

War and Myth: The Might of Myth in the Kosovo War in 1999

ABSTRACT: *This paper concentrates on the connectedness between myth and war. It pictures myth as a causal explanation for war, and mirrors myth's might and roles in erupting and exacerbating the war in Kosovo in 1999. Myths are often related to situations where people seek to construct, legitimize, and contest their social identities and ownerships. Most societies are held together by myth-system. Within such systems, foundation myths purport to explain the origins and destiny of a nation. Although they may be false in significant ways, foundation myths are usually accepted uncritically by people. They tell dramatic stories about a nation's sacred history and this serves as the exemplary model for all significant political activities. Though the Kosovo War is traced to problematic factors that are many and mixed, but from all available indications, part of the factors for the war can be understood from the perspective of contending and competing mythological recounting by the Kosovo-Serbs and Kosovo-Albanians of their past. Both sides' arguments for right over Kosovo are based on a complex interpretation of mythological details. The big question that begs to be addressed is how to reconcile the two diametrically opposing mythical interpretations of historical and legal developments in Kosovo? The finding of this paper is that the failure to achieve a harmonization of the two mythological accounts exacerbated the hotly contested indigeneity question, leading Kosovo and its occupants to a catastrophic war that claimed several thousands of lives.*

KEY WORD: *Between myth and war, war in Kosovo, foundation myths, Kosovo-Serbs and Kosovo-Albanians, and interpretations of historical events.*

RESUME: *Makalah ini berjudul "Perang dan Mitos: Kekuatan Mitos dalam Perang Kosovo pada tahun 1999". Fokus tulisan ini pada keterkaitan antara mitos dan perang. Ianya menggambarkan mitos sebagai suatu penjelasan sebab-akibat untuk perang, dan mencerminkan kekuatan mitos dan perannya dalam menimbulkan dan memperburuk perang di Kosovo pada tahun 1999. Mitos seringkali berhubungan dengan situasi dimana orang-orang berusaha untuk menciptakan, mensyahkan, dan memperjuangkan identitas sosial dan kepemilikan mereka. Kebanyakan masyarakat disatukan oleh sistem-mitos. Dalam sistem tersebut, mitos-mitos dasar diakui untuk menjelaskan asal-usul dan nasib suatu bangsa. Walaupun mitos-mitos tersebut mungkin salah dalam hal-hal penting, namun biasanya diterima secara tidak kritis oleh masyarakat. Mitos-mitos tersebut mengisahkan cerita-cerita dramatis tentang sejarah pengorbanan suatu bangsa dan hal ini bertindak sebagai model contoh bagi semua kegiatan politik yang penting. Walaupun Perang Kosovo berawal dari faktor-faktor problematis yang sangat banyak dan beragam, tetapi dari semua indikasi yang ada, salah satu faktor untuk perang dapat difahami dari perspektif cerita mitos yang bersaing dan menantang oleh orang-orang Kosovo-Serbia dan Kosovo-Albania tentang masa lalu mereka. Argumen kedua belah pihak untuk hak asasi bagi Kosovo berdasarkan suatu interpretasi yang rumit tentang seluk-beluk mitos. Pertanyaan besar yang diajukan adalah bagaimana untuk menyatukan dua interpretasi mitos yang bertentangan secara diametral tentang sejarah dan perkembangan resmi di Kosovo? Temuan dalam makalah ini bahwa kegagalan untuk mencapai keharmonisan dua cerita mitos memperburuk pertanyaan tentang keaslian yang bersaing panas, yang menuntun Kosovo dan penduduknya kepada perang bencana besar yang menelan ribuan nyawa.*

KATA KUNCI: *Antara mitos dan perang, perang di Kosovo, mitos-mitos dasar, Kosovo-Serbia dan Kosovo-Albania, serta interpretasi peristiwa sejarah.*

INTRODUCTION

State fragmentation resulting from incessant intra-state conflicts and political crises, no doubt, assume the defining characteristic of the post-cold war era. The Kosovo War, which began like a spark but developed into full flame in 1999, was one

among the many conflicts and intra-state wars that characterize the post-cold war world. Kosovo has long been a fiercely contested borderland between Serbia and Albania inhabited by ethnic Albanians who are in majority and ethnic Serbs who are in minority (Bideleux & Jefferies, 2007).

