

# MULTICULTURAL DYNAMICS AND HERITAGE (RE)APPROPRIATION IN BELA KRAJINA: NEGOTIATING THE HERITAGE OF THE SERBIAN ORTHODOX COMMUNITY

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## ABSTRACT

**Multicultural Dynamics and Heritage (Re)Appropriation in Bela Krajina:  
Negotiating the Heritage of the Serbian Orthodox Community**

The Serbian Orthodox community in the Bela Krajina region in southern Slovenia, which presently consists of four villages (Bojanci, Miliči, Marindol and Paunoviči), is considered the northernmost “island” of the Serbian Orthodox population and has traditionally been approached through the ideological lenses of locality, authenticity (or lack of thereof), isolation and demarcation from other groups in Bela Krajina. As a consequence, the dominant discourses (both academic and popular) about this community are those that highlight and try to reconstruct “pure” cultural and linguistic traits, or those that lament over their inevitable disappearance. Such a binary perspective precludes any possibility of recognizing the dynamics in both everyday cultural patterns and in heritage negotiation in and around this community. This article highlights heritage as an experience utilized by diverse actors in making sense of their present and future. As such it is necessarily dynamic, dialogical, multi-voiced, and contested.

KEYWORDS: heritage, Bela Krajina, Serbs, folklorization, nostalgia

## IZVLEČEK

**Večkulturna dinamika in polastitve dediščine v Beli krajini: Izpogajanje dediščine srbske pravoslavne skupnosti**

Srbska pravoslavna skupnost v Beli krajini, ki jo danes sestavljajo štiri vasi (Bojanci, Miliči, Marindol in Paunoviči), se pogosto opisuje kot najsevernejši “otok” srbskega pravoslavnega prebivalstva. Tradicionalno se obravnava skozi ideološko prizmo lokalnosti, avtentičnosti (ali njenega pomanjkanja), izolacije in razlikovanja od ostalega prebivalstva Bele krajine. Kot posledica tovrstne obravnave prevladujoči diskurzi (tako akademski kot popularni) o omenjeni skupnosti bodisi osvetljujejo in poskušajo rekonstruirati “čiste”, “izvirne” kulturne in jezikovne značilnosti bodisi tožijo nad neizogibnim izginotjem teh značilnosti. Tovrstna binarna perspektiva zapira možnosti za prepoznavanje dinamike tako v vsakdanjih kulturnih vzorcih kot tudi v izpogajanju dediščine v in okoli te skupnosti. Članek dediščino razume kot izkušnjo, ki jo različni akterji uporabljajo v osmišljanju svoje sedanjosti in prihodnosti. Kot taka je dediščina neizogibno dinamična, dialoška, večglasna in pogosto sporna.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: dediščina, Bela krajina, Srbi, folklorizacija, nostalgija

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## INTRODUCTION: HERITAGE BEYOND MATERIAL OBJECTS OF THE PAST

The Digital Encyclopaedia of Natural and Cultural Heritage in Slovenia (DEDI), includes an entry about the Orthodox church in the village of Miliči in the Bela Krajina region of southern Slovenia. Equipped with information about the church's location and formal status, the entry states that the church "bears witness to the rich Uskok heritage in the area (of Bela Krajina)". The longer description of this object of cultural heritage that follows this technical information gives a brief overview of the settlement of Bela Krajina by the Uskoks, as well as a description of the church building and its geographical location (Lukić n.d.). The village of Miliči, where the church is located, is one of four villages (Bojanci, Marindol, Miliči and Paunoviči) in Bela Krajina which are nowadays populated by people who are known as descendants of Uskoks. They practice Orthodox Christianity and speak a variety of Serbo-Croatian. After almost five centuries of language maintenance, this community is currently undergoing a process of language shift and related socio-cultural processes that condition heterogeneity and hybridity of cultural and linguistic patterns (see Petrović 2006). The Serbs of Bela Krajina, or Uskoks/Vlachs, as they are frequently referred to by the local population of Bela Krajina and also in academic literature and museum narratives,<sup>1</sup> are one of the groups that contribute to ethnic, cultural and religious diversity of Bela Krajina, where people of Catholic, Orthodox and Greek Catholic religions, Slovenes, Croats, Serbs, and Roma have lived together for centuries; the legacy of the Yugoslav state as well as its violent disintegration also brought recent, mostly economic migrants from other former Yugoslav republics to this mosaic of diversity.

