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Memories of a time forgotten: the myth of the perennial nation

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ABSTRACT. This article questions the persistent view of the Balkans as a place where ethnic and national identities were sustained over centuries of Ottoman and Habsburg rule. It concentrates on the Serbian historical narrative and challenges the picture of the Serbs as an ethnic community who gathered around their bards and priests to cherish memories of their ancient kingdom. Rather, it is argued that we can speak of two competing narratives, one ecclesiastical and the other vernacular, neither of which was even remotely national or historical, and that the Serbs, as we know them today, are not the product of centuries of cultural formation but were carved out of a Slavic mass as were the Croats, relatively recently.

KEYWORDS: Balkans; ethnic identity; historical narratives and memories; Orthodox Church; Serbia

Introduction

In writing about the Balkans, it is common practice to accept contemporary ethnic/national designators as historical fact. Almost without exception, medieval Catholic and Orthodox Slavs on territories that are within today's national borders of Croatia and Serbia are designated as Croats and Serbs. Such a retrospective view, which corresponds to the claims of ethnic/national continuity promoted in national narratives, is adopted by individuals affected by nationalism, but also by scholars of nationalism. This is true in particular of the Serbian historical account, which not only remains unchallenged, but about which, oddly enough, modernists are not in disagreement with scholars of primordialist/perennialist persuasion. The Serbs are imagined as a tightly knit ethnic-religious community (Hastings 1997: 135; Hutchinson 1987: 22; Smith 1998: 178) that has survived centuries of Turkish oppression and Catholic proselytism within the Ottoman and Habsburg empires, because the '... memory of the old [Serbian] kingdom defeated by the Turks was preserved in song and heroic story, and ... in the daily liturgy of the Serbian church which had canonised most of its kings' (Hobsbawm 1990: 75–6).

Both the Serbian account, which we shall term the 'saints and songs' narrative for its insistence on the role of popular culture and the church, and

the Croatian 'historical statehood' narrative, which also revolves around memories of lost statehood (Bellamy 2003: 35–40), imply that feelings of allegiance and loyalty toward the Balkan medieval principalities were shared by their subjects. They insist that these people – equally the nobility, clergy and peasantry – continued to exist within other kingdoms and empires, bound together by awareness of common origins and sustained by memories of past greatness. The implication is that not only feelings of commonality existed among distant people in the pre-modern age, but also a sense of solidarity, where the peasants were instructed in history and patriotism by nationally conscious elites – priests and monks among the Serbs and nobles among the Croats.

This article will concentrate on the Serbian historical narrative, because it is more persuasive than its Croatian counterpart, and question its basic premise in light of the available evidence. It will be argued that very few historical memories were sustained in the Balkans and that today's Serbs, like other ethnic/national groups in the region, did not emerge from a period of ethno-cultural formation over the '*longue durée*' (Armstrong 1982: 4, 283) but were fashioned out of a larger Slavic mass according to confessional belonging.

Saints, songs and statehood

Looking back at what was the domain of medieval Serbia, we shall find that indigenous saints – most of them rulers or clerics such as Prince Lazar (the tragic hero of the Battle of Kosovo) and Archbishop Sava Nemanyid (founder of the Serbian church) – were indeed venerated by the Orthodox Church and celebrated at liturgies. However, this was not for reasons of national sentiment. The loyalty of the medieval church was dynastic. Iconographic programmes and literary panegyrics extolled the ruling Nemanyids and provided the religious-ideological backdrop for their political dominance. Not only were individual family members – the kings and prelates whose haloed figures line the walls of their churches – raised to sainthood, but the entire family, in direct analogy with the ancestry of Christ, was proclaimed a 'sacrosanct lineage'. The clan's progenitor, Stefan Nemanja, is depicted as the new Jesse from whose hands spiralling tendrils sprout up bearing the portraits of his descendants. Contrary to the populist view, promoted by nationalist historiography, that these princes were spontaneously venerated by the common people and were only then accepted by the church, canonisation was part of an elaborate political scheme (Pantelić 2002: 17–18, 31–3). Through such audacious propaganda the Nemanyids established themselves in the region with unparalleled authority. After their demise, the practice of using religion for political advantage was adopted by other families. Thus, Prince Lazar, who had established control over the Nemanyid church, was canonised soon after his death at Kosovo in 1389 to ensure the legitimacy and succession of his widow and son (Fine 1994: 413).

The Ottoman conquest in the mid-fifteenth century meant the end of political patronage for the Nemanjic church: unable to function independently, the Orthodox hierarchy turned increasingly to introspective pondering on religion. The 'daily liturgy' centred on 'national' saints (which is usually cited as the Serbs' link with their past), would have required an efficient organisation as well as an educated clergy. However, it is doubtful that despite their comfortable position of almost complete autonomy within the Ottoman empire (cf. Stavrianos 2000: 103–4), the high clergy had any interest in the isolated and scattered village communities. Religious practice seems to have been entirely in the hands of village priests and monks, who were closer to the peasants than to the distant and disinterested church elites. However, these were neither the political activists described in national histories nor the 'nationally minded monks' that one author depicts them as (Banac 1984: 68). It is difficult to imagine how these lowly priests (or the only slightly more educated monks), who were barely able to perform the sacraments (Mazower 2001: 66–7; Skerlić 1909: 79–80), could even have preserved the Christian faith among the population let alone instruct their flocks in medieval history and national solidarity. Indeed, neither liturgical texts nor religious imagery from the Ottoman centuries reveal that the sainted Nemanjic kings were venerated for anything other than their spiritual properties. In the ecclesiastical narrative they have been transformed into spiritual beings oblivious of their earthly lives. Prince Lazar, whom we would expect to see as a fearless warrior with sword in hand, is commonly represented unarmed; sometimes this Christian martyr, who was decapitated by the Ottomans, is shown standing passively with his severed head in hand. The hymns and sermons were no more political; these were panegyrics, almost completely out of touch with reality, that celebrated Lazar's martyrdom and his rejection of the earthly kingdom for the heavenly (Emmert 1991: 23–5). In a typical panegyric, he is likened to Christ and called the '... good shepherd who offered his soul for us' (*ibid.*: 24).

