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Address: Danila Bojovića bb 81 400 Niksic, Montenegro;
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Urednici: Adnan Prekić, Dragutin Papović, Ivan Tepavčević

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Adresa: Danila Bojovića bb 81 400 Nikšić, Crna Gora;
E-mail: mjss@ac.me
www.mjss.ac.me

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ETHICS AND HEROISM IN ORAL TRADITION OF THE MONTENEGRIN NATIONAL MOVEMENT

Jovana DJURIĆ¹
Faculty of Arts Charles University, Prague, Czech
jovanadjuric58@gmail.com

ABSTRACT:

The article explains the historical context in which the oral tradition of the Montenegrins was created. The article analysis individual elements and concepts of the process, which are deeply rooted in the consciousness of Montenegrin society. In a review of the activities of significant individuals, who marked and celebrated the age of social resistance and the fight for freedom, is defined a model that will be in the function of strengthening the moral norm of Montenegrins. Special attention will be focused on the symbolism of the whole process and the way in which certain symbols have influenced the formation of the ideals of humanity and heroism. The Montenegrin folk literature, both written and oral, is the most important source in processing this topic. The analysis of the famous folk epic poetry has shown what the attitude of the Montenegrins towards the ideal of heroism is. Even though the highly idealized legends and epic folk poetry do not paint a realistic picture of the history of the Montenegrin fight for liberation, they are nonetheless a credible source in showing the ideal of heroism in which Montenegrins firmly believed. The method of field research I used the most was an interview. The target group were mostly people from villages in northern Montenegro, who retold me the stories and legends they heard from their parents and ancestors.

KEY WORDS:

Ethics; Heroism; Oral tradition; Montenegro; Folklore.

¹ Jovana Djurić, (1992.), After receiving a scholarship from the Czech government studied ethnology at Faculty of Arts, Charles University 2012-1015. Now is master student in Ethnology working on thesis on Serbian turbofolk and nationalism.
SAŽETAK:
Članak objašnjava istorijski kontekst u kojem je nastala usmena tradicija Crne Gore. Analiziraju se individualni elementi i koncept tradicije koji je usadjen u svijest crnogorskog društva. U tom kontekstu predstavlja se pregled najznačajnijih događaja i ličnosti koji su obilježili proces nacionalnog oslobođenja. Takođe, objašnjava se i model koji se u tom procesu pokušavaju osnažiti određene moralne norme Crnogora. Posebna pažnja posvećena je formiranju specifičnih simbola ovog ponašanja koji će imati uticaj na formiranje ideala čojstva i junaštva. Crnogorska narodna književnost, kako usmena, tako i pisana, je najvažniji izvor u obradi ove teme i ona objašnjava stavove Crnogoraca prema idealu heroizma. Osim narodne književnosti, korištena je i metoda terenskog istraživanja. Ova vrsta istraživanja realizovana je kroz formu intervjua. Ciljna grupa su bili ljudi sa sjevera Crne Gore, koji su prepričavali priče i legende, koje su čuli od svojih roditelja i predaka.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI:
Etika; Čojstvo; Junaštvo; Folkloristika; Crna Gora; Usmena književnost.
**Introduction**

The period of liberation wars of Montenegrins against the Ottoman Empire is characterized by the appearance of a large number of works of epic and oral tradition. For Montenegrins, the wars of liberation against the Ottomans lasted as long as the occupation itself. It is during this centuries long struggle that the concepts of Montenegrin autonomy and Montenegrin honour emerged as a result of epic songs, myths, and legends about various Montenegrin heroes and heroines.

An important cultural component of Montenegrin oral tradition is the ethical ideal of Čojstvo i Junaštvo (Humanness and Heroism) which created the idea of a common ancestor to the various Montenegrin clans and evoked stories of heroic resistance to the Ottomans. As Albert B. Lord explains, oral epics of the nineteenth century are undoubtedly linked to the rise of nationalism and their heroic subjects are meant to stand in as heroes of the entire nation and as glorifications of the national ideal (Lord 1960). It is through these oral epics that we can find the roots of a distinct Montenegrin identity that fosters ideas of individual “heroic deaths” and higher ideals of “freedom”/“honour” more prominently than the surrounding countries that were also under Ottoman occupation.

