

# Cultural Images of the Ethnic Groups and Ethnic Interrelations in the Balkans

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Article abstract

In this paper I work with some cultural representations of ethnic images. I understand ethnic images as mental constructions of ideas, beliefs, opinions, attitudes, and values, created by the members of a given ethnic group and helping them to describe, evaluate and present «our» or «the other» ethnic groups. Ethnic images have different social, psychological, artistic, and other dimensions which need to be studied not only because of their interesting nature as an analytical object, but also because of their significant role as a factor motivating certain behavioural strategies in a situation of interethnic interaction. My observations and conclusions are supported by examples documented over a period of 100 years in order to illustrate the striking constancy of the themes and processes giving rise to ethnic images among some of the ethnic groups living on the Balkan peninsula in the last century and today. Because of the present significance of these problems in the Balkans, I also give examples commenting on current events in the region.

# CULTURAL IMAGES OF THE ETHNIC GROUPS AND ETHNIC INTERRELATIONS IN THE BALKANS<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

The topic of the ethnic image is studied in a multitude of research disciplines. This is preconditioned, on the one hand, by the complex nature of the ethnic image as an object of analysis, and, on the other hand, by pragmatic considerations associated with the need to predict a definite type of human reactions in a certain type of social situations.

The enormous influence exerted by images of “our” community and “other” communities on the human mentality and conduct since ancient times is sufficiently well-known. In this case I shall be concerned with the images of “our” and “their” ethnic communities and with the ways in which human opinions, attitudes, and arguments for social activeness are shaped in accordance with the consciousness of someone’s ethnic identity.

Ethnic prejudices are often mentioned in everyday speech and even in scientific discussions, but it is not always sufficiently clarified that such ethnic prejudices are the result of stereotypical images, arising among different ethnic communities in various historical periods. This article will provide examples documented over a period of 100 years in order to illustrate the striking constancy of the themes and processes giving rise to ethnic images among some of the ethnic groups living on the Balkan peninsula in the last century and today.

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As regards modernity, the events occurring in recent years in the Balkans, and particularly those related to the war in the former Yugoslavia, trigger the production of ethnic images in a definite way and provide sufficient material to observe the power of their impact on people's opinions and evaluations of other people and events. The role of ethnic images as a factor motivating certain behavioral strategies in a situation of interethnic interaction or in the context of discussing such interaction is quite pronounced. This is why I shall also include examples commenting on the principal current events in the Balkan region.

### **Ethnic Images or Images of *Ethnies***

What is meant here is an image or images of a certain ethnic group: images that refer one to the group's general characteristics perceived and interpreted by its members or by members of another ethnic group. In keeping with proper academic tradition I will begin by defining my terms. By *ethnic images* I mean mental constructions of ideas, beliefs, opinions, attitudes, values, etc., created by the members of a given ethnic group and helping them to describe, evaluate and present "our" or "the other" ethnic groups. Ethnic images are based on some *knowledge* about a certain ethnic group but this knowledge can be obtained in quite different ways — ranging from serious written sources to gossiping over a cup of coffee. Hence, this knowledge is not necessarily connected with verified facts. Facts are rather selected to be consistent with this knowledge and to add new emphases to it. This knowledge is part of the specific social knowledge of the group (van Dijk 1993; Fiske and Taylor 1991; Wyer and Srull 1984, 1989) and it can be used by individuals in various social situations to satisfy a large number of social and cultural needs. Most frequently the people sharing this knowledge have no doubts about the truthfulness of the facts that constitute it. Therefore the generic form of ethnic group presentation is quite natural: "We, Bulgarians, are...", "They, Turks, are...".

Ethnic groups also share general *opinions* about themselves or about other groups. As in the case of knowledge, socially shared opinions may be organized by complex mental schemes, which can be denoted by the traditional term *attitude* (van Dijk 1993). As regards *values* (Rokeach 1979), I can say that each type of culture comes with a repertoire of dominant values that are used in the basic evaluations embodied in the cultural concepts, as well as in every text of that culture. Values are those characteristics of the groups that specifically

contribute to the optimal conditions for the “success” of the group and its members (van Dijk 1993; 1984).

Ethnic images function on a personal level but they are part of a commonly shared social experience. They are the mental correspondents of social relations. In this sense I can say that the internal structure of ethnic images is cognitive, but their external structure (including conditions and functions) is group-based, hence social. This allows me to define the social dimensions of ethnic images and to relate the individual and the social in their study.

The social dimensions of ethnic images presuppose definitions of *ethnic group* and *ethnic identity*. I adopt the following definition of an ethnic group for my observations: “a named population with myths of common ancestry, shared historical memories, one or more elements of common culture, a link with a homeland and a sense of solidarity among at least some of its members”(Hutchinson and Smith 1996: 6). It is worth noting that the description of a certain ethnic group is viewed in a context of self/other distinctions (Eriksen 1993; Todorov 1982; Zimel 1990) and that these descriptions depend on identity/membership criteria. Answers to the questions: “Who are we?” “Who belongs or does not belong to the group?” “Who is part of ‘us’ and who is part of ‘them?’” determine the peculiar outlines of ethnic images.

### **Components of Ethnic Images**

The components of ethnic images stem from the definition of an “ethnic group” and can be presented more elaborately as follows:

- a common proper name to identify and express the “essence” of the community;
- a myth of common ancestry: a myth but not necessarily a fact; a myth that includes the idea of a common origin in time and place and that gives an ethnic a sense of fictive kinship...;
- shared historical memories, or better, shared memories of a common past or pasts, including heroes, events, and their commemoration;
- one or more elements of common culture, which need not be specified but normally include religion, customs, or language;

- a link with a homeland, not necessarily its physical occupation by the ethnies, only its symbolic attachment to the ancestral land, as with diaspora peoples;

- a sense of solidarity on the part of at least some sections of the ethnies' population (Hutchinson and Smith 1996: 6-7).