The 1999 war was typified by ethnic and political tension between the Serbian government and the Albanian-dominated Kosovo which sought independence from Serbia (Enuka, 2011). Though the factors that necessitated the war are many, myriad, and mixed, revolving around the problematic issues of contested indignity and ownership over Kosovo; age-long ethnic hate and deep-seated animosity between the ethnic Albanians and the Serbs who inhabit Kosovo; democratization and liberalization of post-Communist Yugoslavia and the concomitant series of wars, it generated in Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia which influence precipitated similar eruption in Kosovo; the lopsided Dayton Accord that ended the Bosnian war and its perceived biased provisions against the marginalized status of the Albanians within the framework of the Serbian state; the Slobodan Milosevic many misrules and radical measures towards *Serbianization* of Kosovo; and the misguided response of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), to the above, and their radical agitation for independence.

But this paper pictures myth as a causal explanation for the war, capturing its role in exacerbating the Kosovo war. This article attempts to cast light on the war in Kosovo with reference to the existence of Serbian national myth, which helped to make an alleged Albanian demographic takeover of Kosovo problematic in the first place and then helped to legitimize armed conflict and even acts of genocide. The position here is that the existence of national myth focused on the fourteenth century Battle of Kosovo did not only cause the wars in Kosovo, but was most useful in legitimizing the rule of Slobodan Milosevic and the brutal conduct of regular and paramilitary forces loyal to the "Serbian cause".

The myth of the battle of Kosovo is a story of a military defeat and moral victory. An earthly kingdom was lost to the Ottomans, the Turks, and a heavenly kingdom was gained and came to live on in the mind and soul of the Serbian people. According to the myth, the Serb commander in chief, Prince Lazar, was offered a choice by God

between the two kingdoms and in choosing the heavenly kingdom, the Serbs became a chosen people. Throughout the centuries, the event gained importance and finally it came to be seen as the birth of modern Serbia.

Since this event unfolded on Kosovo polje, this hill came to be seen as the cradle of Serbia, one of the Serbian nation's most holy places (Kule & Laustsen, 2006). The Slobodan Milosevic government and the Orthodox Church in Serbia used the Kosovo myth to create a narrative of an existential and morally superior Serbdom (Enuka, 2011). Given this background, this paper focuses on the narrative content of the Kosovo myth and the way it came to be used by the dominant political players in Serbia. The analysis is then paralleled by a short enquiry into the Albanian counter-myth, a story which is structurally similar to the Serb version. The only difference is that the Albanians are constructed as the true inheritor of the Kosovo plain.

The Kosovo case study is of interest to the researcher because the Balkan region, where Kosovo is located has historically, been of a strategic relevance to global security issues. The world was plunged into a catastrophic war in 1914 owing to the ethnically based antagonisms that had become a recurrent issue in the region. Noticeably, all the major wars that had truncated the peace of the globe, leaving every part of the system not untouched, have their origins all in Europe. Therefore, historians should be keen to mine from this past in order to give interpretative guidance to the future. And international relation analysts should be concerned with the preservation of the global peace and how best to achieve it. The learning and lessons from the Kosovo case, both positive and negative, will hopefully feed into these interests.

CONCEPTUAL DISCOURSE

A.S. Hornby, A.P. Cowie and A.C. Gimson (1986) pictures myth as a story from ancient times, especially one that was told to explain natural events or to describe the early history of a people; something that many people believe but does not exist or is

false. Myth, like most other important terms in the arts and social sciences, is of Greek origin. Mythos as it was then called by Greek poets in the polis came under heavy attack by Plato who saw it as a threat to "Logos". Plato viewed myths by the Greek poets as lies about the divine he claimed (Cassirer, 2002).

Since then, myth has been as the hyperbolic, as unreason per se, and not just unreason but also that which fuels and lives by desire (Kule & Laustsen, 2006). While some scholars stress the connection between religion and myth, others do not make this connection. Myths can be related to all situations where people construct, authorize, and contest their social identities and therefore cannot be of significant only for the historian of religion.

Myth can be understood as a second order of semi logical system that freezes and naturalizes narrative content. Myth delimits the free play of signifiers and makes acts and beliefs seem natural, right, just, inevitable, and innocent. Through myth, the world becomes less chaotic and dangerous (Kule & Laustsen, 2006). It turns history into nature. To listen to and tell a myth is a form of communication. The narrative is also that of commonness and sharing.