Rather than a memory of the medieval past sustained during the Ottoman centuries, we can speak of two sets of conflicting 'memories' preserved in the ecclesiastical and the vernacular traditions. The former is epitomised by the devout Prince Lazar, canonised by the church and celebrated at liturgies, and the latter by the rowdy and violent Prince Marko, a lively folk character untouched by clerical influence. These were mutually exclusive but parallel worlds. Those same medieval kings and princes who were reinvented as Christian saints within the ecclesiastical tradition lived on in the popular domain as colourful heroes of legend. Here, in their folkloric incarnations, they were not saints by any account; their fantastical exploits and superhuman powers reflected a vibrant popular religiosity that flourished separately from the dry and repetitive hagiographic accounts and incomprehensible liturgies of the organised church. Endowed with the awesome power of pagan gods and the malevolence of demons, they were indeed far from their Christian alter egos. Thus, in the cruel and vengeful Saint Sava from the vernacular

tradition we can hardly recognise the devout cleric who came to be known in his ecclesiastical and nationalist incarnations as the founder and first archbishop of the Serbian church and the patron of schools.¹

This vernacular culture had been persecuted by the clergy from the times of Archbishop Sava: his biographer Teodosije called it the 'dirty expression' (*skrvnoslovesnija*) (Popović 1998: 43), and with good reason. Confined to household, extended family and village, where daily life and custom were defined by an intricate blend of agricultural and ancestral cults and beliefs, this self-contained culture was bound only loosely within a Christian shell; its rituals, performed at hearths and in the fields and forests, were either overtly pagan or in Christian guise. Veselin Čajkanović, the prominent classicist and historian of religion, writing in the early 1900s, termed this the 'Serbian faith' and argued that the funerary and wedding customs of the Serbs had not changed significantly since the Bronze Age (Čajkanović 1973: 5–6). One century earlier, enlightened individuals such as Dositej Obradović, Matija Reljković, Jovan Muškatirović and Aleksije Vezilić observed how the populations who had emigrated to the Habsburg monarchy from the Ottoman empire could not adapt to organised society and Christian norms of behaviour (Skerlić 1909: 58–65). Somewhat later, in 1826, the playwright and educator Joakim Vujić, reporting on the conditions in Ottoman Serbia, ridiculed the peasants for their superstitions and advised them to adhere to Christian values and beliefs (Vujić 1828). Abandoned by their church and largely ignored by the relatively lax Ottoman authorities, they had lapsed into indolence, banditry and polygamy. They were Christian only in name, not only because they were immersed in superstition, and witchcraft and vampirism were rampant, nor because they venerated the ancient Slavic gods alongside Christian saints and observed Muslim holidays with Christian feast days, but also because they had not developed a Christian ethic. This is not to say that the peasants were not attached to the churches and monasteries; they were, but their attachment was of a superstitious nature. It was a fusion of superstition and popular religion that developed around sacred sites and in particular those associated with indigenous saints. One such site was Dečani Monastery, where the relics of the saintly founder, the Nemanyid king Stefan Uroš III, were venerated by both Orthodox and Muslims for their miraculous healing properties. Local lore abounds in stories about supernatural events surrounding the monastery, and sightings of a mysterious apparition claimed to be the king's spirit were documented well into the twentieth century.²

Such indigenous saints were venerated not for ethnic loyalties or historical memories but because their relics and associated *loci sancti* were locally available. And these were a powerful source of magic: Veselin Čajkanović (1973: 23) witnessed women scraping off the paint from saints' eyes in church frescoes and drinking the dust with water, apparently as a magic or healing potion. This was not an isolated incident, for saints with gouged eyes are common sights in churches throughout the Ottoman world. The educated high clergy would certainly have condemned such practice as superstition but the

local priests and monks may even have tolerated it. When nationalism arrived, this practice was interpreted as an attack on the 'national heritage'. The culprits were usually the Turks, but others could be blamed as well; thus a well-known poem by a Serb nationalist poet (Milan Rakić) accuses Albanians of gouging the eyes from the portrait of Queen Simonis in Gračanica Monastery.

