

the rank of the Captain of the Venetian republic. – Kovijanić 1974, p. 49. – For a more detailed analysis of Ivan Crnojević's title and his position of power in Zeta (Montenegro) cf. Mihaljičić, Rade: *Gospodar – Vladarska Titula Ivana Crnojevića*. In: *Istorijski Zapisi*. Podgorica, Istorijski Inst. Crne Gore, Br. 3-4. LXXII (1999), pp. 7-15.

6 F. Radičević: *Starine*. Vol. VII. Cetinje: Prosvjeta 1896, p. 384. – Cf. also Šekularac 2000, p. 38.

7 Jovanović 1948, pp. 54-55.

8 Alice Saltzman 1983, p. 9 stated that: »From the tenth to the twentieth century, the Zeta area preserved a nucleus of Serbian culture and nationalism at time when Serbia was overrun by Bulgars or Ottomans.« – Barbara Jelavich wrote about Montenegro as »the second Serbian state«. In: Jelavich 1983, p. 247. – Cf. also Seton-Watson, R.W.: *The Rise of Nationality in the Balkans*. New York: Howard Fertig 1966, p. 31; Hastings, Adrian: *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP 1997, p. 128 and p. 142.

9 The argument about shared religious believes represents a contested territory because »Orthodoxy alone can not for any length of time paper over other factors of division [...] Montenegrin Orthodoxy has resisted, and still resists, incorporation within a Serb church.« In: Hastings 1997, p. 142.

10 Tomašević, J.: *Peasants, Politics, and Economic Change in Yugoslavia*. Palo Alto: Stanford UP 1955, p. 126 (footnote).

11 With regards to the time frame of the emergence of nation-states and the concept of »nationalism« I am more inclined to follow the so-called »modernist views«, advocated by scholars such as Eric Hobsbawm, John Breuilly, Ernest Gellner and Benedict Anderson than the views expressed by Adrian Hastings.

12 Lederer, Ivo J.: *Nationalism and the Yugoslavs*. In: Sagar, Peter F./Lederer, Ivo J. (Eds.): *Nationalism in Eastern Europe*. Seattle, London: Univ. of Washington Pr. 1969, pp. 399-403.

13 Malcolm, Noel: *Kosovo: A Short History*. London: Macmillan 1998, *Introduction*, pp. xxviii-xxx. – For an interesting analysis of the position of Catholic Albanians in Montenegro at the end of the 19th century cf. Rastoder, Šerbo: *Konkordat Izmedju Crne Gore i Vatikana 1886. Godine*. In: Rastoder, Š.: *Janusovo Lice Istorije: Odabrani Clanci i Rasprave*. Podgorica: Vijesti 2000, pp. 105-125.

the advent of an ideology of national awakening during the last decades of the 19th century, the character, the intensity, and the motives for the region's conflicts have acquired a specific and new framework.¹² Only with the emergence of a political construct that was defined as the need for national homogenization, did the peoples of the region start to confront each other because of their respected ethnic and religious prerogatives (Christians against the »Turks«, Serbs against Croats or Serbs against Albanians and *vice versa*). In earlier times they fought against each other for many reasons and on behalf of many empires, but the elements of ethnic/national animosity did not play a significant role (if any at all) in those confrontations.¹³

The Montenegrin society at that time (17th and 18th century) was characterized by occasional and voluntary cooperation at the inter-tribal level. However, these temporary alliances had a limited military scope and were aimed at fencing off Ottoman forces and had nothing to do with modern concepts of national identity. There can be no questions about the primacy of tribal autonomy in Old Montenegro and Brda over the powers of central authority in Cetinje. Furthermore, almost all of Montenegrin tribes (with the exception of those from *Katunska Nahija*) at one time or another assisted the neighbouring Ottoman forces against other tribes of the area.¹⁴ In Montenegro it was the tribe and not the state/central authority that almost entirely provided all mechanisms of the possible horizontal identification for individuals. Central authority played a very limited role in this process, since it was the tribe that always acted as a safe harbour for the individual, and it was also the tribe that constructed and maintained the social poetics of the time.¹⁵ Considering this it can be concluded with some certainty that the Montenegrin tribesmen of the 17th and 18th century valued highly their tribal alliance and were much more aware of their belonging to a particular tribe than they were thinking of themselves in terms of national identity. These new national demarcation lines within Montenegro and in respect to its neighbours came into existence only with the advent of the idea of national wakening and national homogenization on a more general level.

Montenegro under Prince Danilo's successor, Nikola I Petrović Njegoš (ruled from 1860 until 1918) was characterized by the trend of an upward social mobility and the strengthening of central authority, as well as the development of much needed infrastructures such as roads, elementary and secondary schools, postal service, banking and telephone services. These first steps in developing the Montenegrin economy and the re-structuring of its state apparatus produced some negative consequences. While Prince Nikola was working on strengthening the central authority and elevating his own role in the country's affairs, some tribal leaders felt increasingly marginalized and saw their authority diminished. Nikola's departure from the traditional way of conducting politics (which meant consulting with tribal leaders) was seen as not only the abandonment of the »old ways« but also as the first step in dissolving traditional values of Montenegrin society.¹⁶ On December 19, 1905 the *Constitutional Assembly*, known as *Nikoljdanska Skupština* (*St. Nicholas Day Assembly*) proclaimed the first Montenegrin Constitution. According to the new law of the state, Montenegro was a constitutional but not a parliamentary monarchy.¹⁷ What followed was a series of short-term political alliances, a succession of more or less inefficient governments, and the development of serious political rivalry in Montenegro.¹⁸ After fifty successful years of ruling Montenegro Nikola decided to proclaim the Montenegrin Kingdom in 1910. The coronation represented an effort to strengthen Nikola's weak political position at home as well as an effort to internationalize the question of Montenegro. For supporters of his decision the coronation was a continuation of the tradition of Montenegrin independence and an important step forward in the process of the complete renewal of the ancient Kingdom of Zeta from 1077. While emphasizing his attachment to the Serbian nation, King Nikola I pointed out the importance of Montenegrin independence and sovereignty, effectively dividing Montenegro into two hostile political camps. The new kingdom proved to be a brief accomplishment, because at the end of the World War I, Montenegro lost its independence and sovereignty and found itself first as part of Serbia, and only later of the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (SHS).¹⁹ That was the time when the contested nature of Montenegrin identity came to the political forefront of the country and became the political stumbling block in the relations between Serbia and Montenegro.

