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Abstract

While most modern theorists of nationalism emphasize the role of intellectuals “creating nations out of nationalism” (Gellner, 1983) or imagining the community of nations (Anderson, 1991), I argue that another role of intellectuals may also be equally as valid: the role of the poet as adapting existing communities, and the trappings of those communities, into the shape and appearance of a modern nation. Using the examples of the Montenegrin poet Petar II Petrović Njegoš and the Albanian poet Gjergj Fishta and their epics *The Mountain Wreath* (1847) and *The Highland Lute* (1939), I argue the continuation of their literary epics to the oral epic traditions which formed an important basis for Montenegrin and Northern Albanian communities.

In their literary epics Njegoš and Fishta imitate the language and themes of their communities’ oral traditions, yet improve upon this tradition in their conception of the modern nation. They elevate the peasant language to the level of poetry and take stock of their communities’ historical, cultural, and religious heritage, employing myths, symbols, customs, and values from the oral narrative tradition. However, the writers did not blindly follow the tradition from oral narratives; in many instances, they question the value of this society and suggest changes in the traditional society to develop a national culture.

Far from being “unskilled or unethical psychologists” planting false memories in their communities (White, 2000), Njegoš and Fishta are competent composers who combine their communities’ oral epic tradition, European literary movements, and their own individual poetic skills to forge a new conception of their community as a modern nation. Indeed in these national epics, Njegoš and Fishta present a higher aesthetic and ethical standard for their communities than the preceding oral epic and heroic traditions. While White (2000) accuses Romantic nationalists of invention and deception, their national epics capture an essence of authenticity for the nation that not only makes them influential in their own national literatures and cultures, but also gives them a place in great world literature, representing the highest poetic accomplishments of their respective nations.

They rose to where their sovereign eagle sails,
They kept their faith, their freedom, on the height,
Chaste, frugal, savage, arm'd by day and night
Against the Turk; whose inroad nowhere scales
Their headlong passes, but his footstep fails,
And red with blood the Crescent reels from fight
Before their dauntless hundreds, in prone flight
By thousands down the crags and thro' the vales.
O smallest among peoples! rough rock-throne
Of Freedom! warriors beating back the swarm
Of Turkish Islam for five hundred years,
Great Tsernogora! never since thine own
Black ridges drew the cloud and brake the storm
Has breathed a race of mightier mountaineers.

—Alfred, Lord Tennyson, “Montenegro”

Introduction

While Romantics in Western Europe sought a return to an authentic, natural lifestyle—a primordial agrarian society bound by honor and tradition—many thought they had found one among the tribes of Southeastern Europe. Men and women in Montenegro and Albania were actually living such a life, largely unaware either of the possible “attractiveness” of that lifestyle or indeed of any alternative to it. Some educated leaders in Southeastern Europe who were familiar with Romanticism realized its appeal, not necessarily as a rejection of neoclassical aesthetics and philosophy, as it was in Western Europe, but as a means to create their communities’ first modern literary works. Romanticism inspired several “national epics” from the region, including Petar II Petrović Njegoš’s *Gorski vijenac* (*The Mountain Wreath*, 1848), Ivan Mažuranić’s *Smrt Smail-age Čengića* (*The Death of Smail-Aga Čengić*, 1846), and Francè Prešeren’s *Krst pri Savici* (*Baptism on the Savica*, 1835). Not only are these epics competent poetry, but they are also symbolic works, perceived as capturing the nation’s authentic character. Although Albanian Romantics strove to create a “national epic,” and both Gjergj Fishta’s *Lahuta e malcis* (*The Highland Lute*, 1939) and Naim Frashëri’s *Istoria e Skenderbeut* (*History of Skanderbeg*, 1898) have claimed that title, neither has become an undisputed symbol of Albanian national culture.¹

In 1831, Petar II Petrović Njegoš (1813–1851) inherited the position of his late uncle, Petar, as *vladika*, an archbishop of the Serbian Orthodox Church and political leader of the Montenegrin tribes. Following in his uncle’s footsteps, he implemented several reforms to modernize the Montenegrin state. He founded the first schools in Montenegro, imposed taxes on the tribes, built some of the country’s first roads, and imported and ran his own printing press.² Given his responsibilities as *vladika* and the continual worries of invasion, infighting, and famine, Njegoš had many other important occupations besides writing poetry. Nevertheless, he produced some of the most important poetry of the region, including *The Mountain Wreath* and two other long poems, *Luča mikrokozma* (*The Ray of the Microcosm*, 1845) and *Lažni car Šćepan Mali* (*The False Czar Stefan the Small*, 1851). Additionally, he composed a number of shorter poems and was an avid collector of Montenegrin folk songs. His accomplishments as a poet are unequaled by any other Montenegrin, being the only one to gain an international reputation for his poetry.

Gjergj Fishta (1871–1940) was also a cultural and religious leader in his community. He served as a Franciscan priest in various villages in his native region of northern Albania, where he encountered the lifestyle of the northern Albanian tribes

depicted in his epic, *The Highland Lute*. Trained in a seminary in Bosnia, Fishta read Serbian and Croatian and admired the poetry of Njegoš and Ivan Mažuranić.³ Although he lived several decades after these writers, Fishta played an analogous role in his nation's cultural development; filling a similar void in his nation's literary canon while glorifying the community's heroic culture. Furthermore, Fishta actively participated in education, government, and printing in his emerging nation. He was the director of a Franciscan school and later the editor of a literary journal and a newspaper in the northern Albanian city of Shkodër. Fishta also served as a representative to the Albanian national parliament. Yet it is in poetry that he had his greatest success, winning the accolades of "National Poet of Albania" and "the Albanian Homer."⁴

Although *Romanticism* and *nationalism* are difficult philosophical and aesthetic movements to define, due to their fluidity and variety of understanding, it is still worthwhile to specify how the terms apply to Njegoš and Fishta, whom I describe as Romantic nationalists. This is important primarily because they do not embrace all the tenets of either movement. *Nationalist* is easier to apply to them because they actively sought, beyond their own individual success, the artistic, cultural, and political advancement of their nations.⁵ However, their nationalism is distinctive because they tolerate and even appreciate other national cultures. This attitude is related to the legacy of the Romantic poet and philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder, who described national cultures as flowers that enriched and beautified the garden of civilization by their variety. Njegoš and Fishta, however, stopped short of many of the more radical positions of other Romantics. For example, their sense of individual freedom gave way to national freedom and embraced—rather than rejected—systems of order with national and religious origins. Still, their description as Romantics holds true because of their emphasis on heroism and sacrifice, idealism, and national independence.⁶ Above all, like Herder, Goethe, and the Grimm brothers, they were attracted to the oral narratives and folk culture of their communities.

Recent scholarship has not embraced Romanticism or nationalism with nearly the same enthusiasm these authors did, nor has it necessarily been kind to Romantics and nationalists. One such example is *Nationalism and Territory* by George White, who in examining the importance of territory to national claims and noting the destruction caused by nationalist claims, condemns the ideologies promoted by Romanticism and nationalism. In his conclusion, White rails against Romantic nationalists: "That modern nations did not exist prior to the end of the eighteenth century did not daunt Romantic nationalists who countered with the argument that nations needed to be 'awakened,' or 'reawakened' as the case may have been. Many

individuals, unaware of who they were, had to be told who they were. Such is the arrogance of Romantic nationalism. Like unskilled or unethical psychologists who plant false memories of childhood experiences into the minds of their patients, Romantic nationalists worked feverishly to implant invented national histories in the minds of individuals, targeted by the territories in which they lived.”⁷ Although recent results of militant nationalism in the Balkans may deserve such an outright condemnation, his analogy is perhaps unfair to this first generation of Romantic nationalists. While this essay is not an attempt to deify Romantic nationalists, it is in part a defense of their work and reputation.

That said, however, there is plenty of truth to White’s conclusions. Romantic nationalists from the Balkans usually had such an educational advantage over their compatriots that they were in a position to observe their communities, weigh them against the realities and theories of other European nations, and, in a way, diagnose their failings. They were aware that their understanding of the “nation” was quite different from most of its would-be members, and set out to enlighten them accordingly. Njegoš, Fishta, and others in similar positions worked to change their communities’ perceptions of themselves and their relationship to the world, and as authors of fiction, creative invention was part and parcel of their trade.

Still, White’s analogy is unfair for two main reasons. First, far from inventing national histories, Romantic nationalists more often interpreted their history using a variety of sources. They mediated between Romantic philosophy from abroad and specific cultural conceptions within their communities. Their works and philosophies were neither wholesale imports from Herder and other Western Romantics nor a mere reiteration of folk narratives and customs. The authors’ communities influenced their understanding of the “nation” and many aspects of their works, such as language, genre, myths, symbols, customs, and values. Still, the authors saw the limitations of their communities’ traditional cultures and questioned their viability for the future. Furthermore, the communities were not necessarily duped or defrauded by the authors; the epics are effective and accepted, in part, because of their accurate portrayal of the communities and their compatibility with the communities’ own cultural conceptions.

More to the point, White’s characterization is a caricature that distorts the Romantic nationalists’ motivations and intentions. While it does not target any individual specifically, the analogy has the intent of undermining the reputation of a group of individuals not unjustly honored by nations they helped found. The analogy implies a certain amount of self-promotion in the authors—namely, that they stood to benefit from these “false memories” of the nation.⁸ In reality, their

motives were more often the literary enrichment of their national culture. Although many Romantic nationalists were involved in government, they had genuine literary interests distinct from any partisan aims. Primary among their objectives was the elevation of their nations' literature to the levels of other European cultures. This they hoped to accomplish through emulating the great forms of classic European literature, above all the epic, as adapted for their own unique community.⁹

The epic provided an excellent means for Romantic nationalists to educate the nation and to explain its past, present, and future as well as to shape a cultural national identity. The epic has long been regarded as the highest literary accomplishment, grand in style, scope, and subject. Epics usually treat a historical event "that is central to the traditions and belief of its culture," explaining the history or purpose of a community.¹⁰ Furthermore, many epics draw from and reinforce social standards, norms, and expectations, and frequently celebrate these traditions in the community. An elementary definition of "national epic" may be *a long narrative poem set in the history of a particular community that the author understands to be a nation; it celebrates the ethics and existence of that nation by embellishing symbolically significant elements such as myths, symbols, customs, and values.*¹¹ Moreover, the entire work and each of its individual, nation-specific elements become more significant the more the audience becomes acquainted with the unique culture of the community. A national epic is meaningful for its nation in ways that it cannot be to any other community.

