attempts to impose rule against this backdrop of constant disorder pervade his writing, which is marked precisely by its need to order the universe according to tight systems of combating polarities: light and darkness, good and evil, Serb and Muslim. His chief literary and intellectual influence was his tutor, Sima Milutinović Sarajlija, a friend of Vuk Karadžić and himself a key figure of Serb Romanticism. Milutinović introduced the young Njegoš to Dante, Milton, Goethe, and Schiller, among other authors, and inspired him to begin composing his own verse. Under the influence of Milutinović, Njegoš became a committed modernizer and dedicated himself to the national cause in Montenegro and elsewhere.

Njegoš's *magnum opus* is the poetic drama *The Mountain Wreath* from 1847, which ranks among the most celebrated works in the history of South-Slavic literature. This work elevated Kosovo to a whole new level, revealing its most horrific potential. Set in eighteenth-century Montenegro, Njegoš's tale concerns the attempts of the author's ancestor, Bishop Danilo, to bring order to the region's warring tribes and to assert independence from Ottoman rule. Njegoš composed the poem in the style and meter of the orally transmitted Serb epic. He further emphasized his implicit claim of access to the folk tradition by having folk-dancers voice the collective thoughts of the Serbian people themselves. The *kolo*, as these dancers are called, constitute a revamped Greek chorus, and the unity of their voice and vision stands in stark contrast to the divisiveness and indecision of the Montenegrin tribal chieftains. Through the *kolo*, Njegoš lays out his dark vision of Serbian history. According to the scheme, Serbia's medieval leaders committed the mortal sin of discord and disloyalty. God has punished them through Kosovo, a national fall from grace, which left

the Serbs under the Turkish thumb. Njegoš's own cosmology, fleshed out in another work, *The Light of Microcosm*, mirrors this pattern and dictates that human life itself is a punishment for a primordial fall, in which Adam joined the dark angels in their rebellion against God. But just as humanity can enjoy salvation through Jesus, so too do the Serbs have their national Christ: Miloš Obilić. As the *kolo* proclaims to God:

Oh that accursed supper of Kosovo!
It would be good fortune had you poisoned
all our chieftains and wiped out their traces
had only Miloš remained on the field
along with both of his two sworn brothers;
then would the Serb have remained a true Serb! (Njegoš 11)

Bishop Danilo and the Montenegrin chieftains must come together, and by following Miloš's example, purge the ancient sin. But as Njegoš quickly makes apparent, the chief threat to Serb unity is not some invading Turkish army, but a poison within the Serb people itself: those who have been "turkified" by conversion to the enemy faith (Njegoš 25). Thus, the *kolo* laments:

The high mountains are reeking with heathens.
In the same fold are both wolves and sheep,
and Turk is one with Montenegrin now.
(Njegoš 14)

By unleashing his wrath against the indigenous Slavic Muslims, Njegoš displays his personal hatred of Islam. But it must also be noted that the presence of such impurities poses a fundamental challenge to the Herderian vision, which though it progressively celebrates the diversity of world cultures, also views individual nations as integral, unblendable wholes (Chirot 35). In the words of one of Njegoš's heroes, who bitterly observes Christians and Muslims attending an Islamic wedding ceremony together, "if you were to cook them in one pot / their soups would never mix together" (Njegoš 67).²¹

At Danilo's insistence, the Serbs first attempt negotiation and ask the Muslim chieftains to return peacefully to the Christian fold. But when this strategy fails, more extreme measures are required. The final catalyst comes when Danilo and the Serb chieftains all dream the same dream of a resplendent Miloš Obilić flying above them on a white horse. The next morning they take an oath of unison and agree to do what the *Kolo* has demanded all along. They will fight the converts accepting those who return to the Christian fold, while massacring those who do not (Njegoš 87-88, 94). The Muslims become a human sacrifice, an expiation of national sin. In one fell swoop, Njegoš erases the ambiguities and divided loyalties of the oral tradition. Gone is the hero who serves two rulers. In his place stands a new Obilić: the martyr of national purity, the genocidal Christ.