The issue of identities and loyalties gained in prominence due to a number of factors: geography and politics were among the most important. The process of constructing new geographical boundaries of Montenegro had a profound impact on how interchange took place between local populations and the state authority involved, and how locals adapted to these new

14 Durham, Mary Edith: *Some Tribal Origins, Laws and Customs of the Balkans*. London: Allen and Unwin 1928, p. 82. – Nahija (Nahiya) was the smallest administrative unit in the Ottoman state. Cf. Jelavich 1983, p. 57.

15 Svetlana Boym views social poetics as basis for cultural identity and as »cultural intimacy that provides a glue in everyday life [...] Such identity involves everyday games of hide-and-seek that only »natives« play, unwritten rules of behavior, jokes understood from half a word, a sense of complicity. State propaganda and official national memory build on this cultural intimacy, but there is also a discrepancy and tension between the two.« – Boym, Svetlana: *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books 2001, p. 42f. Cf. also Herzfeld, Michael: *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-State*. New York: Routledge 1997, pp. 13f.

16 Banac, Ivo: *The National Question in Yugoslavia: Origins, History, Politics*. New York: Cornell UP 1984, p. 276.

17 The first Montenegrin Constitution was drafted jointly by Prince Nikola and his legal adviser and journalist from Belgrade, Stevan Ćurčić. The text of this document greatly resembled that of the Serbian Constitution of 1869. Jovanović 1948, pp. 337f.

18 Cf. Djonović, Jovan: *Ustavne i Političke Borbe u Crnoj Gori 1905-1910*. Beograd: K.J. Mihailović 1939. – A growing parliamentary opposition characterized the Montenegrin political landscape of the period. The parliament became the arena for a bitter confrontation between the representatives of the so-called »people's movement« and those representing the Government and Prince Nikola. The main political parties were the *People's Party (Narodna Stranka)*, better known as *Klubaši* (their leader was Šako Petrović) and the *True People's Party (Prava Narodna Stranka)*, known as *Pravaši* (led by Lazar Mijušković). The political credo of *Klubaši* was the unification of Montenegro and Serbia and the dethroning of Prince Nikola.

19 At its session of November 13, 1918, the delegates of the *Podgorica Assmibly* unanimously decided to dethrone King Nikola I Petrović and to »unconditionally unite Montenegro with Serbia in one state under the Karadjordjević dynasty«. Cf. Odluka Velike Narodne Skupštine Srpskog Naroda u Crnoj Gori, Donijeta na Sjednici od 13. Novembra 1918. u Podgorici. In: Bojović, Jovan R.: *Podgorička Skupština: Dokumenta*. Gornji Milanovac: Dečje Novine 1989, pp. 183-201. – As the

frontiers.²⁰ Significant change of the country's size that, in turn, was closely related to the economic state of affairs on the local level, impacted the mechanisms of identification (on an individual level and also on the level of groups). Different groups and individuals living in Montenegro at that time had very specific regional and local interests that could not be easily reduced to a universalized »national« character or political unit and the frontiers delineated by the European powers and by the educational and economic reforms in order to have solidified post-Ottoman identities prove confusing at best.²¹ Moreover, each unit (*klan*) within a given tribe in Montenegro had very specific interests that were not always in accordance to that of the tribe as a whole. These conflicting needs and aspirations on a micro level had rendered the process of national homogenization in Montenegro even more difficult and undermined the cohesiveness of the entire undertaking. A general perception of this process in Montenegro goes along the lines of monocausal explanations of phenomena of ethnic/national identity that is undergoing continuous modifications, but in spite of the romanticism of national histories and persistence of many national awakens, it seems that the process of forging a new Montenegrin identity was anything but a smooth ride. Today remnants of that old tribal loyalty can still be detected among the citizens of Montenegro. Many of them display a significantly high level of attachment and loyalty to their regional, local and tribal identities. In most cases the first level of identification is either the region/*nahija* (*Katunjanin, Crmničanin, Lješnjani, Bjelopavlić, Cuca, Bjelica, Vasojević, Drobnjak, Pastrovic, Malisor, Bokelj*) or the tribe, whose geographic boundaries and name usually correspond with the region (*Vasojevići* tribe, *Drobnjak* tribe, etc.).²² Only then and only in terms of a more general level of identification, which is at present heavily colored by the ideologies of the day, one comes across national categories such as Montenegrin, Serb, Serb from Montenegro, Albanian, Muslim, Croat, etc. Identification along the lines of one's religious affiliation is the only parameter that did not change.

