

Aleksandar Pavlović

Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade
pavlaleks@gmail.com

A Bloodthirsty Tyrant or a Righteous Landlord? Smail-aga Čengić in Literature and Oral Tradition*

The 1840 murder of a notable 19th century Bosnian dignitary Smail-aga Čengić immediately inspired strong artistic production in the South Slav literature and oral tradition. These narratives, comprising newspaper articles, oral epic songs, and particularly Ivan Mažuranić's literary epics written in the manner of oral folk epic, presented and codified Smail-aga as a bloodthirsty tyrant whose ultimate aim was to terrorize and extinct his Christian subjects. In distinction, some marginalized local narratives and oral folk tradition, which will be examined in this article, remembered Smail-aga as a righteous and merciful lord, protector of his flock and a brave warrior. Thus, when we scrutinize several versions of oral songs about the death of Smail-aga recorded between 1845 and 1860, as well as later collected anecdotes from his native Herzegovina, it appears that his hostile portrayal in written literature was rather the contribution of the Serbian and Croatian Romantic nationalists around the mid-19th-century than an actual popular perception of him among local people in the region that he lived with. In conclusion, the article advocates for a wider consideration of the overall polyphonic narrative tradition and the revitalization of traditional narratives that glorify values which transcend strict religious, ethnic and national divisions as a way of reimagining and revaluating relationship of the South Slavs towards the Ottoman heritage.

Key words: Smail-aga Čengić, Ivan Mažuranić, The Death of Smail-aga Čengić, South Slav oral tradition, Romantic nationalism

Крвожедни тиранин или праведни господар? Смаил-ага Ченгић у књижевности и усменој традицији

Убиство истакнутог босанско-херцеговачког вође Смаил-аге Ченгића 1840. године одмах је инспирисало снажну продукцију у јужнословенској писаној и усменој књижевности. Ови наративи, у које спадају написи и чланци у оновременој српској и хрватској штампи, усмене песме и нарочито Мажуранићев уметнички епски спев *Смрт Смаил-аге Ченгића* (1846), писан у духу усмене народне епике, канонизовали су Смаил-агу као крвожедног тиранина чији је искључива намера била да тероризује и

* This article was realised with the support of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia, according to the Agreement on the realisation and financing of scientific research.

истреби себи потчињене хришћане. Међутим, неки маргинализовани локални наративи и усмена народна традиција, који ће бити размотрени у овом раду, такође памте Смаил-агу као праведног вођу, заштитника своје раје и храброг ратника. Штавише, када се детаљније размотри свих десетак доступних варијанти усмених песама о смрти Смаил-аге Ченгића, сакупљених између 1845. и 1860. године, и касније сакупљене анегдоте из Херцеговине, стиче се утисак да изразито негативна представа о Смаил-аги у писаној књижевности представља пре допринос српских и хрватских национал-романтичара половином деветнаестог века, неголи што доноси верну слику популарне представе о њему у народу и крају у ком је деловао. У закључку, рад се залаже за шире посматрање укупне полифоне наративне традиције и ревитализацију традиционалних наратива који величају извесне вредности које надилазе стриктне религијске, етничке и националне поделе, као начин за преосмишљавање и превредновање односа који јужни Словени гаје према османском наслеђу.

Кључне речи: Смаил-ага Ченгић, Иван Мажуранић, Смрт Смаил-аге Ченгића, јужнословенска епска традиција, романтичарски национализам

I Introduction

By focusing on the representation of the Bosnian Muslim Smail-Aga Čengić in oral and written literature, I want to explore the relation between these two narrative traditions, but also to address the role of intellectual elites in codifying the hostility toward the Turks in the Balkans around the mid-19th century. In the processes of documenting their national traditions, 19th century European intellectuals delegated particular importance to their oral traditions and folklore, considered by Romantic nationalists as the “soul of the nation” and the greatest expression of the national spirit (for the concept of “Romantic nationalism”, see Leerssen 2020). Thus, they turned to oral literature as “a rich intellectual, moral, and social fortune, both the document of their traditions and the monument of their language” (Cocchiara 1981, 258), especially to folk epic that typically focused on national heroes, battles against invaders, and the glorious deeds of ancestors, and hence often served as confirmation of a glorious national past and a source of identity representations. (see Pavlović & Atanasovski 2016, 358–361). As I will argue, mid-19th century South Slav writers and intellectuals had a crucial role in codifying the negative image of Smail-aga in popular imagination. To exemplify my claim, I will juxtapose the written narrative tradition of Smail-aga, from newspaper articles and literary epic supposedly deriving from folk oral epic songs, to the instances of local oral tradition from Herzegovina that remembered Smail-aga as a righteous and courageous lord.

Moreover, I will trace in some detail the process of textualization of folk epic songs about Smail-aga in the decades following his assassination, to show how intellectuals’ and collectors’ efforts shaped the selection and publication process and favoured the publication of narratives with a negative perception of Smail-aga. For long, this process of documentation and textualization of oral tradition generally did not attract systematic scholarly attention. As John Miles Foley argued, “until relatively recently investigators have tended to overlook just *how* an oral epic reached textual form, preferring to deal with it as a readymade object that could be

analyzed with available tools” (Foley 2000, 71). Recent scholarship, however, pointed out that the published collections are not a simple reflection of oral tradition and focused on its textual representation, that is, to the entire process of its transcription, edition and publication. As Parry-Lord seminal theory showed, oral patterns of composition, distribution and performance essentially differ from those we find in written literature. Capturing this fluid, dynamic and unstable oral song in a textual form thus means its radical transformation into a fixed text, which is something altogether alien to oral culture (Lord 2000, 4–5). Following their arguments, contemporary scholars like Foley and Lauri Honko describe the process of documentation and textualization of oral tradition as an “intersemiotic translation”, or evolution from performance to text, arguing that a more attentive approach to the textualization and representation of the oral tradition is needed (Honko 2000, 49; Foley 2005, 208; for a detailed overview of textualization of epic, see Pavlović 2014, 13–15).