The community's response to, and assessment of, the work relates to a second meaning of "national epic": *a literary work seen as symbolically representing the national character.* Some Romantic phrases express this same concept: "embodying the spirit of the nation," "the fullest flowering of national genius," and "the greatest accomplishment of national literature." The process whereby a national epic in the first sense becomes symbolic of a national culture may be as much a matter of chance, fate, political climate, and accepted standards of literature as it is of strictly literary merit. For example, while Njegoš's epic, *The Mountain Wreath*, was a staple of Serbian and Montenegrin literature in communist Yugoslavia, the dissolution of that country has challenged its symbolic status.¹² Likewise, while Fishta and his national epic, *The Highland Lute*, enjoyed considerable popularity and notoriety, the Albanian Communist party denounced Fishta and his works, which were banned for some forty years.¹³ Another Albanian epic, Naim Frashëri's *History of Skanderbeg*, enjoyed popular support during this same time, but may lose its popularity with Fishta's return to the national canon.¹⁴ The goal of this essay is not necessarily to explain how these works have or have not been accepted as national epics, but rather

to discuss how the authors sought to make their works both acceptable to their nation and symbolically representative of the nation.

For the purposes of this essay, I will use the following definition for the term “nation” given by Anthony D. Smith: “*a named and self-defined human community whose members cultivate common myths, memories and symbols, possess a distinctive public culture, occupy a historic homeland, and observe common laws and shared customs.*”¹⁵ Other definitions may yield equally interesting and perceptive analyses of the nation, but this definition suits an examination of epics because it emphasizes the same cultural elements (myths, symbols, customs, and values) that national epics draw on for national relevance.¹⁶ I hope that examining the author’s communities, approaches, and works will produce a better understanding of their influences on their nations’ identities. This essay examines the works of two authors, not necessarily to compare them with one another, but rather to yield a better understanding of their nations and a sharper, clearer picture of the Romantic nationalist as a writer in a community whose immediate culture was based in oral narratives and who sought to change the community’s conception of itself as a nation through literature, synthesizing many influences and continuing a folk tradition in a new medium. They are no longer *Singers of Tales*, but rather *Composers of National Epics*.

Context

There are certain limits in comparing Fishta and Njegoš to the bards of the oral epic tradition because the manner, purpose, and effect of the written epics are significantly different. First and foremost, the composition of oral narratives occurred simultaneously with performance and recitation, while writing allowed the authors more time and deliberation in their composition. Furthermore, printing allowed the distribution of a uniform text across the entire language community, whereas oral narratives might vary widely from one performance to another and had a much smaller potential audience.¹⁷ Despite the advantages of literacy, Njegoš and Fishta relied on oral traditions to legitimize their epics. Linguistically, they imitated the forms of oral traditions yet elevated the peasant language to the level of poetry. Furthermore, the oral narrative tradition in many cases created a cultural awareness that the authors of national epics celebrated. Fishta and Njegoš took stock of their communities’ historical, cultural, and religious heritage, employing myths, symbols, customs, and values from the oral narrative tradition. This is not to say, however, that the writers blindly accepted the cultural traditions expressed in the

oral narratives; in many instances, they suggest the changes necessary to develop a national culture.

Language

The Mountain Wreath and *The Highland Lute* appeared at the threshold not only of national identity but also of literacy and language standardization in Montenegro and Albania. The simultaneous growth of literacy and the success of a national epic are probably not coincidental, nor, for that matter, is the simultaneous development of national identity and the emergence of literacy.¹⁸ Njegoš and Fishta joined other notable intellectuals from the area such as Vuk Karadžić, Ljudevit Gaj, Jernej Kopitar, Francè Prešeren, and Naim Frashëri in the debates on language standardization at the heart of defining national identity. By selecting particular orthographic systems, the communities' intellectual and political leaders aligned themselves with, or alienated themselves from, regional powers and cultural centers. The very letters these authors wrote and the words they spelled had important political implications, showing their support for one political and ideological orientation or another.

The particular linguistic situations in Montenegro and Albania made artistic composition a difficult task for any writer. Njegoš and Fishta were essentially starting modern literary traditions in literatures that previously had consisted of little more than oral poetry.¹⁹ Correspondingly, both countries lacked a common literary standard that was also accessible to a majority of the population. In Montenegro as well as Serbia, the literary language of the time was a mixture of Church Slavonic and the language of the people. This "Slavono-Serbian" was quite distant from the spoken language and was perhaps closer to Russian. In Albania three major religions competed for influence; for almost fifty years, Albanian intellectuals could not agree on an orthographic standardization because of their personal affiliations with Ottoman, Greek, or Latin cultures. Their quest for the acknowledgment of their distinct culture necessitated the unification and development of a literary or official standard for the nation.

Regional dialects within the nation posed another problem. Vuk Karadžić tried to overcome the gap between Slavono-Serbian and everyday speech by creating a literary standard from the speech of the peasants in Herzegovina; Njegoš's poetry made similar use of everyday speech. Although Karadžić's reforms eventually succumbed to a standard based on the speech of the cities, these attempts helped to create the ideal of a more accessible, standard literary language for the nation. In their epics, Njegoš and Fishta modified the language of the oral narratives with a higher,

perhaps artificial, aesthetic style. Their language is self-consciously poetic and thus more elevated than common speech, yet it imitates the speech of the peasants and the meter of the oral narratives, linking the epics to the folk communities.

Literary Influences

As literary creations, both *The Mountain Wreath* and *The Highland Lute* exhibit influences from earlier in their nations' cultures. In fact, these works spring from two very different but related literary traditions: oral narrative poetry and the literary epic. The authors aspired to establish a higher level of literature and artistry than that which they found in their local culture, yet they drew from local culture for both content and expression. Their poems succeed as national epics and as world literature in part because of their synthesis of "high literature" with oral narrative traditions.²⁰

Oral and literary cultures also coincided in one of the most significant studies in twentieth-century literary scholarship, the work of Albert Lord and Milman Parry on oral narrative poems in Southeastern Europe.²¹ Although their background was in classical literature and their original intention was to provide a better explanation for the composition of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, their findings not only revolutionized the understanding of those cornerstones of world literature but also rekindled an interest in folk culture and oral poetry. Lord and Parry solved the enigma of epic composition by detailing the "formulaic" composition of oral epics and revealing a similar process in Homer's tales.²² Because the composition of the epic requires the performer, the "singer of tales," to compose at the rate of about ten lines per minute, singers employ previously learned phrases to fit the metric pattern and to cue subsequent parts of the tale. The composition of oral epics by "formulaic phrases" formally distinguishes them from epics recorded in print, because it signifies that the singer composed the song solely from memory.

In addition to establishing a pattern of composition, these oral narrative traditions and the songs they created provided communities with a sense of self-identification. As Christopher Boehm describes in his account of the customs and values of Montenegrins, the recitation of folk poetry was a widespread social event, with men of all ages participating and experienced *guslars* performing.²³ As proof that these events were important elements of the oral tradition, the musical instrument that accompanied the singers—*gusle* in Serbian and *lahuta* in Albanian—came to symbolize the epic tradition both in folk poetry and later in *The Mountain Wreath* and *The Highland Lute*. These performances educated new generations in the tra-

ditions, myths, customs, and values of their elders. Because the stories doubtless changed from one performance to another, let alone from one generation to another, the same messages could be interpreted very differently within the community at any particular time. Although interpretations and compositions varied, a number of themes, stylistic features and adventures, heroes, ethics, and stories permeated the tradition of oral narratives.²⁴ This common background of traditions and symbols outlined widely held understandings of the communities' perceptions of themselves and of other communities.

The process of oral composition merits still further attention. The audience at the performance required that the tale be coherent and engaging. They were not looking for a perfect recitation of some "authentic" text like later judges in folklore competitions; rather, they expected variation in the songs, even from the same singer. The process and tradition of composition required less scrutiny of details, but more consistency with broad conceptions. While details changed, the epics' general meaning and application remained the same. Subtlety was sacrificed for broad brushstrokes, the characters were types more than individuals, and the situations were formulaic rather than specific.²⁵ Njekoš and Fishta found in this epic tradition a language of heroism and respect for the community and its standards, a medium whereby basic virtues and concepts of identity were transmitted from group to group, from generation to generation. In adopting the epic tradition, they carried on this function of socialization and education with a similar, but not identical, set of values and loyalties. National epics exhibit a similar concern for the broad implications and ethical lessons, while they also deliberately detail characters and conflicts. They adapted the conventions of epic singing for their own instrument of poetry—not the lute, but the pen.

Community Profiles

Similar social organizations in Montenegro and Albania governed the relationships between individuals and groups within these communities. A tribal culture had existed in both societies for several hundred years and was a major factor not only in their social and political organization, but also in their cultural values and identity.²⁶ While many saw them as brutal or wildly exotic, others saw the pastoral and tribal life in Montenegro and northern Albania as a rugged, yet genuine, existence, sometimes including this pristine culture in their own national narratives.²⁷ Although the cultures may seem exotic from the perspective of another culture or time, they were the everyday existence for Njekoš and Fishta.²⁸ Although there are

major differences in the two communities, they share remarkable similarities. One is their common claim of historical independence from Ottoman domination.²⁹ This claim is also central to the conflict and national identities in both epics. Mary Edith Durham, a British anthropologist from the early 1900s, refutes the Montenegrins' claim of being the only nation of the Balkans independent of the Turks, citing some Albanian tribes that also maintained independence. However, according to Milovan Đilas, "Montenegro remained under the Turks from the middle of the fifteenth century to the end of the seventeenth."³⁰ To be sure, many Albanian tribes that had been subject to the Ottoman Empire also claimed that they had always been independent.³¹ As with the oral narratives, while the particulars may be inaccurate, this perception is an accurate reflection of the communities' general beliefs.

Montenegro

In the nineteenth century, approximately twenty-four Montenegrin tribes lived between the Austrian Empire to the north and the Ottoman Empire to the south and east.³² The *vladika* was their ecclesiastical and political leader. He was an archbishop of the Serbian Orthodox Church, generally selected by his predecessor, approved by tribal leaders as the leader of the nation, and consecrated outside the country. Although he was the undisputed ecclesiastical leader, the tribes maintained considerable control over their own political and economic decisions.³³ In fact, the *vladika* was essentially a mediator between the tribes as well as between the tribes and other governments. He counseled with tribal elders—the *glavari*—to discuss matters of the nation.