The abovementioned entry in the digital Encyclopaedia of Heritage in Slovenia subscribes to the "traditional Western account of 'heritage'" that tends to "emphasize the material basis of heritage" (Smith 2006: 3), and is essentially oriented towards the past, concentrating on values "often directly linked to the age, monumentality and/or aesthetics of a place" (ibid.). Framing heritage in this way allows for its mapping, study, management, assessment, preservation, conservation, and protection. But what can this entry, which lists the Church of St. Peter and Paul in Miliči as a heritage site, tell us about how this site relates to the people living in Miliči and the wider area? It provides no hint of the meanings and uses of this heritage site for the people who live around it, visit it and use it to "negotiate a range of identities and social and cultural values and meanings in *the present*" (ibid., emphasis added).

The lack of consideration of the people most immediately connected to the heritage sites is a symptom of the wider problem of the lack of the communities' voices in heritage narratives that has already been noted by researchers of heritage who have paid particular attention to the relationship between museums and communities (see Karp, Mullen Kreamer, Lavine 1992; Karp et al. 2006; Crooke 2007; Watson 2007). Likewise, there is a lack of attention to the proactive ways in which community members make use of existing heritage narratives. By taking the active role of participants into consideration (see for example Nadel-Klein 2003), one can avoid the trap of seeing people as passive recipients of external influences. The ethnographic accounts suggest that people are not only aware of the external images based on themselves, but are also trying to cooperate actively with them, make them part of their daily activities and use them in building up a sense of belonging and presence (see e.g. Boissevain, Selwyn 2004).

The need for an understanding of heritage that goes beyond dominant Western views articulated in "authorized heritage discourse" (Smith 2006), has been emphasized by many researchers within the last two decades. They stress that heritage is "a process of engagement, an act of communication and an act of making meaning in and for the present" (ibid.: 1); consequently, heritage debate and practice needs to "recognize and critically engage with issues of dissonance and the use of memory in the for-

<sup>1</sup> Marko Zajc (2003) provides a historical overview of representations of Uskoks in Slovenia; Christian Promitzer (2003) analyzes in detail the ways Slovenian and Serbian ethnologists wrote about the Serbs in Bela Krajina.

mation of heritage and identity" (ibid.: 5).<sup>2</sup> Conceptualized in this way, the idea of heritage became open to individual and private initiatives, to marginalized, invisible and subaltern groups, and to the recognition of the internal dissonances and heteroglossia it both accommodates and produces. The political and moral consequences of presenting something as heritage (and, on the other hand, of excluding something/someone from heritage discourses) have also been acknowledged. In the reframed field of cultural heritage studies, important work has been done with regard to aboriginal communities in Australia and indigenous groups' heritage elsewhere,<sup>3</sup> in relation to working class heritage in the Western World,<sup>4</sup> to post-apartheid heritage politics in South Africa,<sup>5</sup> etc. And while the post-colonial context and the troubled legacies of colonialism seem to produce an impulse towards rethinking cultural heritage and its social, political and moral roles, most European societies, and particularly the post-socialist areas of Europe, remain uninterested in these new questions and conceptualizations, with ideas of heritage still mainly articulated by authoritative experts and closely bound to the ideology of the nation state. Slovenia is no exception to this paradigm, despite frequent challenges to dominant views on heritage and awareness among both scholars and practitioners that heritage is more than aesthetic evaluation of material objects and canonization of traditional practices.<sup>6</sup> Essentially uninterested in the ways individuals and groups make use of heritage, in other words in the *heritage experience*, heritage discourse in Slovenia remains seemingly homogeneous, unproblematic and consonant with other discourses of nation state ideology. In this article, I aim to examine the ambiguities such heritage discourse faces when it comes to geographic areas strongly characterized by ethnic and cultural diversity. I will pay particular attention to the Bela Krajina region and the ways heritage is attached to, but also used, appropriated and re-appropriated by, its Orthodox, Serbo-Croatian speaking inhabitants and others related to this heritage through processes of commemoration, performance, commodification, and memory. The basic assumption I start from is that heritage, to be understood as heritage, has to be *experienced* and, moreover, that it *is* the experience (Smith et al. 2003: 75).

