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THE KOSOVO EPIC  
RELIGION AND NATIONALISM  
AMONG THE SERBS

The previous chapter highlighted Naim Frasheri's fruitless attempts to inject a religious element into Albanian nationalism. Through the use of the (Shi'ite) Kurbela myth, Frasheri attempted to give a religious underpinning to the liberation struggle from Ottoman (Sunnite) domination. However, his endeavours had no lasting influence on mainstream nationalist thinking. Most intellectuals active in the Albanian national movement were determined to eliminate religion as a factor in the politics of national identity because it divided instead of united the Albanians. Since then, Albanian nationalism has evolved into one of the most secular nationalisms of south-eastern Europe.

Serbian nationalism has followed a different path: since the early nineteenth century, (Orthodox) religion and (Serb) national identity have fused, moving the Kosovo myth - a profoundly religious one - to the centre of Serbian nationalist discourse. During the nineteenth century, when Serbian identity was formulated, Orthodoxy became central to Serbianness, even though previously the religious allegiances of the Serbs had occasionally shifted, some Serbs adopting Catholicism (for instance in Dalmatia), others Islam (Bosnia). The central importance of Orthodoxy was the outcome of the Orthodox church's crucial role in preserving a kind of rudimentary Serbian identity during Ottoman times (Petrovich 1980:386-91).<sup>1</sup> When, therefore, in the nineteenth century modern concepts of nationhood developed, religion (or rather the religious imagery of Serbian Orthodoxy) became crucial in defining Serbian

national identity instead of language, a trait Serbs shared with other South-Slavs (Croats and Muslims).<sup>2</sup> This merger between national and religious identity was reinforced by the creation of several autonomous and autocephalous ('national') Orthodox churches in the newly established Balkan states.<sup>3</sup>

Since the first Serbian uprising against Ottoman rule (1804-13), the infant Serbian state and the Serbian church developed a relation of close co-operation and symbiosis. In the first decades of the nineteenth century many Serb Orthodox priests were actively and militantly involved in the Serbian insurrections against the Turks (Petrovich 1980:399). A rump Serbia acquired autonomy within the Ottoman empire in 1830, and in 1831 the Serbs acquired the right to choose their bishops. The now autonomous Serbian Orthodox church became autocephalous in 1879, one year after Serbia's independence (Arnakis 1963:135-6). Then, under the Serbian constitution of 1903, Orthodoxy was proclaimed the official state religion and all state and national holidays were celebrated with church ritual (Ranet 1988:233). This intimate link between state and church has induced the Serbian Orthodox church to adopt a direct political role, especially in times of crisis, ever since.

The fact that Serbian nationalism is grounded in religious mythology and symbolism has led some observers to explain the recent Serbian assault on the Bosnian Muslims and other non-Orthodox populations in the former Yugoslavia in religious terms. As Michael Sells states in his book on religion and genocide in Bosnia (1996), religion has been used as a justification for genocide and ethnic cleansing:

<sup>2</sup> Although throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century it was possible to be a Serb without being Orthodox (but for instance Catholic, Muslim, or Jew), there were always strong social, political, and church pressures to closely identify the two, rendering these groups or categories of non-Orthodox Serbs 'anomalous' or 'ambiguous'. Yet many nineteenth-century Serbian intellectuals (Vuk Karadžić and others) were initially hostile to the church and argued for a language-based definition of Serbian national identity, as in most other countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

<sup>3</sup> This process of compartmentalisation along ethnic lines met strong opposition from the Ecumenical Patriarch in Constantinople, who was the head of the Orthodox millet. The creation of autocephalous churches among the Orthodox nations of the Balkans was labelled 'filetism' or 'ethno-filetism' (a term derived from the Greek *file* or *tribe*) (Radčić 1996:269).

<sup>1</sup> The reinstatement of the Serbian Orthodox patriarchate of Peć (1557-1766) was particularly important for the preservation of Serbian or Slav identity within an Orthodox millet increasingly dominated by Greeks.