The specific historical and social circumstances in which the fight for liberation was developing in Montenegro also influenced the formation of specific models of national consciousness. The specificity is a result of that the Montenegrin literature was almost exclusively oral. As a society without institutions or an organized educational system, cultural works utilized the creation of a national Montenegrin identity. It is for this reason that those responsible for propagating the idea of Montenegrin identity were always representatives of an elite who were simultaneously artists, writers, and poets as well as important political figures. (Hroch, 1999.) The aesthetic function of all works of art reflected the creation of national consciousness focused primarily on the principles of “čojstvo i junaštvo”. For Vido Latković, these “Epic songs, which speak of the fight for the freedom of the Montenegrin people, are not always the best creations of epic poetry from this region, but they contain an impressive picture of a special life, patriarchal and difficult, through which sometimes hard, but always elevated humanism is expressed. And this gives them special value” (Latković, 1964.) In this paper, I employ several examples of oral folklore with the aim of highlighting the specific traits linked to “čojstvo i junaštvo”. These examples emerged in the course of conducting the interviews and observations, which were
selected as methods for this ethnographic study. Some impressively extreme narratives serve to illustrate the relativity of the concepts. Others, popular even among foreign writers, show the far-reaching admiration for the honor and bravery that the heroes embody. And lastly, the use of the mountain setting reveals the significance of the place that, in literal and metaphorical sense for the realization of high ideals, ‘čojstvo i junaštvo’ represent.

And finally, all the mentioned stories and songs relate to the specific historical period, in which the concepts discussed in this paper were developed.

There are two streams in the theories of oral literature on the importance of the author. One in relation to which the individual poet is the carrier and creator of artistic value: “It can be concluded that every performance is actually a special song, because each performance is unique and carries the stamp of the poet who performs it. Perhaps he learned that song from others, but the song produced in that performance is only his. The audience recognizes the song as his, because he stands before them and performs it.” (Lord 1960.)

The second stream is based on the view that folkloristics as a comparative science that studies oral literature, deals with the analysis of the spiritual culture of the people, and therefore attributes the artistic creations of oral literature to the collective spirit of the people, and not to the individual creators. “The admiration to this collective spirit, which is portrayed in the oral songs of the collection of Vuk Karadzic, grew especially because of the praise of the people from the very top of European culture, such as for example Jacob Grimm, but no attention was paid to the poets of oral literary creations as creative creators. The statements of some Europeans who, as lovers of the collective spirit of their people, published books as oral literary works emerging from a collective spirit, show that the collective spirit in oral literature was appreciated, and not that of a creative individual. Three most famous among them are James Macpherson, Prosper Mérimée and Václav Hanka.” (Kilibarda, 2009)

For the purpose of this paper, we will focus on the second approach, which attributes value to the collective spirit as opposed to the creative skills of the individual storyteller. First of all, the anonymity of the majority of the works makes it difficult to focus on the original creator. The systematic collection and recording of these songs and stories started only in the 19th century with Vuk Karadzic, when tracing the origins of earlier works was already a strenuous task. Furthermore, as already
mentioned, what was highly appreciated was not the creative value of those stories but the message they conveyed about the morals and the ideals of the people. Thus, the central figure was not the author or the performer, but rather the hero in the story itself, who represented the values of the collective. And finally, it is worth noting that the time of creation of these works coincides with the struggles to conserve the collective identity during Ottoman occupation, the fights for liberation and the formation of the nation.

In the forthcoming presentation, I will try to explain how and to what extent the oral tradition has influenced the consciousness and collective spirit of Montenegrin people.
CONCEPT OF “ČOJSTVO” IN MONTENEGRO

“Čojstvo” in a rough translation means humanity. In the oral tradition of Montenegro, long handed over from one person to another, heroism does not exist without humanity. These two terms are inseparable. When we talk about “čojstvo”, we also talk about ethics and morality.