This interest in the documentation of the oral tradition, has led to a fuller understanding of the process of collection and textualization of the epic, in particular regarding the role of collectors and editors in the literary fixation and canonization of the oral tradition, and addressed issues that concerned the political and ideological aspects of their work. Lauri Honko summarizes the expansion of this perspective to the process of the textualization of the epic as follows:

“The concept of oral text has experienced a revolutionary development in recent years [...] The modest transcript has undergone acute source-criticism: its textual origin and linguistic accuracy, its methods of documentation, transcription, translation, editing and publication have been subjected to scrutiny, not forgetting the singers ‘voice’ (always in danger of suppression), the collectors purposive role in the making of the text and the editor’s impact on its final form” (Honko 2000, 3).

Foley, therefore, warns that “the process that we too easily reduce to a simple song-to-book trajectory actually begins with fieldworkers’ predispositions and selections, continues with the idiosyncratic conditions of the performances they attend and engender along with the editorial decisions they make” (Foley 2005, 209). In addition, recent scholars like Beissinger, Tylus and Wofford instruct us precisely that interpretation of epic “could be directed more toward study of the tension between the local and the national or universal”, and that “literary study can and should make the political and the culturally specific more visible... To look at the position of epic in the contemporary world is to pose, not to evade, the question of epic ideology and its relation to nationalism, national identity, and the politics of gender” (Beissinger, Tylus & Wofford 1999, 11–12).

Indeed, previous works by Serbian philologists and folklorists scrutinized the socio-cultural, political and ideological traits that marked the collections of Vuk Karadžić (Nedić 1981 etc.), Sima Milutinović (Ljubinković 2000) and Petar II Petrović Njegoš (Kilibarda 1980). Thus, several scholars indicated that South Slav epic tradition underwent major changes in terms of its outlook, and that clear hostility against “the Turks” as opposed to “the Serbs” is a relatively recent perspective that

emerged in the context of the 19th century struggle for national liberation and emancipation (see Pešić 1967, 49–65; Mandić 2021, 173 et passim). Brought by Romanticism, this national awakening saw a pan-European sentiments towards liberation from the Turks, mostly sympathetic to the Greeks (even Lord Byron goes to fight for their freedom) but also Serbs and Montenegrins – then normally understood as belonging to the Serbian nation – and subsequently to other Balkan peoples. For instance, Lidija Delić argues that the dichotomy found in South Slav epic from the 15th to the 17th century is based on confessional and not ethnic lines, corresponding to the Ottoman millet system; thereby, the distinction us/Turks meant Christians/Muslims rather than Serbs/Turks “Christians” (Delić 2016). It is therefore unsurprising that pre-Romantic South Slav epic songs often have ambivalent perspective and are praising or criticising both Christian and Muslim heroes (see Delić 2012; Đorđević Belić 2016, 119–120); in other words, it is the bravery, not ethnicity, that determines ones epic status. Hence, even in Serbian epics collected in the midst of romantic nationalism we often find appraisals of the antagonist, as in the case of Serbian singer praising Albanian antagonist as the greater hero than Serbian Marko Kraljević in the song “Marko Kraljević i Musa Kesedžija” (see Pavlović 2019, 27–31). Moreover, one could easily argue that such general appreciation even for the enemy for his bravery has been a constitutive feature of the epic genre since the *Iliad*.

As I submit, following various mid-19th century narrative traits about Smail-aga enables us to: 1) scrutinize this process of codification of oral tradition by contemporary Romantic-nationalists, 2) juxtapose their narratives to local oral tradition that positively perceived Smail-aga and, thereby, 3) open the space for questioning common tradition that perceives this character as negative, brutal and hostile.

II The Assassination of Smail-aga in Contemporary Press

Smail-aga Čengić (1780–1840) was a high-ranked Muslim dignity from Hercegovina, with a reputation of a great Ottoman warrior – he fought fiercely to crush the Serbian Uprising against the Turks from 1809 to 1813, then beat the Bosnian Muslims who rebelled against the central Ottoman government and, in 1836, he defeated the Montenegrins at the battle of Grahovo; nine members of the ruling Montenegrin Petrović clan perished in the battle, and it is believed that Smail-aga personally killed the brother of the Montenegrin Bishop-Prince Petar Petrović Njegoš. In revenge, Njegoš plotted the assassination of Smail-aga with the assistance of the local Christians from Herzegovina who lived on the territory under Smail-aga’s control. In 1840, the locals attracted him deep into their territory, organised an ambush and killed him by attacking his camp during the night (on Smail-aga, see Popović 1912; Petričević 1964). The assassination of this minor dignity in 1840 was followed by an amazing literary production in the Balkans, and it is to these narratives, such as articles in the Serbian and Croatian press, oral folk songs and, in particular, a poem published in 1846 by a Croatian writer Ivan Mažuranić, that Smail-aga owes his infamous reputation. I will offer a brief account

of newspaper writing about his assassination, before juxtaposing his portrayal in literary and oral tradition, and then following in some detail the establishment and codification of these distinctive narrative traditions.