Political affiliation was another important signifier of identity construction. Political divisions in Montenegro during the first decades of the 20th century proved to be determining factors in the process of national identification and identity construction. Supporters of the *People's Party (Narodna Stranka or Klubaši)* from the turn of the 20th century were not only opposing the policies of prince (and later king) Nikola I Petrović, but were also passionate advocates of the unification of Montenegro with Serbia. Most of them regarded Montenegro as a Serbian state and Montenegrins as ethnic Serbs. Consequently, the plurality of party members and supporters identified themselves as ethnic Serbs. The opposing political group consisted of members of the *True People's Party (Prava Narodna Stranka or Pravaši)* who supported Nikola's policies and the concept of Montenegrin independence and sovereignty. However, no political group in Montenegro of that time represented a uniform entity, particularly when it came to the issue of identity. The independentist attitude of *Pravaši* was heavily influenced by the current politics and most of them did not dispute the perceived ethnic/national sameness between Montenegrins and Serbs, and consider themselves to be Serbs from Montenegro. Prince Nikola was one of the principle advocates of such identity politics.²³ Then, there were those among the *Pravaši* who not only advocated Montenegrin independence but thought of themselves as true Montenegrins. Their understanding of identity was based on the notion of territoriality and a specific political history of the Montenegrin state.

What envelops this multi-layered character of Montenegrin identity and impedes a more complete understanding of Montenegrin history is, among others, its tradition of epic poetry, of which the contents are open to various and often conflicting interpretations. The best illustration of the political dimension of Montenegrin identity are numerous and contradictory interpretations of the literary achievements of Petar II Petrović Njegoš. His legacy serves as telling example of how literature, religion and politics in the Balkans can be interwoven in serving particular political agendas.

Metropolitan Petar II Petrović Njegoš, the 19th century ruler of Montenegro, and his poetic endeavors occupy the central stage in the South Slavic myth-making factory. Njegoš' *magnum opus* is his epic poem *The Mountain Wreath*, written in 1846 in Cetinje and published in Vienna in 1847. The poem appeared in print in the same year as Vuk Stefanović Karadžić' translation of the *New Testament*. According to Professor Vasa D. Mihailović, whose English translation of *The Mountain Wreath* was published in 1997, Njegoš »is revered as Montenegro's most illustrious son and the greatest poet in Serbian literature.«²⁴

The Mountain Wreath is set in 18th-century Montenegro and deals with the attempts of Njegoš' ancestor, Metropolitan Danilo, to regulate the relations among the region's warring tribes.

immediate consequence of this proclamation, the Montenegrin Orthodox Church was abolished and its property seized by the Serbian Orthodox Church and from mid-1919 the Montenegrin territory was occupied by the Serbian troops. Many scholars interpret these events as a *de facto* annexation of Montenegro. Montenegro never entered the Kingdom of SHS as its constitutive element, since its »unification« with Serbia in 1918 was perceived as the natural progression of a process of national unification. From the political perspective of Belgrade the new state was seen as a common state of one people that had three names: Serbs, Croats and Slovenes.

20 During the reign of Prince (later king) Nikola I Petrović, Montenegro quadrupled its territory. As Ivo Banac points out, after the Balkan wars for the first time »Montenegrins ruled not only over a large body of hostile Muslims, many of them Albanians, but also over highland tribes with a tradition of strong ties to Serbia.« In: Banac 1984, p. 275.

21 This adaptation was particularly difficult for non-Christians and non-Slavs living in the bordering areas of Old Montenegro, some of which were later incorporated into the Montenegrin state.

22 *Katunjanin* is the person from *Katunska Nahija*.

23 Ivo Banac pointed out: »The tradition of Montenegrin self-centeredness did not, however, prevent reciprocity with the Serbians, though on the basis of a veritable worship of Montenegro. On the contrary, the Serb tradition percolated down to the consciousness of most ordinary herdsmen by a system of mnemonic devices by which the church continually admonished the Montenegrins to remember the glories of the Nemanjić state. Time and again, Montenegrin rulers took the lead in attempting to restore the medieval Serbian empire.« In: Banac 1984, p. 247.

24 Njegoš, Petar Petrović: *The Mountain Wreath*. Transl. by Vasa D. Mihailovic, Translator's Introduction. Belgrade: Serb. Europe Publ. 1997.

25 The dating of the alleged event is a matter of some controversy. The subtitle of *The Mountain Wreath* tells us that the poem deals with a *Historical Event from the End of the 17th Century (Historičesko Sobotie pri Svršetky XVII vieka)*. Cf. Njegoš, P.P.: *The Mountain Wreath*. Vienna 1847, Title page. – The same dating of the event described in *The Mountain Wreath* appeared in a number of histories of Montenegro publ. during the 19th century, such as those by Sima

Njegoš constructed his poem around a single event that allegedly took place on a particular Christmas Day in the early 1700s, during Metropolitan Danilo's rule: the mass execution of Montenegrins who had converted to Islam.²⁵ The *History of Montenegro*, published by *Litera* in Belgrade, tells us that:

At the dawn of the eighteenth century, in 1707, an event occurred in Montenegro, known as the liquidation of the converts to Islam (Islamicized Christians). Its initiator was Bishop Danilo Šćepčević (later Petrović). The event itself was highly localized in character (it happened in the clan of the Čeklići) but, from the historical point of view, it marked the beginning of a process which would continue throughout the eighteenth century and end with the disappearance of converts.²⁶