Throughout history, different nations have set themselves different moral ideals. For example, in Ancient China, the moral code according to which they lived were the principles of Confucius. Old Greece opens a history of intense philosophical debates on moral virtues and moral behaviour. From Pythagoras through Sophist to Aristotle, ideas and philosophies of morals evolved. After the stoic teaching that it is necessary to live in harmony with nature, the Christian ethics comes in line, which marks the medieval ethical thought. Faith in the intellectual power of man is replaced by religious faith in God. Saint Augustine, the founder of the theological doctrine of morality, as a particular moral value and virtue sees: renunciation, faith, mercy, forgiveness, and non-erotic love.

The Renaissance is an epoch in which the moral codes of Christianity are abruptly abandoned and the Hellenic ideas of morality are being restored, and the principle of satisfaction becomes the dominant moral guide. Ethical ideals further evolve in the new century from reformers, Hobbes and Spinoza through the English Utopians and Age of Enlightenment to German Classical Philosophy and Immanuel Kant.

In Montenegrin oral tradition, in every song and legend you can see the highly expressed moral ideals of humanity in the heroism. Their moral values were mostly influenced by medieval Christian philosophy. This is reflected not only in the idea of “čojstvo” and heroism, but also in the patriarchal upbringing and way of life. The fact that the Christian religion influenced Montenegro is also shown in the fact that archbishops were the heads of the country since 1516, when the last ruler of the Montenegrin dynasty Crnojević denounced the throne in favour of Archbishop Vavil, and Montenegro became a theocratic entity. This lasted until 1852 when Danilo II Petrović Njegoš becomes the first prince of the Principality of Montenegro as a world state instead of the previous theocracy. Despite the fact that the majority of Montenegrins converted to Christianity “Pagan texts, songs and stories continued to live in Christian usage, and Christianity adjusted paganism to its interests”. (Kilibarda, 2009)

The traditions of all world nations contain myths about heroes, in which the cult of heroism and the heroic-chivalrous philosophy of life are expressed. That’s why
every nation remembers its heroes. The history of Montenegro is such that heroism - usually and mainly related to war and battles - has long been the most appreciated characteristic of the Montenegrin people. Examples of humanity and bravery are written by Marko Miljanov at the end of the 19th century, and they demonstrate the unforgettable examples of the heroism of the Montenegrin warriors, but also teach that heroism is a moral category only when it is human, when even the most difficult decisions do not wrong honour. The shortest definition of “čojstvo” and heroism as defined by Miljanov would be the following: “Heroism is when you defend the weaker from the stronger; “čojstvo” is when you defend the weaker from yourself.” (Miljanov, 1996.)

How much “čojstvo” had an impact on the life and death of Montenegrins can be seen in numerous written and unwritten stories, legends and songs. And these folk creations have made the moral ideals to be transferred from one person to another and so on for centuries and unchanged. The most extreme cases, where the most moral ideals cross boundaries and go to the absolute extremity, show how strongly specific values are respected. One such case is a story about how a man killed his godfather:

“And this word of Tomo is beautiful. Trenčo killed his nephew. Tomo mourned his nephew as his own son. That has already been and passed. When Tomo rebuked the killer, telling him: "Why did you kill your godfather, may God and St. John kill you!", the killer said: "Uncle Tomo, that villain Vuja made me do it, so I said: "I will kill him!"- and I couldn’t lie", Tomo:"Well, when you already said it, you were right to kill him! For you must not slay the word, for it would cast your own honour!” (Miljanov, 1996)

