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SONGS, MYTHS, IDENTITY AND TERRITORY: SERBIAN KOSOVO EPIC AS “INVENTED TRADITION”

Abstract

This article offers critical re-examination of the recent scholarship on the so-called Kosovo myth. This popular oral and literary tradition surrounding the Battle of Kosovo that the Serbs fought against the Turks in 1389 traditionally occupied central space in Serbian national narrative. By revisiting the formation of the Kosovo epic in the collections of Vuk Karadžić, the founder of modern Serbian culture, I trace his role in making Kosovo the foundational myth of the whole Serbian nation from the nineteenth-century surge in Romantic nationalism onwards. In particular, I scrutinize Karadžić's editorial procedures as parts of a process of cultural inscription representing a cultural transformation that made the Kosovo epic an instance of the invention of national tradition in Eric Hobsbawm's terms.

Keywords: the Kosovo epic, the Kosovo Myth, Serbian oral tradition, Serbian nationalism, Vuk Karadžić.

Introduction: Celebratory and Denouncing Approach to Serbian Kosovo Tradition

Ever since its first appearance in a literary form in the early nineteenth century, Serbian narrative about the Battle of Kosovo fought in 1389 enjoyed a privileged position both home and abroad.* For Vuk Karadžić (1787-1864), the founder of modern Serbian culture and his followers during the era Romantic nationalism, Serbian epic songs captured the essence of national spirit, and Kosovo epic tradition occupied the central place within this national narrative. Thus, in his first collection of oral folk songs published in 1814, Karadžić already proclaimed that Serbian epic songs “have retained and even now contain for the common folk former Serbian being and name”. Karadžić's friend Sima Milutinović, as a true romantic adventurer, went from Vienna straight to Montenegrin mountains

to collect epic songs, and wrote to Karadžić with fascination: “this is where true masculinity and Serbian glory resides”. Petar Petrović Njegoš II, Montenegrin ruler and writer, is another great national figure. In his collection of folk songs *Serbian Mirror* from 1846 Njegoš correspondingly emphasized that Serbian folk epic contains “the history of this nation that endured enormous sufferings to preserve its freedom”.¹ This view of the folk epic as the expression of popular and collective views of national history was then codified and canonized by Karadžić’s and Njegoš’s followers during the second half of the nineteenth century.²

Under a more inclusive ethnic marker, similar claims were typically found in the literary histories and anthologies of Yugoslav oriented scholars in the twentieth century. Croatian scholar Antun Barac thus says: “The most important feature of Yugoslav popular epic through the centuries was its spirit of fighting and liberation”.³ His Serbian colleague Vojislav Đurić similarly sees this spirit of liberation as the essential feature that unifies the entire South Slavic epic tradition: “All the songs that reached us... are basically permeated by the same, united spirit of liberation”.⁴ Influential publications by Serbian scholars in recent decades have continued this interpretive tradition. Jovan Deretić begins a chapter on Serbian epic poetry in his comprehensive *History of Serbian Literature* from 2002 with the sentence: “Our heroic folk songs originated on the basis of our joint historical tradition, preserved in the collective memory of the people”.⁵ Historian and folklorist Radovan Samardžić similarly emphasizes: “Serbian oral chronicle, preserved in verse, is the fruit of the collective consciousness” and praises its historical and political value.⁶ In short, the dominant view of the Serbian epic, based on Karadžić’s and Njegoš’s collections and views, is that it is a collective creation of the Serbian nation and the confirmation of its historical consciousness and its struggle for national liberation. Later scholars thus only added to the already acclaimed position of the Kosovo epic. They emphasized its aesthetical and ethical virtues and supporting their earlier colleagues such as Stojan Novaković and Tomo Maretić in their claims that the Kosovo ethos had become an integral part of the oral tradition centuries before Karadžić’s collections.⁷

The Kosovo epics that Karadžić and his followers posited as central to Serbian oral tradition,⁸ for long also enjoyed international acclaim as one of the great examples of folk epics. It thus featured prominently in seminal works on oral literature for the most part of the twentieth century, such as Munro Chadwick’s *The Heroic Age* (1912), the Chadwicks’ *The*

Growth of Literature (1932-1940), C. M. Bowra's *Heroic Poetry* (1952), as well as in anthologies of world oral literature.⁹ Even in 1990, a notable international scholar reaffirmed its status and value in the following manner: "For centuries it has been as essential ingredient in the historical consciousness of the Serbian people. ... On the six hundredth anniversary of their nation's Golgotha, Serbian people around the world pause to reflect once again on the meaning and impact of a medieval battle which shaped their destiny".¹⁰

But the rise of Serbian nationalism and violent breakup of the former Yugoslavia created a rift in this interpretive tradition. Thus, while Serbian academics and intellectuals continued to praise the Kosovo legacy as the personification of Serbian dedication to ethical and metaphysical values, some scholars abroad became extremely critical of the Kosovo tradition and even started referring to it as the source and cause of the violence and chauvinism in the Balkans.

The proponents of the first view, which Ivana Spasić recently conveniently labeled as the *celebratory* discourse on the Kosovo tradition,¹¹ described the Serbs as a nation decisively defined by the memory of the Battle of Kosovo. It is believed that the "Kosovo pledge" – the choice of the "heavenly kingdom" and the self-effacing heroism of their fighters that the Serbs followed throughout the centuries, is a distinctive, heroic and profoundly spiritual Serbian quality. Throughout the 1990s, these authors saturated the Serbian public with their catchy parables about Kosovo as the "most expensive Serbian word" (Matija Bećković), Serbian "fidelity to Kosovo" ("kosovsko opredeljenje", Radovan Samardžić,) or "Kosovo commitment" (Predrag Palavestra) etc.¹²

The advocates of the second, *critical* or *denouncing* discourse on the Kosovo tradition, are in many ways the polar opposite of the first. They are highly critical of the myth itself and deny the Serbs any and all of such beautiful qualities delegated to them by the aforementioned "celebrationists". In their writing, Kosovo tradition is described as implicitly or explicitly war-mongering and genocidal, and the Serbs as a power-hungry nation inclined to aggression against others, especially their weaker neighbours.