Regarding the claim about »the disappearance of converts« suffice for now to say that at present, some 16% of the Montenegrin population is of the Islamic faith and that Montenegrins of the Islamic faith have been constantly present in the region. Naturally, one should not overlook the demographic changes that have occurred in Montenegro over the past couple of centuries, but these movements of population can hardly amount to »the disappearance of converts.« Moreover, Montenegrins of Islamic faith and their socio-cultural heritage are at present an integral part of the general matrix of Montenegrin society.²⁷

Regardless of their political agendas, ideological preferences or religious affiliation, every new generation of South Slav historians and politicians appropriates Njegoš' work hoping to find enough quotations to validate their own views. Furthermore, in every translation of *The Mountain Wreath* into English, one can detect attempts to remodel the original. The latest English version by Professor Vasa D. Mihailović is simply another attempt to colonize Njegoš' work for the sake of aiding modern political and ideological struggle in the Balkans. For example, Professor Mihailović translated the word »pleme« (»tribe«) into the English word »nation«, thus, ascribing to Njegoš terminology he never used in *The Mountain Wreath*:

Mlado žito, navijaj klasove,
predje roka došla ti je žnjetva!
Divne žertve vidim na gomile
Pred oltarom crkve i plemena

Ripen, young wheat and corn, into the grain!
Your harvest has arrived before its time.
I see precious offerings piled up high
At the altar of our church and nation.²⁸

By using the term »nation« instead of »tribe«, Professor Mihailović attempted to alter the semantics of the poem, and alluded to the existence of the direct link between Njegoš' work and the issue of Serb identity. He also implied that characters from Njegoš' poem were aware of the concept of national identity. In turn, such implying reaffirms the standard reading of *The Mountain Wreath* that is conditioned by the ideological confines of the Serb national paradigm. But that is a tale for a different poem.

This poem by Njegoš is praised and criticized at the same time; it has been used to support diametrically opposing political views. Numerous Serbian nationalists use it as historical justification for their attempt to keep alive their dream of Greater Serbia. Let us return to Njegoš' translator:

The Mountain Wreath represents a synthesis in another sense as well. It is based on historical facts, thus it can be called a historical play. It epitomizes the spirit of the Serbian people kept alive for centuries; indeed, there is no other literary work with which the Serbs identify more.²⁹

Some Croatian nationalists recognize in Njegoš' poetry the ultimate statement of the oriental nature of South Slavs living east of the Drina river, thus reinforcing the popular notion of a stereotypical *other*. Islamic radicals view this literary endeavor as a manual for ethnic cleansing and fratricidal murder, as a text whose ideas were brought back to life during the most recent nationalistic *dance macabre* in the former Yugoslavia. Montenegrin independentists largely shy away from any interpretation of Njegoš' poetry, and only on occasion discuss its literary and linguistic merits.

My reading of *The Mountain Wreath* is somewhat different. Naturally, this poem by Njegoš can be read in different ways. However, I believe that despite the openness of this work to various interpretations (or precisely because of it), one should not forget the fact that what one is reading is a work of literature. I am not suggesting that literature should not be approached as a source for evaluating any given historical period. On the contrary, literature is a litmus test for

Milutinović Sarajlija (Belgrade, 1835) and Dimitrije Milaković (Zadar, 1856). Later studies of *The Mountain Wreath* by M. Rešetar (Zagreb, 1890), Ilarion Ruvarac, Montenegrina, 2nd ed. (1899) and Lj. Stojanović, Zapisi, II (1903) based their dating of the event on a note allegedly written by the Metropolitan Danilo Petrović himself. The note and its commentary by N. Musulin were published in *Glasnik*, XVII (1836). It is worth pointing out that Ilarion Ruvarac expressed serious concerns regarding the genuine character of the note, but his concerns were quickly brushed aside by a number of local historians. The above mentioned authors offered three different dates for the »Christmas Day Massacre« (1702, 1704 and 1707), while *The Mountain Wreath* positioned the event in the late 17th century. It is interesting to note that in his poem *Ogledalo Srpsko*, Njegoš wrote about the event and positioned it »around the year 1702«. Cf. Njegoš, P.P.: *Ogledalo Srpsko*. S.I. 1845. – A notable exception is Konstantin Jiriček, who, in his *Naučni Slovník*, stated that the event described in *The Mountain Wreath* never took place.

26 History of Montenegro, presented by Litera. In: <http://www.Njegos.org>.

27 For an interesting analysis of the contemporary identity shifts of Muslims in Montenegro cf. Dimitrova, Bohdana: Bosniak or Muslim? Dilemma of one Nation with two Names. In: South East European Politics OnLine, <http://www.seep.ceu.hu>. Vol. II, no. 2. Budapest (October 2001). – Cf. also Rastoder, Šerbo: Crna Gora Multietnička Država: Sadržaj, Stvarnost, Iluzija, Parola? In: Almanah, Br. 13-14. Podgorica 2000, pp. 11-21; Kočan, Esad: Bošnjaci u Crnoj Gori: Identitet i Integracija. In: Almanah, Br. 13-14. Podgorica 2000, pp. 29-37.

28 Njegoš 1997, p. 38. Verses 652-656.

29 Ibid. – Cf. also Banac 1984, p. 272.

30 Cf. Njegoš' letter written on May 2, 1848, to the Serbian Minister of the Interior, Ilija Garašanin, the author of *Nacertanije*. In: Njegoš, P.P.: *Izabrana Pisma*. Beograd: Prosveta 1967, p. 166. – Cf. also Njegoš to Josip Jelačić, Letter written in Cetinje on Dec. 20, 1848. In: *Ibid.*, p. 173f.