The elements listed above can easily be accepted as basic elements of an ethnic image since the latter is the mental correspondent to each of the ethnic group's characteristics.

The highlights in this list of elements are the subjectivity (we speak about shared myths and memories and not about actual occurrences), and the orientation towards the past (origin, common ancestry, and historical formation of the ethnies), which is explored for arguments of uniqueness, i.e. distinction from other similar ethnic communities.

The same arguments are used to present a common culture including a common language or dialect, faith, religion, customs, mentality, specific occupations, food, apparel, etc., and all these in compliance with the values of "our" community. The physical traits of the people belonging to a certain ethnic community are important, yet they are not presented as a real description but rather as a complement to the already preconditioned inclusion of the beautiful=ours and the ugly=theirs.

An ethnic image is built by these principal components regardless of the context in which it is generated or exists, but the specific interpretation of each of them depends on the ethnic identity of the respective individual. Each person interprets their meanings and presents them from his/her specific perspective.

The key characteristics of an ethnic image are:

- *mosaic nature*: its elements are dispersed in social and cultural space, and they are brought together in an orderly definition only for purposes of analysis;

- *metonymic aspect*: most of the cultural texts display only one or several of the listed components of the ethnic image expressing the idea held by the individual or by the community about its own ethnic community or about the other one;

- *conservatism*: ethnic images are reproduced in one and the same way even when the types of cultures are changed, since they meet the same human

needs — the desire to be separate, to demarcate one's own community space, and to make a stand against "the other," "the external";

- *liability to manipulation*: ethnic images are deliberately used by persons or groups to create motivation for certain social actions among the members of the ethnic community and to identify a moral case for those actions.

### Cultural Dimensions of Ethnicity

Each ethnic image is specifically represented in a series of cultural realia: speech, everyday or ritual behavior, music or dance (Aleksandrieva 1994; Danova, Dimova and Kalitsin 1995; *Project on Ethnic Relations* 1993; Gueorgieva 1992, Todorova 1996; Elchinova 1997). In other words, the analysis of an ethnic image begins with consideration of the phenomena in which it is implanted, and ends up with its abstract delineation, such as the definition quoted above. A mental construction of the type of ethnic image can be derived from the different cultural texts containing information on some of its elements. Everyday and ritual speech, everyday and ritual behavior give us a wide spectrum of ethnic expressions and help us explain some typical models of ethnic interactions. This is particularly the case in contact zones, i.e. zones where different ethnic communities come in contact.

I would like to illustrate these more general comments with some examples. In these examples we find reflections of one or more of the components of an ethnic image as constructed from the "we"-position of the ethnic community.

The end of the nineteenth century was a period of Bulgarian "national romanticism." The Bulgarians had only just formed a state during the final stages of the disintegration of the Ottoman empire, and were in need of some sort of cultural stabilizers for the idea of their ethno-national community. It was imperative that the greatness and majesty of the Bulgarian ethnic and state be demonstrated and "proven." Hence very quickly there arose vast quantities of "historical" evidence concerning the ancient origins of the Bulgarians, the great and victorious battles of the Bulgarian tsars, the beauty and purity of the Bulgarian language, the righteous acts of the Bulgarian clergy, and the like. Especially telling in this regard are the writings of G.S. Rakovski, one of the Bulgarian renaissance authors, in which the ancient Bulgarian homeland is sought somewhere in India, and the genesis of the Bulgarian language is found to be in Sanskrit (Rakovski 1988). Writings of this

sort have little concern for historical accuracy, but such ideas of ancient ethnic origins and language nonetheless became popular quite quickly and were woven into oral narratives commenting on these themes. Stories of this kind can be recorded even today. The following is a short fragment of one such narrative:

*The Bulgarians have a long and glorious history...*

“We, the Bulgarians, are a very old people. We arrived here so long ago, that everyone has long since forgotten exactly when. I don’t know exactly where from, but from across the sea someplace...India, Egypt... I’m not really sure. A long, long time they traveled and they found this land. And it’s been ours since pretty much forever, and that’s why we love it and take care of it. We were different from everybody else. We had very strong tsars, the strongest tsars and the strongest country and nobody dared to step up and face us... And a strong culture we had, and everything... And the guys that were here before, nothing! But, we’ve had some bad luck. ’Cause so then the Turks came and just look what they did! They’re bad news, them...” (Todorova 1990).

There is a crisis of national identity in Bulgaria today, aggravated since 1989, and once again there appear writings which concern certain new “facts,” proving the ancient origin of the Bulgarians and the significance of Bulgarian culture through the ages, so that people might find in this the lost worth of their own time (Dobrev 1997). The ideas expressed in these writings often find their way into oral communication.

For the last ten years Yugoslavia has also been in a period of enormous political, economic, and spiritual crisis, which is to say, there has arisen a need for a general shoring-up of weakened national foundations and ethnic values. Hence precisely in this period there has appeared an overwhelming quantity of pseudo-historical literature in which authors seek the ancient roots of the Serbian ethnics and “prove” its great contributions to human civilization. Interesting here is the appearance of a body of literature “proving” that the Serbs have had their own civilization since 4000 years ago, and were literate before the appearance of any other writing system in the world (Lukic-Pjanovic 1994-1996; Deretic 1998). In these writings we find the claim that the ethnonym “Serb” comes from their primary pagan deity “Serbon.” Additionally, we learn that many of the Roman and Byzantine emperors were in fact Serbs; that in place of Sanskrit (or in one case, of Indo-European), we should speak of “Archaic Serbian”; that the roots of Western-European civilization are to be

found in the ancient Serbian civilization in the Balkans, and so on and so forth. In the last few years these ideas have gained widespread popularity, and form the basis for stories told among friends. Such stories most often begin with “Did you know that we, the Serbs...” and continue on about the glorious historical past.