Branimir Anzulović thus talks about "the myths and legends created soon after the battle" and claims that from "the fifteenth to the nineteenth century... the Serbs assiduously cultivated myths of their great past and a great future..." What is more, according to Anzulović, "very few people have read the actual texts, but the folk songs based on their theme have had

huge audiences over the centuries".¹³ In his psychoanalytically informed book *The Bridge Betrayed: Religion and Genocide in Bosnia*, Michael Sells sees Yugoslav conflicts from the 1990s as primarily religious in nature and delegates an important and rather disgraceful role to the Kosovo tradition within it: "The Kosovo mythology operates as an alternative field of logic, history, and reality. In this alternate reality, the configurations of hate stereotypes ... make sense. ... At some point ... Kosovo mythology became so strong that those who tried to manipulate it ... found themselves slaves to the expectations and interior logic of this ideology of eternal conflict unto extermination."¹⁴ In another influential book, *Kosovo: a Short History*, published in 1998 during conflicts between the Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo, Noel Malcom heavily criticised many of the claims established in Serbian history as myths that have no historical grounding, and emphasized 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".¹⁵ It is thus ever more surprising that he still somehow claims that Kosovo epic is rather ancient: "[n]o doubt, during the long centuries of Ottoman rule, there would have been many Serbs who understood these songs as expressing something about the historical origins of their predicament as subjects of the Turks" (Malcolm 1998: 79).

It is a paradox *sui generis* that these two contested discourses share many of the features. Firstly, both are heavily politicized, and thus instead of handling addressing the genesis and the cultural/semiotic fabric of the legend, they pursue overtly political goals: denunciation of the Kosovo myth as barbaric and war-mongering or, alternatively, its vindication as the expression of legitimate albeit widely misunderstood Serbian national interest. However, while scholars showed analysed in some detail the misuse of the symbolism of Kosovo and commitment to the heavenly kingdom in Serbian political discourse,¹⁶ far less has been done in criticizing the other extreme position so far. Furthermore, previous accounts are mostly descriptive, lacking a consistent theoretical framework. Works dealing specifically with the Serbian legend of Kosovo typically focus on certain aspects of the legend, rather than providing a comprehensive account into the Kosovo myth, its cultural roots and applications; the "denouncionists", on their part, sometimes make arbitrary claims or lack empirical evidence.

More importantly here, for both parties Kosovo songs celebrating Lazar's commitment to the heavenly kingdom were widely popular among the Serbian masses for centuries, and practically contained viable

national(istic) traits from the onset. In their view, “the Kosovo Myth is presented in a misleadingly univocal manner, as conveying invariably a single message over many centuries: a message of unyielding collectivism, adoration of war and death, aggressive militarism, and particularistic anti-humanism”.¹⁷

Finally, it is worth mentioning that not all subscribed to these contested views of the Kosovo epic and its role in the wars fought in 1990s in former Yugoslavia. Alternatively, authors like Bakić-Hayden and Greenawalt emphasize that the national symbols of the Kosovo epic are essentially a late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century product, and that the Serbian national movement and especially the Serbian Uprising were decisive for their establishment.¹⁸ Miodrag Popović in particular argued in detail that the mythology surrounding Kosovo tradition has been crystallized during the long nineteenth century, but his lengthy study published in Serbian attracted less international attention.¹⁹ In addition, articles such as Bieber and Bakić-Hayden, avoid the essentialist traps of many of their colleagues by emphasizing shifting and ambiguous features of the Serbian Kosovo myth through the ages, but their sound arguments were given in short articles and thus could profit from a more elaborate illustration.²⁰

Questioning these assumptions about ancient tribal or national origins of the Kosovo tradition spurred by the recent celebratory and denouncing Kosovo discourse, will be the primary topic for the remaining of my discussion. More precisely, this article contributes to these debates by offering a more comprehensive and thorough analysis of the textual origins and editorial role in the establishment of the Kosovo epic in its canonical form. As I will argue, the Kosovo myth as such has been primarily established by Serbian folklorists in the early nineteenth century. In particular, I will examine Karadžić’s editorial procedures as instances of a process of cultural inscription that transformed the Kosovo epic into a typical example of invented tradition in Eric Hobsbawm’s terms.

Vuk Karadžić and the Making of the Kosovo Epic

One should start this examination over the Kosovo epic by recognizing the fact that the entire debate rests on the Serbian epic songs collected and edited by Vuk Stefanović Karadžić (1787–1864) throughout the first half of the nineteenth century.²¹ Born a Serb in a rural family of what

at the time was the Ottoman Empire, Karadžić came to Vienna in 1813 after the collapse of the first Serbian uprising against the Ottoman rule, where he played a major role in the modernization of Serbian literature and culture. He reformed the language and orthography by promoting the vernacular instead of the Slavonic-Serbian language used at the time. He also collected the folklore of Serbian peasants and herders and is considered to have been the first Serbian folklorist, ethnographer, and literary critic.²² Throughout his life, Karadžić meticulously collected Serbian oral epic and lyric songs, and he published three editions with ten volumes altogether between 1814 and 1862. In addition, through his acquaintanceships with leading scholars of the time, such as Jacob Grimm, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and Leopold Ranke, and his many publications, Karadžić drew the attention of scholars and lay readers to Serbian folk poetry and Serbian culture in Europe. Two of his aforementioned younger friends and associates, the prominent Serbian poet Sima Milutinović Sarajlija and Montenegrin ruler and writer Petar Petrović Njegoš II, soon followed Karadžić's founding work and published their editions of epic songs, mostly collected on the territory of present-day Montenegro. Milutinović printed his *Pjevanija Crnogorska i Hercegovska* ["A Montenegrin and Herzegovinian Songbook"] in 1833 and 1837, and Njegoš edited *Ogledalo srbsko* ["The Serbian Mirror"] in 1846. During the second half of the nineteenth century, comprehensive collections of the oral traditional poetry of other South Slavs, such as Jukić-Martić's *Narodne pjesme bosanske i hercegovske* ["Bosnian and Herzegovinian Folk Songs"], Kosta Hörmann's *Narodne pjesme Muhamedovaca u Bosni i Hercegovini* ["The Folk Songs of Bosnian and Herzegovinian Muslims"], and the first four volumes of *Hrvatske narodne pjesme* ["Croatian Folk Songs"], were published.²³ The oral tradition documented by these collectors thus corresponded to their ideas about the Serbian (Croatian, Muslim, South Slav...) folk epic as a narrative that contained the national past and preserved a living memory of the former national heroes and glory.