This appalling climax brings us back to the events of the last several years, which now loom over any discussion of Balkan history. But if Njegoš's final solution finds a parallel too close for comfort in contemporary "ethnic cleansing," I do not want to suggest that Kosovo's nineteenth-century re-inscription produced a nationalized memory so deterministic and stable that it might as well have been centuries old. To be sure, Njegoš's adaptation of the Kosovo myth has provided a lasting schema to support the logic of ethnic exclusivity and persecution, a logic that remains powerful in the Balkans to this day. But the history of radical nationalism in the Balkans should never be confused with the history of the Balkans itself, which, as in Njegoš's time, has always frustrated the reductionist packaging of ideologues. In this sense the history of the Kosovo myth tells a cautionary tale: the aspect of Balkan culture thought most paradigmatically to represent the deeply historical and uniquely local nature of the Balkan tinderbox turns out to be a product of modernity, explicable only in the context of the Balkans' encounter with the intellectual and political history of the West. This is an encounter that also continues, and as the recent history of Serbia exemplifies, not always with such negative results. While any serious look at contemporary Serbia will give pause even to optimists, one can hardly ignore the manner in which a democratically elected Serbian government celebrated the 612th anniversary of the Kosovo battle on June 28, 2001: by extraditing Slobodan Milošević to the Hague so that he might answer his indictment for war crimes before an international tribunal.

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NOTES

¹ This paper represents a revision and condensation of ideas initially set forth in my undergraduate senior thesis, submitted to Princeton University's Department of Religion in April 1994. For help at various stages of the project, many thanks to Ivo Banac, Claire Gilman, Kent Greenawalt, Molly Greene, Shaun Marmon, Elaine Pagels, Michael Sells, & Alexander Ulanov. I also wish to thank the *Fulbright Association* for funding some of the research. Last but not least, heartfelt thanks to Wladimir Fischer and Srdja Pavlović for their invaluable editorial input.

² Significantly, and contrary to popular belief, the event marked neither the collapse of the medieval Serbian state nor the final establishment of Ottoman rule, which did not occur until 1455. Whether the battle was even an Ottoman victory remains in doubt, as the immediate consequence of the confrontation was the retreat of the Ottoman forces. It is also worth mentioning that the battle was not a simple confrontation between Serbs and Turks. Early reports of the battle indicate that a variety of groups were involved, including Christians from all over

the Balkans and farther west, many of whom actually fought for the Ottoman army (Malcolm 1999 62-63).

³ For a general treatment of the legend's basic narrative elements, see Emmert, Popović.

⁴ The points discussed below appear in Popović 13-48.

⁵ A primary example of this phenomenon is the fact that in the early nineteenth century, many Orthodox Slavs in the Habsburg Empire aligned themselves with the Croatian "Illyrian" movement, which, though pan-Slavic in its cultural commitments (and thus not embracing an ethnic Croat nationalism), was clearly distinct from Serbian nationalism in that its political focus was Croatia. Attempting to explain why these elites did not instead gravitate toward Serbia, one nationalist Serb writer has conceded that for the Orthodox Slavs on the Croatian military frontier, "the consciousness of belonging to the Orthodox Church was stronger than that of belonging to the Serb nation" (Gavrilović 211). (Uncomfortable with this conclusion, Gavrilović then retreats from his insight by pronouncing that in fact "nation and church were inseparable and represented two faces of the same being" (Ibid.)). The historian Drago Roksandić makes a similar point when he maintains with regard to the era of Napoleonic occupation from 1809-1813, that the "regional" Croatian name was stronger among the Orthodox elite than was their "national" Serb appellation (Roksandić 122-23).

⁶ Popović looks in particular to the writings of Catholic writers. These texts include the 1530 travelogue of Benedict Kuprešić (excerpted in Serbian in Popović 154-56; and in English in Emmert 85-86), and Mavro Orbini's 1601 *Il regno degli Slavi* (excerpted in Popović 156-60; Emmert 105-10). The latter text is particularly interesting as it introduces the concept of a broader Slavic identity, portraying the battle as one between Christian Slavs and Turks.

There is one manuscript that appeared in the Serb-populated Vojvodina region of the Habsburg Empire in the early eighteenth century, and it does explicitly link the Kosovo battle to the fate of the Serbs, albeit without expounding significantly on this theme. See "Priča o boju kosovskom" (Emmert 111-20). The author apparently based his account on Orbini's text, and the manuscript might conceivably mark the seeds of a Kosovo-centered ideology among Vojvodina elites, who would later play a significant role in fostering a modern national identity among Serbs in the Ottoman Empire. (For more on the Vojvodina Serbs, see Fischer, "The Role of Dositej Obradović" in this issue of *spacesofidentity*).