For someone who is just beginning to study the concept of “čojstvo” and heroism in Montenegrin folk tradition, some things may seem contradictory. From the beginning, it is quite clear that Christian ethics has a great role in the overall formation of the Montenegrin ideal of humanity and freedom of thought. However, it is already clear from the above example that the Montenegrin morality relativizes the sin of murder. There are many situations described in the oral, but also in written tradition, where murder is justified and sometimes it is even called upon. By dealing with this topic, and trying to explain and define the concept of “čojstvo” and what it meant to the Montenegrin people, I have come to the point that in this region one’s own and someone else’s life had a much lower price than honour.
Illustrative example of the Montenegrin experience of the concept of “čojstvo” is the case of the Montenegrin army officer Aleksandar Lekso Saičić. This soldier, then the officer in Russian army in 1905 near Vladivostok, held one of the last knight fights. In the series of conflicts within the Russian-Japanese War (1904-1905) a call was sent from the Japanese side to send one of their heroic prisoners, who will go out on a duel with then the most famous samurai of Japanese Empire. Not to go out on a duel meant to admit one’s own nothingness. Lekso said: “Give me a good horse and good sword, and don’t worry about me”. They shared the duel in the presence of the two armies. After a fierce clash, the samurai was dead. Lekso then gave recognition to the fallen hero and he received a medal from the Russian side. Lekso Saičić was wounded three times in this war, far from Montenegro. And this was also the way of joining Montenegro with the world. Tolstoy liked this very much, and gave Lekso his works and in one of his texts Tolstoy highlighted the following sentence: “If there were heroisms that stink and heroisms that smell, Lekso’s would be the latter.” (Kastratović, Djurović, 1992)

**SYMBOLIC IMPORTANCE OF THE MOUNTAINS IN MONTENEGRO**

A strong emphasis on morality and humanity had to be accompanied by strong symbolism as well. Examples of heroism and bravery could not remain only the act of an individual. They were supposed to be one kind of ideological pedagogy, because of which it was necessary to affirm and expand these values among the population. The most effective aspect of this process was the creation of certain symbols that would be a recognizable sign of all those values and traditions of heroism and bravery. Similarly to some other civilizations, Montenegrins have chosen a mountain for one of the most important symbols of these ideals. In many world literatures, songs, stories and legends, the mountain is an ideal stage for great heroic acts.

From Olympus to the Asian mountains on which Buddhism and other religions developed, the mountain had a symbolic meaning for many people. It represented something sacred, just because it was with its height close to the heavens, it was something mysterious and unachievable, and something that is therefore a subject to imagination and wonder of what could exist up there. This term is most often expressed in the form of myths and legends concerning the mountain of the gods or, as in the case of the Montenegrins, the heroes. Often, the mountain was a place of residence for those who are holy and mysterious, or a place inhabited by the
mysterious forces of glory and immortality. As the earth was connected to all that is human, earthly peaks reaching to the heavens and which were often transformed by eternal snow, were spontaneously regarded as the most suitable material to express spiritual states of consciousness through allegories, myths and legends, often figuratively represented in the form of gods and other supernatural beings. Many cultures considered mountains to be more worthy, more grandiose places, places closer to the divine than any temple or any sacred building made by man.

In the case of Montenegro, the central place of this symbol belongs to the mountain Lovćen, which dominates the area where the first steps of the liberation movement in Montenegro developed. Unlike some other civilizations in which the holy mountains were the places where the Gods and Deities live (Olympus, Ararat), Lovćen is more a symbol of the liberation idea. It is a place exalted above the whole of Montenegro, where various political meetings and conferences were held. Montenegrins marked this mountain not only with mythical beings and legends, but also with real historical events and personalities. Petar II Petrović Njegoš, one of the most celebrated Montenegrin ruler and poet, also saw his place on the highest mountain and he is the second one who is buried there even today. According to today’s knowledge, there were no buildings on the slopes of the high and inhospitable parts of Lovćen until the middle of the 19th century. During his reign Njegoš decided to build a small stone chapel on the steep and rocky ridge of the peak Jezerski vrh. Undoubtedly, his romanticism, with very rational calculations, had impact on his decision to crown the peak of Lovćen with a stone chapel. Lovćen was the place of gathering and pointing out who was bigger, stronger and braver.

In addition to Lovćen, a significant symbolism for a mountain peak is also associated with mountain Rumija and the cult of Prince Vladimir of Duklja.