These tribes were essentially political and economic organizations, owning the land where the members pastured their livestock. The tribes comprised several clans, or *bratstva* (brotherhoods) which made up another distinct layer of Montenegrin society. Clans formed military units in war or feuds and served as the basic legal unit. One scholar described the *bratstvo* as "a union of different households composing a community of which all the members consider themselves to be related in terms of kinship."³⁴ It was also the primary source for social identity among Montenegrins. Even two generations later, most Montenegrins referred to their place of origin by the name of their *bratstvo*.³⁵ The smallest social unit was the household, usually composed of five to eleven people. Families were patrilocal and patrilineal; sons typically remained members of the father's household until his death, although some brothers stayed together much longer. Often several generations lived together and divided the labor among the household.³⁶

Distinct societal values, demanding heroism, bravery, and loyalty from men, and respect, submission, and reproduction from women, reinforced the organization of households, clans, and tribes. Primary among the purposes of the social structure was the continuation of the household, or of the father's line. The tribes recorded the men's genealogy both to link the living family with honored ancestors and to guard against incest, which they feared enormously. Christopher Boehm argues that one of the primary instruments for preserving the connection with the ancestors was the *slava*, or celebration of the clan's patron saint.³⁷ Marriage linked the past to the future by ensuring the continuation of the household. While the men's genealogy safeguarded against incest, no such concerns existed for women because women's contribution to the bloodline was considered insignificant.³⁸ Consistent with this concern for the household's continuation, male children were prized over females. Another notorious aspect of blood that has claimed attention is the blood feud, where clans often felt duty-bound to avenge a family member's murder.

Albania

Northern Albanian society largely corresponded to the Montenegrin tribes' organization and values. Here too, families and households formed the basic level of society. These in turn made up villages, clans, and tribes, all according to the *kanun* of Lekë Dukagjini, a widespread and influential law code that detailed the relationships, customs, and values of the northern Albanian tribes.³⁹ Its origin is unclear; the popular belief is that Lekë Dukagjini, a contemporary of Skanderbeg and prince of some northern Albanian tribes, gave this set of laws to preserve his people and their customs. Others argue that the title refers not to the prince but rather to the region where the code rules.⁴⁰ Whatever its origin, the *kanun* influenced Albanian society for countless generations. The Albanian term for clan, *vëllaznija*, corresponds directly with the Montenegrin term *bratstvo*, also emphasizing kinship and origin. Aside from these similarities, there are some differences in social structures. Structurally, Albanian houses were partitioned to give member families more privacy. This physical division reflects (or perhaps produces) an earlier division of households than in Montenegrin houses.⁴¹ Where Montenegrin clans held judicial responsibilities, in Albania this fell to the tribes. Most important for our purposes, however, is the absence of any unitary ruler, either ecclesiastical or political.⁴² Instead, only a council of elders, similar to Montenegro's *glavari*, convened to discuss occasional intertribal issues.

Albanian society similarly emphasized the continuation of the household and the division of responsibilities between men and women. One of the most noticeable differences in social roles for men and women between the Montenegrins and Albanians is the practice of the “sworn virgin.” In a household that has lost all its men, a woman may assume the social responsibilities as head of household and, in some tribes, dress as a man.⁴³ Albanian families did not celebrate a patron saint, but had a stronger emphasis on genealogy.⁴⁴ The heroic culture also emphasized the bravery of men and required them to exhibit their courage and skill in war and to honor social customs, especially keeping their vows.⁴⁵ Although tribes in northern Albania may have differed in religion, they were united under the teachings of the *kanun*.

The Mountain Wreath

The Mountain Wreath takes place in a village in Montenegro at the beginning of the eighteenth century during the life of Njegoš’s ancestor and predecessor Bishop Danilo. Spurred on by their rivalry with the Ottomans and the encouragement of the blind, aged Abbot Stefan, the chieftains decide to ambush the converted Montenegrins who will not renounce their Islamic faith.⁴⁶ The epic ends with the tribal leaders and the elderly abbot celebrating their successful Christmas Day ambush of the Muslims and reveling in their prolonged freedom from the Turks. Bishop Danilo, the hero of the epic, mourns his compatriots’ deaths in the fratricidal conflict, yet reconciles himself to the inevitable struggle between the externally imposed culture and what he considers the true one.

Although the story of *The Mountain Wreath* comes from a Montenegrin oral epic⁴⁷ and the characters are factual,⁴⁸ Njegoš changes the story from a historical epic to a national epic. Most significantly, the main character, Bishop Danilo, becomes a contemplative, passive observer of the action, and the impetus for ambush shifts from the *vladika* to the tribes, who as Serbian critic Pavle Popović suggests, only wait for his wink to begin the fight.⁴⁹ In a similar manner, Njegoš takes existing traditions from the oral narrative culture and subverts them by expanding the story’s significance to a national audience, portraying a national conflict rather than merely recording history or singing an oral epic. He transforms the poetic practices of oral narratives into fixed poetic text, elevates lesser-known characters into symbols of the nation, and imbues everyday occurrences with national significance. In adapting the oral epic to the page, Njegoš loses the immediacy of the audience and the fluidity of a live performance in order to create a contemplated, concentrated work; each line is

semantically loaded, often approaching the density of a proverb. Njegoš gives some indication of his purpose in his dedication to “the great, immortal Karageorge,” the leader of the Serbian uprisings at the beginning of the nineteenth century: “It was destiny that your head had to pay the price for its wreath!”⁵⁰ As P. Popović suggests, *The Mountain Wreath* is a celebration of the same wreath Karageorge died for, the freedom and resurrection of the Serbian nation,⁵¹ yet Njegoš makes this hero of the Serbian revolution into a symbol of freedom in general and Montenegrin freedom specifically.

The language and poetics of *The Mountain Wreath* demonstrate how Njegoš appealed to existing poetic standards, yet expanded them beyond the tradition of the oral narrative. Because of his skill in the traditional meter of folk tales, his rugged but comprehensible language, and his omnipresent and forceful proverbs, this work became a fundamental part of the national identity of Montenegro as well as Serbia. Indeed, it is such an essential part of national identity that people will quote lines of the poem not only to show erudition but also to invoke moral and cultural authority.⁵²

Njegoš wrote *The Mountain Wreath* in a dialect close to the one that Vuk Karadžić chose as the basis for his standard, and it was published in the same year as Vuk’s translation of the New Testament that has become the standard Serbian version. Njegoš follows Vuk in basing his poem on popular speech, so it conveys a sense of authentic folk culture. Along with this rugged feel, the epic also contains a wealth of proverbs that appeal to popular wisdom and are still in common use.⁵³ The following proverbs give a sense of his style.⁵⁴

U dobru je // lako dobro biti, Na mucu se // poznaju junaci.	When things go well // ‘tis easy to be good, Adversity // shows who is the hero.
Udar nađe // iskru u kamenu.	Tis the blow that // finds the spark within the stone.
Bez muke se // pjesna ne ispoja, Bez muke se // sablja na sakova.	Without travail // the song could not be sung, Without travail // the saber is not forged.

These proverbs also give an indication of the most important poetic characteristic of Njegoš’s poetry, the *deseterac*. This ten-syllable line, with an invariable caesura, or stop, between the fourth and fifth syllables, was both the most common meter of the oral narrative poems⁵⁵ and the meter for all of Njegoš’s later, major works.⁵⁶ As the Njegoš scholar E. D. Goy surmises, Njegoš not only imitated the meter of the folk epics but also “developed it into an artistic expression that could not be carried further, only imitated and parodied.”⁵⁷ One of his adaptations, enjambment, would be

impossible in oral epics because the performer would need to draw breath, and each line needed to be a complete unit in order to hold the listeners' attention.⁵⁸ Despite the incongruity of the enjambment with the folk epic style, *The Mountain Wreath* is both the continuation and the culmination of the folk epic tradition. The Serbian scholar Svetozar Koljević calls it the “ultimate achievement of the Montenegrin epic genius,” noting further that in “*The Mountain Wreath* the Montenegrin oral heroic poetry became only a rich historical, cultural, and literary heritage.”⁵⁹

The influence of foreign literature is most noticeable in *The Mountain Wreath*'s complicated structure. It is difficult to classify the work's proper genre because it seems to conflate two traditionally separate genres: drama and epic. Although written in dramatic form, *The Mountain Wreath*, like Byron's plays and Pushkin's *Boris Godunov*, is better suited for reading than performance.⁶⁰ Commentators disagree on its classification and call it “an epic reduced to dialogues,” “a poem in dramatic form,” and “a dramatic poem.”⁶¹ The dramatic form allows Njegoš to expand *The Mountain Wreath*'s perspective to the community. In contrast to most epics, which relate the story from only one perspective, this poem provides the perspectives of several characters in the community.⁶² Yet, in most dramas, the action takes place in front of an audience. In this regard, *The Mountain Wreath* resembles more closely the epic, where the action is essentially related through the singer or narrator.

Although *The Mountain Wreath* is divided into scenes, they do not form definite acts. Moreover, several scenes seem superfluous because they neither address the main conflict nor relate directly to the plot. The editor of an early edition, Milan Rešetar, asserts that the work does not have a coherent plot and that therefore Njegoš's intention was only to depict the traditional lifestyle of his people through a series of lyrical scenes.⁶³ Pavle Popović, however, writes that the plot is coherent because the scenes that do not relate directly to the main conflict nonetheless *symbolize* the conflict.⁶⁴ Goy's essays in *The Sabre and the Song* bring these disparate explanations together. These scenes are tableaux—not static pictures of an idyllic community but independent portraits wherein sights, sounds, and texture envelop action off-stage. Each tableau stands independently, but when grouped together, they give a series of lush images that reveal not just the conflicts of the nation, but also the community's code of honor. The scenes that do not seem to relate to the ambush justify it by showing the threat to the community posed by the intrusion of another, less humane culture.⁶⁵

Likewise, various commentators understand the *Mountain Wreath*'s characters and their symbolism differently. Rešetar claims that all the characters are symbolic of the Montenegrin patriarchal society; Miodrag Popović sees four characters

representing four poetic styles; while Goy sees two main characters representing conflicting codes of ethics; and P. Popović views all the characters as characters and not as symbols of the nation.⁶⁶ It seems that all the commentators see their own understanding of the play in the symbolism of the characters. In spite of his detailed analysis of the characters, P. Popović fails to acknowledge that the subtle differences between the characters may only be apparent if the reader is thoroughly familiar with the community—the location of the different tribes, the historical significance of the different characters, and their appearance in particular folk songs.⁶⁷ Even without this contextual familiarity, there is an obvious difference between the main character Bishop Danilo, who has a profound range of feeling and historical perspective, and those who plan and carry out the ambush without recognizing any moral consequences beyond their code of honor.