The situation in Macedonia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Romania is typologically similar. In these places as well one often hears of “hard” evidence for the ancient origin of the Macedonian people from the kin of Alexander the Great, or that Macedonian history is 4000 years old. Many Croatians are now of the opinion that the Croatian ethnics has its roots in ancient Persia, whereas the Romanian ethnics is believed to be “directly connected” with the ancient Dacians, etc.

I would like here to give a few additional concrete examples of texts in which the main heroes of the ethnics, the patron saints of its members, and the notions of “natural ethnic boundaries” (which are always more inclusive than those of their respective nation-states), all contribute to the formation of an ethnic image of heroes, saints, borders and history.

### *Twin Songs — Croatian and Serbian*

#### a. Stride after Stride

Running into the streets, running into the streets,  
the maidens of Zagreb.  
Stride after stride, the young Croat marches under his banner.  
We fight, fight the battle,  
The Croatian banner waves,  
For freedom and our home,  
Our Croatian home.  
Running into the streets, running into the streets,  
They were all smiling.  
We fight, fight the battle,  
The Croatian banner waves,  
For freedom and our home,  
Our Croatian home.  
Dear God, Dear God,  
How handsome are these youths!  
We fight, fight the battle,  
The Croatian banner waves,  
For freedom and our home,



Our Croatian home.  
 That's how their mothers brought them up.  
 We fight, fight the battle,  
 The Croatian banner waves,  
 For freedom and our home,  
 Our Croatian home (Colovic 1994; 1995).

b. The Guard of King Petar Marched

Marching, marching,  
 the guard of King Petar.  
 Stride after stride, a young hero under the banner.  
 We fight, fight the battle,  
 The banner waves  
 For the freedom of Serbia.  
 Watching them, watching them  
 the ladies of Beograd  
 Stride after stride, a young hero under the banner.  
 We fight, fight the battle,  
 The banner waves  
 For the freedom of Serbia.  
 Kneeling down, kneeling down,  
 They prayed to God.  
 Stride after stride, a young hero under the banner.  
 We fight, fight the battle,  
 The banner waves  
 For the freedom of Serbia (Colovic 1994; 1995).

Interesting in these two examples is the fact that they are virtually identical in both text and music, and only the central figures are changed to be either Serbs or Croats as needed.

*Proud Croatia! (Croatian)*

I sit on my doorstep, on my street,  
 I will give my Croatian home to no one.  
 Vukovar, pride of all Croatians,  
 Osijek and Vinkovci stand together like brothers.  
 All of Slavonia said "No!"  
 Croatia is so proud of this.  
 Istria is dear, she never cries.  
 The Šibenik lads sing louder and louder.

Marjan shall always wave our flag.  
Stradun will beat up the old oppressors [?].  
All of Dalmatia said "No!"  
Croatia is so proud of this.  
Lika is more beautiful than ever before.  
Sisak is once again a historic city.  
Ancient Varazhdin is in my heart.  
Zagreb has given its sons for our home.  
All of Croatia said "No!"  
The Croatians are so proud of this (Colovic 1994; 1995).

In this example we find the gradual sketching of the Croatian ethnic borders and a clear expression of the perceived naturalness and fairness of this process.

### *Six Centuries Have Gone By Since the Battle of Kosovo (Serbian)*

Six centuries have gone by since the battle of Kosovo,  
I am proud of you, oh my Serbia!  
Because you remember all the heroes fallen for Serbia.  
You hold the relics of Tsar Lazar, you hold our history.  
Six centuries of our history,  
All Serbs, lift your cups!  
Let's drink to the brave warriors  
Who now lie beneath the peonies.  
Oy, oy, oy, oy, six centuries, oy!  
We gathered here together at Gazimestan  
To celebrate the battle of bygone days,  
To bow before the monument to Milos Obilic,  
To see where the nine Yugosvici fell.  
Oy, oy, oy, oy, six centuries, oy!  
Forgetfulness cannot hide your glory,  
As long as Serbia lives, you will be with us.  
You showed the whole world how a glorious battle is fought.  
We will always be grateful to you, sons of Serbia (Colovic 1994; 1995).

This song has become particularly popular since the beginning of recent dramatic events in Kosovo. In it we see the Serbian vision of Kosovo and its significance for the history and culture of the Serbian people. The glorious events in Kosovo are an occasion for pride in Serbian identity.

*Fragments of Popular Songs*

## a. Bulgarian

Give us, Oh Lord, Give us, Oh Lord,  
 Bulgaria on three seas,  
 And let her heroes live forever (Todorova 1989).

This is a reference to that historical moment, glorious for Bulgaria, when the boundaries of the Bulgarian ethnic and state coincided on the Black, Aegean and Adriatic seas.

## b. Croatian

Between the Sava, the Adriatic and the Drava,  
 Always someplace along some borders,  
 There have lived since times long gone  
 Ancient Croatian men and women (Colovic 1994; 1995).

Here we find reference to the territorial boundaries inside which the ancient Croats dwelled, and which, it is argued, by all rights should be valid today.

## c. Serbian

Tudjman thinks his border is the Drina.  
 Now the Drina flows past Knin (Colovic 1994; 1995).

This example is the same as the one given above, but from the position of the Serbian ethnic.

## d. Serbian

There are towers of skulls beyond count,  
 All over the lands of heroes:  
 Slavonija, Carugina,  
 Krsna Lika, and Krajina.  
 Wherever the bones of our ancestors lie,  
 There are the borders of the land of the Serbs (Colovic 1994; 1995).

In this song the idea is expressed that the borders of the Serbian ethnic extend to wherever the bones of the ancestors of the Serbs are buried (Colovic 1997).