Structured around ethnic and religious boundaries, nationalism can comprehend only with great difficulty a culture in which these are transcended by family attachments and local customs. Indeed, the cultural setting of the pre-modern Balkans was no more about religion than it was about nationalism: the saints were venerated out of superstition and fear, not piety, and were valued according to their power to assist or harm, not their nationality (cf. Mazower 2001: 64–9). Yet historiography, like nationalism, imputes modern national loyalties and sensibilities to these people, who, allegedly, even longed for rulers of 'Serbian blood and language' (Banac 1984: 68). However, such national consciousness is not discernible in the popular lore; the few medieval rulers that appear in popular songs and stories are that only in name: they have been transformed into the utterly ahistorical heroes of legend that inhabit a cyclical universe of popular fantasy. Even in those verses that comprise the 'Kosovo epic', there is little to suggest that the peasantry was interested in past battles or even that they lamented the collapse of the medieval principalities. Historiography tends to exaggerate the psychological impact of the Ottoman victories in the late fourteenth and first half of the fifteenth centuries that ultimately led to their conquest of the Balkans. It is true that the raids and warfare caused migrations (Fine 1994: 576–7) but the nobility seemed unaffected; because vassalage was the expected outcome of military defeat, the nobility complied dutifully, as long as they retained their landholdings. Often they did this with extraordinary commitment and unusual loyalty: for example, Prince Lazar's son Stefan not only befriended his father's killer Sultan Bayezid but also dispatched his sister to the sultan's harem (*ibid.*: 425–7). Political relations did not affect the peasant population significantly. If the common people preserved any memories at all in the decades following the Ottoman conquest, they would more likely have been memories of suffering: of the incessant warfare between local barons, the poverty, famine and serfdom. In fact, as suggested by the choice of Prince Marko (an Ottoman vassal of no particular distinction) as their favourite hero, the population had fully accommodated to Ottoman rule. They chose to forget the 'glory' of the medieval past.

When, five centuries after the Battle of Kosovo, Serbian soldiers in the Balkan wars fought to liberate and avenge Kosovo, and Gavrilo Princip and his comrades set out to assassinate Franz Ferdinand on the anniversary of the battle, it is not because memory of the battle had been sustained among the population. This foundation myth of Serbian nationhood, which is widely believed to have been celebrated in epic poetry for centuries, had been introduced into mainstream popular culture only recently. Accounts of the battle had been perpetuated in Catholic Slav literature and as a popular oral

tradition in the Habsburg and Venetian borderlands, where they adapted to the frontier culture of the *Militärgrenze*.³ Here the central character was not the meek Lazar but his knight Miloš Obilić, the celebrated slayer of Sultan Murad. This fierce anti-Muslim warrior was the exact opposite of the Ottoman collaborator Prince Marko, that boisterous and unbridled ruffian favoured by the peasantry across the Sava–Danube borderline, in Ottoman Serbia. There were in fact hardly any references to the battle in the Serbian homeland during the Ottoman centuries. Even veneration of Lazar as a saint and martyr started to wane after the demise of the Lazarević family and the collapse of their successor realms. By the seventeenth century the saint was no longer depicted in church murals (Popović 1998: 58). Having lost the family's sponsorship, the religious cult was all but forgotten. It can be assumed that it persisted in Lazar's own foundation, Ravanica Monastery, where the saint's relics were kept. The cult was revived under the auspices of the Orthodox Church with metropolitanate in Karlowitz (Sremski Karlovci), in the Habsburg monarchy. It was established by Patriarch Arsenije III, who had abandoned his medieval seat in Peć to the Ottomans and in 1690 emigrated to the Habsburg lands. On their flight from the Ottomans, an event celebrated in nationalist historiography as the 'Great Migration of the Serbs', the patriarch and his hierarchs were followed by multitudes; among them were the monks of Ravanica, who were carrying the remains of their monastery's saintly founder. The monks eventually (in 1697) established themselves at Vrdnik Monastery in Habsburg-held southern Hungary.

A simple woodcut engraving dating from these years shows Saint Prince Lazar as a *kephalophoros* (that is, holding his severed head); it was probably commissioned by the monks to promote their saint and encourage popular devotion and pilgrimage to their monastery (Figure 1). There is no reason to believe that they were successful: it seems that no more engravings of this saint were made for another four decades, when veneration of Saint Prince Lazar was endorsed by the high clergy of the Karlowitz metropolitanate. This was only part of a larger trend to promote indigenous Slavic saints, which included the production of copper-plate engravings featuring the Nemanyids and other sainted royalty in elaborate Baroque settings and with generic attributes of kingship such as crown, sceptre and mantle. In a later engraving, by Zaharija Orfelin, the text underneath the standing figure of Saint Prince Lazar provides some basic historical facts⁴ (Figure 2). However, this does not reflect a change in the church's attitude toward the earthly existence of its saints, nor does it in any way betray national consciousness. It reflects an awareness of history that came as the result of the Orthodox clerics' exposure to Catholic Slav literature. One work stands out as particularly influential in that respect: a history of the Slavs written by Mauro Orbini (1601), a Benedictine monk from Dubrovnik. Although uncritical and largely fictitious, Orbini's book was the main source of knowledge for Slavic history that influenced generations of Catholic Slav authors; after 1722, when it was translated into Slavic, it became accessible to the Orthodox (Redep 1991: 261–2).



Figure 1. Anonymous (late seventeenth century), *Saint Prince Lazar*. Woodcut. (© University Library Svetozar Marković, reproduced with permission).

It was mainly from this account that the story of the Battle of Kosovo entered Habsburg Orthodox culture, from where it spread to the repertoires of oral poetry in Ottoman Serbia. Not long thereafter, in the early nineteenth



Figure 2. Zaharija Orfelin (1773), *Saint Prince Lazar*. Copper-plate engraving. (© National Library of Serbia, reproduced with permission).

century, these songs were discovered by the folklorist and language reformer Vuk Karadžić as the ancient *Stimmen der Völker*.