All the critics agree that Bishop Danilo closely represents Njegoš's personal views because of his position as *vladika*. In addition, Danilo has a better understanding and appreciation for other cultures and values. He sees the narrow-mindedness of the other characters' insistence on extirpating Islam from among the tribes, yet also recognizes the potential threat that conversion poses to the Montenegrin community. In his chilling opening soliloquy, Bishop Danilo laments:

O my dark day, O my black destiny!
 O my wretched Serbian nation snuffed out!
 I have outlived many of your troubles,
 yet I must fight against the worst of all!

 When I think of today's council meeting,
 flames of horror flare up deep inside me.
 A brother will slaughter his own brother,
 and the arch-foe, so strong and so evil,
 will destroy e'en the seed within mothers.
 O wretched day, may God's curse be on you!
 when you brought me to the light of this world.

(Mihailovich, ll. 43–46, 79–85).⁶⁸

The bishop's attitude in this passage sharply differs from the Bishop Danilo of the oral epic who instigates the ambush; characters from the oral epics are never as introspective as the bishop in *The Mountain Wreath*. Njegoš's bishop has as much of the author's own character and temperament as he does the character from the oral epic.

Most of the other characters give a perspective more characteristic of the Montenegrin tribes. Thus, just after Danilo's opening lines the young hero Vuk Mićunović chastises him for his apparent weakness:

Don't my Bishop, if you have faith in God!
What misfortune has come over you now
that you're wailing just like some cuckoo-bird
and are drowning in our Serbian troubles?
Is today not a festive occasion
on which you have gathered Montenegrins
to rid our land of loathsome infidels?

(Mihailovich, ll. 89–95)

Moreover, Njegoš also includes Muslim characters and gives their contrasting opinions on the events. The multiple viewpoints show not just the range of personalities within the collective community but also the conflicting understandings of the communities' identities. Reciprocally, the characters give a depth to the conflict that is rare in oral narratives, which tend to present a narrower and more one-sided perspective on the communities.

The conflict is enriched most effectively by the *kolo*, a group of people who sing while dancing a traditional Slavic round dance. Like the chorus in Greek drama, the *kolo* provides popular commentary on the events and situations of the play, foreshadows the development of the plot, and connects the events and morals of the play to the audience's situation.⁶⁹ As a voice in the drama, the *kolo* represents the common will of the community. As Goy notes: "The Kolo is not on intimate relations with the persons of the poem, but rather a more general common memory and attitude. Njegoš makes its nature very clear in the words of vojvoda Milija after the first Kolo . . . 'Hear you not how the Kolo sings? / All that this poem expresses / comes from the mind of the entire people.'"⁷⁰ Furthermore, the *kolo* validates the action of the Montenegrin bands by presenting the will and the history of the nation. It gives a chronological account of the Serbian nation from its golden age to the present conflict. This background reveals that the ambush of the converts is the first step in rectifying the past several hundred years of defeat and bondage.⁷¹ Njegoš transforms the dance into what one author calls "the embodiment of the romantic national spirit," simultaneously turning the ambush of local converts into a war for national independence.⁷² The *kolo* symbolizes the whole nation, not just one community, and it captures the belief that the nation persists through the generations. Later in the play, Abbot Stefan evokes the *kolo* as a continuity of generations:

Grandfathers dance with their young grandchildren.
In the *kolo* join three generations,
it seems they're almost of the same age.

(Mihailovich, ll. 2464–66)

Dilas describes the impact of *The Mountain Wreath's kolo*: “It seems in the poem as if there were no past or measurement of time. Here the past lives in a present idea, as a part of living memory.”⁷³ The *kolo* not only links generations together but it also makes all the generations, and all the participants, equal members of the nation.

In giving a context for the significance of the Christmas Day slaughter, the *kolo* relates common myths and tales of the nation. Its opening lines hearken back to the battle of Kosovo—itself immortalized in folk epics—and to heroic figures involved in the battle:

O that accursed supper of Kosovo!
It would be good fortune had you poisoned
all our chieftains and wiped out their traces,
had only Miloš remained on the field
along with both of his true sworn brothers:
then would the Serb have remained a true Serb!

(Mihailovich, ll. 215–20)

The *kolo's* references to the tragedy of Kosovo recall the community's common cultural background and the role of the oral culture in forming that community. Part of Montenegro's claim to freedom from the Turks comes from the idea that Montenegro was a place of refuge for Serbs after the battle of Kosovo in 1389. *The Mountain Wreath* proposes Montenegro's role as a bastion of freedom and Serbian culture both explicitly and implicitly. So the *kolo* sings:

Those who escaped before the Turkish sword,
those who did not blaspheme at the True Faith,
those who refused to be thrown into chains,
took refuge here in these lofty mountains
to shed their blood together and to die,
heroically to keep the sacred oath,
their lovely name, and their holy freedom.

(Mihailovich, ll. 262–68)

The imagery of the second scene likewise reflects this conception of Montenegro. As a group of heroes climbs Mount Lovćen, a symbol for both Montenegro and Njegoš, they see how the clouds cover all the surrounding lands, but Montenegro

alone is “lying in the sun” (Mihailovich, l. 168).⁷⁴ As the only free nation, Montenegro has the duty to protect Serbian and Christian culture. As P. Popović explains, Njegoš saw the ambush of the Muslims as the beginning of the renaissance of Serbian freedom.⁷⁵ He presents the events of *The Mountain Wreath* as the first sparks of Serbian freedom after the long night of Turkish domination.

While Njegoš shows religion to be an important element in the national character, he emphasizes humanity as essential to the spirit of the nation, perhaps even more important than a particular belief or creed. Several passages in *The Mountain Wreath* demonstrate the importance of the church’s position and traditions to Montenegrin identity. In a meeting between the leaders of Christians and Muslims, one of the Christians pleads with his converted brothers:

Accept the faith of your forefathers,
That we may defend the honour of our fatherland
.....
Pull down your mosques and minarets,
Lay the Serbian yule-logs on the fire,
And paint your Easter eggs in varied colours,
Observe the fasts of Christmas and of Lent;
And for the rest, you may do as you will.

(Goy, *Sabre and the Song*, p.41, ll.854–55, 858–62)

Note that the emphasis is not on the virtues of religion, but on customs; not on values, but on traditions. These customs are the basic guidelines to the interaction of individuals and part of what separates Serbian from Ottoman identity.⁷⁶ Njegoš, however, also gives a subtle indication that the church is not the ultimate authority in national matters; in the play, the Montenegrin heroes start the ambush while Bishop Danilo is still reluctant.⁷⁷ While the customs of the church marked important differences between the Christian Montenegrins and the converts to Islam, the authority of the Orthodox church was limited, even in questions of national identity.⁷⁸

Goy’s perceptive essay “The Ethic and the Game” shows that the main concern of the epic “is not a question of ethics, as much as it is a confrontation of two vastly differing views of being, two conflicting sets of symbols, or . . . two different sets of rules in two different games.”⁷⁹ A wedding celebration attended by both Muslim and Christian guests shows parallel beliefs and practices, including heroes, festivals, and customs.⁸⁰ Another scene, however, shows Christianity’s superior concern for humanity. A Muslim (Skender-Aga) and a Christian (Knez Rogan) are watching a cockfight. The Muslim wants the larger bird to win, but the Christian cheers for the smaller one.⁸¹ Although this conversation seems trivial, it symbolizes the Christians’

concern for the weak and the Muslims' pride in power in the much more significant contest between two cultures. Like Njegoš, Bishop Danilo has a more enlightened view of the conflict; he understands that adherents of each religion find beauty and meaning in their faith, but he also feels a personal responsibility to side with the Christians. Danilo's tears for the massacres of the Montenegrins emphatically demonstrate the humanity Njegoš espouses. The rejoicing and joking that follow his tears suggest that Danilo has accepted the necessity of the struggle and celebrates the victory of Montenegrin identity and the newly gained freedom from the Turks.

In contrast to the Montenegrin oral epic traditions that unapologetically sided with the Christians, Njegoš successfully subverts his readers' (and listeners') expectations by showing parallel customs for Muslims and Christians. He suggests a standard of comparison for the two cultures, common to all people: humanity. While ultimately he decides that Christian ethics are more humane, he challenges the assumption of the mutual exclusivity and estrangement of the cultures. Furthermore, he condemns feuding and other aspects of "heroism" by showing that they are repugnant to a man of thought and civilization, like Danilo. That is not to say that he completely condemned the culture; in fact there was much that he celebrated, especially the desire and will for freedom. As the composer of the Montenegrin national epic, Njegoš carried on the tradition of taking stock of the values and customs of his people, yet he sought to adapt that culture to an honorable nation fighting for its freedom.

The Highland Lute

In *The Highland Lute*, Fishta depicts battles between northern Albanians and Montenegrins over a span of several decades. The fighting starts in the middle of the nineteenth century when the Albanians fend off Montenegrins who, prodded by the Russians, have invaded in order to pester the failing Ottoman Empire. At first the Albanians fight loyally for the sultan, but when they realize that he will neither help them defend their homeland nor recognize them as equal subjects, the Albanians begin to fight for recognition as an independent community. After decades of struggle, the Great Powers finally grant the Albanians independence and sovereignty.

Like *The Mountain Wreath*, the Albanian epic is set among local villages, but unlike the Montenegrin epic, and the general epic tradition, it does not depict a founding event from the distant past. The time of composition (1905–1937) overlaps with the historical subject, Albania's struggle for independence (1864–1912). Fishta wrote *The Highland Lute* a few cantos at a time. As Jorgo Bulo remarks, "As rock

upon rock becomes a tower, so too, song upon song the epic poem *The Highland Lute* becomes a magnificent and unsurpassable tower in the architecture of Albanian poetry.⁸² In addition to its temporal and spatial immediacy, the work has a personal immediacy because Fishta also includes personal acquaintances as heroes of the epic.⁸³ He sees the heroic tradition as a possible base of national identity for the entire nation. He continues the tradition of oral epics by synthesizing traditional poetic and linguistic forms with outside literary and linguistic influences. Moreover, he celebrates the heroic community and compares it to the heroic traditions of Skanderbeg.⁸⁴ Finally, Fishta appeals to the various religious communities by emphasizing religious ecumenism over any specific belief and by drawing on the mythology and customs of northern Albania. In so doing, he transforms the narrative traditions of northern Albania into an epic for all Albania.