Myth explains why we are here and most fundamentally why we are "we". Myths are not really about a distant past, about forefathers, and their heroic deeds, but stories about us, about our identity and being, which is also the reason why we are so eager to tell and live them. L. Kule and C. Laustsen (2006) spoke of geopolitics of myth as a very important aspect of myth. Myths are associated with spaces of gathering and this is evidently so in Kosovo-Serbs mythology. Space is also crucial. Pilgrimages to mythic sites aim to establish ancient claim.

President Slobodan Milosevic's visit to the site of the Kosovo polje, the exact location of the historic battle where the medieval Serb kingdom was defeated by Ottoman forces revived and revitalized the age-long Serbs' claim of right over Kosovo as God-given. Myth works in an effective mode. Its power, argued L. Kule and C.

Laustsen (2006:22), "*Leads people astray, away from the myth, perhaps a demand for it, which is why it is such a great mobilizing force*".

However, this still allows for a considerable variation in the narrative content of the myths and the ways they can be used politically. Myths and the energies they activate can be used both as a means of oppression and a weapon against it. All societies are held together by a myth-system (Eliade, 1967). Within such systems, foundation myths purport to explain the origins and destiny of a nation. Although they may be false in significant ways, foundation myths are accepted uncritically by many people. They tell dramatic stories about their nation's "sacred history" and thus serve as the exemplary model for all significant political activities (Kegley & Raymond, 2003).

At the heart of the Serbian, foundation myth is the sense of continuity between ancient traumas and current events. Concepts of the past and the present are so intermixed that a grievance of long ago is perceived as a present affliction (Kegley & Raymond, 2003). Likewise, it is perceived that a present action may not only vindicate but actually eradicate and reverse a past defeat.

To different people, wars have very different meanings. Etymologically, war derives from an ancient Greek verb, *Weera*, denoting confusing and or ruinous conditions (Barash & Webel, 2009). In simple terms, war is the outcome of the failure of diplomacy and politics (Tshitereke, 2003). The conventional definition of war is that given by Karl Von Clausewitz, a Prussian army officer best known for the *Treatise on War*. He emphasized that war is an act of violence intended to compel our opponents to fulfill our will. Karl Von Clausewitz defined war as "*the continuation of politics by other means*" (cited by Barash & Webel, 2003).

By this, Karl Von Clausewitz meant that war should not simply reflect senseless fury rather it should be an orchestrated action, with a particular goal in mind. Very often, that political goal is the preservation of the power of those statesman and other elites

who orchestrate and hope to benefit from a particular war.

C. Kegley and G. Raymond (2003) defined war as sustained, coordinated violence between political organizations. Such a definition includes great power wars like World War I (1914-1918), colonial wars like those fought by the European great powers in Africa and Asia from the eighteenth century to early 20th century, civil wars in Yugoslavia in the 1990s, and Serbia/Kosovo in 1999 between the ethnic Albanians and Serbs.

This definition has several component parts. *First*, and most obviously, war is violent. It involves the use of force to kill and injure people and destroy military capabilities. The element of violence in warfare separates it from other forms of intergroup and interstate conflict. Conflict of interests, rivalries, disputes, and threats of force do not become a war unless they involve sustained violence.

Another component of war involves the apparently innocuous word that follows violence in the C. Kegley and G. Raymond (2003) definition, "between". It indicates that violence must be reciprocated for it to qualify as war. A war is between two political organizations. The "sustained" element of the definition aims at differentiating war from organized violence that is more limited in its magnitude or impact.

A minor border incident involving opposing armies may result in casualties on one or both sides, but arguably, the term "war" should be reserved for those incidents of violence that escalate and cross a certain threshold of violence. Border clashes between Chinese and Soviet force over disputed areas around the Ussuri River occurred in March 1969, and then six months later, but successful crisis management soon ended the crisis without further escalation (Cohen, 1991).

Generally, such incidents are referred to as clash rather than war. In 1981, Israel bombed an Iraqi nuclear reactor, with the aim of destroying the facility before it could become operational. Iraq did not respond

militarily, in part because it was already engaged in a war with Iran. For that reason, scholars refer to the Israeli action as a preventive strike but not as a war (Moseley, 2002).