The clerics and the aristocrats

As memories among the Orthodox faded during the Ottoman centuries, so they did among the Catholic Slavs during their changing fortunes within the Hungarian, Venetian, Ottoman and Habsburg domains; the peasants in Croatia and Slavonia remembered their medieval kingdom no more than those in Serbia did. If past kingdoms were remembered at all, it was not by the peasantry but by those who would have had a vested interest such as the nobility in the Croatian Diet in Zagreb (Bukowski 1979), who certainly did not have a sense of cultural or any other kind of affinity with what nationalists today would call the 'Croatian people'. Many of them were German or Magyar speakers and probably could not communicate with their Slavic-speaking serfs, even if they wanted to. These serfs, on the other hand, were not interested in the affairs of the nobility and possibly not even aware of the rights and privileges claimed by their feudal lords.

The Orthodox elites and especially the powerful Karlowitz clergy, who instilled fear in the superstitious peasantry and commanded their almost absolute loyalty, were no different than the Croatian nobility. The strong sense of political right, based on privileges granted by Habsburg emperors, that these hierarchs so often wielded referred not only to their ecclesiastical office but also to the clergy personally. They were indeed landed gentry in their own right and they acted accordingly to protect their privileges and landholdings (Skerlić 1909: 69–75). As they rose to power and affluence in the Habsburg aristocratic milieu, they forged an elite culture that excluded the peasantry. Their loyalty was to class, not ethnicity. Yet these ecclesiastics are typically represented as leaders of a tightly knit national community who strove with unprecedented dedication to preserve the ancient traditions and memories, and safeguard national identity. In particular one eighteenth-century heraldic catalogue, the *Stematografija* – commissioned for the court of Arsenije IV, metropolitan of Karlowitz – has been cited as evidence of pre-modern Serbian national consciousness (for example by Banac 1984: 74–5; Davidov 1978: 51). This volume, published in 1741 by Hristofor Žefarović (1741), an Orthodox monk and iconographer, was a translation of a work by the Catholic Pavao Ritter Vitezović (1701), a proponent of pan-Slavism celebrated in the Croatian nationalist discourse as an early ideologue of Croatian nationhood.⁵ To the coats of arms of Slavic (Illyrian) lands, originally designed by Vitezović from Orbini's account, Žefarović added full-figure portraits of Slavic saints, including royalty, church hierarchs and monks of different Slavic backgrounds.

The inclusion in this assembly of Slavic saints of Stefan Dušan, the celebrated ruler of the medieval Serbian empire and the only major Nemanjić who was not canonised, has been used as evidence for the 'national' character



Figure 3. Hristofor Žefarović (1741), *Tsar Stefan Dušan with Minerva and Chronos*. Copper-plate engraving. From Žefarović (1741): f. 54. (© University Library Svetozar Marković, reproduced with permission).

of the publication (Banac 1984: 74–5). The emperor is represented twice: in an allegorical portrait medallion with Minerva and Father Time and as the *imperator triumphans* – the victorious general on a rearing horse (see Figures 3–4). In Figure 3 he is portrayed in armour against a view of a military camp.

Figure 4 shows Dušan crowned by a winged Victoria while brandishing a sword and trampling defeated Ottomans with his powerful steed. These are indeed secular images but representation of a medieval ruler is not in itself evidence of national consciousness, as witnessed by the panoply of such dynastic/royal allegories (Charles Le Brun's *Apotheosis of Louis XIV* (Budapest, 1677) also comes to mind as a possible model). The allusions to the military strength and prowess of Stefan Dušan, who is identified in an inscription as the 'Mighty', explain his inclusion in the volume. He himself is an emblem here: he stands for the proud heritage that was to show the recently instated Maria Theresa the potential of Slavic arms. This is reiterated in the dedicatory poem, where the metropolitan is recommended to the new empress as a loyal subject and warrior for the Christian faith: '... We remind again of the famous Illyrian arms that are known to the entire world...' (Žefarović 1741: f. 12). The Karlowitz clergy, like the Croatian nobility in the Diet in Zagreb, 'remembered' the past not for national reasons but because of vested interest. The references to medieval ancestry in the *Stematografija* were thus no more national than Louis XIV's references to Charlemagne, or any other pre-modern dynastic claims to legitimacy made through allusion to ancient royalty (cf. Stokes 1979: 264).

This publication should be seen in the context of the reforms, initiated by Metropolitan Arsenije IV, that were to transform the medieval framework of the Orthodox Church in the Habsburg monarchy. In 1743 the metropolitan prohibited traditional iconographers from working and established a school where artists from Kiev were to instruct painters in the techniques of the Baroque style (Todorović 2006: 22). It was not long before the rigid and flat saints of traditional icons, hovering in abstract spatial settings, were abandoned for fully modelled realistic figures set in rationally defined space. Adoption of these Western representational models had an important role in the accommodation to a new, competitive, environment. The Orthodox bishops were learning the politics of representation; the theatricality and spectacles of state that were part of Baroque imperial and religious culture. This extended to personal displays of power and authority in the form of triumphal entries, dramatic works and allegories celebrating the worldly achievements of the prelates (*ibid.*). In the portraits they commissioned, they do not look anything like the nondescript churchmen in medieval murals. These are well-groomed and confident individuals in assertive poses: their vestments are lined with red moiré silk and Astrakhan fur; they wear velvet and red silk caps like their Catholic counterparts and their status and education are conveyed through insignia, allegories, and emblematic and symbolic devices. These images of opulence and sophistication were not part of the traditional Orthodox religious context, which is usually funerary or commemorative, but public statements that legitimised the Orthodox ecclesiastics as peers of the Austrian and Hungarian elites. Byzantium was not even a memory any more. The medieval culture of the Orthodox Church was disappearing, not only with respect to the religious imagery but also in the



Figure 4. Hristofor Žefarović (1741), *Tsar Stefan Dušan in Triumph*. Copper-plate engraving. From Žefarović (1741). (© University Library Svetozar Marković, reproduced with permission).

traditional lifestyle and customs that were fading as the population adapted to the dynamics of a modernising society (Timotijević 2005).