*The Curse of King Zvonimir (Croatian)*

a. King Zvonimir was a very brave man, and a very skilled warrior, and what is most important, a zealous defender of the Christian faith. This is why he decided to gather together a mighty army, to set off on the long road, and to liberate the Holy Sepulchre. He ordered his subjects to take up arms, and to come one and all onto the Field of Petar. When the people discovered why the king was summoning them, they began to talk: "What's that king doing? We'll never see our wives, children or homes again." They decided to send some people to kill him, and they killed him by the church of Saint Cecilia. Before his death, the king said: "Oh you, my faithful brothers, Croats and Dalmatians! I regret with my whole heart that I shall be your last king, and that from now on you will be subjects of the kings and princes of others." (Klaic 1972: 144)

b. We had an agreement with the Pope that he would keep and protect us, but that we would never have the right to attack other countries and to take over foreign territories. King Zvonimir wanted to wage war, but the people knew about the agreement with the Pope, and so they killed the king with stones in front of a church. King Zvonimir cursed the Croats before he died to never have their own country...It looks now like the curse is broken, and we have Croatia (Todorova 1995).

This example is connected with an explanation of the declaration of an independent Croatian state after the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia. It appears that the curse of the king has lost its power and at last the Croats can have their own country.

All the examples given above are expression of the "we"- position of the ethnies in question, and thus the construction of the ethnic image is done in such a way that it be wholly positive and a potential source of ethnic pride. The ethnies have some ancient origin and glorious history, their heroes have defended their primordial territories, they have never been aggressive toward neighboring ethnies, but have only defended their "legitimate" rights, for which God and the saints reward them with their heavenly protection.

When it comes to sketching the image of another ethnies, however, the elements of the image are built in a different way and are rife with negative associations. The problem of the two points of view in the construction of an ethnic image is treated in the following section.

## **Ethnic Images as Reflected in the Folk Culture: The View from “Within” and “Without”**

Folkloric texts present valuable evidence for any exploration of the issues under consideration here. This is so for a variety of reasons.

Firstly, folk culture is a traditional type of culture.<sup>2</sup> By this I mean that the texts (re)produced by this culture preserve some elements of traditional models of discourse, thought, or behavior, however altered or transformed we may find them in their present incarnations.

Secondly, folklore in the classical sense (i.e., rural folklore of the previous century) is a culture where the community dominates over the individual and makes him or her obey its norms of “the normal, good, worthy, beautiful.” The folk culture of today’s urban or rural setting is no longer the dominant strain in the culture at large, but is rather one component of the various community and personal cultures. For the production and functioning of ethnic images, however, most relevant are commonly-shared perceptions of the ethnic groups in question, which is to say, here again we see the dominance of the community over the individual.

Thirdly, historical categories build upon mythological ones without ousting them, thus making it possible for us to trace the reproduction of stereotypical forms through different historical periods. The same holds true for regional diversity, which contains variants of the generic and presents them to us “on behalf” of various people and communities.

Fourthly, folklore abounds in mythological implications including the important contrasts between “us” and “them,” “ours” and “theirs,” “internal” and “external,” wherein the first term of the pair is always positively marked. I should note that to find reflections of this, it is not necessary to work exclusively with “old” or “archaic” texts, as such implications can be found just as easily in texts produced by modern rural or urban cultures. I have taken examples for this article from a variety of folklore texts: legends of ethnic origin, portions of free conversations on ethnic topics, songs containing some of the components of the ethnic image, excerpts of written sources dedicated

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2. Specifically, it is one among many traditional types of cultures, other such cultures being, for example, Orthodox iconography and hagiography, or the Catholic mass. These types of culture are traditional in that they reproduce canonical forms and interpret these according to an established norm. They are not, however, folklore.

to ethnicity. Some of these texts come from written tracts on the subject of ethnicity, but are secondarily folklorized in oral communication.

As I have already stressed, the creation, formation and functioning of an ethnic image always depends on the awareness of an ethnic identity on the part of the individual or the community. And this always spells out a possibility for two antipodal aspects of its creation. I will define these two aspects as “a view from within” and “a view from without” having in mind the following affirmation.

An ethnic image is built by using the same set of components insofar as it is always the image of an ethnic group, but their arrangement depends on whether it is created by members of that ethnic group or by members of another ethnic group, who want to present the former in a particular way. In the first case the group talks about itself and in the second, we discover the notions, opinions and evaluations held by the other groups with respect to it. Hence, in the first instance we talk about “a view from within” and in the second one about “a view from without” (Zemtsovsky 1995; Elchinova 1997).

Thus there are two types of ethnic images for one and the same ethnic group, which are the result of two types of perspectives: that of the people representing the group in question, and that of people representing other ethnic groups. The first type of ethnic image is the image of “us,” of “our community;” and the second one is an image of “the other” ethnic community. An adequate analysis requires that we should have at our disposal both types of ethnic images of one and the same group because they reveal the general principles of their creation. Besides, their very intertwining in the cultural space of human communities provides us with an explanation of some types of human thinking and behavior in situations of interethnic interaction.

In general, when each of the two types of ethnic images are being created, two major tendencies are underway:

1. a tendency toward differentiation, i.e. substantiation of the specific uniqueness of “our” group in relation to all others; this is more frequently encountered among the dominant groups for each of the observed states, such as, for example, Bulgarians in Bulgaria, Serbians in present-day Yugoslavia, Macedonians in Macedonia, Albanians in Albania, etc.;

2. a tendency toward integration, i.e. substantiation of the similarities with a certain group judged as prestigious for certain reasons. This is more frequently encountered among the minority groups in a certain state, such as,

for instance, Turks, Gypsies, Jews in Bulgaria, Vlachs in Bulgaria and in present-day Yugoslavia, Albanians in Macedonia, etc.<sup>3</sup>

I have selected a number of etiological legends, recorded in various ethnic communities in the Balkans and in different historical periods. The examples are grouped in order to contrast the two points of view in the construction of the ethnic image. The first group concerns ethnic origins.