The South Slavic newspaper of the time reported extensively about this event: *Ilirske narodne novine* (*The Illyrian Popular Newspapers*) covered it in issues 92, 93, 94 and 95 in November 1840, and again in issues 96, 97, 98 and 100 throughout December. *Serbske narodne novine* (*Serbian Popular Newspapers*) from Pest wrote about it in the issue from 23 November, and even *Allgemeine Augsburger Zeitung* on 28 November 1840 wrote about the assassination and its consequences (see Petričević 1964, 279). This public interest in what could be seen as a local incident should not come as a surprise. *Ilirske narodne novine* were published in Zagreb, then part of the Habsburg Empire, since 1835; its editor, Ljudevit Gaj, and his followers were Croatian Romanticists who advocates the unity of South Slavs and thus regularly reported the news from South Slav lands that were either *de facto* independent – like Serbia and Montenegro, or still part of the Ottoman Empire as was the case with Bosnia and Herzegovina. Similarly, *Serbske narodne novine*, published in Pest by the Serbs from Southern Hungary, also nourished pan-Slav and Serbian sentiment and thereby covered events from all the regions where the Serbs lived, including Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro.

It is striking that already the earliest newspaper article, published on the front page of *Ilirske narodne novine* (*Illyrian Popular Newspaper*) under the title “Bosna i Hercegovina” (*Bosnia and Herzegovina*, ILN 1840, 365–366) contains a nucleus of the epic story, strongly suggesting that the event attracted attention of the singers and that oral tradition shaped its representation from the onset:

“Only the Turkish lords and headers, some 25 of them excluding their assistants and servants, remained sitting under his tent; he already gathered all levy, only one village was to bring 70 tsar’s coins, when a priest, Aga’s subject and friend on Sunday, 11 November, came to him and said: “Run away, you Aga, an army approaches you”. The mighty Turk rushed to the priest and, instead of rewarding him, bent him over and gave him 25 foot slaps, telling him: “You’re trying to scare me so that I don’t come to your villages and collect levy, but you’ll scare me not; you told me the same last year and the year before, and you always lied”. – Tomorrow the beaten priest sent his wife to Aga to inform him to flee soon, as the company is about to arrive, but he didn’t listen to her either. That same night the Morača men, Montenegrins¹ and Uskoci, numbering some 300 to 400 muskets, their leader still remains unknown, rushing as fast as possible through the night to catch the Turks by surprise, arrived at dawn under the tents, in silence and, firstly – beware their skills – stabbed the Turks’ horses and cut the cannons of their legs, so that the Turks cannot flee by rid-

¹ The term Montenegrin at the time had a territorial rather than ethnic connotation, and here denotes people from the four original districts of the so-called Old Montenegro, which roughly corresponds to the present-day Cetinje municipality.

ding them; then they fired their muskets at Turks, most of whom were awake and drinking coffee, and rushed among them with their bare knives, got them all and decapitate them. Only one captain from Nikšić had the luck to flee under the guise of moonlight, spreading the news. Smail-aga found his end here, as well as the judge and almost all other notable Turks from Gacko. Upon hearing the news, other Turks and Aga's followers, who resided in the surrounding villages, hearing about the gundown, fled from the area. It's told that the heads were taken to Montenegro."

The whole narrative appears like a summary of an already formed, popular and dramatic epic story. Smail-aga was just about to leave the area, with the last village being a bit late, when the enemy attacked. Then, the narrative introduces a typical assistant character who warns him of the danger, but the Aga shows his oppressive nature by punishing him and ignoring the danger. Even more dramatic are the descriptions of the attack itself: the company rushes through the night, arriving at dawn; they disable the horses first by cutting their cannons with knives, and then fire the guns and rush against them with bare knives. Typically, only one Turk lives to tell the story, and so on.

In addition to these narrative epic elements, we notice formulaic expressions typical for South Slav oral tradition, found in numerous oral epic songs, such as: *silni Turčin* (*mighty Turk*),² or *goli noževi* (*bare knives*) encompassing four i.e. six syllables respectively. This clearly reminds of the typical South Slav *deseterac*, ten-syllable oral verse, which consists of the two half verses with four and six syllables, with a break (*caesurae*) between them. What is more, the priest's words "Bèži Aga, eto na te vojske!" ("Run away, you Aga, an army approaches you") actually constitute a full, canonical ten-syllable verse – *deseterac*. The similarities between oral tradition and this earliest newspaper account should come as no surprise; Vuk Karadžić relates that epic tradition is liveliest in Herzegovina, where "nearly every house has a *gusle*"³ and nearly everyone, both man and women, know how to sing epic songs (Karadžić 1986, 559). This indicates that the event attracted the attention of local singers and became immediately intertwined with local oral epic tradition.

Throughout this earliest period of newspaper coverage, Smail-aga's perception remained ambivalent. He is thus portrayed as both "that glorious and famous Turkish hero" ("onaj slavni i proglašeni junak turski"), but also "in recent years, unfortunately, a harsh oppressor of his subjects, who illegally collected levy several times" ("od nekoliko godina, za nesreći, uvek, veliki ugnjetatelj raje bio, i arač je više putah bez teskera kupio"; ILN 1840, 365). In the same issue, the anonymous author speculates about the reasons for attack being his oppressive behaviour, for

² For a detailed analysis of the expression "silni Turčin", see Mandić 2021. A comprehensive online corpus of South Slav epic poetry, containing 8 collections with 21 volume and 1254 songs altogether, registers at least 35 songs that use thus formula for either the Turks in general or specific Turkish heroes in particular (see Detelić & Tomić 2010).

