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## From Myth to Territory: Vuk Karadžić, Kosovo Epics and the Role of Nineteenth-Century Intellectuals in Establishing National Narratives\*

In this article, we argue that the nineteenth-century Serbian scholars had a pivotal role in establishing Kosovo as the crucial subject of Serbian literature, culture, and politics. By revisiting the formation of the Kosovo epic in the collections of Vuk Karadžić, the founder of modern Serbian culture, we 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, we 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: Kosovo epic, Serbian oral tradition, Vuk Karadžić

### *Introduction*

This article examines the role of nineteenth-century Serbian scholars, and in particular Vuk Karadžić, in establishing Kosovo as the key theme of Serbian literature, culture, and politics. The Kosovo myth was established by Serbian folklorists in the early nineteenth century. By revisiting the formation of the Kosovo epic in the collections of Vuk Karadžić, the founder of modern Serbian culture, we trace the transformation of the late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century *Weltanschauung* of the Serbs of the Habsburg Empire (especially of southern Hungary, where Karadžić collected most of the Kosovo songs). In particular, we 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.

Serbian oral songs about the Kosovo battle published by Vuk Karadžić are generally still perceived as having been collected rather than invented. This long-

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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. This view also has the support of the glorifiers of the Serbian Kosovo epic and, more recently, those who see it as the source of conflicts in the Balkans.<sup>1</sup> 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, we trace his contributions to the establishment of the Kosovo epic in its present form. We 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, modeling them to fit the existing model of folk songs at the time.

### *Intellectuals and Nation-building*

The role of intellectuals in promoting national agendas has been recognized in the existing scholarship. In the wake of the publication of the works of Benedict Anderson,<sup>2</sup> Anthony D. Smith,<sup>3</sup> Ernest Gellner<sup>4</sup> and others in the early 1980s, it became a commonplace in the humanities to refer to the idea of the nation as a late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century European invention, closely related to the emergence of the modern state, grounded in popular sovereignty

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1 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. 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–Berlin: LIT, 2006), 133–42; Alexander Greenawalt, “Kosovo Myths: Karadžić, Njegoš and the Transformation of Serb Memory,” *Spaces of Identity* 3 (2001): 49–65.

2 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

3 Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986).

4 Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983).

after the French Revolution.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, the pivotal role of intellectuals as the true creators of the “imagined communities” in the nation-formation process has been systematically studied.<sup>6</sup> What such studies reveal is that intellectuals did not merely reveal or discover facts about a nation, they also created or simply fabricated these facts and “truths,” thus “traditions which appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and often invented.”<sup>7</sup> Specifically, in the context of East Central Europe it has been observed that the intellectuals strived to establish “national history” both as a scientific discipline and as a volume of texts marketed towards popular audiences, thus blurring the border between science and the national imagination and the border between academic and lay readers.<sup>8</sup>

In the processes of inventing (“discovering”) their national traditions, nineteenth-century Eastern European intellectuals delegated a role of particular importance to their oral traditions and folklore. To be sure, Romantic nationalism promoted by Johann Gottfried Herder, the Grimm Brothers, and other European scholars in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century already established folklore and folk songs in particular as the “soul of the nation” and the greatest expression of the national spirit.<sup>9</sup> However, these ideas and publications of Herder and the Grimm Brothers had a particularly strong impact on the cultures and nations of Eastern and Northern Europe. As Giuseppe Cocchiara argues, Eastern and Northern Europeans had a relatively modest literary tradition in comparison to the French, English, or Italians, for example. Without strong roots in written literature, national intellectuals thus turned to oral literature as “a

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5 Earlier scholars, such as Max Weber, already pointed out that the idea of the nation does not rest on empirical qualities but on a specific sentiment of solidarity shared by the members of community, and they emphasized the role of intellectual elites in promoting and imposing such sentiments on the wider population. See “The Nation,” in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 171–79.

6 Miroslav Hroch, *Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe: A Comparative Analysis of the Social Composition of Patriotic Groups Among the Smaller European Nations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Anderson, *Imagined communities*.

7 Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Inventing Traditions,” in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1.

8 See Monika Baár, *Historians and Nationalism: East-Central Europe in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 50.