Like Serbian heroic poems, Albanian heroic verse also uses a ten-syllable line (*dhjetërrokëshe*), although a second, shorter line, the heroic ballad, was often used to sing about contemporary events. The ballad is not as metrically strict as the Slavic *deseterac* and contains frequent, albeit irregular rhymes.⁸⁵ *The Highland Lute* continues in the balladic tradition, with lines that are normally eight syllables long and rhyme regularly and deliberately. Fishta uses internal rhymes and alliteration to control the poem's tempo. For example, when a Montenegrin band invades, Fishta drives home the terror and frenzy with rhymes in double time:

Lshojn Shqyptarët bagtin at <i>hera</i> .	The Albanians leave their flocks,
Hjedhin plaçkat neper <i>ferra</i> ,	Throw their bags to the thorns,
Edhe vrap hikin si <i>era</i> :	And run, escaping like the wind:
Njani <i>shkorres</i> , tjetri <i>rrmores</i> ,	One through the brambles and one on the rocks,
Kush i <i>urë</i> e kush <i>terthuer</i> ,	Some cross the bridge, and some leave the road,
Pa kqyrë driz, pa kqyrun <i>gur</i> ,	Not minding the thorns, not noticing the stones
Veç si t'pshtojn prej Shkjaut <i>mizuer</i> .	Just barely evading the spiteful Slavs.
Se ç' t' u dha <i>brima</i> e <i>ulurima</i> !	O the howling and wailing, the horrible noise!
Se ç' t' u dha <i>gjama</i> e <i>piskama</i> !	The crying and the shrieking as from an outside voice!
Fmija <i>vrrit</i> , nanat <i>gerthit</i> ;	Children scream and mothers shriek,
Çikat <i>kjaj</i> e nuset <i>fshaj</i> ,	Daughters screech, and wives weep,
<i>Fshaj</i> e <i>kjaj</i> pre atij gazezit!	Weep and sob at this upheaval!

(XXII. 234–45, emphasis mine)

In comparison to the Albanian oral poetry that inspired *The Highland Lute*, Fishta's lines are much more self-consciously "poetic" in that they focus on the rhyme and image while the ballads concentrate on the broader story.⁸⁶ Like these oral narratives in which the singer would repeat lines to buy time to think up the next part, Fishta repeats several phrases, not just for the sake of outward imitation

but also to construct his rhymes and ensure that the tempo of the work, although read rather than recited, matches that of the oral narratives.⁸⁷

Fishta's *Highland Lute* is closer in form and presentation than *The Mountain Wreath* to the tradition of the literary epic. Indeed, it may be one of the last successful European epics ever written. It imitates the traditional Greek epics in structure, comprising about sixteen thousand five hundred lines divided into thirty cantos.⁸⁸ In addition to structural similarities, Fishta faithfully follows the stylistic conventions and treats the traditional topics of literary epics. The concern with heroism, action, and adventure and the interaction between the heroes and mythological figures play off the traditions of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Muses are more than poetic inspiration; they are lively participants in the stories. They are among the cast of mythological figures who interfere in, comment on, and weep over the heroes and the nation. These, however, come from Albanian, not Greek, mythology. Fishta incorporates traditional folk culture in order to create an Albanian national epic, not a classical epic.

In addition to carrying on oral narrative traditions, Fishta attempted to develop the Albanian language into a literary medium on par with other European languages. Unlike Serbia and Montenegro, which attracted the attention of many European folklorists, Albania was virtually unheard of in Europe in the late 1800s. In addition, the Ottoman Empire's Tanzimat reforms of the nineteenth century minimized the Albanians' opportunities to develop their language and literature. These reforms essentially outlawed teaching, publication, and written correspondence in Albanian because the Ottoman rulers wanted to maintain a single Ottoman culture among the Muslims of the empire. Reacting against these prohibitions, many Albanian intellectuals strove to make other Albanian speakers and the powers of Western Europe aware of their separate linguistic community.⁸⁹ In the beginning of *The Highland Lute*, Fishta highlights the difficulties facing the Albanians in a scene depicting the 1878 Congress of Berlin, where the Great Powers are astounded at the very idea of an Albanian community (VII. 1–210).⁹⁰ From its inception, the quest for a unique Albanian national identity had its basis above all else in a shared language, uniting a culture divided since the Ottoman incursion.

Fishta's language develops from the northern Albanian Geg dialect, but incorporates a variety of linguistic differences. Perhaps the best way to appreciate Fishta's approach is to compare his language to Naim Frashëri's *History of Skanderbeg*, which many still consider the primary Albanian national epic. While colloquial Albanian was, and still is, saturated with Turkish words and phrases, not a single Turkish word appears in Frashëri's epic. Sometimes he goes to great lengths to achieve this.⁹¹ His native dialect of southern Albania, Tosk, closely resembles the dialect that would

become the literary standard.⁹² Furthermore, because the Albanian communist government canonized Frashëri as the primary founder of Albanian literature, his work became a prime example of literary Albanian.⁹³ Consequently, despite its somewhat contrived phrasing, his epic is not a difficult read for literate Albanians. Fishta, on the other hand, relishes foreign words, frequently including not only Turkish but also Montenegrin terms in his poem.⁹⁴ He embraces the cultural differences of the region and does not attempt to create a pure, standard Albanian. Moreover, his language comes mainly from the northern Geg dialect, which is less similar to the literary standard, making *The Highland Lute* a challenge even for well-read Albanians.⁹⁵ As a result, some editions published since his reinstatement into the national canon, such as the one edited by Jorgo Bullo, contain footnotes explaining the terminology and phrasing. While the text definitely has a rustic texture like *The Mountain Wreath*, the inaccessibility of the language is a formidable obstacle to its potential as a symbolic national epic. Yet despite its disappearance during communism, Fishta's was the first Albanian epic to gain a wide appreciation, and with its reappearance in the national canon, it may again influence a broader understanding of Albanian language, literature, and identity.

In addition to imitating the stylistic and linguistic characteristics of oral heroic epics, *The Highland Lute* integrates elements from these oral narratives to celebrate the heroic culture. From beginning to end, the poem glorifies and imitates the heroic culture of northern Albania. Its title clearly refers to this society and the importance of sung heroic epics to that community's identity. Furthermore, Fishta figuratively becomes the *lahutar* (balladeer) of the highland as he steps to his instrument with the traditional invocation of the Albanian bards, "Ndihmo, Zot, si m' ke ndihmue!" ("Help me, God, as you once helped me!") (I. 1).⁹⁶ Fishta continues this role by imitating not only the poetic and linguistic particulars of the oral tradition, but by including scenes, characters, and situations from actual oral narratives. In addition, he includes his own complete rendition of such a story. As the Albanians prepare to defend Shkodër, the heroes request a song, and one of them sings about the Albanian (and Muslim) hero, Gjergj Elez Ali, defeating a monster that threatens his home and family.⁹⁷ In addition to the obvious parallels with the threat of a Montenegrin invasion, the song cues a number of exchanges that replay traditional Albanian customs. The whole scene is a portrayal of heroic customs and beliefs: auguring the future with a ram's shoulder bone, heroes engaging in traditional games and tests of athleticism, and the *çeta* (warriors) preparing for the upcoming battle by cleaning and loading their guns (V. 1–171).

However, these are not just Albanian characteristics; *The Highland Lute* also acknowledges the value of the Montenegrins' heroic culture. The epic's title is not only an indication of Fishta's intent to carry on the heroic epic tradition, but it also indicates its similarity to *The Mountain Wreath*.⁹⁸ The scene described above is also a literary tip of the hat to Njegoš because many of these same rituals also appear in the Montenegrin epic. Fishta openly praises Njegoš, his epic, and the heroism the poem portrays (XXV. 86–124). The major difference between the Montenegrins and the Albanians in Fishta's work is that the Montenegrins are acting as agents of Russian greed, while the Albanians are fighting for freedom and recognition of their nation. The heroic poems of northern Albania also depicted the Christian communities as honorable, yet *The Highland Lute* is more overt in praising the Montenegrins. Yet, as John Kolsti has pointed out, in setting the epic in actual, historical skirmishes with neighboring Montenegrins, Fishta goes one step beyond the heroic oral epics in creating ethnically-based antagonism, as the communities in the heroic epics were either unspecified places or far-off exotic lands.⁹⁹ Otherwise, however, Fishta does not simply imbed hatred for the South Slavs in his epic as much as he inspires respect and admiration for an equally heroic community.

Fishta shows the Albanian heroic community as the cultural heritage for the descendants of Skanderbeg, who united the Albanian princedoms to fight against the Ottoman Empire in the fifteenth century. Several other Albanian intellectuals of the time also looked to Skanderbeg as an example of heroism and unification and as the progenitor of the modern Albanian nation.¹⁰⁰ The existence of an Albanian community and identity as distinct from the larger Muslim community within the Ottoman is a fierce point of contention in *The Highland Lute*. In one scene, a messenger to the sultan claims equal status for Albanians because they support the empire and are exempt from taxation. The rulers scorn the messenger, affirming the Ottomans' domination over the Albanians (X. 104–07). The failure of the Ottoman Empire to acknowledge them justifies the Albanians' revolt, but it was the heritage of Skanderbeg and the culture of honor and heroism he represented that united the Albanian tribes and villages. One repeated example of the Albanian nationalists' appeals to the heritage of Skanderbeg is their rallying banner, the personal coat of arms of Skanderbeg—the two-headed black eagle against a red background. Another of Fishta's common phrases, *nipat e Skenderbeut* (grandchildren or nephews of Skanderbeg), binds the community together as kin and as common heirs to Skanderbeg's strength and independence (IX. 356, XIX. 235). As Fishta uses the phrase, not only are national representatives Skanderbeg's posterity, but so too are the common Albanians of the mountains and plains.