³ The *gusle* are a traditional, one string instrument made of maple, typically found in the entire Balkans and used to accompany the singing of oral epic folk songs.

his poor subjects suffered extinction and pillage by him (“jer je isti Ismail-Aga sirotinju raju već sasvim u crno zavio, i pepeo im na ognjištu zapretao, gdi je god ko što imao, to je on poplénio”), but gives preference to the Montenegrin revenge as the motives behind the assassination (“Drugi vele, da je osveta Cernogorska, i ovo će najpri biti”; ILN 1840, 365). Similar ambivalence can be found in other newspaper reports about Smail-aga at the time (see Petričević 1964, 279).

III Smail-aga as the ‘Ugly Monster’: Mažuranić’s Poem and its Relation to Oral Folk Songs

Far more influential and lasting influence on Smail-aga’s contemporary and subsequent perception came from written literature, more precisely from a literary epic *Smrt Smail-age Čengića* (*The Death of Smail-aga Čengić*), first published by a Croat Romantic-national poet Ivan Mažuranić (1814–1890) in 1846. Commonly described as the peak of Croatian romanticism and national revival, this epic depicted Smail-aga as a bloodthirsty tyrant with pathological hatred towards his Christian subject that he wishes to extinguish. One typical excerpt from the fourth canto “Harač” (“A Blood Tribute”) suffices to illustrate this point:

Smail-aga collects the bloody tribute
In Gacko and the near purlieus...
From the east the tribute collectors ride,
They drag the rayah between the horses’
tails...

The aga stands, the other Turks stand,
And on this mournful sight
They feast their angry eyes,
And all their awful thirst for blood
By the Vlach’s blood and Vlach’s torture
is quenched.

When, covered with blood,
The sad rayah crawled to the tents
The mad aga, ugly monster,
Cries, “Tribute, rayah, tribute,
Tribute, tribute, or still worse whips”.

Smail-aga krvav harač kupi
Po Gackome i okolo njega [...]
Od istoka haračlije jašu,
Vode golu na repovijeh raju [...]

Aga stoji, ini Turci stoje,
Ter prizorom žalosnijem
Gnjevno svoje pasu oko,
I svu groznu krvi žeđu
Vlaškom krvi, vlaškom mukom gase
[...]

Gdje domilje krvi oblita
Do čadorja raja tužna,
Bijesan aga, neman ružna,
“Harač, rajo, harač!” riče,
“Harač, harač. Il još gore biće”

(Mažuranić 1979 [1846], 86–90)⁴

As these quotations amply illustrate, Mažuranić portrayed Smail-aga, using epithets such as “furious” (*bijesan*) “angry” (*ljutit*), “ugly monster” (*ružna neman*) in order to ultimately demonize this character.

⁴ While I consulted on the translation of *The Death of Smail Aga* by J. W. Wiles, I made several changes when I felt the more literal translation is needed, and thereby consistently referred to *harač* as a “(blood) tribute”.

Approaching the issue of the relation between Mažuranić's literary epic to oral folk songs about the same event, it clearly captures traditional spirit by using many of the expressions typical for South Slav oral epic songs, such as formulas and formulaic expressions ("Za krst časni i slobodu zlatnu" / "For the Honoured Cross and Golden Liberty"), epithets ("britku sablju" / "sharp sword", "oko sokolovo" / "eagle's eye"), stylistic devices such as repetitions and Slavic antithesis ("Je li hajduk, il uhoda turska ... / Nit je hajduk, nit uhoda turska" // "Is he a haiduk or a Turkish spy ... / Neither is he a haiduk nor a Turkish spy") etc. However, unlike oral epic written consistently in *desetarac*, ten-syllable verse, with caesurae after the fourth verse, Mažuranić's verse is mostly eight-syllable one, with occasional ten-syllable lines, all with the caesurae after the fourth syllable. Moreover, the overall composition and conception clearly depart from the oral tradition and belong to the artistic, literary sphere. Thus, more recent scholars readily emphasized that his epic goes beyond the simple dichotomy of "Turks–Us" in promoting romantic and universal ideals of freedom and popular revolt against tyranny, particularly drawing from the political ideas promoted by the French revolution (see Protrka Štimec 2017, 181–199; for a critical overview of the poem's reception, see Dukić 2017).

Because Mažuranić was so effective in capturing this spirit of popular folk songs, his readership and early scholars believed that his poem depended heavily on the popular folk songs about Smail-aga's death that were circulating at the time. However, further analyses showed that this was not the case, and I will here briefly present several main facts established in later scholarship (for a more detailed description of the ties and relations between Mažuranić's poem and oral epics about Smail-aga's death, see Živančević 1988, 212 et passim; on his knowledge and ties with Montenegro and his sources of information about the epics' content, see Živančević 1988, 217–220; Barac 1945, 137, 148–149).

Mažuranić himself has never been to Montenegro, nor in any other part of the Ottoman Empire for that matter and thus had no direct, personal experience about the region that he describes, its people and their folk epics; the source of his information about the subject were the abovementioned newspaper articles and second-hand accounts by his two brothers who visited Montenegro in the early 1840s or passers-by from the region that he met at the time. More importantly, he finished his work in the late 1845. At the time, only one folk epic song about Smail-aga was published a couple of months before in a literary magazine. It seems that Mažuranić had not read it but, even if he did, it made no significant influence on his poem, which was already largely finished when the song was published (see Živančević 1988, 212–217). The closest link with oral tradition and *Smrt Smail-age Čengića* we find in an anecdotal note of the poet himself and his brother in law, describing that a year or so before he wrote the poem, the family invited for a visit a common Montenegrin who was passing by. This anonymous Montenegrin, who allegedly took part in one the battle against Smail-aga himself, was an excellent storyteller who told the story of his death in great detail, apparently relying on the folk songs about this event; the whole family was touched with his detailed story of the campaign, and Mažuranić in particular was so fascinated that he decided to write a poem about it (Živančević 1998, 196–198). Thereby, it seems that Mažuranić's poem

shows certain similarities with the oral folk songs simply because the story that inspired the poet was based on the same oral tradition as the folk songs.