31 Greenawalt, Alexander: Kosovo Myth: Karadžić, Njegoš and the Transformation of Serb Identity. In: *space-identity.net*. Vol. I, iss. 3. (October 2001), <http://www.space-identity.net>.

32 Njegoš 1997, p. 42. Verses 760-763.

the deeper understanding of a particular historical period. I am simply arguing against its exclusive usage as the primary and sole determining element in the process of historical evaluation across time. I would like to propose reading Njegoš' *The Mountain Wreath* as the tale of a long-gone heroic tribal society that was poeticized in order to depict the state of affairs in Njegoš' Montenegro. With this in mind, I believe that his work can be approached as an additional source for assessing the conditions within a particular time frame in Montenegrin history, that is Njegoš' time: the first half of the 19th century. The long-gone Montenegro that Njegoš wrote about had little in common with the Montenegro of his time, and has nothing in common with the contemporary Montenegro. However, *The Mountain Wreath* does speak volumes about political, social, cultural and economic conditions in Montenegro during the early 19th century and about Njegoš' efforts to advocate the ideas of pan-Slavism and the Illyrian Movement.³⁰ The early 1840s in Montenegro were years of drought, hunger and the ever-present threat of an Ottoman invasion. For many Montenegrins, converting to Islam meant having access to grain and, thus, being able to save their extended families from starvation.

Despite the difficulty of proving that an event of such a magnitude and in such a manner as described by Njegoš – *the killing of Montenegrins who had converted to Islam* – ever took place in Montenegro, the prevailing attitude is to approach Njegoš' poem as a somewhat poeticized version of a historical event of this kind. A lack of historical sources related to this issue has not prevented the misreading and misuse of Njegoš' poetry. One comes across statements that claim intimate knowledge of the metropolitan's private thoughts and that emphasize Njegoš' personal animosity towards Islam: »By unleashing his wrath against the indigenous Slavic Muslims, Njegoš displays his personal hatred of Islam.«³¹ That the victims in *The Mountain Wreath* are depicted as *converts to Islam* is not taken as a reflection upon the socio-political conditions in Montenegro during Njegoš' time, but as an easy explanation for those who believe that a deeply embedded hatred towards Islam exists in Njegoš and in Montenegro. In Njegoš' work we cannot find an instance that would indicate his personal hatred towards any group of people or towards any religion. Njegoš did not hate the Turks as a nation or the religion of Islam, and he did not hate individuals in Montenegro who converted to Islam. On the contrary, he managed to find rather sophisticated ways of euphemizing the fact of the conversion to Islam: attributing it to the difficult historical circumstances and harsh living conditions in Montenegro. It is almost as though he would be absolving the converts of their guilt by saying:

Da, nijesu ni krivi toliko;
premami ih nevjera na vjeru,
ulovi ih u mrežu djavolju.
Šta je čovjek? Ka slabo živinče!

It may not be the turncoat's fault as much;
the infidel enticed them with falsehood,
and entangled them in the devil's net.
But what is man? In truth, a weak creature!³²

Njegoš is angry because, together with other Montenegrins, he is forced to wage a constant battle for the survival of the Montenegrin state, its freedom, its traditions and culture against a much stronger opponent. He generally condemns the urge to conquer others, regardless of what particular group (in this case, the Ottomans) practices such methods. For him, the Islamization of Montenegrins represents the initial stage in the process of dissolving the traditional socio-cultural values that are so typical for Montenegro, and he condemns the converts for not being conscious of that fact.

Based on various misreadings of *The Mountain Wreath* many scholars have tried to justify their theories about the historical continuity of Montenegrins' violence towards *others*. This »character trait« is then presented as a determining factor in Montenegrin history. What escapes their attention is the crucial difference between the concepts of *being violent* and that of *becoming violent*. Making this distinction will open up new interpretations of Montenegrin history. Such a change in the analytical approach constitutes a new discourse that is concerned more with the aspects of the process of *becoming violent* than with a focus on violence and hatred as central features of the Montenegrin character. Of course, one could talk about Njegoš, the politician, who fought against the Ottoman rule through all his life, but this struggle should not be taken as any form of *hatred of Islam*. Njegoš' correspondence with neighboring Ottoman officials shows that the metropolitan displayed a surprisingly relaxed attitude towards his political and military enemies.³³ One need only be reminded of the verses from *The Mountain Wreath* about Istanbul and Islam:

33 Huseinu-Begu Gradašćeviu. Cetinje, 4. februara, 1832. In: Njegoš, 1967, p.33; cf. also Mehmed-Spahiji Lekiću. In: Ibid., p.79 and Osman-Paši Skopljaku. In: Ibid., p. 133.

34 Njegoš 1997, pp. 47-48. Verses 911-919.

35 Rovinsky 1998, p. 273.

36 Njegoš 1997, p. 31. Verses 469-473.

37 Goy, Edward Dennis: *The Sabre and the Song: Njegos' The Mountain Wreath*. Belgrade: Serb. PEN Centre 1995, p. 36. Qutd. in <http://www.Njegos.org>.