Serbian oral songs about the Kosovo battle published by Vuk Karadžić are generally still perceived as having been collected rather than invented. As mentioned, this long-established conviction in the secondary literature has primarily been the result of two principal underlying presumptions: that Karadžić was a reliable collector and editor who refrained from altering or adding to the texts he published and that the Kosovo songs were popular and widespread among the Serbs for centuries. In the previous section, I exemplified this view by referring to both the claims of the

representatives of the celebratory and denouncing approach to Serbian Kosovo epic. Focusing on the “universal” or “eternal” qualities of the Kosovo epic, both approaches fail to identify Karadžić’s interventions as cultural inscriptions representing a cultural transformation which makes the Kosovo epic in his edition an instance of invented national tradition in Hobsbawm’s terms. By revisiting the formation of the Kosovo epic in Karadžić’s collections, I trace his contributions to the establishment of the Kosovo epic in its present form. I make two principal arguments: first, Karadžić secured for the Kosovo epic songs a far more prominent role than the role they appeared to occupy within the oral tradition itself; and second, he shaped their published form, modelling them to fit the existing model of folk songs at the time.

The Kosovo epic published by Karadžić in the early nineteenth century had all the virtues required of a national tradition. It comprises a separate and distinct cycle of some 15 related epic songs describing the events of the Battle of Kosovo, fought in 1389 between the Serbs and the Ottomans. Over the centuries, the battle acquired mythical status and evolved into one of the central national symbols in Serbian culture, referred to as the Kosovo tradition or the Kosovo myth. These oral epic songs about Kosovo are by far the most important source of the myth, and both Karadžić himself and later scholars in particular appreciated and praised this cycle as central to the entire Serbian oral tradition.²⁴ In these songs, the Battle of Kosovo is depicted as the decisive one that saw the downfall of Prince Lazar, the Medieval Serbian Empire, and Serbia’s independence, while at the same time it established the Ottomans as the new masters. The Kosovo epic contains various elements of literary, religious, and popular origin, such as the last supper on the eve of the battle, the treason of Lazar’s brother-in-law Vuk Branković, the heroic death of Miloš Obilić, who killed the Ottoman Sultan Murad, Lazar’s deliberate choice of death and the kingdom of heaven over earthly fame, the sorrows of mothers and maidens who lost their sons and grooms etc.

As far as the selection of the material is concerned, it has long been established that Karadžić’s collections are anthologies rather than collections.²⁵ His manuscripts, for example, show that he published only a small percentage of all the songs that he had at his disposal. Karadžić himself was ready to admit that his publications were not representative of the whole of Serbian oral tradition, but rather contained only its best achievements. Responding in 1833 to a comment about his exclusiveness in publishing the songs, he explained his views: “I believe it to be foolish

not to choose, if one can, [and I believe] that our folk songs would not get such praise and glory if I had published them all, and without any order."²⁶

Karadžić's particular interest in the songs that celebrated the heroes from the times of the Medieval Serbian Empire and the Kosovo battle forms another important aspect of his editorial approach. For instance, in his earliest (1814) songbook, he stressed the particular importance of these songs that "preserve former Serbian being and name."²⁷ Such an attitude had significant implications with regards to his editorial practice, since in the first decades Karadžić focused mainly on documenting these songs and heroes at the expense of other popular subjects. For example, more than half of approximately twenty-four songs that he collected from Tešan Podrugović (1783?-1820?), who was Karadžić's favorite source for Serbian epic poetry, are about medieval heroes and subjects, and Marko Kraljević alone appears as a hero in nine of these songs.²⁸ However, these older subjects and heroes were far less prominent if placed in the context of Podrugović's entire repertoire, which is due to Karadžić's selective process of collecting songs. As Karadžić himself noted, Podrugović knew "at least one hundred of songs such as this one that I wrote down from him, especially about certain highwaymen from the [Dalmatian] Coast, Bosnia and Herzegovina."²⁹ In accordance with his editorial preferences, however, Karadžić collected and published all Podrugović's songs about Marko Kraljević, but very few about more recent heroes. Another similar example is his transcription of Starac Milija's (?-after 1822) songs, who was another important source for Karadžić. For years, Karadžić persistently tried to arrange a meeting with this singer, because he had heard that Milija knew two songs about medieval Serbian aristocracy exceptionally well, "Ženidba Maksima Crnojevića" ["The Wedding of Maksim Crnojević"] and "Banović Strahinja" ["Banovic Strahinja"]. Again, it shows his special interest in the songs about subjects and heroes from the times of the Serbian Empire. In total, Karadžić managed to write down three songs about older heroes from this singer, and only one about a more recent local character, but he left testimony that Milija knew many more songs about these newer events.³⁰ In both cases, therefore, the bulk of the singer's repertoire consisted of songs about relatively recent local characters and events. Karadžić, however, documented and published only those describing the exploits of older heroes, thus giving the songs about the "former Serbian being and name" a more prominent position in his early collections that they appear to have had in the early nineteenth-century Serbian oral tradition.