The relationship between objects and traditions framed as "the Uskok heritage" and the actual people inhabiting the Orthodox villages of Bela Krajina, and particularly the possibilities for these people to make use of that heritage in order to create meaning in the present, are strongly shaped by both the ways this community is positioned within the framework of the Slovenian nation state as well as the way it is represented in academic and popular discourses. In the first part of the article, I outline the main characteristics of these discourses and highlight the ideological assumptions on which they are based. The second part of the article focuses on ethnographic details of the celebration of the Feast of St. Peter in Miliči. These details reveal the Miliči churchyard as a site of multiple, mutually related, heteroglossic and interest-laden experiences and performances of heritage. Simultaneously, they show that multiple solidarities and differentiations emerge from this process of heritage performance and experience in which members of various communities are engaged in the (re)appropriation of the heritage of the Serbian Orthodox community in Bela Krajina.

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2 See, for example, articles in the *International Journal of Heritage Studies* and *Museum Worlds: Advances in Research*.

3 See Smith (2006), Chapter 8; Smith, Wobst (2005).

4 See Smith (2006), Chapter 6; Smith, Shackel, Campbell (2011).

5 See Rassool (2000, 2006).

6 See Hudales, Visočnik (2005a, 2005b); Jezernik (2010a), 2010b. According to Rajko Muršič (2005: 8), in parallel with the recognition of the increasing importance of cultural heritage for modern society "and with the completion of the ideological formation of the notion of cultural heritage", emerges its critique which indicates the hegemonic effects of the ideology of cultural heritage.

## THE HERITAGE OF THE SERBS OF BELA KRAJINA IN POST-1991 SLOVENIA

During the process of the dissolution of the Yugoslav federation at the end of 1980s and beginning of the 1990s, the Serbs of Bela Krajina unwillingly played a role in the establishing the new nation states and national identities. The exposure of this small group to public attention, on the other hand, significantly influenced the identity strategies chosen by its members. Their attitudes towards practices and performances through which their distinctiveness as an ethnic community is construed had essentially to do with the tensions emerging from the relationship between citizenship and other modes of belonging. In October 1990, Slovenian President Milan Kučan visited the Orthodox villages, and told their inhabitants the following:

You are citizens of Yugoslavia and citizens of Slovenia. You are good citizens of the Republic of Slovenia and good Serbs. The viewpoint according to which one who lives here and is a good Serb cannot be a good citizen of Slovenia is not acceptable. Both are possible and necessary. To do otherwise would be a poor endorsement of the Republic of Slovenia (Krasko 1990: 9).<sup>7</sup>

This statement by Kučan, which sheds light on the issue of the relationship between ethnicity and citizenship, is a continuation of a discourse which followed the creation of nation states in Europe. In the process of the formation of nation states, small ethnic groups are usually seen by the majority as “a problematic element in their settings that resists the establishment of a homogeneous nation” (Promitzer 2004: 17).

The Serbs of Bela Krajina could not escape the perception that they are a problematic, unsuitable and potentially dangerous element for the independent nation state of Slovenia. This is clear from the notes of Pavle Čelik, a commander in the Slovenian police during the period of obtaining independence:

We immediately thought of Bela Krajina. There, in part of the Municipality of Črnomelj, live descendants of Uskoks, who ran there from the Balkans escaping from the Turks. They mainly inhabited villages Bojanci, Marindol, Miliči, Žuniči, Paunoviči etc. In the course of time they, naturally, almost totally assimilated into the majority population, but blood is thicker than water. How would developments in the neighbouring Croatia affect them? How would they react? They belong to the Orthodox religion (...) According to experts, the Serbian Orthodox Church is known for its conservativeness. It might lead to security issues. The Orthodox priest Peran Bošković in Ljubljana has proved himself a defender of Serbdom in the recent years. We have instructed police units in Bela Krajina to monitor developments on the ground (Čelik 1994: 21–22, in Knežević Hočevar 2004: 128).

The Serbs of Bela Krajina did not enjoy “special attention” only from the Slovenian state during the time of Yugoslavia’s dissolution. The nationalistic discourse generated by the regime in Serbia at the time demanded that the Serbs of Bela Krajina join Srpska Krajina, which was situated on Croatian territory. This discourse can be traced to some years before the breakdown of the state: in 1988, anonymous authors sent a letter to Belgrade, to the Parliament of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), on behalf of the “Committee of Serbs from Bojanci and Marindol” protesting the discrimination against the Serbs in this Slovenian region (Čontala 1989: 26). However, there was no such Committee in Bojanci or Marindol, nor was any kind of protest sent to Belgrade from these villages. In 1989, several articles appeared in *Politika* and other Serbian newspapers stating that the Serbs of Bela Krajina were threatened and were not allowed to use their native language (Ivačić 1989: 20–21). Attempts to prove historical