Those organising the persecutions [...] identified themselves and their cause through explicit religious symbols. The symbols appeared in the three-fingered hand gestures representing the Christian Trinity, in the images of sacred figures of Serbian religious mythology, on their uniform insignia, in the songs they memorised and forced their victims to sing, on the priest's ring they kissed before and after their acts of persecution, and in the formal religious ceremonies that marked the purification of a town of its Muslim population (Sells 1996:15).

The thrust of his argument is that Bosnian Muslims, or 'Turks', as they are called by Bosnian Serbs, have been singled out for genocide by Serbian nationalists because of their role as 'Christ killers', i.e. killers of the Serbian prince and martyr Lazar during the Kosovo battle. Although in my view this analysis is flawed because Sells explains historical events exclusively in culturalist terms, I think it is important to look at this level of religious and nationalist discourse. I want to repeat here that the 'cultural stuff' with which nations mark themselves off and define their identities is not irrelevant to an understanding of ethnic processes (Jenkins 1997:107). We should be prepared to acknowledge that ideologies, religious doctrines and myths indeed shape people's cognition and perception and that they to some extent motivate or mould action, though any analysis of specific events always needs to take the economic, political and historical dimensions into account as well. Through the manipulation of myths and symbols, political programmes may be transmitted from the intellectual sphere to that of mass politics, inducing people to think, feel, and act collectively according to the political premises (Denich 1994:369). Myths and symbols can even help in breeding collective violence, through the creation of an ideological context in which violent acts are made thinkable.<sup>4</sup>

### *The theme of suffering*

Not unlike Shi'ism, Serbian Orthodoxy is imbued with a strong sense of victimisation and suffering, which is traced back to the

<sup>4</sup> I am particularly inspired by the work of Stanley Tambiah (1986), who provides a combination of social, economic, political and cultural explanations for the violence in Sri Lanka, and the work of Bruce Kapferer (1988), who demonstrates how myths are invoked to create environments in which ethnic violence, including murder, becomes acceptable.

Kosovo battle when the Serbs were defeated by the Ottoman Turks (1389). The Serbian Orthodox church sees itself as a *suffering* church (Ramet 1988:232), an idea which was brought to its apogee in the first half of the twentieth century by the Serbian bishop and theologian Nikolaj Velimirović (Bremer 1992:112-60). Velimirović (together with the other major Serbian theologian of this century, Justin Popović) adapted this mindset of Serbian suffering to the modern conditions of the nation-state, transforming the suffering of the church into the suffering of the Serbs as a *nation*. World War II reinforced the notion of Serb suffering, with the destruction of hundreds of monasteries and churches, the liquidation of hundreds of Serbian Orthodox priests (including six of the church's top hierarchs), and an enormous number of civilian casualties. As the losses were huge both in human, material and psychological terms, the war had an equally traumatic effect on the Serbian Orthodox church (Ramet 1988:236-8). After the war, the church's suffering did not stop: under communism it was severely punished by the communists for its nationalist and reactionary stands in the pre-war period. It was marginalised in social and political life, its possessions were confiscated and Serbian Orthodox clerics were severely harassed (Ramet 1988:238-41).

In the early 1980s, in the wake of growing ethnic unrest and nationalism in the former Yugoslavia, the Serbian Orthodox Church made a come-back on the political scene. It started to revive the notion of a suffering Serbian nation by focusing on the problem of Kosovo. The growing conflict between Serbs and Albanians was presented as a clash between two opposing civilisations, a renewed battle between Christianity and Islam, in which Serbs were being threatened with extinction and 'genocide'. It was alleged that Albanian 'fundamentalists' were embarking upon a *jihad* attempting to ethnically cleanse Kosovo of its Serbian inhabitants.<sup>5</sup> By exploiting the Kosovo issue, the Serbian Orthodox church saw a chance to regain much of its political influence after forty years of forced submission to communist rule. It reclaimed