9 See Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, esp. Chapter I, “The Discovery of the People” (London: Temple Smith, 1978), 3–22, and Giuseppe Cocchiara, *The History of Folklore in Europe*, trans. John N. McDaniel (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1981), 177ff.

rich intellectual, moral, and social fortune, both the document of their traditions and the monument of their language.”<sup>10</sup>

Under such circumstances, the folk epic was more than likely to attain a privileged position in society. Epic songs typically focus on national heroes, battles against invaders, and the glorious deeds of ancestors, and thus often serve as confirmation of a glorious national past and a source of identity representations. As John Miles Foley reminds us, “for national identity, epic is a foundational genre.”<sup>11</sup> According to Beissinger, Tylus and Woofford, this peculiar and complex connection of epic to national and local cultures or, as they call it, the “political explosiveness” or “political potency” of epic is most evident “in the intense reimagining of epic undertaken by most emerging European nations as a means of coming to self-knowledge as a nation.”<sup>12</sup> Michael Branch and Vilmos Voigt also view this exceptional early nineteenth-century interest in epic poetry in Eastern Europe as a part of the process of national formation and self-affirmation. As they emphasize, oral poetry often served as “a convenient substitute for written history” for Eastern European nations, and the epic was the only proper form for this subject. Voigt describes this as “the constant urge to establish or re-establish a heroic past from and in the form of heroic songs as part of the cultural tradition and identity.”<sup>13</sup> Branch conveniently labels this practice “the invention of national epic” and “the patriotic imperative to produce an epic,” and he follows the birth of several mystifications published as

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10 Cocchiara, *The History of Folklore in Europe*, 258. It is also instructive in this respect to keep in mind that terms such as *national* and *popular* also had different connotations in various European languages. Gramsci, for example, notes that while in France the term *national* had a meaning in which the term *popular* was “politically prepared for because it was linked to the concept of sovereignty,” in Italy it had a very narrow ideological meaning, which never coincided with that of *popular*; and that, on the other hand, the relationship between these two terms was completely different in Russian and other Slavonic languages in general, in which *national* and *popular* were synonyms (see Cocchiara, *The History of Folklore in Europe*, 257). In other words, Slavonic folklore and folk songs were additionally associated with the notion of the nation by the terminology itself.

11 John Miles Foley, “Epic as genre,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Homer*, ed. Robert Fowler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 185.

12 Margaret Beissinger, Jane Tylus, and Susanne Wofford, eds., *Epic Traditions in the Contemporary World: The Poetics of Community* (Berkeley–Los Angeles–London: University of California Press, 1999), 3.

13 Vilmos Voigt, “*Primus Inter Pares*: Why Was Vuk Karadžić the Most Influential Folklore Scholar in South-Eastern Europe in the Nineteenth Century,” in *The Uses of Tradition: A Comparative Enquiry into the Nature, Uses and Functions of Oral Poetry in the Balkans, the Baltic, and Africa*, ed. Michael Branch and Celia Hawkesworth (London–Helsinki: School of Slavonic and East European Studies–Finnish Literature Society, 1994), 183.

“ancient” epic poems that were “discovered” in the first half of the nineteenth century.<sup>14</sup>

### *Vuk Karadžić and the Making of the Kosovo Epic*

The aforementioned scholars also consider Serbian epic songs collected and edited by Vuk Stefanović Karadžić (1787–1864) throughout the nineteenth century as especially relevant and illustrative examples of the importance and exceptional role of epic poetry in these processes.<sup>15</sup> Born 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.<sup>16</sup> 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 acquaintances 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 younger friends and associates, the prominent Serbian poet Sima Milutinović Sarajlija and Montenegrin ruler and writer Petar II Petrović Njegoš, soon followed Karadžić’s founding work and published their editions of epic songs, mostly collected in the territory of present-day Montenegro. Milutinović printed his *A Montenegrin and Herzegovinian Songbook (Pjevanija Crnogorska i Hercegovacka)* in 1833 and 1837, and Njegoš edited *The Serbian Mirror (Ogledalo srbsko)* 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 *Bosnian and Herzegovinian Folk Songs (Narodne pjesme bosanske i hercegovacke)*, Kosta Hörmann’s *The Folk*

14 See: Michael Branch, “The Invention of a National Epic,” in *The Uses of Tradition*, 195–211.

15 See Branch, “The Invention of a National Epic”; Voigt, “*Primus Inter Pares*”; Foley, *Epic as Genre*, 171–86; Margaret Beissinger, “Epic, Genre, and Nationalism: The Development of Nineteenth-Century Balkan Literature,” in *Epic Traditions*, 69–86.

16 Jovan Deretić, *Istorija srpske književnosti* (Belgrade: Prosveta, 2004), 553–82. For a more comprehensive account of Karadžić’s role, see: *O Vuku Karadžiću: studije i eseji* (Belgrade: Prosveta, 1968).