38 The term »Hajduk« (*Haiduk*) has a complex structure whose semantics have varied in time and depended on constantly shifting power relations in the Balkans. During the Ottoman rule in the region, Hajduks were »[...] individuals accused of crimes or protesting injustice«, which would then »characteristically head for the hills or forests to live the life of the hajduk, or outlaw. Both of these forms of resistance increased from the 17th century«. In: *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Vol. 14. London 1998, p. 675. Morton Benson defined them as »anti-Turkish highwayman«, while the *Enciklopedija Jugoslavije* states that *Hajdučija* (living the life of Hajduks): »[D]uring the Turkish period it had the form and character of highway-robbery«. In: Benson, Morton: *Srpskohrvatsko-Engleski Rečnik*. Drugo preradjeno i dopunjeno izdanje. Beograd: Prosveta 1982 and *Enciklopedija Jugoslavije*. Vol. 3. Zagreb, MCMLVIII, Leksikografski Zavod FNRJ, pp. 652-54. Among the South Slavs (Serbs and Montenegrin in particular) this activity acquired additional meanings in the late 18th and early 19th centuries and became viewed as a form of social unrest and national/political struggle against the Ottoman rule. In Montenegro, such resistance (*Hajdučija*) also re-presented a form of war economy because small bands of *Hajduks* often looted estates of neighboring Muslim landowners. *Hajduks* in Serbia and Montenegro played a different role in their respective societies, and their motives for »heading for the hills« were different from those of *haidus* in 15th and 16th century Hungary. *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica* tells us that *haidus* were »Ma-gyar and Slav foot soldiers (*hajdus*) who fought for Istvan (Stephen) Bocskay (1557-1606), prince of Transylvania. This militarized population called *haiduk* (brigand or »bandit«) by the Turks, were granted lands, privileges and title exemptions by Bocskay«. In: *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Vol. 5. Micropaedia 1998, p. 624.

O Stambole, zemaljsko veselje,
kupo meda, goro od šečera,
banjo slatka ljudskoga života,
dje se vile u šerbet kupaju;
o Stambole, svečeva palato,
istočniče sile i svetinje,
bog iz tebe samo begeniše
črez proroka sa zemljom vladati;
šta će mene od tebe odbiti?

O Istanbul, earthly delight and joy,
a cup of honey, a mountain of sugar,
the sweetest spa of human existence,
where the women bathe in honeyed sherbet!
O Istanbul, palace of the Prophet
the source of his power and his holy shrine –
it is Allah's pleasure to rule the earth
only from the palace of the Prophet.
What can ever separate me from you?³⁴

It is not easy to find a better, more poetic depiction of both the Islamic faith and the Sultan's city in the entire corpus of South Slavic epic poetry. As for the population of Montenegro, one can say that until the present day – outside political manipulations – Montenegrins have not cared much about the issues of religious and national differences, not even in the early 19th century:

A Montenegrin does not have any national prejudice. He is very eager to adopt good things from others if these are not in conflict with his basic principles and his natural inclinations. He easily establishes communication with a foreigner regardless of religion and nationality.³⁵

The late Professor Edward Dennis Goy, a scholar at Cambridge University and the author of *The Sabre and The Song: Njegos' The Mountain Wreath*, took an interesting approach in analyzing segments of this poem. One example is particularly revealing. In his poem, Njegoš described the following episode:

Mujo Alić, turski kavazbaša,
odveo nam Ružu Kasanovu
i uteka s bratom najmladjijem.
Evo ima više no godina
otka nešto medju sobom glave[.]

Mujo Alić, the Turkish Chief of Guards,
Had run away with Ruža, Kasan's wife,
And fled with her and his youngest brother.
More than a year, perhaps, it has been now
Since those two put their heads together[.]³⁶

Professor Goy interprets this episode, in which Ruža, the wife of Kasan (both of the Eastern Orthodox faith) left her husband to run away with Mujo Alić, a convert to Islam as a kidnapping and goes to explain that this type of event was a common criminal practice associated with Islamized Montenegrins of the period. Moreover, Professor Goy then projects this negative stereotyping forward through time in order to reach the startling conclusion that: »When one considers modern Islam and its taking of hostages and murder, one may wonder whether it is not a characteristic of the faith.«³⁷ The fact that one often finds accounts of the hostage-taking of Muslim women by Orthodox Christian outlaws (*Hajduks*) and their conversion to the Christian faith (usually depicted by the following verse: »From Hajkuna he makes Andjelija / Od Hajkune pravi Andjeliju« in both Serbian and Montenegrin epic poetry does not figure at all in Goy's analysis.³⁸ After reading these and other similar statements about Njegoš' poetry, I am convinced that this dead poet has few readers, and that misunderstandings more often than not spring out from every word of his verse. Despite the persistent return of many scholars to Njegoš' writing, it seems that his epic poem *The Mountain Wreath* still remains unread as literature.

Moreover, available sources indicate that the episode about Ruža Kasanova and Mujo Alić described in *The Mountain Wreath* might be yet another example of Njegoš reshaping a segment of a mythologized past that was preserved in the popular memory. In the article *Ruža Kasanova*, published in *Bosanska Vila* in 1895, Ivan Djurović retold the legend about a Montenegrin man named Vukman (Eastern Orthodox), who lived on the slopes of Mount Lovćen. The legend tells us that his wife Jela abandoned him and went away with the Pasha from Podgorica, named Abdović. The legend also speaks about Jela's love for the Pasha and her wish to live with him rather than to stay with her husband. Vukman's brothers went after them alongside the creek called Pištet, and killed them both on the mountain Simunja.³⁹ It is interesting to note that the story told in *The Mountain Wreath* bears a striking similarity with this legend and that the entire episode described by Njegoš takes place on the same locations.⁴⁰

The myth of the *slaying of infidels* in early 18th-century Montenegro is a recurring theme in almost every analysis of the region's history and the mentality of its people. It's use as the ultimate explanation for the recent historical developments in the region is apparent and particularly troubling. Apart from being a material mistake, the employment of this theme serves the purpose of further restraining Montenegro within the confines of the notions of the so-called

39 Djurović, Ivan: Ruža Kasanova. In: Bosanska Vila, no.135 (1894).

40 Njegoš 1997, pp. 30-31. Verses: 469-475 and p. 31f. Verses 480-498.

41 Cetinjski Ljetopis. In: Cetinje: Fototipsko Izdanje Centralne Biblioteke NR Crne Gore 1962.

42 Grupa autora, Istorija Crne Gore. Vol. 3, knj. 1. Titograd 1975. – Cf. also Tomović, Slobodan: Komentar Gorskog Vijenca. Ljubljana, Beograd: Nikšić 1986, p. 146f.