<sup>5</sup> In 1985 the Kosovo mindset was epitomised by the case of Djordje Martinović, a Serb peasant from Kosovo who claimed to have been raped and abused by two Albanians with a broken beer bottle. He immediately acquired the status of a martyr, an 'archetype of Serb suffering and Albanian (Muslim, Ottoman...) evil' (Thompson 1992:129).

its national role by using its pan-Serb church structure to strengthen Serbian unity in a federalised Yugoslav state, where the Serbian nation had been divided among several republics and autonomous provinces. It claimed that under communism it had been the only institution that had not betrayed the Serbian nation, unlike most Serbian communists who had 'sold out' Kosovo to the Albanians.<sup>6</sup> It was particularly the theologian (and later bishop) Atanasije Jevtić, a tough nationalist and prolific writer, who contributed most to the reactivation of the discourse of the 'suffering Serbian nation' (Jevtić 1987, 1990). He developed an entire Serbian theology out of Serb suffering in the centuries-old struggle for Kosovo (van Dartel 1997:145). Another major advocate of this idea was the controversial Montenegrin bishop Amfilohije Radović.

However, the cultivation of the theme of Serbian suffering did not remain confined to the church. In the second half of the 1980s, it became a leitmotif in politics and academia as well as in the mass media. The Kosovo problem, which had initially been presented as a human rights issue, was now being redefined as a Serbian national issue, a new Kosovo battle fought between the old enemies, the Orthodox Serbs and the 'Turks', i.e. Muslim Albanians. Eventually, this discourse was adopted by leading communist politicians. Slobodan Milošević sky-rocketed to power when he stood up to protect the Kosovo Serbs against further suffering, making his famous declaration, 'nobody should dare to beat you ...' during a visit to Kosovo in April 1987 (Magaš 1993).

The notion of Serb suffering (in a more secular version) was for the first time expressed in the Memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (1986), which presented the predicament of the Serbs in Kosovo in almost apocalyptic terms: 'The physical, political, legal and cultural genocide of the Serbian population in Kosovo and Metohija is a worse defeat than any experienced in the liberation wars waged by Serbia from the first Serbian uprising in 1804 to the uprising in 1941' (Mihalović and Krestić 1995:128). The document compares the 'genocide' in Kosovo to

<sup>6</sup> Church dissent with communist policy in Kosovo was for instance openly expressed in April 1982, when twenty-one priests signed an appeal to the authorities 'for the protection of the spiritual and biological existence of the Serbian nation in Kosovo and Metohija'. An English translation of this petition can be found in *South Slav Journal*, 5(3), 1982, pp.49-54.

the extermination of Serbs during World War II. It also claims that the Serbs were discriminated against and under threat of annihilation in other parts of Yugoslavia, particularly in Croatia and Bosnia, hence painting a picture of a humiliated nation whose cultural and spiritual integrity was trampled upon (Mihalović and Krestić 1995:134). The document further claims that the Serbs are subjected to 'physical annihilation, forced assimilation, conversion to a different religion, cultural genocide, ideological indoctrination, demigration and compulsion to renounce their own traditions because of an imposed guilt complex. Intellectually and political unmanned, the Serbian nation has had to bear trials and tribulations that are too severe not to leave deep scars in their psyche...' (Mihalović and Krestić 1995:138).

In 1989, on the eve of the 600th anniversary of the Kosovo Battle, there was a further outburst of publications in which Serbian history was portrayed as a succession of defeats and losses.<sup>7</sup> Even in the mass media Serb suffering – particularly under the Ottoman Turks and in World War II – became the focus of attention (Marković 1996). In the next two years, before the outbreak of the war, counting the dead became a kind of 'national hobby' (Marković 1996:647), while nationalist politicians (for instance, the leader of the Krajina Serbs, Jovan Rašković) started to refer to their nation as 'the slaughtered people', giving more sinister meaning to the notion of 'heavenly Serbia'. The dead bodies of Serbian victims of World War II were exhumed and reburied in church ceremonies which were frequented by nationalist politicians (Denich 1994; Hayden 1994; Bax 1997). Yet some nationalists underlined the fact that suffering made the Serbs what they are and that they should somehow be grateful for that: 'We are a lucky people ... yes, we really are in a special way. The Turks hate us. Thank God. [...] Everything of us that has any value came into being when they oppressed and hated us most. Thanks to them we exist and