At the end of the 10th century, Vladimir was the ruler of Duklja, which at that time spread from Boka Kotorska to the River Bojana. In complicated foreign policy conditions, Vladimir tried unsuccessfully to make an agreement with Byzantium against Emperor Samuil. This provoked Samuil’s anger, and in 997 he sent his army to Duklja. The conflict took place on the River Bojana and the Duklja’s army was defeated. Vladimir was captured and taken to Samuil’s Palace in Prespa (Macedonia). Samuil’s daughter, Princess Kosara, fell in love with Duklja’s prince and with Samuil’s consent, Vladimir and Kosara married soon after. Vladimir returned to Duklja as Samuil’s vassal, however, after Samuil’s death in 1014, the new Macedonian ruler Vladislav decided to remove Vladimir. He called him to Prespa, and as a
guarantee that nothing would happen to him, he sent Vladimir a cross above which he swore on his peacefulness. Vladimir came to Prespa but emperor Vladislav didn’t keep his promise, and in 1016, he killed Duklja’s Prince Vladimir by beheading him. In 1019, Vladimir’s relics were transferred to the monastery of St. Marija Krajinska (Prečista Krajinska), on the slopes of the Montenegrin mountain Rumija, above the Skadar Lake. People thought that Vladimir’s relics were miraculous and he was proclaimed a saint. On icons, iconostasis and frescoes St. Vladimir is always shown as he holds his head in his left hand and a cross in his right hand. St. Vladimir was the ruler of Duklja before the division of the Christian church into the Catholic and Orthodox Church in 1054, so he is celebrated in Montenegro by Catholics and Orthodox Christians and Muslims. Every 22nd May the inhabitants from the surrounding villages climb onto the mountain Rumija and each one of them symbolically carries a stone, so that one day a church could be raised there when the conditions permit. (Rotković, 2003)

This is another story in which we can see the significance of honour and courage and the importance that the given terms have in this part of the Balkans. On one hand, the story on the brave and honourable prince, and on the other, the emperor who violates the given word, were passed on to the generations and today live in the form of custom that is part of the local community.

Along with the mountain peaks, in the symbolism of Montenegrin experience of the ideals of heroism and bravery, many micro-locations in Montenegrin hills, canyons and ravines represent significant places. Often confronted with a superior enemy, Montenegrins used natural shelters to attack the Ottoman Army or their merchant caravans. One of the most famous ambushes was when Novak Cerović killed Smail-aga Čengić with his troop. This event was sung in the poem of Ivan Mažuranić called “The death of Smail-aga Čengić”.

This is just one of the ambushes prepared for the Ottomans, organized by numerous troops and troop leaders across Montenegro, and many of these ambushes were sung in folk songs.
GUSLE SINGERS AND SONGS

In the absence of literature, literacy and other civilization heritage, the only way to transfer these ideas of heroism and bravery was an epic tradition and gusle players. Gusle players, epic poets, sang out long stories about history and heroes, while playing on single or double-string instruments called gusle. They were the main bearers of oral tradition and literature. Painter Peter Lubarda said about the gusle players: “In the long winter nights, we gathered together and I was lying and looking from the bottom through the fire at gusle player and I painted him in the way I saw him when I was a kid, from a lying position, illuminated by the light of fire from the fireplace.” (Kilibarda, 2009)

The harsh and cold winters in the mountains gathered people around the fireplace, where gusle players sang about their heroes and spoke about specific events from the past. “Since the circumstances influenced the oral form of creation, they must be taken into account. Epic poetry, in Yugoslavia, was sung on various occasions. In the villages, where the houses were often at a large distance, the gatherings were most often happening in one of the houses.” (Lord, 1960)

An elementary part of Montenegrin epic poetry is gusle. Gusle players, folk singers, sang almost about all events from national history, until these lyrics were finally recorded. Most of the songs speak about the time of Ottoman reign and fight for independence. Vuk Karadžić wrote down many epic songs in the early 19th century. Most of the gusle songs speak about real historical events and characters, however, they are romanticized and have played an important role in the creation of myths and legends.