### *On the Origin of the Turks*

#### a. Bulgarian-Turkish Version

Now let me tell you... a long time ago Allah made the first man — Adam was his name, and his wife we call Havva. And they had many children, 72 pairs, boy and girl. And from them come all the people on the Earth. But you see, Adam loved his youngest son Islam the best. And his brothers were all angry and wanted to kill him — their father, I mean. They plotted to kill him one day as he was coming out of the mosque. Islam, however, overheard them and warned his father. And the next day they went to the mosque and prayed there to Allah, and when they had finished their prayer, they went to leave. Adam then halted at the door and cursed his sons to all speak different languages. So they couldn't understand each other, and so then they couldn't kill him. And since then there has been a division of languages, faiths and nations. They were scattered all throughout the world. Adam remained with his son in Tsarigrad (Constantinople), and he named that city Islambul. Later they started calling it Stambol, because they had forgotten how it was supposed to be. And now it's already called Istanbul. And so Islam becomes a Turk and from him comes the Muslim faith. From his other brothers come the other different religions. Ibrahim is the king of the Israelites. They all descend from him, and from him they get their religion. The Prophet Isa

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3. This is not to say that this is always the case among minority ethnic groups, but rather that, in all the materials available to me this tendency appears in the overwhelming majority of texts recorded among minority populations. Here one is tempted to speculate that the very nature of folklore documentation practices might have a role to play in this skewing of the material. In most cases the researcher is him or herself a member of the majority group, a representative in some sense of the powers-that-be, collecting data for publication in some medium belonging to the dominant group, and this may affect the type of information minority consultants are likely to provide. It should however be noted that the same skewing appears in the materials collected by researchers who are themselves members of the minority group in question.

came to these lands and from him we get the Christian faith. You all call him Jesus Christ. And you believe in him, because you're from his stock. We, on the other hand, are from the stock of Islam, and so we believe in him. So now you get it. But it does all come from Allah. What's important is that you believe. Otherwise, you just aren't human (Todorova 1993).

b. Canine Version (Bulgarian)

The Turks are of the Dog-Faith. They don't know about fasting on Wednesday and Friday, and they don't recognize kinship bonds. During fasts, they eat fats like the dogs do, and they marry their relatives, like the dogs do... Their mother was a Christian, and their father was a dog, and when she gave birth to eight children at once, everyone began to call them "Osmanliji" (Bulgarian "osem" = "eight", and "osmanliji" = "Ottomans") (*Sbornik za narodni umotvorenia* 1899: 310-311).

c. Incestuous Version (Bulgarian)

The mother is offered to her son as a wife because they live in exile, separated from human society, in non-human space: in the desert, the mountains, in caves... When the generation born from incest becomes numerous, it demands from the Bulgarian tsar (Tsar Kostadin) land on which to settle. The tsar marks off for them as much as can be covered by an ox-hide. They cut the hide into a thin strip, and with it enclose a wide space, in which they settle and become a large people. They become so strong that they take over the kingdom of the Christians. This is the punishment of the Christians, that they must be subordinated to unbelievers, in order to redeem themselves from their sins: "they went to church on horses, they took the communion bread with their lances, they stole the pretty wives of their friends, and for that the Lord commanded that their kingdom be taken from them" (Gueorgieva 1992: 24).

*On the Origin of the Vlachs*

a. Vlach Version (abbreviated)

Vlachs are descended from the ancient original inhabitants of Bulgaria whom the Slavs encountered upon their arrival on the Balkan peninsula. Alternatively, they are Bulgarians who fled Turkish aggression to settle on the other side of the Danube in the Vlach lands (Romania). There they learned the Vlach tongue, which they preserved even after their return to Bulgaria.



## b. Bulgarian Version

Once in the time of the Latins there appeared in the kingdom some troublemakers who stole things and killed people. The people asked the tsar to drive out these bandits. The tsar commanded that the bandits be sent away to what are now the Vlach lands across the Danube. He gave them neither livestock, nor food, nor women, nothing except one cat, which was to serve them as transport and for dragging the plough. They had to catch fish from the Danube, and to barter with them in order to survive. The tsar forbade them to build houses, and they had to dig holes in the ground, which they covered with reeds and rushes. Isolated for centuries, they became wild to such a degree, that they forgot their language, and could pronounce only the word "oooo-pre-shte!" ("stop!" in Romanian). They didn't recognize either the tsar or the bishop. They didn't pay taxes to anybody, and they didn't go to church, because they were heathens. In addition, they didn't cut their hair, and they didn't shave, and since they went around naked, their bodies became covered with fur, like on animals. That's why the people began to call them vlasi, which means "hairy," "furry."

One day the Bulgarian tsar, who was on our side of the Danube, pardoned them, and decided to baptize them, and to tame them. He sent priests to baptize them, but they ran off and hid in their holes, in the reeds. Then the tsar sent some soldiers, who caught all the Vlachs and baptized them. Then he commanded that they be brought to this side of the Danube, to keep them for a few years, until they could learn to talk. But they couldn't learn to speak good Bulgarian and they continued to confuse it with their old language (*Sbornik za narodni umotvorenia* 1893: 128-129).

## *On the Origin of the Gypsies*

### a. Bulgarian Version

(Saint Gregory the Theologian explains:) These people (Gypsies), I loved them. I did lots of good things for them, made them profess the faith, but they blasphemed me, and slandered me. So, from now on, let no one love them, no one do anything good for them, and let them have no faith at all, no kinship bonds among them, and no law. By my hand, they were rich and comfortable. From now on, let them wander the whole world, and have no city or town anywhere. Let them survive by thieving and cheating, let them go always barefoot and naked, and let no one at all respect them (*Sbornik za narodni umotvorenia* 1890: 176-177).