Nevertheless, nationalists and other proponents of perennial ethnic and cultural continuity insist that among the Orthodox, religious affiliation implied national belonging; or, as one author stated with reference to the

Stematografija, that ‘... adherence to Orthodoxy made for Serb nationhood’ (Banac 1984: 75). Such arguments are based on the belief, which has become entrenched in historiography, that the Orthodox Church in the pre-modern Balkans functioned as a nationalising force (*ibid.*: 66–7; Ekmečić 1989: vol. 1, Preface). Such a ‘national’ church is contrasted with the universalist Roman Catholic Church, whose proscription of the vernacular and insistence on Latin as a universal liturgical language was seen to have been an impediment to the development of national consciousness among the Catholic Slavs (Bukowski 1979: 327–8). What is often overlooked is that Church Slavonic, the liturgical language of the Orthodox Church, was as incomprehensible to the faithful as Latin and that the Orthodox clergy opposed the vernacular no less than their Catholic counterparts, and for very much the same reasons. The misconception of a pre-modern ‘national’ church stems from a retrospective view of today’s Orthodox Churches – which indeed are national institutions, closely connected to the state and with prominent political roles in national programmes and ideologies. This change happened when the church, in response to the shift from dynastic empire to nation-state in the later nineteenth century, accommodated to the new political trend of nationalism. This was not unusual in view of the Orthodox Church’s traditional dependence on the state. Before that, the Orthodox Church was guided by universalist principles no less than the Catholic Church and served loyally in multinational empires and tended its multinational congregation. There is indeed no compelling reason why the Orthodox clerical elites in the pre-nationalist Balkans would have held a significantly different, more ‘national’, outlook than their Catholic counterparts. Even when their different political, social and cultural backgrounds are taken into account, the world-view of these Catholic and Orthodox prelates was grounded in basically the same set of values centred on a hierarchical world of faith. Their allegiance was not to an ethnic or national community or any particular state but to a ‘Kingdom of God’ where the church will stand as the spiritual pillar of divine kingship (cf. Stokes 1979: 260–1).

Nonetheless, scholarship is quick to impute nationalism when it comes to the Orthodox Church. Thus the religious bias of the *Stematografija*, its ‘adherence to Orthodoxy’, is not for reasons of nationalism but stems from the simple fact that it was commissioned by a cleric. That confessional allegiance did not in fact postulate a sense of nationhood was confirmed by none other than the prominent Metropolitan Stefan Stratimirović, when he stated unambiguously that he considered all South Slavs, Catholic and Orthodox, to be ‘of one blood and one race’ (Fine 2006: 546). In his political and social philosophy the metropolitan was close to the conservative aristocrat Sava Tekelija, who advanced the idea of a multiconfessional Slavic (Illyrian) nation (Adler 1979: 274–6; Paxton 1972: 343). As a cleric, however, he lobbied for a multinational spiritual domain. His objective was to assert authority over all the Orthodox under his jurisdiction. The Orthodox Church never aspired to political independence or national sovereignty; the extent of

its political ambitions was to be ruled by a sympathetic (preferably Orthodox) ruler. This is evident from the various political schemes that emerged around 1803–4 from the circles around Metropolitan Stratimirović to secure the church's survival should the Ottoman empire come to an end. These plans did not envisage an independent state for any one group, nor did they claim historical or ethnic territories (Paxton 1972: 340–3). The peoples in these domains were those who today would be classified as Serbs, Bulgarians, Romanians, Macedonians, Vlachs and possibly even Montenegrins and Albanians; they all belonged in the universalist vision of the pre-national Orthodox Church.

Similarly, sixty years earlier, in the *Stematografija*, rather than one 'national' entity featuring more prominently, the lands that could be designated as belonging to medieval Serbia are represented separately under different names and each with distinct arms – 'Nemanyid lands', Serbia, Rascia and Tribalia. There is indeed very little exclusively Serbian about this volume: the arms of Serbia are displayed as equal to those of Bulgaria; no less than seven saints can be regarded as being of Bulgarian origin and two of Albanian. Even the author, Žefarović, referred to as an 'Illyrico-Rascian' painter, is praised in the dedicatory text as a 'zealot of the Bulgarian fatherland' (Žefarović 1741: f. 53). The sense of ethnicity discerned here is as vague and interchangeable as the notion of a 'national' past. The disparate and fragmented references to events and personages from the past in the *Stematografija* can hardly be regarded as historical memories (cf. Paxton 1972: 346). They are manifestations, still in embryonic form, of a historical consciousness that the Orthodox elites were developing through exposure to Habsburg culture. By way of the Catholic Slav tradition (notably Orbini and Vitezović), the emerging Orthodox intelligentsia were becoming aware of their Slavic origins and history. In the dedicatory poem of the *Stematografija* – where the author, one Pavle Nenadović, states that the reader of the book will be '... delivered from the deep darkness of ignorance of the Serbian past ...' (Žefarović 1741: f. 52) – a view shared by proponents of enlightened rationalism on the necessity of education can be discerned.⁶ For intellectuals such as Zaharija Orfelin and Dositej Obradović, to name the most prominent of these enlightened individuals, interest in history came from a genuine desire to learn and to apply reason and scientific method to counter myth and superstition (Stokes 1976: 79). For the landed aristocracy that was emerging from the ranks of the high clergy, officer corps and merchants, references to medieval lineages provided legitimacy and status.