In short, the links between Mažuranić's poem and folk songs are rather distant, and it would be unjustified to identify his artistic conception with the popular perceptions of Smail-aga and his death. In his literary work, the poet heavily transformed the events in order to give them a broader significance and universal meaning. In the spirit of Romantic nationalism, Mažuranić thus constructed the character of Smail-aga as a ruthless bloodthirsty tyrant who molests innocent helpless Christians, but tries to escape when he hears the Montenegrin guns.

IV Oral Epic Songs about the Death of Smail-aga

The ways in which Mažuranić's poem departs from the popular tradition are best exemplified by the oral songs about this event. Between 1845 and 1860, at least nine folk songs about the death of Smail-aga were collected throughout the South Slav area, which clearly shows the popularity of this event among the oral singers. These songs also welcome Smail-aga's death, but usually do not emphasize so much his oppressive character and portray him as a brave warrior – although he could have escaped, he stayed and encouraged others to stay and fight the attackers. Moreover, unlike Mažuranić's epos, oral songs clearly identify the Montenegrins and Bishop Petrović as either the inspirer or supporter of the assassination, and some even refer to him as "Vladiko, Crnogorski kralju" ("The Bishop, king of Montenegro"; Karadžić 1986, 338–350; Počić 1849, 247–260). Finally, in distinction to Mažuranić, they essentially present Smail-aga's death as a local incident without any particular or broad political consequences.

In the songs published by Karadžić, therefore, Smail-aga defies danger and boasts of his bravery; when he is warned about the danger, he replies: "Ja s' ne bojim pet stotina vlaha" ('I'm not afraid of five-hundred infidels'; Karadžić 1986, 336, similarly, Počić 1849, 258); consequently, when the attack starts, the singer says: "To kazuju i pričaju ljudi, / Da doista pobjeći mogaše, / Al' ne može Turčin od junaštva" ('People were telling us / He indeed could have escaped / but the Turk was obliged as a hero' "Smrt Smail-age Čengijća", Karadžić 1986, 337; similar verses are found in "Žalosna smrt Smaji-age Čengića", Počić 1849, 259). In addition, Smail-aga has been presented simply as the heavy levy collector, while his son comes later and abuses the poor rayah and rapes their women. (Karadžić 1986, 325; Karadžić 1986, 339, Počić 1849, 248). As Karadžić claims, the other four songs he collected are largely similar to the first one he published (Karadžić 1986, 350).⁵ The

⁵ These four songs have been published in *Srpske narodne pjesme iz neobjavljenih rukopisa* Vuka Stef. Karadžića, knjiga IV (Volume IV of Unpublished Songs from Karadžić's Manuscripts, Nedić & Mladenović 1974). Indeed, they similarly point out to Bishop Petrović as the inspirer or supporter of the action; thus, in all four songs, he is referred to as: "slavnom gospodaru" ("noble lord", Nedić & Mladenović 1974, 113), "vladike, crnogorskog kralja" "the Bishop, Montenegrin King", Nedić & Mladenović 1974, 120), "našega mila gospodara" ("our dear lord", Nedić and Mladenović 1974, 130), "gospodin vladici" ("lord vladika", Nedić & Mladenović 1974, 137).

song published in *Srbsko-dalmatinski magazin* in 1845 differs inasmuch as it presents Smail-aga as initially fleeing from the battlefield. However, when a fellow Turk shouts at him for leaving his own son, Smail-aga returns and gets shot. Moreover, in this version Smail-aga falls from the horse and asks for a bargain, apparently to escape death (“Bogom sinko Aleksiću Mirko, / Ustav’ sablju i desnicu ruku, / Ja bih tebi nešto besjedio” // “In God’s name my son Aleksić Mirko / Hold up the sabre and your right hand / I wish to tell you something”, SD 1845, 146–147). Therefore, this version goes far in exposing his cowardice and thus denying him the heroic status.

It is important to take a closer look into where from and under which circumstances were these songs collected. Seven out of these nine songs were collected by Vuk Karadžić or on his behalf. Karadžić started collecting and publishing oral songs already in 1814, and by the 1840s he was the most important and influential collector of South Slav oral songs. At the time of Smail-aga’s death, Karadžić was already preparing the collection of epic songs about most recent events. Naturally, he became very interested in this event, and by 1860 gathered seven songs describing the death of Smail-aga. Since Karadžić actually lived in Vienna and only came to Serbia for relatively short visits, he relied mostly on his associates. Most of the songs Karadžić received from his associate Vuk Popović from Risan, on the present-day Montenegrin Adriatic Coast. Risan was the place where local peasants from Hercegovina used to come to the market. Karadžić’s associate had an arrangement with one of these peasants from Grahovo who knew a little bit of writing, and from 1846 onwards he delivered dozens of epic songs, including at least four about the death of Smail-aga. Two other version were recorded around 1846 in Western Serbia, from the settlers from villages in Morača and Trebinje respectively. Then, in 1860 Karadžić received another song about this event from the Montenegrin capital Cetinje, from a Montenegrin dignitary Đuko Sredanović. Finally, two other songs were published at the time of his staying by the Adriatic coast – the one published in Dubrovnik in 1849 was written down in Dubrovnik from a peasant, and the one printed in 1845 in Zadar is of uncertain provenance (see Karadžić 1986, 17–19; Počić 1849, 232; Živančević 1988, 212–213).