*On the Origin of the Pomaks (Bulgarian Muslims)*

a. Pomak Version

We Pomaks, who knows who we are?! We are a tormented people (folk etymology: Bulgarian “pomâchen” = “tormented” recalls the ethnonym “Pomak”). We are a very old people. Once here in these lands there lived Thracians, and our roots are with them. Already in the ninth-century, there were Arab missionaries around here, and we took our faith from them. Our faith is very old (Todorova 1995).

b. Bulgarian Christian Version (abbreviated)

Pomaks are Bulgarians who converted to Islam after the fall of the Bulgarian Kingdom in the fourteenth-century, generally under threat of violence.

Here the contrast between “our” glorious origins and the “strange,” “unnatural,” or even “sinful” origins of the neighboring ethnic groups is evident. In everyday speech this black-and-white contrast is significantly more nuanced and sometimes notably softened, but the basic idea, that “we” are somehow better, is preserved.

I now give several examples commenting on religion as an element of the image.

*The True Faith, or why Turks don't eat pork... (Bulgarian Version)*

One day the Prophet Elijah and the Prophet Mohammed were out walking in the desert, and they got thirsty. Prophet Elijah struck a rock with his staff, and from the rock gushed forth clear, cold water. Mohammed also wanted to do a miracle, so he commanded his men to flay an ox, and make a water-skin out of its hide, and after that to fill it up with water, to bury it in the sand, so that when they passed by there again, he could poke it with his staff and water would burst forth from it. But some pigs happened by that place first, dug up the water-skin, and popped it. And so Mohammed wasn't able to do his miracle, and that's why he cursed all pigs, and the Mohammedans don't eat their meat, and are revolted by it (*Sbornik za narodni umotvorenia* 1983: 881-882).

*The Holy Books and Ethnic Relations (Bulgarian-Turkish Version)*

So look how it is then. The Koran, the Indjil, the Tevra, and the Zebur — there are four of them. The four angels (melyaks) brought down from

on high, you see, four books, four texts. And these are the four scriptures. The Koran, see, is for the Muslims — the Turks, and the Indjil is for the Bulgarians. The Koran, the Bible, these are the same book. As for belief, I believe in the Indjil, and in the Koran, and in the Tevra. I believe also in the Zebur. The Tevra is for the Italians, the Zebur is in Israel, the Koran is for the Turks, and the Indjil is for the Bulgarians. The Indjil and the Koran are one and the same books, one and the same book. And so the priest says, “Amen, Amen,” when he reads, and the Hodja says “Amen” when he reads. I know the entire Koran. I know the Bible too. And so I’m telling you how it is (Todorova 1993).

### *Why All Jews Have Freckles... (Bulgarian Version)*

When a long time ago they crucified Christ, they left guards to watch him. The guards began to cook a rooster in a pan and to roast some fish. Then one of them started to doubt whether Christ would be resurrected or not, and the other told him that he would be resurrected when the fish and the rooster came back to life. And then all the fish jumped back into the pond, and the rooster started flapping its wings and crowing. In doing so, the rooster splattered the guards with soup, and since then all Jews have freckles (*Sbornik za narodni umotvorenia* 1983: 880-881).

Once again there is little doubt as to who has been given “the true faith,” and as for the others, there are various reasons why they do not possess the “correct” religion, but in any case first among these reasons is their belonging to an “other” ethnica.

The following are examples of trades as a component of the ethnic image.

### *Why All Gypsies Are Blacksmiths... (Bulgarian Version)*

- a. Because once a Gypsy made the nails that they crucified Christ with. The Gypsy got carried away with himself and made one nail too many, and Christ cursed him to keep making nails forever (*Sbornik za narodni umotvorenia* 1894: 98).
- b. Because Gypsies were very lazy, and started to make all sorts of stuff out of iron, so they could sell them for food to the ploughmen [Bulgarians] (*Sbornik za narodni umotvorenia* 1930: 32-33).
- c. Because the Gypsies believe that their tsar, the Pharaoh, was chained to the bottom of the Red Sea when he was chasing the Jews, and that

through their blacksmith's trade, they, as his subjects, can make his chains thinner and break them, in order to set him free (*Sbornik za narodni umotvorenia* 1983: 880-881).

There is also a story, well-known in the Bulgarian region of Gotse Delchev, which tells about a family of Gypsies that settled by a village. The villagers, convinced that they were blacksmiths, as all Gypsies were supposed to be, immediately brought over their tools that needed repair. The Gypsies were highly surprised because they were not skilled in that craft. However the villagers insisted that this was impossible. The story spread throughout the region and pretty soon other Gypsies, who were skilled blacksmiths, came over to live there and practice their craft. This event did not affect the villagers' belief that all Gypsies were blacksmiths but only confirmed it. To this very day they maintain that all Gypsies are blacksmiths because descendants of the Gypsy blacksmiths still live and work there.

#### *What God Gave the Various Ethnicities... (Bulgarian Version)*

To the Turks — lordship, to the Bulgarians — work, to the Jews — the accounts, to the French — finesse, to the Gypsies — poverty, to the Greeks — doing bad things to people (*Sbornik za narodni umotvorenia* 1889: 124).

The bipolar nature of the construction of an ethnic image is part of “inherited knowledge,” but it changes and is modified in concordance with concrete historical circumstances, with the current state of relations with the ethnies under discussion, and with the individual views of the person speaking, writing, or singing. In any case, however, the tendency toward contrast is preserved, because the basic point of the construction of the images is that one's own positive characteristics be found in them, and that a certain type of community/internal harmony be established.