In *Theory of International Relations*, Kenneth Waltz (1979) developed at least three levels of analysis, as an analytical framework for understanding war. The framework he developed suggests that the causes of war can be analyzed at the level of the individual, the nation-state, and the international system. The individual level focuses primarily on human nature and predispositions towards aggression; and on individual political leaders and their belief systems, personalities, and psychological processes. The national level includes both governmental variables such as the structure of the political system; the nature of the policy-making process; and societal factors such as the structure of the economic system; the role of public opinion and non-economic interest groups; ethnicity and nationalism; and political culture and ideology. Systemic-level causes include the anarchic structure of the international system; the number of major powers in the system; the distribution of military and economic power among them; patterns of military alliances and international trade; and other factors that constitute the external environment common to all states (Waltz, 1979).

A weakness within this level of analysis framework is that much of the theoretical outline does not seem relevant when dissecting the Kosovo war. The rationale being that the Kosovo war and that of entire Balkans were largely civil wars.

THE KOSOVO WAR

The Kosovo conflict was one among many other conflicts that characterized the post-Cold War period. Until the war in 1999, Kosovo was in Serbia, and Serbia was part of the defunct Yugoslavia. Yugoslavia before 1991 was one country that comprised six Republics: Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, and Macedonia. Serbia was further divided into two autonomous provinces: Kosovo and

Vojvodina (Lampe, 1996; Malcon, 1999; and Stilles, 2006). Each Republic and the two autonomous provinces in Serbia had a seat on the federal presidency and had a considerable amount of autonomy in local affairs. Kosovo lies in southern Serbia and has a mixed population of Serbs minority and the majority ethnic Albanians.

With the death of longtime Yugoslav leader Josep Broz Tito in 1980, the relationship between Kosovo Albanians and the Yugoslav government began to deteriorate noticeably. Throughout the 1980s, tensions between ethnic Kosovo Albanians and the Yugoslav government rose (Cohen, 1992). These tensions peaked in 1989 when Serbian President, Slobodan Milosevic, officially revoked Kosovo's autonomous status within the Republic of Serbia (Kirkpatrick, 2007). This action exacerbated the already volatile situation and further set Serbia and Kosovo on a course toward conflict.

From the beginning of the time of President Slobodan Milosevic in Serbia, a formal depreciation of the status of Kosovo Albanians permeated all Serbian laws and regulations governing economic, social, cultural, and political life in Kosovo. The politics of oppression was fully institutionalized and it amounted to formal, ideological, and informal discrimination against the Albanian population. Almost on a day-to-day basis, the Serbian police in Kosovo used physical violence, open threats, insults, and other forms of intimidation against the Albanians (March & Sil, 1999; and Ignatieff, 2000). The Albanians were ideologically discriminated against by the Serbs in Kosovo who supported the *Serbianization* of Kosovo based on the ideas of Serbian sacred land and ethnic superiority.

Reacting to their increasing political marginalization by the Yugoslav government, Kosovo Albanians declared Kosovo an independent Republic within the Yugoslav state in 1990 (Clissolde *et al.*, 1996). Two years later, the self declared Republic elected its own parliament and named Ibrahim Rugova as its President. Until the

mid-1990s, the Kosovo Albanians adhered to a policy of peaceful resistance embraced by Ibrahim Rugova. However, by 1996, Ibrahim Rugova and his policy of non-violent opposition were increasingly discredited due to their inability to raise international support for the Kosovo Albanians' cause. Internal opposition forces began to take a more assertive approach and support for civil disobedience grew (Maliqi, 1998). It was at this time that the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) emerged as an armed opposition force.

With the rise of the KLA, incidents of human rights abuses against Albanians increased, including arbitrary arrest and extrajudicial killing (Chandler, 2002). Serbian police behavior was directed at members of the KLA and at Kosovo Albanian politicians, activists, and other civilians. In February 1998, the international Contact Group on Kosovo reacted to this situation, declaring their view that the FRY (Federal Republic of Yugoslavia) needs to address this question urgently, and that making progress to resolve the serious political and human rights issues in Kosovo is critical for Belgrade to improve its international position and relations with the international community. The Contact Group expressed its readiness to facilitate the dialogue (Weller, 1999). However, these calls for restraint and dialogue went unheeded by the Yugoslav government.

On February 27, 1998, Serbian forces, including armored units and helicopter gunships, attacked several villages in the Drenica region, a known base of KLA activity (Kirkpatrick, 2007). A Human Rights Watch report concluded that a wide array of civilians, including dozens of women and children, died in the attack. In the face of the international community's condemnation of the attack, the Yugoslav government characterized the situation as an internal matter that was under control.