43 Petrović, Vasilije: Istorija o Čeranoi Gori. St. Petersburg 1754.

44 Njegoš, Petar I Petrović: Kratka Istorija Crne Gore. In: Grlica (Cetinje 1835).

»ancient hatred«, »irrationalism« and »barbarism«. I will try to provide a brief account of my findings related to the alleged massacre of Montenegrin Muslims as described in *The Mountain Wreath*.

The most significant source related to this popular myth in Montenegrin history is *The Book of Medojeвина*, an account of church property in Cetinje that is part of a larger collection of documents known as *The Cetinje Chronicle*.⁴¹ *The Book of Medojeвина* consists of two documents – sworn statements by Petar and Vukosav Medojević. The first statement is dated on April 25, 1733, in the Cetinje Monastery, while the second statement was written fifteen years later, in 1748. Both documents deal with an earlier conflict over a large property that the Medojevićs, an old Montenegrin Eastern Orthodox family, whose members had worked as blacksmiths for the Cetinje Monastery since 1485, had had with the Church authorities. According to the documents, during the rule of Metropolitan Danilo, the family had refused to vacate the property and return it to the Church, in spite of the loud objections of local priests, tribal leaders and the metropolitan. The conflict escalated to the point that leaders of various Montenegrin tribes gathered in Cetinje to discuss a course of action. Even though Metropolitan Danilo half-heartedly tried to defuse the dangerous situation, a number of Montenegrins went on to destroy the Medojevićs' houses and burn all their possessions. Tribal leaders decided to expel the family. However, the Medojevićs refused to leave and resettled on the same property once again, in spite of the collective decision on the part of the tribal leaders to expel them from Cetinje and in spite of a curse put upon them by the metropolitan himself. Both documents tell us that in the course of the next decade, the Medojevićs, who had previously been a large family, dwindled to only two adult members. Both documents also mention childless wives in the family. Pero and Vukosav Medojević then decided to seek forgiveness from the metropolitan and ask him to lift the curse. And they gave back the property to the Cetinje Monastery.

In essence, both documents depict a conflict between the ruler of Montenegro and the Medojevićs, which spiraled out of control and, in time, became an important segment of local tradition. The Montenegrin oral tradition reshaped and redefined this conflict between the ruler and his subordinates into the myth of *the killing of converts*. This was accomplished by resorting to the notion of *guilt by imagined association*. Namely, the popular oral tradition connected the conflict between the Medojevićs and the metropolitan from 1704 to the case of a number of Montenegrins who were, together with Staniša Crnojević, forcefully converted to Islam in 1485. In time, the popular memory positioned the confrontation over the property from 1704 in the same category as the imagined conflict between the Orthodox metropolitan and the converts. Both events (one from 1485 and one from 1704) shared an important feature: the taking away of land from the Cetinje Monastery and the popular memory equated the two groups, characterizing them as *traitors*. The fight over property between the ruler and the Medojevićs, its aftermath and the Metropolitan's curse in particular resonated strongly in the popular imagination, and the story was remembered and retold as an example of a traumatic event. During the first half of the 19th century, this event entered the literature and was refurbished with significant new meanings. The Medojevićs became the *Turks* and the property dispute, as well as the expulsion of this family from Cetinje, entered the realm of national mythology as the grand theme of the *killing of converts*.

It is indicative that there are no written sources related to the *killing of converts* dated before the early 19th century. The first Montenegrin historian, Metropolitan Vasilije Petrović Njegoš, in his *Istoria o Čeranoi Gori* fails to mention anything remotely resembling the organized mass killing of converts. Moreover, he does not make any reference to islamized Montenegrins at all. Such attitude of the metropolitan was understandable given his urge to portray Montenegro as the focal point of the anti-Ottoman struggle in the region and as a country whose main historical feature was its permanent struggle against the invader.⁴³ Another historical text about Montenegro, *Kratki Opis o Zeti i Crnoj Gori*, dated at 1774, does mention neither the event itself, nor the existence of converts in Montenegro. The first mention of the ultimate crime appears in a poem by the Montenegrin ruler, the Metropolitan Petar I, which was published in 1833. He revisited the issue in his *Kratka Istorija Crne Gore* that first appeared in 1835 in the journal *Grlica* in Cetinje.⁴⁴ Petar I wrote about the killing of converts in Montenegro during the time of his predecessor Metropolitan Danilo (1700) but did not offer any context for the event and failed to elaborate on its causes, its dynamics or the individuals involved. Njegoš' teacher and mentor, Sima Milutinović Sarajlija, used this motif in his *History of Montenegro* because he thought it necessary to add significance to the role of the Petrović dynasty in the history of Montenegro.

45 Sarajlija, Sima Milutinović: *Istorija Crne Gore*. Beograd 1835. – An earlier work of Milorad Medaković does not mention the killing of converts at all. Cf. Medaković, Milorad: *Povjesnica Crne Gore od Najstarijih Vremena do 1830*. Zemun 1850. – Almost fifty years later, Medaković changed his mind and wrote extensively on the event and attempted to prove its existence. Cf. Medaković, Milorad: *Vladika Danilo* (1896).