The case of the Kosovo epic is equally telling. Karadžić appreciated these songs in particular and made efforts to collect all the songs available at the time. For instance, upon hearing that a blind female singer from Fruška Gora near Novi Sad performed a song called “Propast carstva Srpskoga” [“The Downfall of the Serbian Empire”], he immediately wrote to Lukijan Mušicki, the prior [iguman] of the nearby monastery, and asked him to collect Kosovo songs about Lazar from a particular blind singer. As Karadžić explicitly says: “we will hardly find these songs anywhere else.”³¹ This statement was logical, given that he had collected practically all the songs about Kosovo in this narrow region of Fruška Gora, and perhaps even suspected the tradition was not present anywhere else. Thus, in the following period, he persistently reminded Mušicki to collect three Kosovo songs from the blind woman from Grgurevci; finally, in late 1816, Mušicki informed Karadžić that the woman had been brought to the Šišatovac monastery, and that deacon Stefan had written down the songs she had sung.³² During these years, Karadžić collected several other songs of the Kosovo epic, as a rule from the blind singers who resided and performed in the area of Fruška Gora.

Apparently, Karadžić suggests that these particular songs about Lazar were neither widely popular nor widely known. His later collections confirm the point made in this letter. Namely, although in the following decades Karadžić established a network of associates in Serbia proper, Montenegro, and Herzegovina, he later published only one more song about Lazar, which describes the building of Ravanica, a Serbian Orthodox monastery in the Kučaj Mountains that was constructed as an endowment of Prince Lazar.³³ Other collectors who published songs from the mountainous regions where the Serbian oral epic tradition was practiced, such as the aforementioned Sarajlija and Njegoš, also found no instances of the Kosovo epic. Even in the early twentieth century, Slovene folklorist Matija Murko studied contemporary oral tradition in Bosnia and Herzegovina and reported that the Kosovo songs did not feature prominently among the repertoires of the local singers:

I was surprised that the Bosnian and Hercegovinian Orthodox did not know the magnificent songs relating to the ancient history of Serbia as well as I had expected, any more than did the Orthodox people of Montenegro. When I collected recordings in Sarajevo, the intellectual Serbs present asked a singer from the region if he knew the poems about Prince Lazar, Miloš Obilić, and Vuk Branković. He answered: “No, I’m illiterate.”³⁴

This indicates that, rather than being widely popular at the time, the songs about Prince Lazar were mostly confined to the Srem region surrounding the monasteries of Fruška Gora.

This is hardly surprising. After the so-called Great Migrations in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, the centers of the Serbian Orthodox Church moved from Kosovo and central Serbia to the north, and Fruška Gora, with important Orthodox monasteries, became the center of Serbian religious life. Moreover, in 1697 the monks from Ravanica moved his relics to the Vrdnik monastery in Fruška Gora. The monastery annually commemorated the day of Lazar's death, and medieval texts, such as the aforementioned *Slovo o knezu Lazaru*, were read on the occasion.³⁵ This shows both how the local cult of Lazar found its way into this local oral tradition and how Karadžić significantly contributed to the establishment of this tradition as a (and almost the) national tradition.

From the Unified Lazarica Poem to the Separate Kosovo Songs

The arrangement of the Kosovo songs in Karadžić's collections forms another important element of his influence over the Kosovo epic. The Kosovo tradition in Fruška Gora existed in the form of one long poem about Kosovo. Karadžić's awareness of this fact is corroborated in his *Srpski rječnik* ["Serbian Dictionary"] from 1818, in which he acknowledges the existence of a long poem sung by the blind singers who called it *Lazarica* and specifies that "all other Kosovo songs are only parts of *Lazarica*."³⁶ Moreover, Karadžić's manuscripts contain one instance of such a lengthy Kosovo epic poem. In 1820, a local priest informed Karadžić that he had collected one large Kosovo song from a blind singer residing in the same area in which other Kosovo songs had been collected.³⁷ The manuscript of the song, called *O Boju Kosovskom* ("About the Battle of Kosovo"), contains exactly 2,439 decasyllables,³⁸ which is approximately twenty times more than an average Serbian oral song and over twice the length of *Ženidba Maksima Crnojevića* ("The Wedding of Maksim Crnojević"), by far the longest song published by Karadžić.

So, why did Karadžić publish the Kosovo epic as separate songs if he apparently knew that they form one long poem? This editorial choice may seem unlikely, even counterintuitive, if one keeps in mind the fact that the early folklorists as a rule approached their material in the opposite way. Macpherson and Lönnrot, for example, typically regarded the Iliad

as the role model of an oral tradition, and they unified short Scottish and Finnish oral songs to form long, narrative poems (*The Works of Ossian* and *Kalevala*).

The rationale for Karadžić's approach is that he wanted to accommodate the Kosovo epic into the existing model of a Serbian folk song. He had started his folkloristic career in 1814 in Vienna under the influence of the Slovene scholar Bartholomeus (Jernej) Kopitar and Jacob Grimm, who preferred the songs collected from illiterate, common people in rural areas, which they regarded as true, genuine, and authentic folk songs. Jacob Grimm, for example, recommended to his correspondents and associates that they collect songs in remote regions uncorrupted by urban civilization and education. According to Grimm, "On the high mountains and in the small villages, where there are neither paths or roads, and where the false Enlightenment has had no access and was unable to do its work, there still lies hidden in darkness a treasure: the customs of our forefathers, their sagas and their faith."³⁹ According to him, the creativity and imagination characteristic of folk poetry spring and originate from these deepest and most conservative parts of the peasantry.⁴⁰ For him, therefore, the notion of the folk as a creator was collective and limited to a particular background and particular class, specifically the rural population living in remote areas detached from the influence of official literature and civilization.