In the aftermath of the events in Drenica, both the KLA and Serbian forces increased the depth and scope of their activities. Serbian forces continued to commit abuses against civilians in their attempt to crush

the Albanian insurgency. Similarly, the KLA were reported to have kidnapped and executed a number of Serbian civilians. The frequency and extent of the use of violence by both sides elevated the situation to an internal armed conflict. In light of the growing violence in the region, representatives of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) alliance began to openly discuss NATO military intervention.

Under the threat of NATO action, Slobodan Milosevic ordered a "military stand-down" at the beginning of October 1998 (Judah, 2008:31). After a period of intense negotiations, Slobodan Milosevic and USA (United States of America) Special Envoy, Richard Holbrooke (representing the Contact Group), reached an agreement. While the agreement was never published, its major points addressed the reduction in forces and deployment of human rights monitors from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe or OSCE (Perritt, 2010). Despite this initial progress, the situation deteriorated again in December 1998. According to OSCE analysis, several things became clear: (1) the October-November 1998 reduction in fighting had been a lull, not a trend; (2) OSCE monitors were not in a position to address needed peacekeeping issues; and (3) violence targeting civilians continued (Weller, 1999).

The turning point in international reactions to the conflict came in the middle of January 1999 when Serbian forces committed violations of international humanitarian law, which were documented almost immediately by a team of OSCE observers. From January 12-15, 1999, Serbian forces brought heavy military equipment into the municipality of Stimlje, establishing permanent positions. On January 15, 1999, Serbian forces assaulted the village of Racak village within the municipality. In the process, Serbian forces executed forty-five ethnic Albanians. On January 16, 1999, OSCE monitors investigated the site of the massacre. The team found "*evidence of arbitrary detentions, extra-judicial killings, and mutilation of unarmed civilians*" (Weller, 1999:14). Despite the international

documentation of these events, Yugoslav authorities denied that any civilians had been killed, stating that it was simply an action against the KLA.

In February 1999, the Contact Group called peace talks in Rambouillet, France, but this effort quickly dissolved, marking the start of a new offensive by Serbian forces. The renewed violence resulted in the withdrawal of the OSCE monitors on March 20, 1999. As stated by OSCE Chairman-in-Office, Knut Vollebaek, "*I have no choice in the present situation than to withdraw the OSCE personnel*". The departure of the OSCE monitors led to a surge in violence against the Kosovo Albanians.

On March 23, 1999, the NATO Secretary-General, in a letter to the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General, outlined the rapid deterioration of the situation in Kosovo. According to the NATO Secretary-General, Serbian forces were "*using excessive and wholly disproportionate force, thereby creating a humanitarian catastrophe*" (Daalder & O'Hanlon, 2000). With this determination, it was clear that NATO had arrived at the point of armed intervention.

MIGHT OF THE BATTLE OF KOSOVO POLJE MYTH

The 1389 battle of Kosovo Polje, or the Field of Blackbirds, is central to Serbian national self-image. According to the myth, in the fourteenth century, Serbia was the centre of a rich and large empire, the ambitions of which were challenged by the Ottoman Empire (Denisa, 1997). When the Ottoman Sultan Murad tried to force the Serbian Prince Lazar to submit to his powers, this resulted in war. The highpoint of this conflict, the Battle of Kosovo Polje, ended in Serbian defeat and the death of Prince Lazar, who was beheaded by the Turks. Yet the Turks victory had its price as the Sultan Murad also died, ingeniously killed by the Serb Milos Obilic, who had obtained an audience with the Sultan and attacked him with a knife, cleverly hidden in his clothes.

This assassination was Milos Obilic's answer to the accusation of disloyalty

towards Prince Lazar which was raised against him the night before the battle. The allegation against Milos Obilic was raised by Prince Lazar at the common dinner table, but the source of the lie was Prince Lazar's jealous son-in-law, Vuk Brankovic. It was he who betrayed Prince Lazar in withdrawing his troops after agreement with the Turks (Kule & Laustsen, 2006).