Fishta further celebrates and imitates Albanian heroic culture by frequently including mythology and traditional customs. At the same time, he reaches out to the Muslim, Orthodox, and Catholic communities of the nation. Fishta's contemporary, the poet Pashko Vasa, wrote the most famous lines on Albanian religious identity:

Let us all, as brothers, swear a common oath
And not look to church or mosque,
The faith of the Albanian is Albanianism!¹⁰¹

Tellingly, Vasa's last line became the motto of the League of Prizren, the leading organization for Albanian cultural and political unification.¹⁰² Albanian intellectuals realized that the disparate religious affiliations were the largest internal obstacle to national unity.¹⁰³ To counter, they promoted a sense of ecumenism among the different religions, despite their personal religious differences and duties. In one episode of *The Highland Lute*—which if not autobiographical is certainly true to Albania's religious atmosphere—Father Gjoni, a Catholic priest, negotiates with the Montenegrin army as the representative of the Albanian company. The Montenegrin leader Mark Milani asks him how it is possible that a Christian should negotiate for the Muslims. Father Gjoni responds that for Albanians faith is not as important: the Albanians are brothers regardless of religion (XXI. 257–64). Here Fishta shows that religious differences did not hinder Albanian unity and even suggests that such tolerance was a unique part of Albanian culture.¹⁰⁴

While almost all Albanian intellectuals tried to overcome religious differences in uniting the nation, Fishta's approach in his epic—basing the ethics, values, and customs in the folk tradition—is unique. As with language, the contrast with Frashëri brings out vastly different approaches to national and folk culture. While Frashëri was promoting Bektashism¹⁰⁵—a pantheistic Sufi-mysticism approach toward Islam—as a unifying spiritual and moral basis of the nation, Fishta favored folk customs and beliefs.¹⁰⁶ Even with Frashëri's underlying religious belief, very little is explicitly religious—Christian or Muslim. For instance, based on Frashëri's portrayal of heaven, figures of the Enlightenment are more likely to reside in paradise than either Mohammed or Christ.¹⁰⁷ Where reason and enlightenment rule in Frashëri's epic, mythology permeates Fishta's poem. While Frashëri appeals to the merits of the Enlightenment, Fishta evokes traditional folk mythology to integrate the epic into the heroic community. In addition to including these deities as actors and commentators, Fishta describes the heroes and their conquests in terms of Albanian folk beliefs. For example, the hero of the first five cantos, Oso Kuka, is not just a hero, but a demigod (*dragua*), destined to destroy a dragon (*kulshedra*)

in the form of the invading Montenegrin army (IV. 55, V. 404).¹⁰⁸ In the same vein, national heroes receive strength from the gods like the heroes in the myths.¹⁰⁹ While these Albanian poets have very different religious loyalties, their attitudes toward religion are remarkably similar because they emphasize the need for moral living, without limiting morality to a particular religion.

While it briefly mentions the Albanians' different religions, *The Highland Lute* is replete with references to the Faith of the country, which seems to include the beliefs and values of both Muslims and Christians (e.g., XV. 131–32). This Faith (*Fe*) (with a capital F) is a heritage from their forefathers, like language and ethnicity, inseparable from their cultural and patriotic heritage, given to them at birth, and lost only at death (XVII. 503, IX. 104, XI. 38–39). So what is this Albanian religion, similar in doctrine and effect to Frashëri's Bektashism? Is it one religion? This Faith refers not to a religious organization but rather to the social code of the Albanians, best detailed in the *kanun*, the code of customary law described above. As it is for Albanian tribal society in general, the *kanun* is the central expression of national identity. In a number of places, the threat to the community is not the destruction of property or life, it is a forced change in lifestyle: the abolition of the *kanun*. In one scene, Father Gjoni calls upon his flock to protect their families and villages from the Slavs:

They aim to take the fort at Shkodër,
To extinguish Albania's name,
To turn Albanians into Slavs,
To convert our *kanun* and our creed.

(XIX. 252–55)

Although Fishta sees the *kanun* as a tremendous source of Albanian customs and way of life, he recognizes its faults. According to Ernesto Koliqi, Fishta depicts the culture and their life according to the *kanun* as he sees it, “with beauty and inescapable ugliness, the good as well as the bad, with virtues as well as deficiencies.”¹¹⁰ Yet, while Fishta sees the ethics and society of Western Europe as superior to traditional Albanian life, he acknowledges the value that the *kanun* has given to Albanian society.¹¹¹

Fishta most clearly shows a reverence for the *kanun* in the sacrifice of a young woman, Tringa, an obvious archetype of the Albanian nation, at the epic's emotional climax. While the Montenegrins invade a remote mountain village, Tringa cares for her mortally wounded brother. Just before the invasion, her brother dies and Tringa must prepare the body for burial. Because the last male of her family has died, she decides to swear her virginity and take over the operations of the household. As she

leaves to get help for burying her brother, she sees the Montenegrins approaching her house. She immediately gets her brother's gun and stands at the threshold of the house to defend her family's honor:

Help me, O God! Holy Saint Noah!
She said to herself out loud,
And straightway went for the door,
Wrenching it open with firm resolve.
Now the girl could never be turned back!
But with fire in her eyes, her brows knit,
Her twisted shawl spanning them like a bridge,
She stood tall like a noble cypress,
Coming suddenly to the middle of her yard,
Her weapon veiled at the back of her hip.

(XXII. 800–07)

She fells one attacker but then is shot by a second. Her martyrdom is a model for all Albania, which would be blessed if all her daughters followed Tringa's example and gave their lives "for honor, faith, and homeland" (XXII. 861). The characters and location are insignificant, but the symbolic heroism and devotion to her brother and the *kanun* is immense. Her sacrifice stands for all women under the *kanun*, showing fidelity to kin, custom, and country. This sacrifice gains immortal prestige as the fairies bewail her heroic death. Their ultimate consolation is that the nation will remember her death:

I swear this daughter of the mountain,
Has stood just like the noble ones:
While yet living she left not her brother,
The Slavs could not catch her but in death,
Who more than self her country loved,
Like the best men of the highlands.
Her parents and her children she did not shame,
But left for all Albanians an honorable name.
Some day her song will be sung,
And wherever Albanian is spoken-
That divine, manly tongue-
Will be sung by the great men of the world
What this daughter of the earth has done,
Tringa, daughter of Ulja and Ulë Keqotës,
When she saw the war's crisis at Nokshiq;
And as far as reach the century's rays,
Further still will Tringa's name be praised.

(XXIV. 855–71)

Tringa's martyrdom sanctifies not only her house, but also the way of life she represents. Thus, in the free Albania that Fishta writes for, the *Kanun* of Lekë Dukagjini is not just a law code that needs to be revised and updated; it is a holy inheritance for the entire nation. With a nation that lacked a unified confessional base, the *kanun*, the heroic ethics of the highlanders, and the heritage of freedom and independence passed down from Skanderbeg to his *nipat* would have to serve as a spiritual base. However, as with the *kanun*, Fishta does not accept the Albanians' heroism blindly. Because of his exposure to, and appreciation for, the other Christian cultures of the region, Fishta acknowledges the equally venerable heroic traditions of the Montenegrins. Like Njegoš, who shows the parallel customs and values of the Christians and Muslims, Fishta sides with the group with nobler ethics. Thus, the Albanians' fight for freedom is honorable, while the Montenegrins' fighting for Russian expansion is deplorable. Also like Njegoš in his role as the composer of the national epic, Fishta develops the themes, language, and poetics of the oral narrative tradition into a competent, rich, and symbolic composition that enriches the nation's literature and develops a common national identity.

Conclusion

Although some scholars insinuate that Romantic nationalists, such as Petar II Petrović Njegoš and Gjergj Fishta, helped create the ideologies that drew their nations into senseless wars over ethnicity and territory, these authors combined influences from Romanticism and nationalism to found a free political state, initiate a modern literature, and refine their communities' social organizations and values. Far from being "unskilled or unethical psychologists" planting false memories in their communities, Njegoš and Fishta are competent composers who blend their communities' oral epic tradition with European literary movements and their own individual poetic skills to forge a new conception of their community as a modern nation. In their national epics, Njegoš and Fishta present a higher aesthetic and ethical standard than the oral epic and heroic traditions did. Although George White accuses Romantic nationalists of invention and deception, their national epics capture an authenticity for the nation that not only makes them influential in their own national literatures and cultures, but also gives them a place in great world literature, representing the highest poetic accomplishments of their respective nations.

Njegoš and Fishta created the first major modern compositions for their nations. In effect, they adapt and subvert the oral narrative tradition by self-consciously con-

structing poetry and contradicting some of the oral epics' messages of community. The poets intentionally imitate the meter and language of oral narratives, often borrowing symbols and myths from the past. Yet their works are refined and detailed, unlike the epics, which have a broader range. Like the singers of oral epics before them, the authors of these national epics integrate current events and contemporary philosophy into their work. Both oral and national epics bear stamps of the singer or composer's personal experience and need.¹¹² However, with their printed epics, Romantic nationalists extend the realm of the community from an intimate, personal audience to a widespread, anonymous readership.¹¹³ Still, this emerging print community relies on the oral traditions for its content. Moreover, in the case of *The Highland Lute*, the work passed into illiterate communities through oral recitation.¹¹⁴ While Njegoš and Fishta borrow the forms and themes of the oral epic tradition, they turn the tradition to their own purposes, portraying the folk culture as national culture, questioning traditional social organizations, and refining social values.

Even more dramatic than their departure from the tradition of illiteracy is the national epics' adjusted code of ethics for their communities. The conflicts in the epics are the threats of political domination, the loss of identity, the end of tradition, and the death of the community. The communities' responses to the threats are guided by the highest ideals of Romantic nationalism—unity, honor, and love of the nation, which are also traditional communal values taken from the heroic oral narratives.¹¹⁵ At one level, the essence of *The Mountain Wreath* is the preservation of a singular national identity; at another it is a criticism of the tribes' narrow interpretation of this identity. Most of the characters see the conflict as a fight for the survival of their community. For example, Abbot Stefan sees the conversion of the Montenegrins to Islam as a denial of the community's identity. Njegoš contrasts this view with the thoughts of the main character, Bishop Danilo. As expressed in his opening soliloquy cited above, while he understands the community's desire for action, he also realizes that this means killing those who had been brothers in the nation (43–46, 79–85). The bishop's tears and the abbot's laughing mix together like the cup of vinegar and the cup of honey, representing the bittersweet fratricide necessary for independence. *The Highland Lute* frequently holds the *kanun* as the traditional standard, yet Fishta laments its emphasis on blood and revenge. Whether the authors' enlightened sense of humanity comes from their training as Christian clerics, familiarity with European literature, or from some internal sense, the authors advocate a higher standard for ethical conduct than was customary for their respective communities.

In conclusion, Njegoš and Fishta's national epics capture an authenticity somewhat different from the Western Romantic conception; they are authentic, generous

works of Christian humanism that promote appreciation of one's own culture without denying the virtues of other communities. This may sound like a hollow argument to those who see Njegoš's poem as a "blueprint for ethnic cleansing"¹¹⁶ or a "hymn to genocide";¹¹⁷ both epics are undeniably violent, certainly exceeding what most modern critics would tolerate, but this should not necessarily diminish their potential for constructing a humane ideal of the nation. Critics bent on condemning nationalist violence run the risk of missing the central ethic of the poems; even interpretations of the works as a typology of the community and a glorification of heroism would miss the key success of these epics. Their authenticity lies not just in an accurate depiction of traditional societies—the customs, language, values, symbols, ethics, characters, and conflicts—but in their affinity with principles of humanity common to all nations. They understand that other cultures have different traditions and values. That is not to say that they accept a culture outright, yet they see the commonality of their positions and their desires. Instead of encouraging violence toward others, the epics require greater honor of the customs that respect others and teach humanness. They condemn revenge but condone defense; the authors decry imperialism and extortion but celebrate independence and freedom. Still, the works draw just criticism for their portrayal, and hence tolerance, of violence. However, they not only show the violence, they show the consequences of, and regret for, the violence. True generosity and humanity would not permit fellow human beings, let alone kin, to live in ignorance of their faults. While the authors extol heroism and bravery, they also illustrate the failings of traditional values that refused to acknowledge the consequences of bloodletting and not understanding one's neighbors. Moreover, the writers desire the freedom of their countries, perhaps the only justifiable reason for violence. While later generations of nationalists may ignore this aspect in favor of preaching the superiority of their culture over others, or to justify exterminating other cultures, these national epics decry inhumanity, even the seemingly legitimate inhumanity of one's own group.