<sup>7</sup> Unless indicated differently, all translations of non-English quotations are mine.

rights to Bela Krajina using these four villages also came from Croatia. Marijan Majstorović, one of the authors of the volume *Croats in Slovenia* (1997), cites the four Orthodox villages as a key argument for the “Croatianess” of Bela Krajina. He writes that “even the Serbs, Croatia’s biggest enemies, could not hide the overall Croatian character of the Bela Krajina region” (Majstorović 1997: 100), and therefore Stanoje Stanojević (1925) wrote in the Encyclopaedia that Marindol is a hilly village in Croatia; this author, adds Majstorović “did not know that by that time this village *inhabited by Croats* was already under Slovenian rule” (ibid., emphasis added).

The Serbs of Bela Krajina, on the other hand, did their best to avoid public exposure in the late 1980s and early 1990s, in part by hiding everything that made them appear different from the majority population. In all interviews published in the beginning of the 1990s, they stated that they needed no protection and that they did not feel endangered in Slovenia. They also stressed solidarity among the inhabitants of Bela Krajina regardless of their ethnic or religious background (see e.g. newspaper articles by Ivačič 1989: 20–21; Dimitrič 1990: 2; Lesar 1991: 22).

The need to “hide” and not to be exposed in public spaces, which was a consequence of their not conforming to the national narrative espoused in Slovenia in the 1990s, made the Serbs of Bela Krajina withdraw from being actors of negotiation of their own cultural heritage: their folklore ensemble folded, which the Serbs of Bela Krajina attributed to a general lack of interest among the younger generations, but they also mentioned “a kind of fear”. They also declined a Slovenian government initiative to re-establish schooling in their mother tongue.

In the dominant, institutionalized heritage discourses, their heritage is reduced to a temporally distant “Uskok tradition” and the objects through which this distant tradition is materialized, and thus detached from this small community, their current needs and modes of identity negotiation. If the notion of heritage is more directly linked to the actual community of the Serbs of Bela Krajina, this community is, again, observed from two ideological positions which both link their heritage exclusively to the past. From the first, “folkloristic” position, the “pure” cultural and linguistic traits found in this community are highlighted and reconstructed. The second position produces discourses of nostalgia and lamenting over the inevitable disappearance of these traits. These two sets of discourses usually come hand in hand, supporting one another – the extensive focus on the “old customs” and traditions is justified by the fact that they are going to die out soon.

## FOLKLORIZATION AND NOSTALGIA

In the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, anthropologists and ethnographers wrote with romantic delight about small ethnic communities in the Balkans and stressed their exoticism and authenticity (cf. Promitzer 2004; Cvijić 1987 [1922]; Smiljanić 1905). Slovenian anthropologist Niko Županič, who was himself from Bela Krajina (he was born in the village of Griblje) dedicated a significant amount of attention to the inhabitants of the Orthodox villages in Bela Krajina. In his opinion, the Serbs of Bela Krajina were the last healthy Balkan nucleus in the region unspoiled by European influence. The traditional *kolo* folk dance and the white traditional costume typical of Bela Krajina were disappearing, together with the old patriarchal morals and values; the only ones who were preserving them were the Serbs of Bela Krajina. The increasing influence of “Bavarians and Slovenians from the North”, on the other hand, had brought higher material culture and widespread European individualism (Županič 1925: 148–149). “The people of Marindol and Bojanci (...) are the only Carniola Serbs who have preserved their nice old Jekavian language, costumes, customs, and Orthodox religion.” (Županič 1912: 9–10) In his report from a scientific trip to Bela Krajina, Županič wrote: “There I observed folk life in the villages near the Kolpa river, because folk traditions are best preserved there and the population is characterized by *the highest purity*” (Županič 1910, in Promitzer 2003, emphasis added).

In more recent ethnographies of Bela Krajina’s Orthodox villages, enthusiasm and delight has been

replaced by nostalgic laments about the loss of authenticity and the disappearance of old customs in this community. In the 1970s, the Bosnian ethnographer Milenko Filipović did research in the four Orthodox villages of Bela Krajina and wrote with nostalgia that “the customs die along with the old people” (Filipović 1970: 215). In the late 1980s, Slovenian researchers Marinka Dražumerič and Marko Terseglav researched the Serbs of Bela Krajina; Dražumerič came to the conclusion that:

The inhabitants of Marindol, Miliči, Paunoviči and Bojanci agree that there is no possibility to preserve themselves as a separate ethnic group. This is also the conviction of their [Slovene] neighbours in Bela Krajina. Both sides only see the possibility in recording and documenting the existing material, social and spiritual culture (Dražumerič 1988: 316; English translation cited in Promitzer 2007).