In conclusion, such a large number of songs certainly indicates that this event received popular interest. However, without Karadžić’s persistent efforts from 1846 onwards, we would have had the impression that it attracted far less significance in oral tradition. In addition, most songs were collected at the Adriatic coast. In other words, by the 1840s the channels through which oral songs got published were already established; thus all the songs with identifiable place of origin come from a very narrow area around Grahovo and Trebinje, and were conveniently delivered or performed for the collectors at the Coast. In other words, no one actually went to the mountains to observe local oral tradition in the spot and to collect these songs directly from the locals. It is thus no surprise that these songs have many similarities, and sometimes leave us in doubt whether to treat them as separate versions or as the same song textualized several times in a slightly different form. Finally, as indicated, several songs even refer to Bishop Petrović Njegoš II as “the king of Montenegro”; unsurprisingly, the Bishop is so highly praised by Đuko Sredanović

who resided in his service in Cetinje at the time, but also in a song sung by a peasant in Dubrovnik in 1849, which also shows the appreciation of the Montenegrin Petrović. Therefore, it is striking that there are no songs gathered from the actual place of Smail-aga's death nor from the area under his control: all that has been recorded came from a more literate areas, through mediation of nationally minded Romantic scholars and intellectuals.

V Smail-aga as a Brave Warrior and Righteous Governor

It was only much later, during the first decades of the twentieth century, that we find particular local narratives, recorded in the area where Smail-aga ruled and died, that provide a rather different account of him as a righteous, honourable and courageous figure.⁶ Thus, Lazo Popović's 1912 book *Pogibija Smail-age Čengića*, written on the basis of the local tradition that the author recorded from the Drobnjaci area that Čengić ruled over by talking to old local Serbs and visiting the location of his death, offers precisely the opposite memory of him than Mažuranić's epics:

"Smail aga je bio dobar, pošten i pravičan čovjek. Zuluma po Drobnjacima nije činio. Hrišćanima ne samo što je dopuštao da vrše svoje vjerske obrede i običaje, već je, štaviše, zaštićavao crkve i sve što je crkvensko. O Božiću je pekao peciva, uzimao vina, pa pozivao hrišćane, svoje ljude, i častio ih. Njegov podanik, pa ma on i čese zlatna novca imao, slobodan je bio svuda, niko mu nije smio ništa učiniti, samo kad bi rekao, da je iz Smail-agina kadiluka. Uopšte, Drobnjaci nijesu imali boljeg turskog starješine od Smail-age, te su ga zbog njegovih vrlina poštovali."

"Smail aga was a good, honest and fair man. He made no harm to the Drobnjaks. Not only that he allowed the Christians to perform their religious customs and rituals, but he, moreover, protected churches and all its belongings. On Christmas he baked pastry, brought wine, invited the Christians, his men, and offered them a treat. His subject, even if he carried full bags of gold coins, was free anywhere he went, and no one could do him any harm if he said that he was under Smail-aga's reign. Generally, the Drobnjaks never had a better Turkish lord than Smail-aga, and respected him for his virtues" (Popović 1912, 18).

Marjan Miljić and Čedo Baćević also confirm that "Montenegrin anecdotes and songs remember Smail-aga's virtues and heroism, but also cruelty towards the defeated, concluding that he was the man of his time" (Miljić 2009, 184–186). One anecdote from Baćević's work (Baćević 2011) conveniently illustrates this point:

"Čengića sablja ne siječe mučki

⁶ I am not taking into consideration here specific Muslim/Bošnjak literary and oral tradition about Smail-aga's death; recorded around the turn of the 20th century, it predictably contains a consistently positive outlook on him (see Mulavdić 2019, 422–442).

I vojska paše Miljevine udari na Drobnjak. Predvodili su je Turci *seratlije* – u pasu su im bile srmene kubure, o ramenu izvezene šešane, a u ruci oštre sablje dimiskije. Junaštvom su se oglasili i junaštvom zanosili. A ispred svih, na vrancu, jahao je najveći hercegovački gazi-ja – Smail-aga Čengiđ iz Lipnika.

- Smail-aga, koliko ćeš posjeći kaura? – zapita ga paša Miljevina.

- Nijednog, čestiti pašo, koji mi poljubi ruku, a sto i jednog koji je odgurne! Čengiđa sablja ne siječe mučki, no balčak na balčak, i brid na brid!

Istorija kazuje da je Smail-aga baš takav i bio: nemilosrdan prema protivnicima, a milostiv prema pobijeđenima.”

“Čengiđ’s sward does not slay traitorously

An army led by the Bosnian pasha Miljevina went against the Drobnak tribe.⁷ On the front stood the *seratlije* (frontier guards), each carrying a silver holster and embroiled rifle and holding a Damascus sword. Heroism was their reputation and their inspiration. And, in front of them all, on a black horse, rode the greatest Herzegovinian hero – Smail-aga Čengiđ from Lipnik.

‘Smail-aga, how many infidels are you going to slay?’, the pasha asked.

‘Honourable pasha, I will slay none that accepts my hand, and hundred and one that rejects it – The sword of Čengiđ slays not through cowardice, but on the battlefield, by hilt against the hilt and by blade against the blade!’

The history says that Smail-aga was exactly so: ruthless towards his enemies and merciful towards the defeated ones” (Bačević, Internet).