Perhaps the time for writing national epics has passed, but the epic tradition continues in other forms. Although there are many more writers and styles in the literatures of Southeastern Europe than there were in Njegoš and Fishta's times, the most successful writers have also concentrated on the importance of folk culture and have maintained a similar, although nuanced, vision of their nations and national identity. It was "for the epic force with which [he] traced themes and depicted human destinies from [his] country's history" that the Nobel Prize committee honored Ivo Andrić with the 1961 prize in literature.¹¹⁸ His award-winning novel, *Na Drini ćupriji* (*The Bridge on the Drina*, 1945), relates the historic development of a community's

identity, symbolizing the history of a much larger community. The same could be said of the preeminent contemporary Albanian author Ismail Kadare, whose work is continually concerned with the incorporation of traditional customs, language, and religion both in his writing and in Albanian nationalism.¹¹⁹ Likewise, the films of Emir Kusturica, such as *Otac na službenom putu* (*When Father Was Away on Business*, 1985) and *Dom za vešanje* (*The Time of the Gypsies*, 1989) concern folk traditions and are built upon folk songs. Like Njegoš and Fishta, each of these three twentieth-century artists contradicts and questions common conceptions in his community. Furthermore, although they are criticized for sometimes-excessive violence, they also capture the authenticity of the human spirit by recognizing the values and faults in their own communities and acknowledging the value of other cultures. Thus, the oral epic tradition that evolved first into national epics is now succeeding in other creative mediums such as novels and films.

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Notes

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1. Bulo, introduction to *Lahuta e Malcis*, by Gjergj Fishta, 3–7, and Robert Elsie, from personal correspondence.
2. Margulis, “Njegoš's Montenegro,” 60. There was also a printing press in the sixteenth century, but that was destroyed by Turks. *Ibid.*, n. 152.
3. Elsie, *The Highland Lute*, 9. In canto XXV Fishta admires the humanity expressed in these writers' poetry.
4. *Ibid.*, 10.
5. Cf. Berlin *The Crooked Timber*, 258.
6. Cf. *ibid.*, 222, 215.
7. White, *Nationalism and Territory*, 253.
8. White also conflates all senses of nationalism and Romanticism into a singular, destructive ideology. He does not distinguish between literary or cultural nationalism and militaristic or political nationalism. For such a differentiation, see Cooper, “Francè Prešeren,” 202. Although these different facets of nationalism frequently conflict one another, having different sources, motives, and objectives, White treats nationalism as a coherent ideology whose objective is the nation-state. It is the project of a select group of intellectuals, who conspire to construct a convincing yet counterfeit ideology. He accuses Romantic nationalists of arrogance and questionable ethics based not on their individual lives or works, but on the subsequent historical lives of their nations. For an example of the disparate motives and outcomes of nationalists, see Stokes, *Politics as Development*, which shows the evolving conception of the nation and approaches to political nationalism from 1869 to 1888.
9. Bulo, Introduction to *Lahuta e malcis*, 7.
10. *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 1993 ed., s.v. “Epic.”
11. Although this definition is my own, I have drawn up on the discussion in *ibid.* and in Smith's

The Antiquity of Nations (Cambridge: Polity, 2004), 19–20.

12. Andrew B. Wachtel, “How to Use a Classic.”

13. Elsie, introduction to *The Highland Lute*, 14–17.

14. Elsie, *History of Albanian Literature*, Vol. 1: 236.

15. *The Antiquity of Nations*, 17.

16. I have in mind here the oft-cited definitions from Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*, and Gellner’s *Nations and Nationalism*, which are more suitable to the authors’ own explanations of the origin of nationalism than they are to explaining the advent of nationalism in Montenegro and Albania. See Todorova, “The Trap of Backwardness,” 144.

17. Although few could read when these epics were written, they could be read to, as was the case of William Jovanovich, the publisher of Đilas’s book, *Njegoš*. See p. xi.

18. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 13–19.

19. Goy, *Sabre and the Song*, 12. It is important to remember that the Serbian kingdom had an important medieval literary tradition. In a sense, the literature in Montenegro and Serbia was a revitalization of literature in Serbia.

20. The interaction has gone both ways—oral narratives inspiring or being adapted into written literature, as is the case of these national epics, or written works becoming a part of the oral tradition. For example, Ivan Gundulić’s epic *Osman* (1622) was later adapted in oral narratives in Kotor in the western part of Montenegro (Koljević, *The Epic in the Making*, 2). Likewise, the works of several Albanian poets contemporary with Fishta were transmitted throughout illiterate villages as popular ballads. Poems from southern Albanian authors, including Naim Frashëri, became popular folk songs, passing on the literature to the illiterate and synthesizing the oral and written cultures in the opposite way that the literary epics do (Sugarman, “Imagining the Homeland”).

21. Albert Lord scrupulously avoids the terms *folk*, *national*, and *epic*, although many others had called these compositions *folk* or *national epics* (*Singer of Tales*, 4–11). Parry’s work is collected in *The Making of Homeric Verse*.

22. Peabody, foreword to *Songs of the Frontier Warriors*, vii. Boehm, *Montenegrin Social Organization*, 75.

23. Boehm, *Montenegrin Social Organization*, 75–79.

24. Svetozar Koljević gives other instances where South Slavic folk songs were recorded, including *Ribanje*, Alberto Fortis’s *Viaggio in Dalmacia*, and others. He uses these as evidence for the tradition of singing among the South Slavs as well as for tracing changing perceptions of communal identity within these recorded songs. See *The Epic in the Making*, 12–94.

25. Special thanks to Henry Cooper for this point.
26. Durham sees the tribal stage as a universal stage in civilization (*Some Tribal Origins*, 13); Saltzman emphasizes the discontinuity of the tribal community, stating that tribes held the political authority after the breakup of the Nemanja dynasty (“Montenegro in Historical Perspective,” 8–14).
27. For example, Ivan Mažuranić’s *Smrt Smail-age Čengića*, a Croatian (Illyrian) epic, glorifies the honorable Montenegrins who avenge the cruelty of a local Ottoman ruler.
28. Goy says this specifically about the setting for Njegoš, but it also applies to Fishta (*Sabre and the Song*, 37).
29. Boehm emphasizes autonomy as one of the central values of Montenegrin society, citing this as the primary factor in the Montenegrins’ willingness to suffer devastating military defeats and economic hardship rather than submit to the Ottomans. Montenegrins proudly claimed that they were the only ones able to retain their independence from the Ottoman Empire (*Montenegrin Social Organization*, 83–84).
30. Durham, *Some Tribal Origins*, 25; Đilas, *Njegoš*, 311.
31. This is the gist of the Albanians argument against the Ottomans in *The Highland Lute*, as well as Frashëri’s argument in *History of Skanderbeg*.
32. Boehm, *Montenegrin Social Organization*, 52. Durham puts the number closer to thirty around 1900 (*Some Tribal Origins*, 34).
33. Margulis, *Njegoš’s Montenegro*, 29; Boehm, *Montenegrin Social Organization*, 64.
34. Cyprien Robert Les Slaves de Turquie. (Paris: L. Passard, 1844), 118, cited in Christopher Boehm, *Montenegrin Social Organization*, 42. Đilas argues the artificial nature of the names and claims of kinship in the clans; there is probably an element of imagination in the genealogies, but the kinship was felt if not actual (quoted in Margulis, *Njegoš’s Montenegro*, 19).
35. Boehm, *Montenegrin Social Organization*, 43.
36. Margulis, *Njegoš’s Montenegro*, 19.
37. Boehm, *Montenegrin Social Organization*, 21–24.
38. Durham, *Some Tribal Origins*, 15.
39. “The family consists of the people of the house; as these increase, they are divided into clans, clans into kinship groups, kinship groups into tribes, tribes into banners, and all together constitute one widespread family called a nation, which has one homeland, common blood, a common language, and common customs,” Fox, *Kanuni i Lekë Dukagjinit*, 14, art. 19.
40. *Ibid.*, xvii; and Gjergj Fishta, introduction to *Kanun i Lekë Dukagjinit*, xxv–xxvi. Margaret Hasluck attributes it to the person in *The Unwritten Law*, 12–14.

41. Hasluck, *Unwritten Law*, 27.
42. A religious leader such as a *vladika* was impossible, given the divide in religions. Shtjefën Gjeçovi's version of the *kanun* reveals that one family, the Gjomarkaj family, enjoyed primary authority of interpreting the law for some of the northern tribes (Fox, introduction to *Kanuni i Lekë Dukagjini*, xix).
43. Boehm expresses this difference (*Montenegrin Social Organization*, 24).
44. Durham writes of Albanians remembering up to thirteen generations of the father's line (*Some Tribal Origins*, 20).
45. Elsie, introduction to *The Highland Lute*, 8–9.
46. The term for conversion to Islam, *poturice*, essentially means the same thing as having become Turkish. The linguistic terminology indicates a political association not present in the English term. See Mladenović, introduction to *Gorski Vijenac*, 14.
47. "Srpsko Badnje večë" (Serbian Christmas Eve).
48. Pavle Popović, *O "Gorskom Vijencu"* (On "The Mountain Wreath"), 166–214.
49. *Ibid.*, 115–122.
50. Mihailovich, *The Mountain Wreath*, l. 24.
51. P. Popović, *O "Gorskom Vijencu,"* 94–115.
52. Wachtel, "How to Use a Classic," 148; Mladenović, introduction to *Gorski Vijenac*, 16.
53. Mihailovich, introduction to *The Mountain Wreath*, xi; and Goy, "Petar II Petrović Njegoš," 167. Goy comments that the abundance of proverbs in the text may have been influenced by (and perhaps even contributed to) Vuk's collection, *Narodne poslovice* (Folk Proverbs, 1836), published on Njegoš's printing press in Cetinje (*Sabre and the Song*, 89).
54. The three proverbs are found in ll. 137–38, 2322, and 602–03, respectively. The first is my adaptation of Goy's translation in *Sabre and the Song*, 88. His translation of the latter line reads: " 'Tis adversity that shows who is the hero." I changed the line to match the caesura and the decasyllable line. The second and third proverbs are Goy's translation in *Sabre and the Song*, 88–89.
55. Koljević, *The Epic in the Making*, 80, 91; and Coote, "Serbocroatian Heroic Songs," 272–75.
56. Goy, "Petar II Petrović Njegoš," 162.
57. *Ibid.* P. Popović considers whether Njegoš's imitation of, and borrowing from, other sources in some way diminishes his art (*O "Gorskom vijencu,"* 6–42).