#### **Ethnic Position — Ethnocentrism — Nationalism — Chosen People**

An essential element of ethnicity-oriented thinking is the establishment of an ethnies' position in the broader social and cultural space of society. This position is also established in relative terms, via comparison with other ethnic groups. In the situation of the modern state, researchers talk about a “majority,” “a dominant group,” and about a “minority” and “minority groups.” This division into dominant and minority groups is of great importance for the

formation of ethnic images. In the case of Bulgaria, Bulgarians constitute the dominant group, while all the rest (Turks, Gypsies, Jews, Armenians, etc.) make up the minority groups. The ethnic position of the group known as Pomaks is ambiguous. Their language is Bulgarian, which links them with the Bulgarian majority, while their religion is Muslim, which connects them with the Turkish ethnic community. This ambiguity yields extremely interesting folklore versions concerning their ethnic origin and historic destiny.

An important aspect of my observations is that along with the establishment of an ethnic position, a tendency towards ethnocentrism can be noticed within each of the ethnic groups, although perhaps mostly within the majority group in each country.

Ethnocentrism can be defined briefly as a system of ethno-social inequality where "our ethnies" dominates "other" ethnic groups. This ethnic dominance is implied and implemented, hence reproduced, in different kinds of interethnic communications. As an integral part of human consciousness the idea of ethnic dominance comes into play in everyday speech and in folklore explanations of "our" and "their" traits; it can be found in various legends or stories commenting on historical events where, on the whole, "we" are heroes or victims, while "they" are enemies and flawed people.

Ethnocentrism is an intrinsic characteristic of human communities that can be encountered at various levels of their social and cultural being. Ethnocentrism has been embedded in the principles of intracommunity and intercommunity communication from the establishment of the first community formations (clan, tribe) to the present-day uni- or multinational state structures. Inevitably the center of the world, the center of the universe has been wherever "we" are, while savages and barbarians, non-people are around "us", whoever "we" or these "others" may be. Ethnocentrism is always there but it is not always a prerequisite for an ethnic conflict. Ethnocentrism can, however, acquire additional political connotations; it can be harnessed in definite political strategies and it can then become a contributor to ethnic conflicts. Such phenomena are witnessed nowadays throughout the world and in the region of the Balkan peninsula in particular.

The transformation of ethnic identities into national ones has taken place over the past few centuries in the course of the emergence of national states (Smith 1986; 1991; 1995). The historic imperative "a single ethnies in a single state" was the beginning of nationality, the beginning of a new type of social

behavior, the beginning of a new mass psyche, the beginning of a new cultural ideology. Normally in the course of this historic process the ethnic group that dominates in a certain state transforms its ethnic identity into a national one. Its ethnic characteristics become national, its ethnocentrism becomes nationalism. This process also gives rise to yet another possibility for ethnic conflict — the intrastate relations between the majority and the minorities. Nationalism may also take on political connotations and become an element of a given political ideology.

Obviously there are historic periods when people need to prove to themselves and to those around them that they belong to prestigious ethnic communities with long established merits; to communities set up in olden times that have developed rich and, in a certain sense, unique cultures (Smith 1981b; 1984). And indeed at the very time when ethnic identity becomes a problem, it most needs to be connected with stability and prestige. When the ethnies is bound up with a state structure and the ethnic identity is converted into a national one, the production of ethnic images is enhanced. The people declaring their national identity find it important to communicate the positive qualities of their nation. This nation should necessarily have an ancient history, its culture should be unique, and its members should necessarily be bearers of diverse moral and intellectual virtues. In this respect there is nothing new in the Balkan region. It would be interesting to compare this process at the end of the nineteenth century, when some of the Balkan states were set up, and today, when new ones are being formed. The empirical materials recorded in each of the Balkan countries are typologically similar, and they are consistent with the predictable emergence of such ethnic images during periods of national consolidation. Since ethnocentrism is a broader concept than nationalism, I prefer to use it when elaborating on this subject.

As we develop the idea of ethnocentrism and nationalism further we arrive at the idea of the “chosen people” (Smith 1996). This idea is also reflected in various cultural messages and it can be discovered far more frequently and among many more peoples than it might seem at first glance. As far as the Balkan countries are concerned, there are numerous documented examples indicating that each people is a “chosen people” in a certain way: their land has been given to them by God, the members of the respective ethnies are endowed with more talents than those of the neighboring ethnies, the contribution of that ethnies to regional history is always greater and more significant. The fact that one of the ethnies is “chosen” also implies that it

shoulders mega-responsibilities and that it is called upon to accomplish important spiritual missions. The implementation of these missions presupposes the overcoming of severe trials. The war in former Yugoslavia, the economic crises in Bulgaria and Romania, etc. have been interpreted along these very lines. These events are perceived as ordeals that will entail spiritual elevation of the respective ethnies and will enable it to realize its mission.

The following examples are selected to illustrate the arguments by which each ethnies proves its own “chosen of God” status and special position among both closer and geographically more remote ethnies.

### *Serbia*

a. An excursus on the Heavenly Kingdom of Serbia, and fragments from a poem on the same theme:

Ay, that great Heavenly Serbia! She represents the already long-ago-realized ideal of a Greater Serbia. We believe that in her there live more than 100 million baptized Serbs, who in Earthly Serbia served Christ, and suffered for Christ for centuries and centuries...Those who are more like Christ, in the next world are closer to Him. We believe, in the Gospel tradition, that some nations much larger than Serbia on Earth will be much smaller in the Kingdom of Heaven...