<sup>7</sup> The obsession with suffering and death is present in many literary works, for instance in the works of writer-politicians like Vuk Drašković (*Nač, Kratič, 1983*), Dobrica Čosić (*Vreme smrti*, 'Time of Death' 1977-8), but also in the poetry of Radovan Karadžić. For similar tendencies in academic historiography see for instance Dimnić Bogdanović's *Krajica o Kosovu* (1986), *Le Kosovo-Metohija dans l'histoire serbe* (Samardžić et al. 1990), and Bataković's *The Kosovo Chronicles* (1992) which can all be read as chronicles of Serb suffering in Kosovo since the Middle Ages, under Ottoman, Albanian and communist rule.

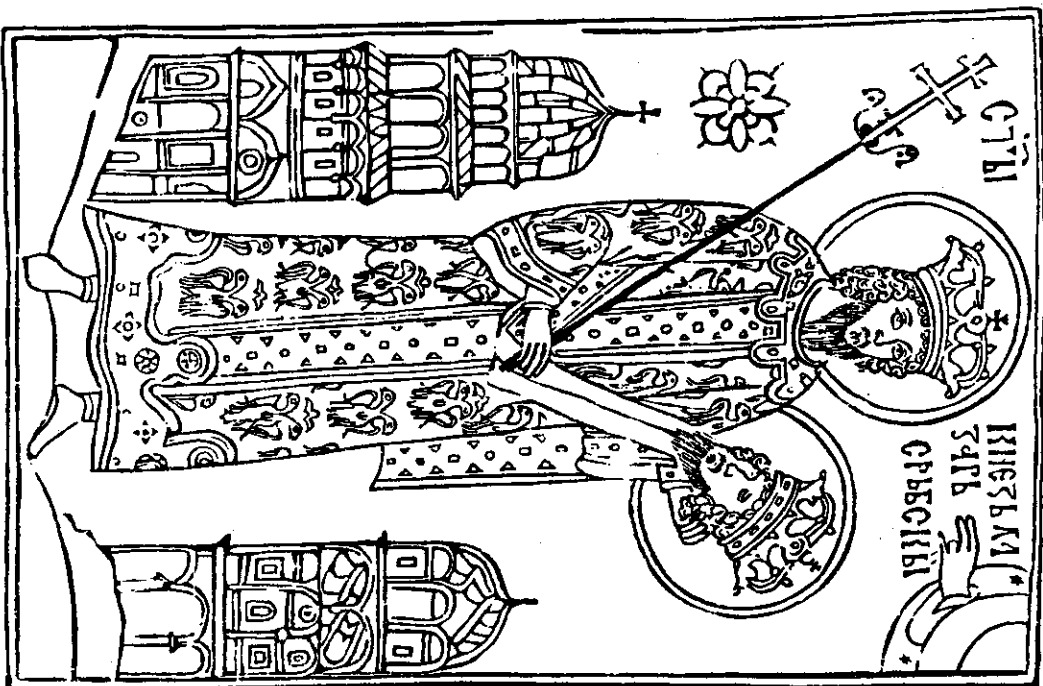
we know who we are. [...] Had they not existed, we would not have had our Kosovo....' (Danilo Radomirov, member of the nationalist party *Srpska Narodna Obnova*, 'Serbian National Renewal', quoted in *Vreme*, 8 May 1995, p.39).

### The Kosovo myth

Central to this obsession with suffering is Kosovo, where a defeat by the Turks in 1389 led to the downfall of the Serbian medieval empire and the 'enslavement' of the Serbs for the next 500 years. It is this lost battle between the Christian (mainly Serbian) and Ottoman forces which has gained mythical proportions in Serbian history. Although the first reports of the battle proclaimed a Christian victory, in the next few decades the Christian armies failed to halt the Ottoman advance and almost all of the Balkans fell under Turkish rule. During the battle both army leaders died: Sultan Murad was killed by Miloš Obilić (so the legend goes), while the leader of the Christian forces, Lazar, was captured by the Turks and beheaded.