⁷ Adrian Hastings advances a similar theory, tracing the transformation of the Kosovo myth to the "great migration" of Serbs to Habsburg territory following the Austro-Turkish war of 1689 (Hastings 132). The point is hard to evaluate, however, as Hastings cites no source for his theory.

⁸ Take, for example, the poem "Tsar Lazar and Tsar Milica," in which Lazar's brothers-in-law, the brothers Jugović, all refuse to miss the battle despite their sister's fear of being left brotherless. As one of them explains, he prefers not to live if the price of survival is that others will say:

Look at that coward Boško Jugović
 He dared not go down to Kosovo
 to spill his blood for the honorable cross
 and to die for the faith of Christians.
 ("Car Lazar i Carica Milica," in Karadžić, vol. 2, 216).

⁹ The only possible exception in the Karadžić collection is the famous Kosovo curse in which Lazar declares that:

Whoever is a Serb and of Serb birth
 And of Serb blood and heritage
 And comes not to fight at Kosovo,
 May he never have the progeny his heart desires!

Neither son nor daughter,
 May nothing grow that his hand sows!
 Neither dark wine nor white wheat;¹⁰
 ("Musić Stefan," in Karadžić, vol. 2, 222)

Although still obscure as to the ultimate significance of the Kosovo battle, this appeal signals a more explicitly ethnocentric impulse than is readily apparent in the rest of Karadžić's collection. Interestingly, the quoted text appeared for the first time in Karadžić's 1845 edition of heroic folk songs, whereas the collection contains a different version of the pledge that initially appeared in the earlier 1813 edition, and which Karadžić claimed to have culled from his own childhood recollections. This earlier version is notably lacking in the appeal to Serb blood and heritage, and states simply:

Whoever will not fight at Kosovo,
 May nothing grow that his hand sows,
 Neither the white wheat in the field,
 Nor grape vines in the hills.
 ("Komadi iz razliĉnijeh Kosovskih pesama" at 229)

One can only speculate as to why the versions are so different. Although divergent accounts of the same stories are to be expected in the case of orally transmitted traditions, it is significant that the sparer version is the one which Karadžić claimed he knew as a child growing up in Ottoman Serbia, whereas the more explicitly Serbo-centric version was published at a time when Karadžić was committed to explicitly nationalist ideologies and Serbia itself was well on its path to independence.

¹⁰ All translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own.

¹¹ J. Redhouse's Turkish (Late Ottoman) and English Dictionary, (Constantinople 1890) translates the words both literally and metaphorically, stating that *recâya* derives originally from Arabic and in Ottoman Turkish means: "1. Flocks or herds at pasture. 2. Nations or tribes subjects to kings. 3. Subjects of the Ottoman Government, paying tribute to it as representative of the State of Islam; the term is commonly applied to non-Muslim subjects or to any individual of that class" (978).

¹² For a basic account of the Ottoman system, see Sugar 31-59.

¹³ The patriarchate was, with intermissions, preserved until 1766 (abolition of the Āpek/Peć patriarchate). Cf. Stavrianos 249.

¹⁴ This version of the account, for example, appears in a late 17th century bugarstica from Dubrovnik and collected by Duro Matej (d. 1728) ("The Song of the Battle of Kosovo" Miletich 29-30). It also appears in the early 18th century "Story of the Battle of Kosovo" (Emmert 119).

¹⁵ For a general account of the uprising and the Ottoman background, see Jelavich 3-37.

¹⁶ The account is set forth in "The Downfall of the Serbian Empire" ("Propast Carstva Srpskoga," Karadžić, vol. 2, 219-21).

¹⁷ Translation adopted from Pennington & Levi 47.

¹⁸ See Fischer, "The Role of Dositej Obradovic" on page 81 of this issue of *spacesofidentity*.

¹⁹ For a basic account of Karadžić's life and work, see Wilson.

²⁰ For a fascinating turn-of-the twentieth century account of the clan system in the Montenegro, Kosovo, Albania region, see Durhham.

²¹ This language pointedly rejects the earlier conciliatory words of a Muslim leader who offered that:

Though this country is a bit too narrow
 two faiths can live together side by side,
 just as two soups can be cooked in one pot.
 Let us live together as brothers,
 And we will need no additional love!