It is precisely for this authenticity that Karadžić's early collections, conveniently published at the peak of scholarly interest in folk poetry, almost instantly gained international repute and unanimous recognition among leading scholars of the time as great achievements of "natural poetry." The collections offered a number of folk songs "uncorrupted" by literacy and scholarly influence, as Karadžić wrote in his first short collection from 1814.⁴¹ In his lengthy review of Karadžić's edition of *Srpske narodne pjesme* in 1823, Jacob Grimm similarly emphasized that the songs had been collected directly "aus dem warmen Munde des Volkes," and he wrote that the works were the most important and valuable epic songs for an understanding of heroic poetry since the Homeric epic, and Kopitar claimed that no European nation could match the Serbs in the quality of their folk poetry.⁴²

The "problem" with the Kosovo epic was that it hardly met these standards. Not only was it apparently not so popular "on the high mountains and in the small villages," but it had been sung by a professional guild of blind singers located around Fruška Gora.⁴³ As shown by scarce bits of evidence from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century,

blind singers were trained to sing epic and other songs in the town of Irig at the center of Fruška Gora, and they had the assistance of the local community and nearby monasteries.⁴⁴ According to the few available sources, the “school” actually consisted of a basement or an abandoned building where blind singers practiced during the winter. A report from 1826 testifies that “these blind singers form a sort of a guild among themselves, like the German *Meistersingers*; older singers educate the younger ones, and that is how these wonderful songs are preserved. Those blind singers perform mostly at fairs, gatherings, and other similar occasions.”⁴⁵ Scholars have explained why Karadžić himself makes no mention of the “Irig School”: any emphasis on this institutional and professional manner of epic singing would compromise the idea of the collectivity of the oral tradition and its popular basis.⁴⁶ The oral technique and repertoire were not the manifestations of a living oral tradition, as in Montenegro and Herzegovina, but were part of a professionalized and institutionalized procedure. Consequently, Karadžić decided to divide *Lazarica* into separate songs and present it as other short songs collected from the highlanders from Montenegro and Herzegovina, “where almost every house has a *gusle*” (the traditional one-string instrument that typically accompanies the oral epic performance).⁴⁷

A detailed philological analysis would likely reveal other, less prominent forms of Karadžić’s interventions in the Kosovo epic. For instance, in his earliest collections he published some words originally performed by singers in the ekavian dialect used in Fruška Gora in the ijekavian that was spoken in Herzegovina and Montenegro, for instance using “bijelo” and “vjerna” instead of “belo” and “verna.” While this may not appear terribly significant, it was in line with his belief at the time that the songs that were of Herzegovinian origin but had been collected in Southern Hungary should be published in the Herzegovinian dialect. This gave the impression that the songs had been collected from the rural mountainous parts of the central Balkans, rather than from the areas of what at the time was southern Hungary, the culture of which was strongly influenced by literacy and Serbian Orthodox church. These changes could serve as fabricated arguments in support of his view according to which all Serbian heroic songs originated from Herzegovina, while the culture of the more urban and literate Serbs from the Habsburg Empire was not of great value. Thus, he wanted to ground new Serbian culture on an illiterate oral and epic tradition and hence presented the Kosovo epic as the highest expression of this illiterate rural population. But the high

ethical values and expressions of advanced culture in the Kosovo epic were made possible precisely through combinations of oral and written, urban and rural, European and Orthodox cultures.

In addition, although Karadžić declared that the songs he published had been collected directly from the singers as part of the living oral tradition, he did occasionally use existing written sources. Thus, in his first collection he published *Hasanaginica* not, as he claims, on the basis of his childhood memory, but on the basis of Alberto Fortis's book *Viaggio in Dalmatia*, published in Venice in 1774, and he continued to reprint it regularly in the later editions. The same applies to several other songs for which Karadžić claimed to be part of the living oral tradition, but which in fact were taken from printed sources.⁴⁸

Svetozar Matić and Miodrag Maticki also suggested that several of Karadžić's Kosovo songs and songs about older subjects from Montenegro had not been collected directly from oral singers, but rather had been taken from earlier manuscript collections.⁴⁹ According to their suggestions, in addition to transforming certain ekavian dialectical forms into ijekavian, Karadžić made other changes when editing the Kosovo epic. For instance, he inserted some verses from other songs, relied on the Kosovo songs available in unpublished manuscripts of the educated Serbs of the time, and even possibly falsely attributed some fragments of the Kosovo epic which he took from the manuscripts to his father, Stefan. However, without Karadžić's original manuscripts, these contentions remain a matter of dispute.

Finally, although Karadžić demanded that his associates write down the songs accurately, he did not always respect these high methodological demands and principles himself, and quite often he made certain changes and corrections or altered certain phrases in the texts he published. The difficulty with identifying these changes, however, lies in the fact that Karadžić did not keep the manuscripts of the songs he published. As Živimir Mladenović indicated, this might be a consequence of his intention to shrink his voluminous archive, but he also may have sought to conceal the actual amount of editorial changes he had made.⁵⁰ Karadžić's manuscripts thus consisted mostly of the songs that he received from his associates after 1832 and which remained unpublished during his lifetime. Nevertheless, his archive still contains some writings made in the earliest period of his work which enable us to create a provisional image of his overall editorial procedure. Živimir Mladenović's comprehensive analysis of Karadžić's manuscripts identified three basic types of changes in the texts that Karadžić had published.⁵¹ The songs that Karadžić personally

wrote down from his best singers, such as Filip Višnjić, he edited practically without any changes, apart from punctuation and minor corrections. The preserved part of the manuscript of the song “Knez Ivan Knežević,” collected from Filip Višnjić in 1815, for example, contains only two slight divergences from the published texts. Karadžić published the verse “Pred bijelu pred Brodačku crkvu” as “Pred Brodačku pred bijelu crkvu,” and he changed “Ni Ivanu kogodi zavalı” to “Ni Ivanu kogodi zafali.” These changes thus only affect word order or orthography in some cases, which has little to do with folklore and has relevance in the context of his efforts to reform Serbian grammar and orthography. In the songs that Karadžić himself had written down on the basis of renditions by less accomplished singers, Mladenović observes that he intervened more frequently, often changing the word order, substituting phrases, or inserting certain verses.⁵² Finally, in the songs that Karadžić received from his associates, Mladenović argues, he felt free to intervene aggressively and add or remove whole verses or even series of verses.⁵³

Conclusion

In conclusion, Karadžić’s editorial method and procedure should not be judged too severely, especially when placed in the context of his time and compared with the methods used by Macpherson and Lönnrot. In general, Karadžić collected many oral songs himself, and he persistently searched for the best singers and quite successfully avoided obviously literary epic songs and poems that some of his contemporaries considered oral songs and published as examples of the purest folk poetry. Foley’s conclusion that “his editing was light in comparison with the usual practice of the time”⁵⁴ thus appears justified.