*Songs of Bosnian and Herzegovinian Muslims (Narodne pjesme Muhamedovaca u Bosni i Hercegovini)*, and the first four volumes of *Croatian Folk Songs (Hrvatske narodne pjesme)*, were published.<sup>17</sup> 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. This notion of the folk epic as the expression of popular and collective views of national history was codified and canonized by Karadžić's and Njegoš's followers during the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>18</sup>

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.<sup>19</sup> 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.

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17 *Narodne pjesme bosanske i hercegovinske*, ed. Ivan Frano Jukić and Grga Martić (Osijek: n.p., 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.

18 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 309–26.

19 Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, *Srpske narodne pjesme I*, vol. 4 of *Sabrana dela Vuka Stefanovića Karadžića*, ed. Vladan Nedić (Belgrade: Prosveta, 1975), 569.

As far as the selection of the material is concerned, it has long been established that Karadžić's collections are anthologies rather than collections.<sup>20</sup> 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."<sup>21</sup>

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."<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup> 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."<sup>24</sup> 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

20 Deretić, *Istorija srpske književnosti*, 558.

21 Karadžić, *Srpske narodne pjesme IV*, 388.

22 Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, *Mala prostonarodnja slaveno-serbska pjesnarica (1814)*; *Narodna srbska pjesnarica (1815)*, vol. 1 of *Sabrana dela Vuka Stefanovića Karadžića*, ed. Vladan Nedić (Belgrade: Prosveta, 1965), 44.

23 See the analysis of Podrugović's contribution in Vladan Nedić, *Vukovi pevači*, ed. Radmila Pešić (Novi Sad: Matica srpska, 1981), 31ff.

24 Karadžić, *Srpske narodne pjesme IV*, 394.

heard that Milija knew two songs about medieval Serbian aristocracy exceptionally well, *The Wedding of Maksim Crnojević (Ženidba Maksima Crnojevića)* and *Banović Strahinja (Banović 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.<sup>25</sup> 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 *The Downfall of the Serbian Empire (Propast carstva Srpskoga)*, 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.”<sup>26</sup> 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.<sup>27</sup> During these years, Karadžić collected several other songs of the Kosovo epic, as a rule from the blind singers whose sided 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

25 Ibid., 397.

26 Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, *Prepiska I (1811–1821)*, vol. 20 of *Sabrana dela Vuka Stefanovića Karadžića*, ed. Golub Dobrašinić (Belgrade: Prosveta 1988), 250.

27 Karadžić, *Prepiska I (1811–1821)*, 320, 334, 353, 365, 366.



describes the building of Ravanica, a Serbian Orthodox monastery in the Kučaj Mountains that was constructed as an endowment of Prince Lazar.<sup>28</sup> 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 Serbian intellectuals 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.”<sup>29</sup>

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 Lazar’s 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.<sup>30</sup> 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.

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28 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), 154–60.

29 Matija Murko, “The Singers and their Epic Songs,” *Oral Tradition* 5 (1990): 123–24.

30 Miodrag Popović, *Vidordan i časni krst: Ogled iz književne arheologije* (Belgrade: Slovo ljubve, 1976), 65.

## *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 *Serbian Dictionary (Srpski rječnik)* 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*."<sup>31</sup> 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.<sup>32</sup> The manuscript of the song, called *About the Battle of Kosovo (O Boju Kosovskom)*, contains exactly 2,439 decasyllables,<sup>33</sup> which is approximately twenty times more than an average Serbian oral song and over twice the length of *The Wedding of Maksim Crnojević (Ženidba Maksima Crnojevića)*, 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. James Macpherson and Elias 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. 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

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31 Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, *Srpski Rječnik 1818*, vol. 2 of *Sabrana dela Vuka Stefanovića Karadžića*, ed. Pavle Ivić (Prosveta: Belgrade, 1966), 360.

32 Karadžić, *Prepiska I*, 794, 984.

33 See "O boju kosovskom," in *Srpske narodne pjesme iz neobjavljenih rukopisa Vuka Stefanovića Karadžića*, ed. Živimir Mladenović and Vladan Nedić (Belgrade: Srpska akademija nauka i umetnosti, 1974), 63–115.

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.”<sup>34</sup> According to him, the creativity and imagination characteristic of folk poetry spring and originate from these deepest and most conservative parts of the peasantry.<sup>35</sup> 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.<sup>36</sup> 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.<sup>37</sup>

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.<sup>38</sup> 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.<sup>39</sup>

34 Christa Kamenetsky, *The Brothers Grimm & Their Critics: Folktales and the Quest for Meaning* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1992), 66.