These narratives somewhat differ from the aforementioned ones. While the excerpt from Popović would fall into oral history, the following two are oral anecdotes and, as such, all bare their distinctive generic features. Thus, oral memories and anecdotes are historical, concretized and localized; the latter commonly end with a pun in a form of a witty, bold sentence; in addition, serious and heroic anecdotes contain examples of heroic statements and deeds performed by well-known persons (Pešut, 1990, 840–844). However, scholars emphasize that these are also oral genres that transpose real events to an abstract level and that their historical accuracy is secondary; that they can be similar to oral songs but still remain more grounded in local, concrete and common or profane (Zlatković 2007, 285–288). Thus, while Smail-aga’s biography certainly made him memorable amongst his Herzegovinian subjects, one could argue that these more “relaxed” and geograph-

⁷ The Drobnjaks (nowadays a region in North Montenegro) are Orthodox Christians that due to specificities of the late Ottoman rule in the Balkans lived almost freely in the Herzegovinian mountains. Their nominal rulers were Ottoman dignitaries from Bosnia and Herzegovina, who occasionally launched military campaigns in order to subdue them and collect the tax.

ically narrow and local folkloristic genres were particularly prone to remembering him in a more positive light. The generic features and time distance notwithstanding, it is still worth notifying that oral history recorded among the peoples and region that Smail-aga ruled over, still appraised him as righteous, protective and noble ruler nearly a century after his death. Yet, the process of selection and documentation of folklore largely bypassed and folklorists ignored this narrative tradition before the 20th century.

VI Conclusion

In summarizing, this article exemplified briefly four distinctive narrative traditions about Smail-aga's death – newspaper articles published immediately after his assassination in 1840, Ivan Mažuranić's literary epic published in 1846, oral songs collected between 1845 and 1860, and local anecdotes about him and his rule from Drobñjaci and Herzegovina published in the early 20th century. Two types of those narratives stand in stark opposition – local anecdotes remembering Smail-aga as a righteous governor who protected and did not oppress his subjects, and Mažuranić's literary epos that presented him as a ruthless tyrant who tortured and killed the Christians. Oral songs and newspaper articles also often describe him as a villain and oppressor, but also mostly mention his reputation and bravery. In explaining such large discrepancies between these narratives, I focused on the role of mid-19th century Serbian and Croatian scholars and intellectuals in codifying the tradition about Smail-aga as a villain; in accordance with their ideas about national emancipation, the narratives with the negative portrayal of Smail-aga stood better chances of being documented. This picture then became codified from 1840s onwards during Romantic nationalism period, and hence local narratives that offered more ambivalent or even altogether positive picture of Smail-aga remained shuffled and effectively absent from published/public discourse until early 20th century.

In other words, common, then mostly illiterate people were telling stories and singing songs about Smail-aga and his death. But, oral tradition is fluid and dynamic, and the way it became accessible to us, in the sense of what kind of narratives are going to be collected, memorized and canonized, depended heavily on the collectors' predispositions, their values, expectations and contacts. Arguably, Karadžić and his contemporaries were fascinated by Mažuranić's poem, and thereby inclined to document the corresponding folk narratives. In other words, even though these songs and anecdotes were performed or told mostly by illiterate peasants, we should be attentive of the role that literate intellectuals played in the codification of this tradition about Smail-aga. Certainly, this does not mean that we should merely inverse the Romantic tradition and celebrate Smail-aga – he seems to be in his own time already the man of the past, believing in Muslim supremacy won on the battlefield. Better, we should be more attentive to the ways in which oral tradition has been shaped by the influences and impetuses from the literary sphere. While in the ground there was a polyphony of various voices and perspectives, it was through the efforts of these great Romantic literary and national figures that this inherent folkloric heteroglossia became unified and codified into a coherent per-

spective of “otherness” or hostility towards the Turks. Thus, considering the overall tradition about Smail-aga, which is far more complex and nuanced than the Romantics presented it, testifies to an outlook that transcends strict religious, ethnic and national divisions and thereby calls for reimagining and reevaluating one’s relationship towards the Ottoman heritage altogether.

Sources

- Detelić, Mirjana & Branislav Tomić. 2010. *Epska narodna poezija*. <http://monumentaserbica.branatomic.com/epp/> (Accessed February 20, 2021).
- ILN 1840. “Bosna i Hercegovina”. *Ilirske narodne novine*. 11. November 1840. 92 (VII): 365–366.
- Karadžić, Vuk Stefanović. 1866. *Srpske narodne pjesme*, knj. 4, *Sabrana dela Vuka Stefanovića Karadžića*, Vol. VII, Beograd: Prosveta.
- Mažuranić, Ivan. 1979 [1846]. *Smrt Smail-age Čengića. Sabrana djela Ivana Mažuranića*, Svezak I, Zagreb: Sveučilišna naklada Liber.
- Mažuranić, Ivan. 1925. *The Death of Smail Aga. Redndered into English by J. W. Wiles*. London: G. Allen & Unwin.
- Nedić, Vladan & Živomir Mladenović. 1974. *Srpske narodne pjesme iz neobjavljenih rukopisa Vuka Stef. Karadžića. Knjiga 4. Pjesme junačke novijih vremena o vojevanju za slobodu*. Beograd: Srpska akademija nauka i umetnosti.
- Počić, Orsat (aka Pucić, Medo). 1849. „Žalosna smrt Smaji-age Čengića“. In: *Dubrovnik: cviet narodnog književstva* (1849), ed. Orsat Počić, vol. I: 247–260. Dubrovnik: Tijeskom Martenikoviem.
- Popović, Lazo. 1912. *Pogibija Smail-age Čengića*. Cetinje: Državna štamparija.
- SD 1845. „Smrt Čengića Smail-age“. *Srbsko-dalmatinski magazin* 10: 141–147. Zadar: Braće Battara.