Nevertheless, when talking about the Kosovo epic, I believe that the aforementioned analysis exemplifies the impact of Vuk Karadžić and the nineteenth-century conceptions of folklore and folk songs on editing, codifying, and interpreting the Kosovo epic at the time. Most importantly, Karadžić separated an existing long Kosovo poem into smaller epic songs dedicated to particular events and parts of the legend. In addition, I revisited the commonly held idea about the Kosovo songs being widely popular among the Serbs for centuries, which persists to this day in the “glorifying” and “critical” approaches to the Kosovo legend, and suggested that Karadžić and later scholars contributed substantially to this exceptional

status of the Kosovo songs. Thus, it has been argued that Karadžić, though his interventions are certainly not as drastic as those made by many of his contemporaries, had a distinguished and formative role in the codification of the Kosovo epic in its present form.

The impact of Karadžić's Kosovo epic on the formation of Serbian nationalism is hard to overemphasize. Since its inception, the Kosovo myth has been one of the cornerstones of the discourse, which is due not only to its purported vernacular popularity, but primarily because of the political potency of the myth. Namely, the story of the Serbian medieval state provided an enviable legitimacy to the current political claims of Serbian nationalism, especially in order to vindicate specific territorial claims. This comes as no surprise, since European national movements of the day generally relied heavily on medieval history for legitimacy, particularly in order to define themselves in spatial terms. As Patrick J. Geary argues, the Middle Ages were in the nineteenth century seen as a time of "primary acquisition," when the European lands were supposedly rightfully parceled out by the historic nations.⁵⁵ Since the Kosovo epic made it possible to see the vast swathe of land in the hands of Ottoman Empire at the time as the "primary acquisition" of the Serbian nation, the myth served not only as a literary achievement, but also as a veritable battle cry and a trump card of Serbian expansionistic politics.⁵⁶ Its popularity has been fostered through various adaptations since the mid-nineteenth century up to the recent times. One of the early and most influential was the publication in 1871 in Belgrade of the poems arranged by the "epic alignment" by Stojan Novaković, followed by an edition in Zagreb the following year, and entitled simply "Kosovo," in an effort to present a comprehensive and succinct plotline.⁵⁷ The Kosovo epic has won praise the world over, as during the first half of the twentieth century, the poems were typically included in the anthologies of world epics and singled out as one of the great folk epic achievements in general.⁵⁸ More recently, the tale has featured prominently both in the agenda of Serbian nationalists, who saw in it the nation's commitment to metaphysical values and heroism,⁵⁹ and to Western authors, who referred to it as the source of and explanation for much of the troubles and atrocities in the Balkans.⁶⁰ Perhaps shifting the focus from allegedly centennial and metaphysical features of the Kosovo myth to the contributions made by Karadžić and other nineteenth century figures to the Kosovo epic and its establishment as invented tradition will bring some welcome moderation into discussion of its present contested status.

NOTES

- * A shorter and restructured version of this article appeared in Hungarian Historical Review's special issue on the topic "Nationalism & Discourses of Objectivity: The Humanities and Social Sciences in Central Europe in the Long Nineteenth Century". I owe sincere gratitude to New Europe College for both their permission to publish it and for excellent research conditions, hospitality and support they provided during my fellowship.
- ¹ Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, *Mala prostonarodnja slaveno-serbska pjesnarica (1814)*; *Narodna srbska pjesnarica (1815)*, vol. 1 of *Sabrana dela Vuka Stefanovića Karadžića*, ed. Vladan Nedić (Beograd: Prosveta, 1965), 44; Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, *Prepiska III (1826-1828)*, *Sabrana dela Vuka Stefanovića Karadžića*, XXII (Beograd: Prosveta, 1989), 858. Petar II Petrović Njegoš, *Ogledalo srbsko* (Beograd: Prosveta / Cetinje: Obod, 1977), 10.
- ² See, for instance, Jovan Skerlić's classical study *Omladina i njena književnost: Izučavanja o nacionalnom i književnom romantizmu kod Srba*, esp. Ch. 12 "Kult prošlosti" and Ch. 19 "Uticao narodne poezije" (Belgrade: Srpska Kraljevska Akademija, 1906), 191–201 and 309–326.
- ³ Antun Barac, *Jugoslavenska književnost*. Zagreb: Matica Hrvatska, 1954, 92.
- ⁴ Vojislav Đurić, *Antologija narodnih junačkih pesama*. Beograd: SKZ, 1961, 13.
- ⁵ Jovan Deretić, *Istorija srpske književnosti*. Beograd: Prosveta, 2002, 368.
- ⁶ Radovan Samardžić, *Usmena narodna hronika*. Novi Sad: Matica Srpska, 1978, 5, 14.
- ⁷ Armin Pavić, *Narodne pjesme o Boju na Kosovu godine 1389*. Zagreb: Naklada Akademije knjižare L. Hatmana, 1886; Tomislav Maretić, "Kosovski junaci i događaji u narodnoj epici", in *Rad Jugoslavenske akademije znanosti i umjetnosti*, XCVII (1889), 69-181. Stojan Novaković, *Kosovo: srpske narodne pjesme o Boju na Kosovu*. Beograd: Državna štamparija, 1876; H. Munro Chadwick, *The Heroic Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1912), 313-319; Dragutin Subotić, *Serbian Popular Balads: Their Origin and Development*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932; Vojislav Đurić, *Naša narodna epika*. Beograd: Prosveta, 1963; Jelka Ređep, *Priča o boju kosovskom*. Novi Sad: Filozofski fakultet, 1976; Nenad Ljubinković, "Kosovska bitka u svome vremenu i u viđenju potomaka", in *Kosovo u pamćenju i stvaralaštvu*, ed. Nenad Ljubinković (Beograd: Raskovnik, 1989), 127-164; Thomas Emmeth, "Kosovo Legacy", in *Kosovo*, ed. William Dorich, Alhambra : The Kosovo Charity Fund '92.
- ⁸ See Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, *Srpske narodne pjesme I*, vol. 4 of *Sabrana dela Vuka Stefanovića Karadžića*, ed. Vladan Nedić (Belgrade: Prosveta, 1975), 569.