All these discourses are driven by an ideology of authenticity that has a substantial influence on nearly every aspect of anthropology, ethnology, linguistics (see Bucholtz 2003), and also heritage studies. It is “a quintessentially modern concept” based on the belief that “the scholarly gaze must be cast back from modernity to a prior time – or at least to a place out of modern Western time – in order to make sense of the modern present” (ibid.: 399). The commitment to documenting ways of life vanishing in the wake of modernity is thus heavily and inevitably nostalgic.

The documentation, recording and reconstruction of the traditional culture of the Serbs of Bela Krajina have indeed always been dominant practices in which both academics<sup>8</sup> and heritage workers<sup>9</sup> have engaged. The exclusive focus on the preservation of something old and pristine, something that is not a part of the present day and everyday life, in conjunction with nostalgic discourses of loss, shrinking and disappearance as definite, one-way and irreversible processes, has two important consequences. First, it contributes to the folklorization of the community, whereby its representations are limited to fixed images of traditional life and costumes, folklore performances and texts, fixing the community in the idealized, pristine, authentic past and ignoring hybrid and innovative ways in which it may use its tradition in the present.<sup>10</sup> This in turn has the consequence that the community sees own practices, values and own heritage as disconnected from the present and modernity. When it comes to their mother tongue, the Serbs of Bela Krajina could be compared to the members of an Indian community in South America, speakers of the Mexicano language, who

fail to recognize the most obvious function of Spanish loan words, which is to mark elevated Mexicano registers in which discourses of power in the communities are conducted. The result of this failure is a nostalgic purism that makes demands of Mexicano speech that cannot be satisfied (Hill 1998: 83).

Such an attitude towards the mother tongue can be related to what Eric Hamp (1978: 155–164) marks as *self-deprecation*: in case of the Arvanítika speakers in Greece, he notes that they “unflinchingly and happily accept the axioms that Greek is the oldest culture, Greek literature the first, and the Greek language the oldest, the richest (...) the only one with a true grammar.” The Arvanítika speakers stress that “the Arvanítika language was once pure and people [once] spoke [it] without mixing their language with Greek, whereas today Arvanítika has become a bastard language” (Tsitsipis 1998: 132). Similarly, the speakers of the Serbo-Croatian idiom in Bela Krajina describe their language as “not the real Serbian

8 See Dražumerič (1988); Dražumerič, Terseglav (1987); Terseglav (1989, 1996); Petrović (2002, 2004).

9 The permanent ethnographic exhibition at the Bela Krajina Regional Museum in Metlika displays several objects that characterized the traditional life of the Uskoks; in 2008 an exhibition titled “First came the Turks, then the Uskoks” was also centred upon objects of traditional life (see Misja Zgaga et al. 2008).

10 For different aspects and meanings of folklorization, see Habinc (2012); Kaneff (2004); Klekot (2010); Rogers (1999); Stanonik (2001).

language, it is rather a mixture of Serbian and a dialect spoken in Kordun (Croatia), in addition there are many Slovene words in our language.”<sup>11</sup>

Such an essentially past-oriented approach which greatly contributes to the imagining of the Serbs of Bela Krajina as a pre-modern, homogeneous and compact group, cause this community to remain trapped in representations such as those produced by Janez Vajkard Valvasor many centuries ago. Valvasor (1984 [1689]: 123) described the Uskoks as morally problematic persons, with strange and savage feeding habits and peculiar rituals. It adds to differentiation and ethnic distance and ignores similarities, mutuality and dialogue. As a consequence, “some understandings of heritage are legitimised, while other nuances are discredited” (Waterton, Smith 2010: 9).

Folklorization and nostalgia as dominant modes of approaching small ethnic communities such as the Serbs of Bela Krajina and the extensive focus on traits of their culture which presumably existed in the past in a pure, pristine form paradoxically contributes to the speed of the shift towards and assimilation into the majority culture. This was also noted by Milenko Filipović, who wrote that he “had the impression that they avoided speaking about traditional customs and opinions, as if they took the view that these are over and gone as well as a symbol for backwardness” (Filipović 1970: 215, English translation cited in Promitzer 2007). This remark by Filipović touches upon the important effect of discourses of folklorization and nostalgia: they imagine small ethnic groups as essentially pre-modern, and this is not the image with which members of such groups identify themselves. For the community of the Serbs of Bela Krajina, their mother tongue, traditions and customs are ideologically connected with backwardness and opposed to modernity. The opposition backwardness vs. modernity has a significant impact on internal relations in the four Orthodox villages of Bela Krajina, where the inhabitants of the village of Bojanci are seen by those in the other three villages as more progressive and open-minded. The inhabitants of the neighbouring Slovene villages also notice differences between the two groups of Orthodox villages. Marinka Dražumerič (1988: 307) writes that:

Slovenes consider the inhabitants of Bojanci to be more progressive and sophisticated because of their more intensive interactions with Slovenes. On the other hand, they see the inhabitants of Marindol, who stick to their tradition, as backward and stubborn. Because of these characteristics, they are not entirely accepted by the Slovenian majority.

Nostalgic discourse about disappearance of old cultural traits is not only a characteristic of scholarly discourses, but is also articulated within the community – as a rule, by elder male members of the community. For these community members, Lukas Tsitsipis (2004: 581) stresses that their “projected social self recapitulates and foregrounds the authoritative word of the community as its legitimate representative. This authority is not locally invested in just anybody, but crucially in those individuals whose age and social background make them good and reliable spokes-persons for the communities’ wisdom and collective ideology.” The following excerpt from an interview with an elderly man from Bojanci illustrates the articulation of discourses of nostalgia and male authority:

Most people here do not care about the restoration of the church, but I tell them that it is easy for them not to care about that, because nobody comes to them. Everybody comes to me. Yesterday two scouts from Maribor came and wanted to see the church.

The elder male inhabitants of the Orthodox villages in Bela Krajina contrast the value systems that existed in the past with those existing today. The two periods, *then* and *now*, are characterized by oppos-

<sup>11</sup> Unless indicated differently, all quotes of inhabitants of Orthodox villages in Bela Krajina are excerpts from the interviews which I recorded during my fieldwork.

ing value systems; according to older interviewees, there used to be more respect in the past; they also regret the gradual abandoning of the old customs and traditions:

My older son still speaks in our way, but the younger one speaks Slovene. I wanted to say something to him many times, but I remained silent, because everyone should do what one considers the best for him... Our language and customs, all that will disappear one day, but there is nothing we can do about that.

Jane H. Hill, who explored nostalgia among the Nahuatl Indians in Central Mexico, finds a similar ideological patterning of discourse of nostalgia: "The successful men who produce the discourse of nostalgia clearly benefit from social relations of the type invoked in the discourse of nostalgia, whether their success is manifested by high position within the community hierarchy or based on resources accumulated through wage labour" (Hill 1998: 79).

The second consequence of folklorization and nostalgia as two dominant approaches to small ethnic groups such as the Serbs of Bela Krajina is that it forecloses possibilities for recognizing dynamics in both everyday cultural patterns and in heritage negotiation in and around this community. The meanings community members attach to values, cultural patterns, heritage objects and performances thus remain outside interest and recognition, as do the multivocality, heterogeneity and tensions that are result of these attachments. The linear view of the Serbs of Bela Krajina as a community going through the irreversible loss of their cultural traits which will end in total assimilation into the dominant Slovene population (and for this reason these traits must be collected, documented, reconstructed, and displayed in museums) is deeply informed by the nation state ideology, since it also presupposes that the only way for the Serbs of Bela Krajina to become *modern* is to assimilate into the majority. Such a view ignores the complexity of the patterns that are employed in present-day identity negotiations (and that were also employed at any given moment in the past as well).<sup>12</sup> It also overlooks the modernity which is the consequence of this complexity. These patterns are contested and heterogeneous, characterized by mixing, mutuality and dialogicity. Moreover, they enable multiple identifications and detachments, and produce simultaneous similarities and social distances. To provide an illustration of this complexity, simultaneity and multiplicity, below I will focus on heritage as performance and as experience, shaped on the site of and essentially related to the building described as part of the "rich Uskok heritage" in the digital encyclopaedia entry which I referred to at the beginning of this article – the Church of St. Peter and Paul in Miliči.