The *Stematografija* was indeed an influential work that inspired Serbian and Bulgarian heraldry (Skerlić 1909: 250), but it was not distributed widely among the masses, nor was it the 'most beloved book of the Serbian people' (Davidov 1978: 51) or the main source of patriotism and political-national consciousness in the eighteenth century, as it is viewed by nationalist historiography. Only a select few could read or understand the hybrid language in which it was written, a language that was 'neither Serbian nor

Bulgarian, nor properly Russian or Ukrainian' (Picchio 1991: 519). The 'reader of the book' to whom the author of the dedicatory text refers is a member of the educated elites, not the *Volk*. This was a work by the ecclesiastical elites made for their own particular needs and for their consumption. The *Stematografija* was not by any account a product of nationalism.

Class and culture

When the powerful Stefan Stratimirović – metropolitan, nobleman and privy councillor to the imperial court – prevented the publication of Vuk Karadžić's books on language and folklore and had his publications seized by the Habsburg police (Popović 1998: 127), he was protecting the established order. This was only one episode in the long struggle for linguistic and cultural reform. It has been argued that the opposition to Karadžić stemmed from the clergy's fear that secular culture, over which they had no control, would replace their world of faith (Adler 1979: 278). This may indeed have been true for the traditionalist and uneducated lower clergy, for whom language reform would have been a betrayal of religious traditions, but less so for the educated clerical elites. Their opposition was not to secular culture but to the vernacular language and oral poetry that had been denounced by the church six centuries earlier (Teodosije's 'dirty expression') and that were now being promoted by the Romantics. The medieval church persecuted vernacular culture mainly because of the pagan practices and beliefs that it involved. This was still the case; but more was at play now than religious bigotry. The very suggestion that the song and speech of the peasantry were equal to high culture was an attack on the natural order of things – the hierarchical order in which each estate had its divinely sanctioned place. It was tantamount to advocating social equality. Antagonism to Karadžić's ideas was shared by the nobility and the emerging urban middle class, whose concerns were as much about ideology, class and privilege as about good taste and propriety. To prefer the rude and simple to sophisticated elegance was demeaning and, for many cultured individuals, beyond comprehension. We can only sympathise with Milovan Vidaković, a popular writer, when he exclaimed in sincere bewilderment: 'Why do not Germans write as their swineherds or goatherds speak?' (cited in Fairley 2003: 183).⁷

Rather than a tightly knit national community, as it is often portrayed, Orthodox society in the eighteenth century was sharply divided. The high clergy and aristocracy, privileged and holding high offices and government pensions, held in contempt the illiterate peasants and their culture. Those of enlightened persuasion such as Sava Tekelija and Lukijan Mušicki – the former of the secular landowning class and the latter of the ecclesiastical – endeavoured to educate the common people, or at least they professed to. For them, it was the duty of the enlightened to educate the masses, but not to

accept their ways. That is precisely what they accused Vuk Karadžić of doing when he proposed replacing the hybrid Slaveno-Serbian language with the vernacular: debasing the literary language by adopting the vulgar language and lore of the peasantry. To put it in Tekelija's own words: 'Most people study so that they know better . . . but he [Karadžić] studies, wanting to become foolish' (cited in Fairey 2003: 183). Even when some of them professed interest in the vernacular tradition, it was but an intellectual fashion that came as a result of Herder's influence; privately, they regarded it inferior to high culture. Thus, according to Karadžić, Mušicki could not hear to the end a folk song accompanied by the *gusle*, a bowed single-stringed instrument common to the Balkans (Popović 1998: 110–11). We can only imagine how this admirer of Horace must have strained himself trying to listen to the rugged 'voice of the ages' – the monotonous narratives in decasyllabic verse recited to the sound of the *gusle*. Indeed, for the cultivated elites untouched by Romanticism, the piercing sound of the primitive instrument came to epitomise the vulgarity of popular culture. Tekelija summed that up in a verse: 'Shall the blindman's *gusle*, Oh Orpheus, the lyre be? . . .' (cited in Selimović 1967: 39).

The clerical and secular elites held the lower classes in contempt and regarded the peasants as people to be ruled over, not lived with. Even those patriotic individuals, like Orfelin and Obradović, whose devotion to the ideals of enlightened rationalism led them to support the cultural development of the common people, did not share the egalitarian views of Vuk Karadžić. They did develop a sense of belonging to a wider community that was more inclusive than the parochial allegiances of their fellow Orthodox, but the patriotism of these men should not be confused with nationalism. They were not motivated by nationality or religion and did not aspire toward national independence (cf. Petrovich 1956; Stokes 1976: 78–81). Nationalism was not to happen yet and would come from an entirely different direction.