- ⁹ See H. Munro Chadwick, "The Battle of Kosovo in Servian Poetry," in *The Heroic Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1912), 313–319; Janko Lavrin, "Historical Preface," in *Kosovo: Heroic Songs of the Serbs*, ed. Helen Rootham (Oxford: Blackwell, 1920), 9–20; Maksimilijan Braun, *Kosovo: bitka na Kosovopolju u istorijskom i epskom predanju*, trans. Tomislav Bekić (Novi Sad: Platoneum, 2004), 10 (originally published in German as: Maximilian Brown, *Kosovo: die Schlacht auf dem Amselfelde in geschichtlicher und epischer Überlieferung* (Leipzig: Markert [und] Petters, 1937); Cf. chapter "Yugoslav Poetry" in Munro Chadwick and N. Kershaw Chadwick, *The Growth of Literature*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932–1940), 2:299–456; Cecil Maurice Bowra, *Heroic Poetry*, London: Macmillan, 1952. Mary P. Coote, "Serbocroatian Heroic Songs", in: Felix J. Oinas, *Heroic Epic and Saga: an Introduction to the World's Great Folk Epic* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 263.
- ¹⁰ Thomas Emmert, *Serbian Golgotha: Kosovo 1389*, New York: Columbia University Press (East European Monographs, 1990), 142.
- ¹¹ Ivana Spasić, "The trauma of Kosovo in Serbian national narratives", in: Ron Eyerman, Jeffrey C. Alexander, Elizabeth Butler Breese (eds.), *Narrating Trauma: On the Impact of Collective Suffering*, Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2011, 81- 105.
- ¹² Radovan Samardžić et al., *Kosovo i Metohija u srpskoj istoriji*. Beograd: Srpska književna zadruga, 1989; Matija Bećković, *Kosovo: najskuplja srpska reč*. Valjevo: Glas crkve, 1989; Radovan Samardžić, *Kosovsko opredeljenje: istorijski ogledi*. Beograd: Srpska književna zadruga, 1990. Predrag Palavestra, *Književnost – kritika ideologije*, Beograd: SKZ. To be sure, not all Serbian intellectuals subscribed to their views. Most notable among those publications that persistently criticised such nationalistic views of the Kosovo myth are: Nebojša Popov, (ed.) *The Road to War in Serbia: Trauma and Catharsis*, Budapest: CEU Press, 2000, and Ivan Čolović, *The politics of symbol in Serbia: Essays in political anthropology*, translated by Celia Hawkesworth, London: Hurst, 2002 [1997].
- ¹³ Branimir Anzulović, *Heavenly Serbia: From Myth to Genocide*, New York and London: New York University Press, 1999, 2, 12
- ¹⁴ Michael Sells, A., "The Construction of Islam in Serbian Religious Mythology and Its Consequences", in: Maya Schatzmiller (ed.), *Islam and Bosnia: Conflict Resolution and Foreign Policy in Multi-Ethnic States*, Montreal&Kingston : McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002, 56-85, 67.
- ¹⁵ Noel Malcolm, *Kosovo: a Short History*, London: Macmillan, 1998, 79.
- ¹⁶ See: Julie Mertus, *Kosovo: How Myths and Truths Started the War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 184-5; Jasna Dragović-Soso, "Saviours of the Nation": *Serbian Intellectual Opposition and the Revival of Nationalism* (London: Hurst & Co, 2002), 115-132.

- 17 Ivana Spasić, *The Power of Code: The Kosovo Legend and Serbian National Identity* (unpublished).
- 18 Milica Bakić-Hayden, "Kosovo: Reality of a Myth and Myth of Many Realities," in *Serbien und Montenegro: Raum und Bevölkerung, Geschichte, Sprache und Literatur, Kultur, Politik, Gesellschaft, Wirtschaft, Recht*, ed. Walter Lukan, Ljubinka Trgovčević and Dragan Vukčević (Vienna and Berlin: LIT, 2006), 133–142; Alexander Greenawalt, "Kosovo Myths: Karadžić, Njegoš and the Transformation of Serb Memory," *Spaces of Identity* 3 (2001): 49–65.
- 19 Miodrag Popović, *Vidovdan i časni krst: Ogled iz književne arheologije*, Beograd: Slovo ljubve, 1976.
- 20 Florian Bieber, "Nationalist Mobilization and Stories of Serb Suffering: The Kosovo myth from 600th anniversary to the present", *Rethinking History* 6(1), 2002, 95–110; Milica Bakić-Hayden, "National memory as narrative memory: The case of Kosovo", in: Maria Todorova (ed.), *Balkan Identities: Nation and Memory*, New York: New York University Press, 2004, 25–40.
- 21 See Michael Branch, "The Invention of a National Epic"; Vilmos Voigt, "Primus Inter Pares"; John Miles Foley, *Epic as Genre*, 171–186; Margaret Beissinger, "Epic, Genre, and Nationalism: The Development of Nineteenth-Century Balkan Literature," in *Epic Traditions*, 69–86.
- 22 Jovan Deretić., *Istorija srpske književnosti* (Belgrade: Prosveta, 2004), 553–582. For a more comprehensive account of Karadžić's role, see: *O Vuku Karadžiću: studije i eseji*, Belgrade: Prosveta, 1968.
- 23 Ivan Frano Jukić, Grga Martić, *Narodne pjesme bosanske i hercegovačke*, (Osijek: 1858); Kosta Hörmann, *Narodne pjesme Muhamedovaca u Bosni i Hercegovini*, 2 vols. (Sarajevo: Zemaljska štamparija, 1888–89); *Hrvatske narodne pjesme*, 4 vols. (Zagreb: Matica Hrvatska, 1896–99). For a fuller list of the nineteenth century collections see Đuro Šurmin, *Povijest književnosti hrvatske i srpske* (Zagreb: Lav. Hartman, 1898), 23–24.
- 24 Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, *Srpske narodne pjesme I*, vol. 4 of *Sabrana dela Vuka Stefanovića Karadžića*, ed. Vladan Nedić (Belgrade: Prosveta, 1975), 569.
- 25 Deretić, *Istorija srpske književnosti*, 558.
- 26 Karadžić, *Srpske narodne pjesme IV*, 388.
- 27 Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, *Mala prstonarodnja slaveno-serbska pjesnarica (1814); Narodna srbska pjesnarica (1815)*, vol. 1 of *Sabrana dela Vuka Stefanovića Karadžića*, ed. Vladan Nedić (Beograd: Prosveta, 1965), 44.
- 28 See the analysis of Podrugović's contribution in Vladan Nedić, *Vukovi pevači*, ed. Radmila Pešić (Novi Sad: Matica srpska, 1981), 31ff.
- 29 Karadžić, *Srpske narodne pjesme IV*, 394.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 397.