## THE FEAST OF ST. PETER IN MILIČI<sup>13</sup>

Every year on 12 July, the Church of St. Peter and Paul in Miliči becomes a site of the celebration of the Orthodox religious Feast of St. Peter (*Petrovdan*). The religious life in Miliči, as well as in the other three Orthodox villages of Bela Krajina, has declined in the last several decades, so two of the Orthodox churches (in Miliči and Bojanci) are not heavily visited by the local inhabitants. It is only the oldest generation which attends the infrequent church services during the year (priests come occasionally from Croatia – from Srpske Moravice to Miliči and from the Gomirje monastery to Bojanci) and nostalgically recalls times when everyone was going to church. Nevertheless, once every year, on July 12, the church-

12 In the collective memory of the Serbs of Bela Krajina, traditional life and celebrations were always characterized by mutuality and presence of members of other ethnic groups.

13 I attended the celebration of the Feast of St. Peter in Miliči several times during my fieldwork in Bela Krajina between 2001 and 2005, as well as in 2010 and 2013. The points I want to make about heritage negotiation through performances and narratives related to this event are based on my own observations as well as Promitzer's description of the celebration of the Feast of St. Peter in 1998 (see Promitzer 2007).





Figure 1: Celebration of the Feast of St. Peter, Miliči (12 July 2005). Photo Tanja Petrović.

yard in Miliči is full of people attending church services. They gather to celebrate the Feast of St. Peter, which is Miliči's village *slava*, or feast day.

What becomes immediately clear to an observer of this event is that it is by no means restricted to the local community of the four Orthodox villages. Not only do Slovenes also attend the celebration of Petrovdan due to friendship and matrimonial ties with inhabitants of the Orthodox villages, but the event has in a sense a transnational character: the priest that serves in Miliči comes from the village of Srpske Moravice in Croatia, some thirty kilometres from Miliči. Many Croatian Serbs from Lika, Kordun and Karlovac also come to Miliči on St. Peter's day. While the common ethnic origin and family connections provide a basis for solidarity between the Serbs in Bela Krajina and those in neighbouring areas in Croatia, the common celebration of Petrovdan simultaneously produces tensions between the two groups and different, often conflicting claims, appropriations of tradition and negotiations of identity. Promitzer (2007) noted the dialectical relationship between the Serbs of Bela Krajina and the Serbs from Karlovac upon their encounter in Miliči on 12 July 1998; this dynamics has a lot to do with the inclusion of the two groups into respective national frameworks (Slovenian and Croatian), which was intensified after the border between two independent states was erected in 1991. But, as Promitzer warns,

we should not be so naive as to believe that there had not been any differences between these two groups of Serbs previously. The local population was of rural origin, at least they were part-time farmers and were still living in a rural surrounding, even if they commuted to neighbouring Slovene towns like Črnomelj, Metlika and Novo Mesto. The people from Karlovac, however, already had the style of cultivated city dwellers (Promitzer 2007: 93).

The opposition urbanity vs. rurality is not the only one that produces tensions between the two groups of Serbs; they can also occur as a result of questioning each other's competence with regard to Serbian tradition, expressed in the question "Da li to umijete?" (Do you know this one?) with which musicians who came from Karlovac addressed the local Serbs while playing Serbian tunes during the meal after the

church service, in order “to check whether the listeners knew the lyrics and could accompany the tunes with their voices” (ibid.: 95). This challenge by the Serbs from Karlovac, however, does not support the correspondence between loss of competence in local tradition and modernization as it is usually seen by the Serbs of Bela Krajina. In this particular context, and also due to different demographic characteristics of Serbs in Croatia, sticking to the local tradition is not seen as backwardness and conservatism.

In addition to Slovenes and Serbs from Croatia, other “outsiders” in the St. Peter and Paul churchyard on 12 July include more recent migrants of Orthodox background who came to Bela Krajina and Dolenjska during the Yugoslav period and after the dissolution of Yugoslavia. These predominantly economic migrants have appropriated the “Uskok heritage” of Bela Krajina in order to satisfy their own needs for practicing religion and negotiating heritage in the new setting.<sup>14</sup> The attitude of the local Serbs from the four Orthodox Bela Krajina villages to these participants in the St. Peter’s Day celebration is just as ambiguous and characterized by solidarity and distancing as in the case of the Croatian Serbs; these migrants have nevertheless become important actors in performances and practices which constitute the heritage at the local level, and have also contributed to its vitality. The interactions between recent migrants and the Serbs of Bela Krajina indicate the complex ways in which locality and migration as transnational experience inform each other (see Whitehead 2013: 181).