Almost immediately after the Kosovo battle, the writing of ecclesiastical sermons and hagiographies began, commemorating the battle and Prince Lazar's death (Zirojević 1995:9). Lazar was proclaimed a martyr who sacrificed himself for the Christian faith; his military defeat was seen as a consequence of his choice for a heavenly kingdom over an earthly one. Thus his downfall was turned into a moral and spiritual victory.<sup>8</sup> Later, these monastic texts about Kosovo became the substance of songs, which were composed and sung in the courts of the Serbian aristocracy (Koljević 1980). However, with the advance of the Ottoman Turks and the destruction of Serbian feudal society, this oral poetry mainly became the property of peasants. Since the (Serbian) Orthodox church enjoyed a privileged position within the Ottoman  *millet* system, it was compelled (at least officially) to suppress the memory

<sup>8</sup> For early samples of hagiographic work on Prince ('Tsar') Lazar, see: Holton and Mihalovich 1988:22-8. The central theme of the Kosovo myth, Lazar's choice of the heavenly kingdom ('Better a praiseworthy death than a life in scorn') was formulated soon after the battle in the poem 'Narration about Prince Lazar' (1392) (Holton and Mihalovich 1988:25).



Prince ('Tsar') Lazar.

of Kosovo (Skendi 1954:76).<sup>9</sup> But it was kept alive in epic songs performed by *guslars* (singers of folk epics) to the accompaniment of their *gusle* (one-stringed instruments played with a bow), who retold the tragic events of Kosovo and also sung about their own heroes and fights with the Turks.<sup>10</sup>

There is clear evidence of continuous transmission and development of Kosovo songs from the earliest years after the battle (Malcolm 1998:78). However, these songs focus on the principle characters of the Kosovo legend (such as Prince Lazar and Miloš Obilić), their martyrdom and the downfall of the Serbian kingdom and feudal society rather than the destiny of the Serbs as a nation. This shift in meaning occurred only in the nineteenth century, when the Kosovo theme evolved into a national myth, providing a source of inspiration to avenge its loss, to resurrect the nation and to recover the national homeland. Prince Lazar became a national saint and martyr whose *živo telo* (living body) became the most important Serbian national relic.

Vuk Stefanović Karadžić was instrumental in retrieving the Kosovo songs from Serbian popular tradition and standardising them into a coherent story.<sup>11</sup> Between 1814 and his death in 1864, he collected numerous epic songs, of which the songs about the Kosovo battle formed a major part. By collecting and compiling them into a whole he 'canonised' the Kosovo myth and thus provided Serbian national ideology with its mythical cornerstone.

<sup>9</sup> By the seventeenth century the monastery of Ravanica (Lazar's burial place) was the only location where the cult of St Lazar was celebrated (Malcolm 1998:78).

<sup>10</sup> The heartland of epic songs seems to be the mountainous terrain of Bosnia, the Sandžak, Montenegro and northern Albania. One of the major functions of these songs has been to make important historical events known, or to spread the news about recent events among an illiterate population. Ugrešić has aptly called it 'gusle journalism' (Ugrešić 1994).

<sup>11</sup> Vuk Karadžić was a pivotal figure in this formative period of the Serbian national idea: among other things he was responsible for the standardisation of the Serbian vernacular language and the development of the Serbian Cyrillic script, both key steps in the process of Serbian nation-building. In 1815 he produced a Serbian grammar, and three years later a Serbian dictionary. He published his first collection of Serbian poetry in 1814. His famous six-volume *Srpske narodne pjesme*, published between 1844 and 1866, became the classic anthology of traditional Serbian oral poetry.