- 31 Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, *Prepiska I (1811-1821)*, vol. 20 of *Sabrana dela Vuka Stefanovića Karadžića*, ed. Golub Dobrašinić (Belgrade: Prosveta 1988), 250.
- 32 Karadžić, *Prepiska I (1811-1821)*, 320, 334, 353, 365, 366.
- 33 The term endowment in this context refers to a monastery founded by an Orthodox ruler or dignitary, erected to serve as a family chapel during the founder's lifetime, and later as his burial place. See "Opet Zidanje Ravanice," in Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, *Srpske narodne pjesme II*, Vol. 5 of *Sabrana dela Vuka Stefanovića Karadžića*, ed. Vladan Nedić (Belgrade: Prosveta, 1976), 154-160.
- 34 Matija Murko, "The Singers and their Epic Songs," *Oral Tradition* 5 (1990), 123-124.
- 35 Miodrag Popović, *Vidovdan i časni krst: Ogled iz književne arheologije*, Beograd: Slovo ljubve, 1976, 65.
- 36 Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, *Srpski Rječnik 1818*, vol. 2 of *Sabrana dela Vuka Stefanovića Karadžića*, ed. Pavle Ivić (Prosveta: Belgrade, 1966), 360.
- 37 Karadžić, *Prepiska I*, 794, 984.
- 38 See "O boju kosovskom," in *Srpske narodne pjesme iz neobjavljenih rukopisa Vuka Stefanovića Karadžića*, ed. Živomir Mladenović and Vladan Nedić (Belgrade: Srpska akademija nauka i umetnosti, 1974), 63-115.
- 39 Christa Kamenetsky, *The Brothers Grimm & Their Critics: Folktales and the Quest for Meaning* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1992), 66.
- 40 Miljan Mojašević, *Jakob Grim i srpska narodna književnost: književnoistorijske i poetološke osnove* (Belgrade: Srpska akademija nauka i umetnosti, 1983), 415.
- 41 Karadžić, *Mala prostonarodnja slaveno-serbska pjesnarica*, 42
- 42 See the reprint of Grimm's review in Karadžić, *Srpske narodne pjesme I*, 554.
- 43 Aleksandar Pavlović, "Rereading the Kosovo Epic: Origins of the 'Heavenly Serbia' in the Oral Tradition," *Journal of Serbian Studies* 23 (2009): 83-96.
- 44 Matija Murko, *Tragom srpsko-hrvatske narodne epike: putovanja u godinama 1930-1932* (Zagreb: Jugoslavenska akademija znanosti i umjetnosti, 1951), 1:212ff. Miodrag Maticki, "Jezik u jeziku slepih guslara," in *Sima Milutinović Sarajlija: Književno delo i kulturnoistorijska uloga*, ed. Marta Frajnd (Belgrade: Institut za književnost i umetnost, 1993), 169-174.
- 45 *Ibid.*, 171.
- 46 *Ibid.*
- 47 Karadžić, *Srpske narodne pjesme I*, 559.
- 48 See Vladan Nedić, "O prvoj i drugoj Vukovoj Pjesnarici," in Karadžić, *Mala prostonarodnja slaveno-serbska pjesnarica*, 373. Cf. Svetozar Matić, *Naš narodni ep i naš stih: Ogledi i studije* (Novi Sad: Matica srpska, 1964), 7-55.

- 49 See Matić, *Naš narodni ep*, esp. 35ff; Miodrag Maticki, *Istorija kao predanje* (Belgrade: Rad, 1989), 38–44.
- 50 Živomir Mladenović, *Traganja za Vukom* (Tršić: Vukov sabor and Belgrade: Rad, 1987), 131, 140.
- 51 See: Živomir Mladenović, “Vuk kao redaktor narodnih pesama,” in *Traganja za Vukom*, 138–188.
- 52 Mladenović, *Traganja za Vukom*, 159–160.
- 53 *Ibid.*, 167.
- 54 John Miles Foley, “Analogues: Modern Oral Epics,” in *A Companion to Ancient Epic*, ed. John Miles Foley (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 208.
- 55 Patrick Geary, *The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).
- 56 Cf.: Holm Sundhussen, *Geschichte Serbiens: 19.–21. Jahrhundert* (Vienna: Böhlau, 2007), 115–120.
- 57 Stojan Novaković, *Kosovo: Srpske narodne pjesme o boju na Kosovu: pokušaj da se sastave u cjelinu kao spjev* (Belgrade: Državna štamparija, 1871).
- 58 See note ix.
- 59 Radovan Samardžić et al., *Kosovo i Metohija u srpskoj istoriji* (Belgrade: Srpska književna zadruga, 1989); Matija Bećković, *Kosovo: Najskuplja srpska reč* (Valjevo: Glas crkve, 1989); Radovan Samardžić, *Kosovsko opredeljenje: Istorijski ogledi* (Belgrade: Srpska književna zadruga, 1990).
- 60 Branimir Anzulović, *Heavenly Serbia: From Myth to Genocide* (London: Hurst, 1999); Tim Judah, *The Serbs: History, Myth and the Destruction of Yugoslavia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997); Noel Malcolm, *Kosovo: A Short History* (London: Macmillan, 1998).

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