#### Heavenly Serbia

Heavenly Serbia is a Serbia in paradise,  
 Fragrant, beautiful as a rose in May.  
 Here are our fathers, and our holy forefathers...  
 Here are our chiefs, our kings, and tsars...  
 Here are honorable monks and pale nuns...  
 Sufferers on Earth, poor and unfortunate,  
 Are joyful there around Saint Sava,  
 Like the sons of kings with kingly glory.  
 And glorious Chetniks, the avengers of God...  
 All have become saints of the Lord...  
 Many generations of the best strains of men,  
 People, God's people, in numbers unending.  
 This is that Heavenly Serbia,  
 Which like a vast constellation,  
 Shines before God (Velimirovic 1996: 111-113).

b. The trials and victories of the Serbians, God's chosen people

We must not be proud that we are God's chosen people, we Serbs, because we are better-loved than the rest, but rather because according to God's will and plan, we have important and responsible tasks to achieve along the way to the New Era (Jovanovic and Reic 1996: 3).

(Said Christ to the Serbian people:) You alone are the nation which has returned to that place where it once resided. You recognized your ancestral homeland, and you reestablished your proto-language... My dear people, you are now at war, which will be one of the fiercest in your history. But wars of aggression against you can be convenient circumstances for spiritual cleansing and improvement. Thus it can be now, if you show the whole world, as you have always and everywhere, that with love, every enemy can be defeated. Go forth in victory and lead the world into the New Era (Jovanovic and Reic 1996: 6)!

*Bulgaria*

a. Why Bulgaria is so beautiful...

Once upon a time, when the Good Lord made all the people, it came time to assign them all a place to live. He said to them, "Let each people send a representative, so I can tell them which are the lands of each people from now until forever." All the peoples sent their representative and God parceled out the lands for each one. The Bulgarian had lots of work to do, and so was late. When he got there, the Lord exclaimed, "Oh! So what am I supposed to do now?! I already gave out all the lands! Come over here, and I'll chop you off a piece of Paradise." This is why Bulgaria is a Garden of Eden on Earth (Stanoev 1996).

b. Some cosmic musings concerning the nature of the Bulgarian people...

The Bulgarians are a great cosmic nation, and in Bulgaria in particular will the sixth race be born, whose civilization will lead the entire world. The Bulgarian language is trans-galactic, because the Glagolitic alphabet has heavenly origins. It is the language which is spoken on the Planets of the Divine, and is the mathematical basis of all natural languages (Todorova 1992).

The Earth is a living organism whose heart lies underneath Bulgaria, which makes Bulgaria a special junction of the Energy Flows. Bulgaria is one of the strongest Energy Points, along with Tibet and Mexico. The



didn't settle in these lands by accident. Rather the God Tangra himself told Khan Asparukh in a dream where to found the Bulgarian Kingdom. Nothing ever happens by accident. Not by accident was the White Brotherhood (a mystical religious group of the 30s). Not by accident are there so many places with strong Energy here — the Rila Mountains, the Pirin Mountains, Veliko Târnovo, Teteven, Bankya, and others (Todorova 1994).

## *Bosnia*

### a. Bosnian people have a specific messianic function

The Bosnian people have a specific messianic function — the Islamization of Islam. They are chosen by God, and marked by the sign of Allah, to be as a sign-post for the faithful, to show to the whole Islamic world with their sacrifices and struggle (Jihad) the true path. They are the people of God, who must show the way to an end to the schism between Sunnites and Shi'ites, and to the creation of an Islamic spiritual unity... It is a question of the specific Islam of Bosnia, in connection with ancient Bogomil wisdom and universal Islamic spirituality (Tanaskovic 1987: 54-55).

## *Macedonia*

### a. The Macedonians are a biblical people

The name "Macedonia" occurs many times in the Bible [when questioned as to the precise location of these references, the speaker responded, "in the New Testament"]. I have asked many people, Norwegians, Swedes, Danes, Irish (sic) if they know why they have a cross on their flags, and none of them could tell me! Do you know why? This symbol comes from Macedonia! When St. Paul left the Holy Land and settled in Macedonia, he founded the Christian faith, and from this very place, Christianity spread across the whole world, along with its symbol, the cross. The cyrillic alphabet too, invented by a Macedonian, has spread across the whole world. Did you know that they use our alphabet in Mongolia now? Before they didn't even know how to write [from here the conversation turns to a discussion of that ancient Macedonian poet, Homer...] (Barnes 1997).

I could also cite numerous examples of how the members of a community describe and evaluate other elements of their own cultural activities and those of "the others": apparel, dialect, ability to communicate, intelligence, moral qualities, etc. All these can be presented through the "us-them" contrast:

“we are hospitable and they are not,” “we are a warm and cordial people, while they are reserved and cold,” “we are elegant, while they exhibit a deficiency of aesthetic taste,” “our speech is correct and pure, while theirs is ridiculous or incomprehensible,” etc. To my mind, however, the examples quoted above are sufficiently illustrative of the topic under review.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Instead of drawing conclusions I would like rather to elaborate on the point of all these observations and considerations. It lies first and foremost in my desire to show how the modern interpretations of ethnicity on the Balkan Peninsula ensue naturally from some more general principles of human thinking and are not solely fabrications conceived by politicians. Political parties can at times quite adroitly manipulate stereotypes and relatively conservative ethnic images for the purposes of political propaganda, but these images are naturally present in the culture on both the local and national levels. Ethnic images are ready-made constructions, which are reproduced in a particular way and can be used only after some transformation or enhancement of certain of their semantic accents. The examples quoted above show the presence of these ethnic images in folklore texts documented in the last century, as well as newer versions. The texts and the historical context for the ethnies in question are remarkably similar in both time periods. In any case it is useful to be familiar with the characteristics of ethnic images, if for no other reason than to protect ourselves from the political manipulations into which these images so often enter. For even the most intelligent people frequently fail to recognize these manipulations, and this often results in the spectacles of violence and tragedy which we witness throughout the world.

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