46 One example of this new trend is *Kratka Istorija Srbskog Naroda za Osnovne Srbske Škole* (Cetinje 1868). This book was for twenty years the official history textbook in Montenegrin schools. – Cf. also Perović, Lazar: *Dvojekovna Vlada Slavne kuće Petrović-Njegoš*. Cetinje 1896; Tomić, Jovan: *Iz Istorije Crne Gore*. Beograd 1901; Dragović, Živko: *Kratka Istorija Crne Gore za Školu* 1910; Erdeljanović, Jovan: *Stara Crna Gora*. Beograd 1926.

47 Nikčević, Vojislav P.: *Istrage Poturica Nije ni Bilo*. In: *Ovdje*, br. 189. Titograd 1985, pp. 8-10.

48 The most recent and most comprehensive account of the alleged killing of converts is the monograph by Nikčević, Vojislav P.: *Istraga Poturica u Njegoševom Gorskom Vijencu*. Cetinje 1990.

49 Deuteronomy, 13/15, 16.

50 Njegoš 1997, p. 38. Verses 659-662.

Milutinović' book appeared in print in Belgrade in 1835. Regarding the killing of converts, Milutinović provided numerous details that were adopted from epic poems, and it would be safe to say that his account was both, a poeticized and mythologised version of Montenegrin history.⁴⁵ The turning point in the debate about the killing of converts came with a new book by Dimitrije Milaković that was published in 1856. He described the event as a historical fact and provided numerous details about personalities involved. Even though Milaković' account can easily be categorized as yet another remaking of a mythologised past, his work cemented the dogma of the organized extermination of islamicized Montenegrins during the rule of Metropolitan Danilo.⁴⁶ Njegoš adopted this motif and began developing it in his early works.⁴⁷ Finally, in *The Mountain Wreath*, and in accordance to the ideology of his time, Njegoš elevated this incident, preserved in the popular memory and reshaped by it, to the level of the struggle for the preservation of Montenegro's freedom, heritage, and Eastern Orthodox faith. One can detect a connection between the image of the early Medojevićs as traitors/converts embedded in the popular memory and the characters of Hadži-Ali Medović Kadija and Skender-Beg Medović in Njegoš' *The Mountain Wreath*.

Available sources point out that Njegoš did not base his poem on a historical event.⁴⁸ However, he realized the potential significance of a reshaped myth and through *licencia poetica* actualized its meanings. The myth of the *slaying of converts*, as an act of cleansing and the indication of a fresh start, meshed nicely with Njegoš' efforts to turn Montenegro into a modern state. With this awareness, I would like to propose yet another way of reading *The Mountain Wreath* – the reading of an epic poem about a *New Beginning*.

All myths about a *New Beginning* are variations of a story about horrible crimes being committed, especially the killing of the innocent and the killing of relatives. Very often it tells the story of twin brothers constructing a dramatic setting, where blood relations make the crime almost unimaginable and therefore highly symbolic. The initial crime committed in Montenegro, the crime that signifies its birth, is the extinction of brothers. It is a civil war. The *Beginning is Tragedy*. It is the destruction of everything that is and the collapse of the fundamental taboos that regulate the life of the individual and the society. It is the final departure from a past way of life and its radical alteration. It seems as if Njegoš adopted and adapted the logic of the *Old Testament* related to the total annihilation of the enemy:

And if it is true and it has been proved that this detestable thing has been done among you, you must certainly put to the sword all who live in that town. Destroy it completely, both its people and its livestock. Gather all the plunder of the town into the middle of the public square and completely burn the town and all its plunder as a whole burnt offering to the Lord your God. It is to remain a ruin forever, never to be rebuilt.⁴⁹

In the *Beginning* is the crime of all crimes, a crime for which there is no justification since it denounces all accepted values and modes of life. After such a crime, only two solutions are left: the death of the guilty or the construction of an entirely new identity, something so new that the process will last as long as it is necessary for the guilty to repent or be erased all together. It seems to me that what Njegoš – the politician – was trying to accomplish was precisely this: the homogenization of Montenegrin tribes in accordance with the concept of national awakening, the restructuring of a tribal society into a nation. In other words: the construction of a new identity. Such a process is painful and calls for sacrifices. But that was the essence of Njegoš' politics: to destroy the Old (tribal) Montenegro and create a modern state. He was destroying it because it was impossible to reform the tribal heroic society in which he lived. Because of the scope of the crime one can only seek forgiveness in extremes: to succeed in the attempt, or to perish forever. Both Njegoš and the Metropolitan Danilo from the poem seem painfully aware of the terrible choice but opt for *violence* as the only way to *recreate* their *being* in a new environment.

Neka bude što biti ne može,
nek ad proždre, pokosi satana!
Na groblju će iznići cvijeće
za daleko neko pokoljenje!

Let it be what men thought could never be.
Let Hell devour, let Satan cut us down!
Flowers will sprout and grow on our graveyards
For some distant future generation.⁵⁰

The Mountain Wreath is an important literary achievement, and it should be analyzed as a drama that confronts and challenges the concepts of ›*thought*‹ and ›*action*‹, ›*morality*‹ and ›*righteousness*‹, ›*religion*‹ and ›*human nature*‹ and not as the poeticized version of a historical event. It is a poetic tale written by a man who continuously deconstructs and questions the very world he