58. Goy, *Sabre and the Song*, 95.
59. *The Epic in the Making*, 279.
60. Goy, *Sabre and the Song*, 58.
61. Skerlić, *Istorija*, 174; Pavle Popović, *O "Gorskom Vijencu,"* 82; Goy, *Sabre and the Song*, 59; and Deretić, *Istorija*, 299. See Goy, *Sabre and the Song*, 56–62 for a summary of these commentaries. A similar debate surrounds Francè Prešeren's *Baptism on the Savica* because it seems to be an incongruent combination of forms.
62. Đilas, *Njegoš*, 329; and Miodrag Popović, *Njegoš*, 33.
63. As discussed in P. Popović, *O "Gorskom Vijencu,"* 48–62.
64. *Ibid.*, 63–89.
65. *Sabre and the Song*, 43, 54–55. For further discussion, see the final section of this essay, which discusses the values and ethics of the two works.
66. Rešetar in P. Popović, *O "Gorskom Vijencu,"* 164–66; M. Popović, *Njegoš*, 33–34; Goy, *Sabre and the Song*, 43–52; and P. Popović, *O "Gorskom Vijencu,"* 167–74.
67. However, there are also differences implied in the text, such as the speeches of the characters, their inquiries about Venice, their attitudes toward the nation and the ethics of heroism.
68. Compare this with Njegoš's personal lament: "At times the bloody and hard struggle overwhelms me, and I curse the hour when this spark rose up from the ashes of Dušan's greatness and into these mountains of ours" (quoted in Goy, "Petar II Petrović Njegoš," 168).
69. For example, Goy, *Sabre and the Song*, 77–79. Goy also emphasizes that there are significant differences between Njegoš's use of the *kolo* and the Greek choruses.
70. *Ibid.*, 77.
71. P. Popović, "Gorskom Vijencu," 89–94.
72. M. Popović, *Njegoš*, 27.
73. *Njegoš*, 328.
74. For the importance of Mt. Lovćen, also Njegoš's mausoleum, see Wachtel, "How to Use a Classic," 135–44.
75. *O "Gorskom vijencu,"* 248–57.
76. This is consistent with my personal experience of religion in the area, where outward religious *expression*—and not *doctrine*—identifies someone as a member of a particular region. This held true for followers of Islam, Orthodoxy, and Catholicism.

77. P. Popović points out that this contradicts the historical account of the massacre, where Danilo and the Martinović brothers were the primary instigators of the ambush (*O “Gorskom Vijencu,”* 175–79).
78. This is consistent with the conclusions of Boehm, *Montenegrin Social Organization*, 62–64. It also corresponds with Njegoš’s successor Danilo’s decision to drop the title of *vladika* and rule as a secular prince.
79. *Sabre and the Song*, 39–55.
80. Mihailovich, ll. 1783–854. See the notes for these lines on page 114.
81. *Ibid.*, ll. 1204–09. Goy gives other examples in *Sabre and the Song*, 47–51.
82. Introduction to *Lahuta e malcis*, 8. Here and in the text below, the translations (and emphasis) are my own unless otherwise noted. Note that Bulo’s first words in the quote are a variation of a common Albanian proverb, “*gur gur bëhet mur.*”
83. Elsie, introduction to *The Highland Lute*, 5–6.
84. Berisha, “Epika gojore shqiptare,” 1069.
85. John Kolsti, *The Bilingual Singer*, 83–84. Albanian meter is difficult to judge because of the frequent elisions (omission of vowels). The most common vowel in Albanian is the schwa (/ë/), which is often omitted in spoken Albanian. It is difficult to know when this is pronounced in the poem, especially considering the dialectal variations in phonology (*ibid.*, 31).
86. I am referring to the collection of Albanian epic verse made by Shtjefën Gjeçovi (1874–1929), Bernadin Palaj (1894–1947), and Donat Kurti (1903–1983) which appeared under the title *Kangë kreshnikësh dhe legenda* (Songs of the Frontier Warriors and Legends) in *Visaret e Kombit* (Treasures of the Nation) in 1937. See *Songs of the Frontier Warriors*, xi.
87. In *The Bilingual Singer* Kolsti provides evidence of the oral epic tradition common to Albania, Montenegro, and Bosnia. Among his examples are several editions of songs that fit the same balladic style that Fishta imitates because one of the singers he is studying prefers the ballad when singing in Albanian.
88. While dramatic productions of *The Mountain Wreath* have yet to succeed, *The Highland Lute*, which had no trace of dramatic form, has had successful dramatic renderings (Elsie, introduction to *The Highland Lute*, 17).
89. Skendi, *Albanian National Awakening*, 131–34, 144.
90. *Lahuta e Malcis*, VII. Text citations are to canto and line.
91. Cipo, in his notes to the text of *The History of Skanderbeg*, occasionally describes how Frashëri worked around a common Turkish work in favor of a dialectical term or a neologism (Frashëri, *Istoria e Skenderbeut*).

92. The current Albanian standard is Tosk-based, although at the time of Fishta's writing it was based on a southern Geg variant in Elbasan, which is just north of the traditional isogloss of the Albanian dialects—the Shkumbi River. It is practically a central dialect comprehensible to both Geg and Tosk speakers and was the native idiom of the important Albanian linguist and folklorist Konstantin Kristoforidhi who did most of his work in the middle of the nineteenth century. See Byron, *Selection Among Alternates in Language Standardization*.

93. Elsie, personal correspondence. It is worth noting that the failure of northern Albanian dialects to be fully integrated into standardized Albanian has political consequences with the demands of Kosovar Albanians for a separate language standard.

94. There are a number of terms—especially heroic terms—that are identical in the Serbo-Croatian tradition of epic poems such as *četa*, a group of warriors, and *sokol*, falcon (perhaps the most common metaphor for heroes). It is interesting to note that Vuk Karadžić's New Testament included several Turkish words and consequently was initially rejected by the Serbian Orthodox Church.

95. Elsie, introduction to *The Highland Lute*, 7.

96. Cf. identical lines in several of the songs in *Songs of the Frontier Warriors*.

97. This same hero is also mentioned in the exchange between Christian and Muslim wedding guests in *The Mountain Wreath*, ll. 1783–86. He is the central figure in Xhevahir Kolgjini's painting, "Ringjallje," included in the cover.

98. Elsie, introduction to *The Highland Lute*, 9.

99. "From Krajina to Krahina: The European Borderland in Albanian Epic Tradition." Annual convention of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies, Salt Lake City, UT. November 2005. Kolsti's studies were based on Albanian oral epics of 200–2000+ lines in the Parry-Lord Collection at Harvard University.

100. Treptow, "The Formation of the Albanian National Consciousness," 445; Bulo, introduction to *Lahuta e Malcis*, 7.

101. Elsie, *History of Albanian Literature*, I: 263–67.

102. Treptow, "Formation of Albanian National Consciousness," 461.

103. Albanian intellectuals generally downplayed religious differences for national reasons, and the various faiths got along fairly well. Durham reports tribes with both Muslim and Catholic populations (*Some Tribal Origins*, 18–34). Ger Duijzings, however, argues that the very emphasis that Albanian leaders put on *not* fighting suggests that religion was important to Albanians "Religion and the Politics of 'Albanianism,'" 62. In any case, as compared with other areas with a mixture of religious communities, religious differences in Albania were fairly well tolerated.

104. Albanians are obviously not the only nation that tolerates religious differences, although

Fishta and other Albanian intellectuals emphasize the point. Perhaps it is a perception of tolerance compared to their neighbors.

105. An excellent description of Bektashism is offered by G. G. Arnakis “Futuwwa Traditions in the Ottoman Empire: Akhis, Bektashi Dervishes and Craftsmen,” in *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, vol. 12, (1953), 243 which is also cited in H. T. Norris, 1993, 165–66: “Perhaps more than any other Anatolian sect, the Bektashis interpreted Scripture allegorically and effaced all sharp contrasts and vicissitudes, preaching as they did, their favourite theme of the unity of existence. . . . Tolerance in all directions, common places of worship for Christians and Moslems, stories of miracles for the followers of Christ, and Mohammed indiscriminately, saints venerated by both peoples, and a persistent, if vague identification of Ali with Christ and Haji Bektash with St. Caralampos—these are some of the factors to which the Bektashis owe their success.”

106. Duijzings, “Religion and the Politics of ‘Albanianism.’”

107. *Istoria e Skenderbeut*, XII.

108. See also nn. 142, 148, in Elsie, *The Highland Lute* and Elsie, *Dictionary of Albanian Religion*.

109. Compare Ali Pasha Guci’s experience in *Lahuta e malcis*, VIII, with Mujo’s encounter in “Mujo’s Strength” in *Songs of the Frontier Warriors*, 2–9. See also Berisha, “*Epika gojore shqiptare*,” 1086.

110. *Syzime letrar*, 78.

111. Introduction to *Kanuni i Lekë Dukagjinit*, xxix–xxx.

112. Koljević, *The Epic in the Making*, 341–43.

113. Cf. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 44–45.

114. Berisha, “*Epika gojore shqiptare*,” 1077.

115. *Ibid.*, 1070, 1074.

116. Wachtel describes how *The Mountain Wreath* and *The Death of Smail Aga-Čengić* were banned for their supposed promotion of ethnic hatred (“How to Use a Classic,” 144–46).

117. Anzulovic, *Heavenly Serbia*, 54. Anzulovic’s “destructionist” critique of the poem is valid in criticizing the excess of violence, but he too passionately argues this aspect and consequently overlooks the subtle humaneness of Njegoš’s poetry. Christopher Catherwood draws a similar connection between the ambush of the Muslims in *The Mountain Wreath* and the violence against the Muslims in the most recent Balkan wars (*Why the Nations Rage*).

118. Österling, Presentation Speech of 1961 Nobel Prize in Literature.

119. See especially, Cox, “No Ordinary Albania.”

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