Gusle is an instrument that is related to the settlements of the South Slavs and is mentioned even in the 10th century in Byzantine writings. It is a string instrument - the sound is produced by dragging the fiddle bow over the strings. It has one, or possibly two strings, and it is usually made of maple tree. Besides Montenegro, gusle can be seen in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Dalmatia. The skill of making gusle is highly appreciated in the countries in which they are found. They are often carved with additional motifs associated with heroes described in folk epic poems, as well as religious symbols. Gusle, as a steppe instrument, further originates from Central Asia. Its most related instruments are morinhur and igil. At the top of gusle is often a horse or goat’s head as a symbol of livestock breeding and nomadic peo-
ple, while the fiddle bow is most often made in the form of a snake, as a symbol of mountaineer’s anger. The symbol of the snake is often present in the South Slavs, and often has a positive meaning. The snake which is considered to be a house keeper is still respected in many rural environments, where it is considered a sin and the invocation of an accident to kill a snake near the house. Veselin Čajkanović, one of the most important researchers of ancient Slavic mythology, explains in connection with the cult of the ancestors, the following: “There was a custom of laying ashes of the deceased below the threshold of the house where he/she was born. It was believed that on the ashes of the ancestors sleeps “Snake, the house keeper”, and that it was magically connected with the ancestors as their representative on the earth.” (Čajkanovic, 1973). Later the characters of the heroes appeared at the top of gusle.

It is interesting to note that the most vivid tradition with gusle took place almost as a rule in the mountainous regions, communities in which nature was often merciless, and the conditions for life were almost impossible, in Montenegro, Herzegovina and the southern and mountainous parts of Serbia.

The songs are mainly about Montenegrin battles of the 18th and 19th centuries. Besides-the conflicts with the Ottomans, the themes of the songs are the abduction of the herds, robberies, inter-tribal conflicts. The themes of the songs are historically precise and realistic, apart from the descriptions of the heroes, which are often highly exaggerated and romanticized. In the tradition of gusle the heroes become more akin to dragons, falcons, and essentially larger than life.

Gusle’s primary role in Montenegrin society was, perhaps, above all else, educational since notable historical events, moral values, traditions and cultural obligations were disseminated through the instrument to the people.

Gusle players were often illiterate and differed from other members of the peasantry only by their ability to create. As text carriers or creators, gusle players were able to acquire knowledge and spontaneously inform about events and heroes. In the case of a literary poet, the work is carried forth indefinitely once its recorder. However, for a gusle player the moment of creation and the moment of performance is one, indivisible, because “the creation of a song and its saying are two aspects of the same moment”. (Lord, 1960) Gusle players had the ability to learn, but also to emotionally experience their songs. This helped them with the performance, when they started to change the oral text or add romantic motives. This way of saying maintained the oral literature through centuries. The duration of this kind of creative creation covered the entire territory of today’s Montenegro. (Kilibarda, 2009)
CONCLUSION

The present paper explored the creation of epic and oral tradition in Montenegro and the emergence of the ideals of ‘čojstvo and junaštvo’ in turbulent historical times. The cultural merit of these ideas for the collective Montenegrin spirit was analyzed with the help of interviews and literature on the topic. The interview was chosen as a research method due to its great value for the better understanding of the influence of the songs and stories on the todays society, and the preservation of the memory of the collective spirit. As to the literature review, the analysis of the birth of the nation was supported with the works of Miroslav Hroch, while Benedix’s “In Search of Authenticity. Formation of Folklore Studies” was helpful in the discussion of the oral tradition of the gusle singers. Additionally, the collective works of Vuk Karadzic and Marko Miljanov, as well as Njegoš’ “Gorski Vijenac” were used to provide authentic examples of narratives that emphasize the importance of ‘čojstvo i junaštvo’.

The turbulent history of the Balkans is most evident in the area of today’s Montenegro. There is almost no peaceful period that would allow the Montenegrins to have normal living conditions or the development of material and cultural goods. Pavle Rovinjski in his work “Montenegro in the past and present” claims that: “All Montenegrin past, all its history is eternal warfare, which was man’s everyday job, as well as other profession.” (Rovinjski, 2004). Only these living conditions could create the creative legacy of Montenegrins.

Through the history of fighting and war in Montenegro, a characteristic aspect of cultural creativity has been created, that was a support and which kept a unique moral code, whose important part is “čojstvo”. Of course, “čojstvo” and heroism cannot be innate characteristic. The Montenegrin could perceive humanity and heroism only from the example of their traditions.

In this moral code, freedom had a higher price than life, and therefore there is no monument in Montenegro today for an unknown hero. All its heroes are famous and prominent.
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