In taking the popular Kosovo songs as his source, he also made a great step forward in bridging the gap between the nationalist intelligentsia and popular culture (Ekmečić 1991:335). Perhaps the most important episode of the Kosovo cycle (which consists of a number of songs describing the events before, during and after the battle<sup>12</sup>) is Prince Lazar's choice of a heavenly kingdom, as a result of which the Serbian army lose the battle against the Turks. It is described in the poem below, *The Fall of the Serbian Empire*, which is central to Serbian national ideology.

*Poletio soko tica siva*  
*od svetinje od Jerusalima,*  
*i on nosi tica lastavica.*  
*To ne bio soko tica siva,*  
*veće bio svetitelj Ilija;*  
*on ne nosi tice lastavice,*  
*veće knjigu od Bogorodice;*  
*odnese je caru na Kosovu,*  
*spušta knjigu caru na koleno,*  
*sama knjiga caru besedila:*

From that high town, holy Jerusalem,  
 There comes flying a grey bird, a falcon,  
 And in his beak a small bird, a swallow.  
 Yet this grey bird is not just a falcon;  
 It is our saint, the holy Saint Elijah.  
 And the swallow is not just a swallow,  
 But a message from the Holy Virgin.  
 The falcon flies to Kosovo's flat field.  
 The message falls in the lap of the Tsar.  
 For Tsar Lazar is the message destined:

'O Tsar Lazar, Prince of righteous lineage,  
 which of the two kingdoms will you embrace?  
 Would you rather choose a heavenly kingdom,  
 Or have instead an earthly kingdom here?  
 Ako voliš carstvu zemaljskome,  
 If, here and now, you choose the earthly  
 kingdom,

<sup>12</sup> Of special importance are the episodes that predict or announce the coming battle and its tragic outcome (such as dreams or quarrels between Serbian knights), the events at the eve of the battle -- especially Prince Lazar's supper which is modelled on Christ's Last Supper (Zirojević 1995:10) -- as well as the aftermath of the battle seen through the eyes of the women that remain behind. The main characters are Prince Lazar Hrebeljanović, Miloš Obilić and Vuk Branković. While Lazar embodies devotion to the Christian faith (figuring even as a kind of Christ reincarnated), Miloš Obilić primarily represents the virtues of loyalty and bravery: according to the Kosovo legend he infiltrates the Ottoman camp and kills Sultan Murad. Vuk Branković is the third main figure, the traitor or Judas figure. He enters into an agreement with the Sultan in return for the preservation of his position. He is basically blamed for the loss of Kosovo. The most important women are the Kosovo girl who tends the dying warriors with wine and water and the mother of the Jugovići who loses all her nine sons in the battle. All these figures have become 'the archetypes of Serbian virtue and villainy' (Thompson 1992:144).

sedlaj konje, pričeži kolanel!  
 Vitezovi sadlje pripasujie,  
 pa u Turke jurš ušimite:  
 sva će hurska izginiti vojskal!  
 Ako l' voliš carstvu nebeskome,

saddle horses, tighten the saddles' girths,  
 let all the knights put on their mighty swords,  
 and launch you then assault against the Turks.  
 Then their army, all the Turks, shall perish.  
 But if, instead, you choose the heavenly  
 kingdom,

a ti sakroji na Kosovu crkvu,  
 ne vodi joj temelj od mramera,  
 već od čiste svile i skreteta,  
 pa pričesti i naredi vojsku;  
 sva će tvoja izginiti vojska,  
 ti ćeš, kneže, s njome poginuti.  
 host'.

Then you must build a church at Kosovo.  
 Do not build it upon a marble base.  
 But on pure silk and costly scarlet cloth,  
 And give your host orders to Holy Mass.  
 For every man, all soldiers, will perish,  
 And you, their prince, will perish with your  
 host.'