The peasants and the nationalists

If the elites were nationally unconscious, the peasants were even more so. They did not desire rulers of their own 'blood and language'. They held in reverence their bishops and lords not because they were Serbs, but because they were bishops and lords. Matija Nenadović, an influential participant of the insurrection of 1804, described in his memoirs (Nenadović 1969: 157, 165) how the peasants were affected by symbols of royalty and sacredness rather than by references to the 'national' past. Images or objects associated with the ancient Nemanjic kings did instil reverence, but no more than those associated with Peter the Great, Maria Theresa, or even the sultan – for a tsar is a tsar whatever his faith. In the minds of the superstitious population, royal authority was coupled with not political but magical power. The sultan in the semi-mythical *Tsarigrad*, the 'city of tsars' (as Constantinople was known in the Balkan vernacular), was to these peasants as distant and

insubstantial as the saints in their icons. He belonged in the songs and stories alongside Prince Marko and other heroes. Religious authority was what they feared most: clerics, who were part of everyday life, were believed to possess the ability to cast curses – a power that they seem to have used abundantly, as witnessed by the folkloric incarnation of Saint Sava, who had a penchant for cursing entire villages. Even the enlightened Metropolitan Stratimirović is reported to have cast a curse on a village (upon being shot at by the villagers) (Popović 1998: 91).

Immersed in a hermetic world of folk custom and belief, the peasantry was bounded within a cyclical time-frame that did not relate to sequential chronology; their reference points did not transcend immediate experience and the familiar landscape (cf. Kitromilides 1996: 177). Even millenarianism, although often cited as a significant aspect of Orthodox culture in the Ottoman empire (Stoianovich 1994: 168–70), was predominant only among the clergy. The peasants do not appear to have been significantly motivated by millenarian dreams; these would emerge only in times of strife, either as prophecies foretelling the demise of the Turks or as narratives heralding the return of popular heroes. One such story that is often cited as evidence of millenarianism has Prince Marko asleep in a cave, from which he would rise once again. But such sentiments reflect brief periods of turmoil in the otherwise relatively uneventful life during the Ottoman centuries; in the more mainstream version of the legend, Marko died and was buried (Popović 1988: 168–79). This version comes closer to reality: these times were not marked by a culture of heroic resistance, as narrated by traditional histories (cf. Perica 2002: 6–8), but by a culture of acquiescence (Popović 1998: 45–6). Thus, as late as the nineteenth century, in the heroic ballad ‘The Beginning of the Revolt Against the Dahis’ (*Početak bune protiv dahija*), the sultan is invoked as a protector of the Serbs (Holton and Mihailovich 1997: 278–98; cf. Kitromilides 1996: 184). Even when they did revolt, the common people were not motivated by ideals of liberation or revival (Meriage 1977), for there was no golden age they longed for. Nor were their revolts particularly substantial. As with the earlier insurrections, the one of 1804, which eventually led to the establishment of an autonomous Serbian principality, was not a liberation movement or revolution; it consisted of fragmented and short-lived outbursts by an otherwise passive and politically disinterested peasantry who often had to be coerced into fighting (Stokes 1976: 83).

Although the southern Slavs in the pre-modern Balkans shared a relatively homogenous cultural space outlined by that syncretic mesh that constitutes popular religion and the common language in all its regional dialects and sub-dialects, they lacked a feeling of mutuality – a clearly defined sense of common history and origins that would bound the disparate communities. Just as the elites’ loyalties were to class, those of the peasantry were to village and homestead. Their attachments would rarely extend beyond the locale; they may have gone as far as clan and kinship could be traced, or a dialect was spoken or one particular set of customs practised, but this was far from that

feeling of belonging that would reach out beyond the local and familiar to include the imagined. Otherwise, like Hristofor Žefarović, one could be Illyrian and Rascian and Bulgarian and Serbian at the same time; however, most would not have given it much, if any, thought.

The insurrection of 1804 gave impetus to the budding sense of identity and history among the Habsburg Serb intelligentsia, but it was the transformation of the Belgrade *pashalik* into an autonomous principality in 1830 that really set off the nationalist ‘awakening’ among these elites (Stokes 1976: 87). However, the imagination of a handful of nationalists and patriotic intellectuals was hardly sufficient to arouse mass sentiments. Although the Serbian principality was under a ruler of ‘Serbian blood and language’, Miloš Obrenović, there was no mass exodus to the liberated homeland, as one would expect of a community bounded by feelings of ethnic affinity or national consciousness. Only the most enthusiastic of the nationally minded intelligentsia, adventurers and resourceful merchants, crossed into the principality (Stoianovich 1959: 243).

A single identity and a sense of broader community were forged through the authority of the state and its institutions – school, barracks and church. School curricula in the Serbian kingdom (which arose from the principality after independence was won in 1878) instilled a sense of fatherland from an early age: history and geography taught the children who they were and where they came from (cf. Jelavich 1983), while patriotic poetry and drama of the nationalistic United Serbian Youth (Skerlić 1906) added a romantic note to the emerging national imaginary in which medieval saints, churches and monasteries stood alongside ethnic lore. After it was integrated into the new Serbian kingdom, that same elitist Orthodox Church that had rejected popular culture and opposed Karadžić and the Romantics so vehemently, not only embraced the vernacular tradition – language, lore and custom – but managed to build itself into the national imaginary as the perennial guardian of the national heritage and traditions. In the closing years of the century, this overwhelming exposure to national myths set in and local attachments and loyalties were extended to include lands and people beyond personal experience. It was only then, just in time for the Balkan wars, that the population was prepared to kill and die for such abstractions as ancient homelands. In 1912 Serbian peasants, schoolteachers and shopkeepers fought side by side to avenge and liberate Kosovo from the Turks. They were driven into battle by visions of Miloš Obilić and Prince Marko (Popović 1998: 167; Bakić-Hayden 2004: 28). This was indeed a dramatic change from that Serbian peasant four decades earlier who, in 1876, declared that acquiring Bosnia would not make his plot any bigger (Pavlowitch 2002: 69).