And finally, the event which takes place in the Miliči churchyard on 12 July also attracts those whose main motive is economic, although other impulses behind their presence should not be underestimated. Promitzer mentions that in 1998, when he attended the St. Peter’s Day celebration, “a booth was erected with haberdashery put up for sale. The marketer and his wife were from a small place close to the city of Novo Mesto, they were of Serbian descent and came originally from Dalmatia. They had heard of the meeting in Miliči, but apparently had no contact with the local population. The latter scarcely took notice of the booth and its articles, and the marketer did not make any profit” (ibid.: 92). In 2010, when I was attending the celebration, a Serbian restaurant owner from Novo Mesto set up a barbeque stand and was selling *čevapčići* and *pljeskavice*. The owner and his crew were dressed in T-shirts with the restaurant logo on the back and Tito’s portrait and signature printed on the front. They were also distributing these T-shirts free of charge to their customers. From the conversation with the restaurant owner, a Serb who originally came from Leskovac in Serbia, it became clear that his impulse to come to Miliči on that day was economic, but no less an emotional one. He was happy to attend the Orthodox service in the local church and to be among his co-ethnics in a small Slovenian village. For him, this was an important act of negotiating heritage which he claimed he shared with the Serbs of Bela Krajina. And his presence and the smell of the *roštilj* he barbequed shaped the event of the St. Peter’s Day celebration, despite the fact several local Serbs might have not been happy with it. The “presence” of Tito at the village *slava* in Miliči, although in a way paradoxical, confirms the important role that cultural memory plays in establishing solidarities and heritage experience in a shared space.

## CONCLUSION

The local population of the four Orthodox villages of Bela Krajina is inevitably and constantly engaged in positioning and repositioning vis-à-vis the different gazes of all the subjects involved in events such as the Feast of St. Peter in Miliči. Such events make what is usually designated as “old Uskok heritage” open to different interpretations and appropriations, and in this process the Serbs of Bela Krajina negotiate their own position as fluid, changing, and internally contested. This position is decisively marked by in-betweenness, mixing, polyglossia and fluctuation. Their in-betweenness (being neither “real” Serbs nor

<sup>14</sup> The heritage of migrants in Slovenia has not yet been thematized nor is it a topic within mainstream heritage discourses. Like several other European nation states, in the area of heritage among others, Slovenia maintains a self-image of being a homogeneous society (for Denmark, see Parby 2013: 183).

“real” Slovenes), described by one of my interviewees with the phrase *ni tamo, ni vamo* (“neither here nor there”) is often a reason for (self-)deprecation, frustration and intra-community struggles. Such position, however, simultaneously equips community members with skills to manage diversity and mutuality on several levels and to dwell in multiple culturally and linguistically distinct spaces – encompassing the local setting of their villages, the broader region of Bela Krajina, the national framework of Slovenia, the transnational space of cross-border connections with the Serbs in Croatia, as well as imagined spaces of Serbdom in general that reaches to Serbia as a “motherland.” They, moreover, navigate through different layers of cultural memory, from the canonized narratives about Uskoks provided by Valvasor and later writers and ethnographers, to the more recent past of the common Yugoslav state and the legacy they as Serbs share with other non-Slovenes now living in the Republic of Slovenia. And finally, they utilize multiple communication codes and are capable of adapting to very different interlocutors. Communicative adaptability is a characteristic of the Serbs of Bela Krajina, which was also frequently noted by ethnographers. Dražumerič, Terseglav (1987: 211) state that:

the fieldwork has shown extraordinary linguistic adaptability of the Serbs presently living in Bela Krajina: with another inhabitant of Bela Krajina they would speak in his dialect, with a “Carniolan” they would speak Slovenian (the vernacular with dialectal and Serbo-Croatian elements), with Croats they would speak Croatian with slight deviations.

All these different spaces, layers, cultural and linguistic codes play a prominent role in the ways heritage is experienced and performed in village feasts, *slavas* and religious holidays, in the way the Serbs of Bela Krajina see and talk about their customs, traditions and materiality of their local world. This diversity, polyglossia, simultaneity and undulating between spaces, codes and belongings – in opposition to the rather pre-modern image that traditional ethnographic, folkloristic and heritage narratives impose on them – make the Serbs of Bela Krajina quite modern, or even postmodern. And their post-modern character should not be ignored in the institutionalized representations of their heritage. True, it makes it very difficult to provide a homogeneous, coherent, univocal unproblematic narrative, but no engagement with and negotiation of cultural heritage appears as homogeneous, coherent, univocal and unproblematic if one looks at the ways real people grasp it in making the sense of their present and future. This is even less so in the case of small ethnic communities such as the Serbs of Bela Krajina, who are torn between and simultaneously involved in so many different spaces, codes, memory layers and modes of belonging.

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