Literature

- Baćović, Čedo. 2011. “Smail-aga Čengić – mit i stvarnost”. https://www.montenegrina.net/pages/pages1/istorija/cg_u_xix_vijeku/smail_aga_cengic_mit_i_stvarnost.htm (Accessed February 20, 2021)
- Barac, Antun. 1945. *Mažuranić*. Zagreb: Matica hrvatska.
- Beissinger, Margaret, Tylus, Jane & Wofford, Susanne. 1999. *Epic Traditions in the Contemporary World: the Poetics of Community*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Cocchiara, Giuseppe 1981. *The History of Folklore in Europe*. Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues.
- Delić, Lidija. 2016. „Kliče Miloš srpski pop'jevati: Konceptualizacija etnonima u usmenoj epici“. In *Srbi i srpsko*, ed. Dejan Ajdačić, 50–71. Belgrade: Alma.
- Delić, Lidija. 2012. „Erlangenski rukopis starih srpsko-hrvatskih narodnih pesama: epske pesme“. In *Pesme Erlangenskog rukopisa*, eds. Mirjana Detelić, Snežana Samardžija & Lidija Delić. <http://monumentaserbica.branatomic.com/erl/radovi/3%20Lidija%20Delić,%20ER%20EPSKE%20PESME.pdf> (Accessed February 20, 2021).
- Dukić, Davor. 2017. “Ivan Mažuranić’s *The Death of Smail-aga Čengić* (1846): The Controversial Reception of an Epic Poem”. In: *Narrative(s) in Conflict*, eds. Wolfgang Müller-Funk & Clemens Ruthner, 31–39. Berlin/ Boston: De Gruyter.
- Đorđević Belić Smiljana. 2016. *Postfolklorna epska hronika. Žanr na granici i granice žanra*. Beograd: Čigoja štampa.
- Foley, John Miles. 2000. “The Textualization of South Slavic Oral Epic and its Implications for Oral-Derived Epic”. In *Textualization of Oral Epic*, ed. Lauri Honko, 71–88. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Foley, John Miles. 2005. “Analogues: Modern Oral Epics”. In *A Companion to Ancient Epic*, ed. John Miles Foley, 196–212. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Honko, Lauri. 2000. *Textualization of Oral Epic*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Kilibarda, Novak. 1980. „Beleške i objašnjenja“. In *Ogledalo srpsko. Celokupna dela Petra II Petrovića Njegoša*, vol. 5: 485–615. Beograd: Prosveta; Cetinje: Obod.
- Leerssen, Joep. 2020. *Encyclopaedia of Romantic Nationalism in Europe*, ed. Joep Leerssen (electronic version). Amsterdam: Study Platform of Interlocking Nationalisms. <https://ernie.uva.nl/> (Accessed February 20, 2021).
- Lord, Albert B. 2000. *The Singer of Tales*. 2nd edition. Cambridge, Mass, London: Harvard University Press.
- Ljubinković, Nenad. 2000. *Pjevanija crnogorska i hercegovačka (budimska i lajpciška) Sime Milutinovića Sarajlije: prilog proučavanju narodne poezije Vukovog vremena*. Beograd: Rad.
- Mandić, Marija. 2021. “The Serbian proverb *Poturica gori od Turčina* (A Turk-convert is worse than a Turk). Stigmatizer and Figure of Speech”. In *Imagining Bosnian Muslims in Central Europe. Representations, Transfers and Exchanges*, ed. František Šístek, 170–193. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Miljić, Marijan. 2009. „Smail aga između stvarnosti i legende“. *Matica: časopis za društvena pitanja, nauku i kulturu* 49 (3): 181–192.

- Mulavdić, Vedad. 2019. „Motiv smrti Smail-age Čengića u bošnjačkoj preporodnoj književnosti“. *Godišnjak Bošnjačke zajednice kulture „Preporod“* 10 (39): 422–442.
- Nedić, Vladan. 1981. *Vukovi pevači*, Novi Sad: Matica srpska.
- Pavlović, Aleksandar. 2014. *Epika i politika. Nacionalizovanje crnogorske usmene tradicije u prvoj polovini XIX veka*. Beograd: XX vek.
- Pavlović, Aleksandar & Srđan Atanasovski. 2016. “From Myth to Territory: Vuk Karadžić, Kosovo Epics and the Role of Nineteenth-Century Intellectuals in Establishing National Narratives”. *Hungarian Historical Review* 5 (2): 357–376.
- Pavlović, Aleksandar. 2019. *Imaginarni Albanac: simbolika Kosova i figura Albanca u srpskoj kulturi*. Beograd: Institut za filozofiju i društvenu teoriju.
- Pešić, Radmila. 1967. „Stariji sloj pesama o uskocima“. *Analiz Filološkog fakulteta* 7: 49–65.
- Pešut, Petar. 1989. *Ratničko patrijarhalna anegdota*. Beograd: Naučna knjiga.
- Petričević, Marko. 1964. „Lik Smail-age Čengića“. *Naše more: znanstveni časopis za more i pomorstvo* 11 (5): 277–279.
- Protrka Štimec, Marina. 2017. „Prirodno pravo i Smrti Smail-age Čengića: Mažuranićev 'Fuit Tyrannus'“. *Umjetnost riječi* LXI (3–4): 181–199.
- Zlatković, Branko. 2007. „Usmena narodna anegdota“. *Književnost i jezik* 54 (3/4): 281–289.
- Živančević, Milorad. 1988. *Ivan Mažuranić*. Novi Sad: Matica srpska; Zagreb: Globus.

Примљено / Received: 19. 11. 2020.

Прихваћено / Accepted: 11. 05. 2021.