A kad care saslusio reši,  
 mišli care, mišli svakojde:  
 'Mili Bože, što ću i kako ću?  
 Kome ću se privoleti carstvu:

When Tsar Lazar has heard the whole message,  
 Lazar is vexed; he ponders, he thinks much:  
 'O my dear Lord, what shall I ever do?  
 And of the two, which kingdom should I  
 choose?

da ili ću carstvu nebeskome,

Shall I now choose the promised heavenly  
 kingdom,

da ili ću carstvu zemaljskome?  
 Ako ću se privoleti carstvu,  
 privoleti carstvu zemaljskome,  
 zemaljsko je za malena carstvo,  
 a nebesko uvek i daveka.'

Or shall I choose an earthly kingdom here?  
 If I do choose, I embrace the latter,  
 If I do choose the earthly kingdom here,  
 Then what I choose is but a transient kingdom;  
 The eternal one is that promised in heaven.'

Car volede carstvu nebeskome,

Lazar chooses the promised heavenly  
 kingdom;

a negoli carstvu zemaljskome,  
 pa sakroji na Kosovu crkvu:  
 ne vodi joj temelj od mramera,  
 već od čiste svile i skreteta,  
 pa doziva srpskog patrijarha  
 i donosast veliki vladika,  
 le pričesti i naredi vojsku.  
 (Arsenijević 1989:257)

he refuses the earthly kingdom here.  
 So he has built the church of Kosovo.  
 He does not build upon a marble base.  
 But on pure silk and costly scarlet cloth.  
 He calls to him the Serbian patriarch;  
 Beside him stand twelve great Serbian bishops.  
 The whole army comes to take communion.  
 (Holton and Mihailovich 1988: 95-6)

The stanza, Prince Lazar's oath (first published in 1815 and part of the poem *Musić Stefan* in the Kosovo cycle), in which Lazar curses those Serbs who refuse to join him on the Kosovo battlefield, became a battle cry of the national movement:

Ko je Srbini i srpskoga roda  
 i od srpske krvi i kolena,  
 a ne doš' o na boj na Kosovu:  
 ne imao od sva poroda,  
 ni muškoga ni devojčakoga!  
 od ruke mu ništa ne rodilo,  
 nju no vino ni šemica belaj!  
 Rlom kap' o dok mu je kolenal!  
 (Stojković 1987:204)

Whoever is a Serb of Serbian blood,  
 Whoever shares with me this heritage,  
 and he comes not to fight at Kosovo,  
 May he never have the progeny  
 his heart desires, neither son nor daughter;  
 Beneath his hand let nothing decent grow  
 Neither purple grapes nor wholesome wheat;  
 Let him rust away like dripping iron  
 Until his name shall be extinguished!  
 (Sells 1996:39)

These two poems became central to the *Vidovdan* cult: the first depicts the Serbs as a chosen nation which has signed a Covenant with God, while the second calls on all Serbs not to forsake their duty of defending their nation in times of crisis.

#### *Kosovo in the Active Mood*

Vuk Karadžić collected the Kosovo songs and other heroic songs at a time when the first Serbian uprising against Ottoman domination was in full swing (1804-13). The ideological underpinnings of Serbia's liberation struggle, i.e. revenge for the loss of Kosovo and the resurrection of the medieval Serbian empire, were already emerging at that time (Judah 1997:51). In the first half of the nineteenth century Serbian writers, especially those living in areas under Hapsburg control, took the Kosovo battle as the subject of their work, for instance Zaharija Orfelin (Holton and Mihailovich 1988:62-4) and Jovan Sterija Popović (Holton and Mihailovich 1988:72). In 1828 Popović wrote *Boj na Kosovu* (The Battle of Kosovo) and a drama based on the same theme, *Miloš Obilić*, which were performed for many decades in small towns all over Serbia (Ekmečić 1991:334). Serbian romantic poets wrote poems that vilified the Turks and praised the joys of Serbian peasant life, whereas the style of the epic song came to dictate most literary expression.

In more concrete political terms, the Kosovo myth was harnessed to a programme of territorial expansion and the recovery of the great medieval Serbian kingdom. The figure who combined both elements (the poetic and the political) was Petar Petrović Njegoš, who ruled over Montenegro in the middle of the nineteenth century. The work that is most relevant to our theme is his epic