35 Miljan Mojašević, *Jakob Grim i srpska narodna književnost: Književno istorijske i poetološke osnovne* (Belgrade: Srpska akademija nauka i umetnosti, 1983), 415.

36 Karadžić, *Mala prstonarodnja slaveno-serbska pjesnarica*, 42.

37 See the reprint of Grimm’s review in Karadžić, *Srpske narodne pjesme I*, 554.

38 Aleksandar Pavlović, “Rereading the Kosovo Epic: Origins of the ‘Heavenly Serbia’ in the Oral Tradition,” *Journal of Serbian Studies* 23 (2009): 83–96.

39 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), 169–74.

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.”<sup>40</sup> Scholars have explained why Karadžić himself makes no mention of the “Trig 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.<sup>41</sup> 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).<sup>42</sup>

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

40 Ibid., 171.

41 Ibid.

42 Karadžić, *Srpske narodne pjesme I*, 559.

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 Dalmazia*, 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.<sup>43</sup>

Svetozar Matić and Miodrag Matićki 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.<sup>44</sup> 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 Živomir 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.<sup>45</sup> 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

43 See Vladan Nedić, "O prvoj i drugoj Vukovoj Pjesnarici," in Karadžić, *Mala prstonarodnja slaveno-serbska pjesnarica*, 373. Cf. Svetozar Matić, *Naš narodni ep i naš stih: Oglеди i studije* (Novi Sad: Matica srpska, 1964), 7–55.

44 See Matić, *Naš narodni ep*, esp. 35ff; Miodrag Matićki, *Istorija kao predanje* (Belgrade: Rad, 1989), 38–44.

45 Živomir Mladenović, *Traganja za Vukom* (Tršić–Belgrade: Vukov sabor–Rad, 1987), 131, 140.

period of his work which enable us to create a provisional image of his overall editorial procedure. Živomir Mladenović's comprehensive analysis of Karadžić's manuscripts identified three basic types of changes in the texts that Karadžić had published.<sup>46</sup> 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 zavalu* 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.<sup>47</sup> 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.<sup>48</sup>

### *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"<sup>49</sup> thus appears justified.

Nevertheless, when talking about the Kosovo epic, we believe that the aforementioned analysis exemplifies the impact of Vuk Karadžić and the nineteenth-century conceptions of folklore and folk songs on editing, codifying,

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46 Ibid., 138–88.

47 Ibid., 159–60.

48 Ibid., 167.

49 John Miles Foley, "Analogues: Modern Oral Epics," in *A Companion to Ancient Epic*, ed. John Miles Foley (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 208.

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, we 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 we suggested that Karadžić and later scholars contributed substantially to this exceptional status of the Kosovo songs. Thus, we 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.<sup>50</sup> 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.<sup>51</sup> 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.<sup>52</sup> The Kosovo epic has won praise the world over, as during the first half of the twentieth century, the

50 Patrick J. Geary, *The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

51 Cf.: Holm Sundhaussen, *Geschichte Serbiens: 19.–21. Jahrhundert* (Vienna: Böhlau, 2007), 115–20.

52 Stojan Novaković, *Kosovo: Srpske narodne pjesme o boju na Kosovu: pokušaj da se sastave u cjelinu kao spjev* (Belgrade: Državna štamparija, 1871).

poems were typically included in the anthologies of world epics and singled out as one of the great folk epic achievements in general.<sup>53</sup> 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,<sup>54</sup> and to Western authors, who referred to it as the source of an explanation for much of the troubles and atrocities in the Balkans.<sup>55</sup> 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.

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53 See H. Munro Chadwick, "The Battle of Kosovo in Servian Poetry," in *The Heroic Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1912), 313–19; Janko Lavrin, "Historical Preface," in *Kosovo: Heroic Songs of the Serbs*, ed. Helen Rootham (Oxford: Blackwell, 1920), 9–20; 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 *Heroic Epic and Saga: an Introduction to the World's Great Folk Epic*, ed. Felix J. Oinas (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 263.

54 Radovan Samardžić et al., *Kosovo i Metohija u srpskoj istoriji* (Belgrade: Srpska književna zadruga, 1989); Matija Bečković, *Kosovo: Najskuplja srpska reč* (Valjevo: Glascrkve, 1989); Radovan Samardžić, *Kosovsko opredeljenje: Istorijski ogledi* (Belgrade: Srpska književna zadruga, 1990).

55 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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