Forgotten memories

When Vuk Karadžić discovered the songs about the Battle of Kosovo among the peasants in Ottoman Serbia in the early nineteenth century, they did not

represent a tradition that had been sustained spontaneously for centuries. The story had only recently found its way from the Habsburg milieu to the repertoires of the folk bards, where it was shaped through the interaction of folklorists and peasant singers to become an expression of the national 'spirit'. The extraordinary mythology built up around this historical event since the mid-nineteenth century corresponded to Serbia's expansionist plans (Banac 1984: 83–4). Without the political goal of liberating Kosovo, it is doubtful that the account of this battle would have assumed a prominent place in the national imaginary. The songs that constitute the 'Kosovo epic' would most likely have remained largely unknown and ultimately disappeared as part of a dying tradition (cf. Lord 1963: 271).

Indeed, powerful narratives that emerge as mobilising strategies are structured around political programmes and often have little (if any) foundation in popular perceptions and sentiments. This is in contrast to what adherents of the perennialist/ethnosymbolist approach would argue (Smith 2001: 97). For them, such narratives would necessarily reflect pre-existent myths and memories formed over the *longue durée* (Armstrong 1982: 4, 283). The Kosovo narrative, on the other hand, which was to become the foundation myth of Serbian nationhood – the *mythomoteur* of the perennialist discourse (*ibid.*: 8–9) – stems from a 'forgotten' memory, one that had been sustained outside of the Serbian homeland, mostly in written literature. When it was 'selected', it did not invoke any deep-seated memories or emotions but had to be gradually impressed on the population, in school and church, until it finally 'resonated'. Institutional endorsement was critical and the transmission process appears to have been of greater import than the actual content. It is not hard to imagine how, with such unremitting and overwhelming exposure, almost any other story would have 'resonated' just as well.

Nationalism creates powerful illusions of established truths and immutable concepts; once internalised, even recently constructed memories – very much like traditions that are often seen to reach back into 'times immemorial' – are accepted as unquestionable fact. The 'saints and songs' narrative is one such illusion. Neither song nor liturgy perpetuated historical memory. In the minds of the apolitical peasantry, the ancient kings and princes were not historical figures but supernatural beings feared and venerated for their magical and healing powers or admired for their fantastical exploits. For the church in its pre-national existence, on the other hand, they were only saints – indigenous saints perhaps, particularly esteemed for their relics and patronage of monasteries, but still only saints and not historical figures or symbols of nationhood. Under the many layers of myth that accumulated over the centuries in the Balkans, there is not much historical memory to be found. There was no one to sustain it.

The historical 'memories' and traditions that came to constitute Serbian identity were pieced together loosely from the assortment of myths, beliefs, custom and lore that constitutes the shared heritage of the Balkans. The identities that formed the cultural landscape of the pre-modern Balkans were

vague and apolitical (cf. Breuille 1996: 151, 154): they were tied to clan, kinship and custom and often traversed political and religious boundaries. For example, in the Croatian *Krajina* (military border), the local Orthodox and Catholic population went under one name, either 'Illyrian' or 'Croat' (Fine 2006: 371–2). Although these communities may have had many of the ingredients of Smith's 'ethnies' (Smith 2001: 190–3) or Hobsbawm's 'proto-national' communities (Hobsbawm 1990: ch. 2) and may have even developed an intricate web of myths and symbols (Smith 1998: 181–3), they did not become nations. In fact, nationalism destroyed many of these 'pre-existing' bonds. The Serbs and Croats as we know them today were carved out of the Slavic mass along confessional lines, by callously cutting through local ties and disregarding cultural specifics and regional traditions. The nations that emerged were the result of politics and ideology, not history and culture.

Notes

1 For Saint Sava in the vernacular tradition, see Ćorović (1927).

2 These were published by none other than the abbot, Leontije Ninković (1929).

3 As demonstrated by Miodrag Popović in his seminal study of the Kosovo narrative (Popović 1998). This book, which challenges the official position, has been suppressed by Belgrade's nationalist academia since its publication in 1976.

4 Orfelin's engraving, which is dated 1773, is based on a lost print by Hristofor Žefarović of 1746 (Davidov 1978: 248). Five years earlier, in 1741, Žefarović included a full-figure portrait of Saint Prince Lazar in his *Stematografija* (Žefarović 1741: f. 7).

5 The conventional view on Vitezović is reiterated by Banac (1984: 73–4) in his discussion of these two volumes. For a reassessment of Vitezović, see Blažević (2003) and Fine (2006: 482–92).

6 Similarly, Jovan Rajić, in his influential history of the southern Slavs, promises '... to deliver out of the darkness of oblivion into the light of history' (Rajić 1794–1795: vol. 2, 121; cf. Petrovich 1956: 20–1).

7 Butler (1969) conveys well the ferocity of the struggle between the Romantics and the conservatives.

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