But Vuk Brankovic was in some sense just part of a greater divine plan. A falcon representing Saint Elijah and a swallow representing Virgin Mary thus come to Prince Lazar at the battlefield and offer him a choice. He can choose the Kingdom of Earth and attack the Ottomans immediately and he will win; or he can choose the Kingdom of Heaven and build a church in Kosovo and call his men to communion, in which case he loses the Kingdom of Earth, but wins an eternal kingdom (Holton & Mihailovich, 1998).

Evidently, as Prince Lazar was defeated, he had chosen the Kingdom of Heaven instead of the Kingdom of Earth, which the presence of the Serbian-Orthodox monastery of Gračanica, outside Priština is said to confirm (Duijzings, 2000; and Judah, 2000). Through the eyes of the Serbian tradition, the death of Prince Lazar and the defeat at Kosovo Polje marked the end of a glorious empire and the beginning of centuries of slavery under Ottoman rule (Duijzings, 2000).

The Ottoman Empire thence after dominated the region and controlled Kosovo into the twentieth century. Since this event unfolded on Kosovo Polje, this hill came to be seen as the cradle of Serbia, one of the Serb nation's most holy places. Looking back on these momentous events, nineteenth and twentieth Centuries' Serb nationalists mythologized the 1389 battle, and more generally the role of Kosovo in their nation's history. In the process, they portrayed the primarily Muslim Albanians essentially as sympathizers of the victorious Turkish invaders. Owing to harsh Ottoman rule and difficult economic conditions over the centuries, many Serbs migrated to lands north of Kosovo.

In the meantime, Albanians began moving from their rugged mountainous homeland on the Adriatic into the adjacent Kosovo basin, where they replaced the Serbs as Kosovo's largest ethnic group. From the Serb perspective, the Albanians occupied Kosovo's sacred soil and converted to Islam to reinforce Turkish domination, hence they do not rightfully belong in Kosovo. For those under the sway of Serbia's foundation myth, these alleged injuries must be avenged, no matter how long ago they were committed (Fromkin, 1999). They believe that steadfastness in the face of suffering will eventually turn defeat at Kosovo Polje into victory. The complex interaction of Serbs, Albanians, and Turks over ensuing centuries provided the ground for all parties' competing historical perceptions, myths, fears, and vendettas which culminated into the violent Kosovo War of 1999 (Enuka, 2011).

With the advent of modern nationalism, Prince Lazar's role in the battle and its place in the history of Serbia and the contest over the ownership of Kosovo condensed into a coherent and comprehensive story. The nationalistic Serbian literature and art thus gave the Battle of Kosovo its present importance. The story of Prince Lazar's defeat became clearly modeled over the well known Christian symbols. Simultaneously, the main characters of the story: Prince Lazar, Vuk Brankovic, Milos Obilic, the Kosovo maiden, who tends the wounded warriors and the mother of the Jugovici, who lost nine sons in the battle, become "*archetypes of the Serbian virtue and villainy*" (Kule & Laustsen, 2006).

Prince Lazar is claimed to be Jesus who is given a choice between heavenly and earthly kingdoms, and Vuk Brankovic is Judas who betrays him in a scene resembling the Last Supper. Kosovo Polje is the Serbian Golgotha, where Prince Lazar is killed and the Kosovo maiden and the mother of the Jugovici play the part of Mary Magdalene and the Virgin Mary mourning the dead. The framework of the Serbian national self-understanding is thus well-known Christian stories, though they tend to have a specific

twist (Pennington & Levi, 1984). The story of the Battle of Kosovo has, strikingly, been called a “nationalized Christiad” where Christianity and nationalism have become one (Duijzings, 2000).

The nineteenth century reconstruction of the Kosovo legend as a nationalist founding myth was accompanied by the introduction of the national celebration of rituals of remembrance, most importantly “Vidovdan”, St. Vitus’ Day or Vid’s Day on 28 June, the same date as the battle of Kosovo. According to some sources, the day refers to St. Vitus, a southern Italian martyr who had been celebrated by the Serbian Orthodox Church for centuries (Vucunich & Emmert, 1991); while others claim that the day refers to the pagan sun god Vid (Kule & Laustsen, 2006). Regardless of the background of “Vidovdan”, it was only with the “national renaissance” of the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century that it came to be a day of national remembrance dedicated to glorious events in national history (Judah, 2000).

From the first public political celebration of Vidovdan in 1851, the celebration of the defeat of Prince Lazar rapidly became an important symbol in the struggle for Serbian independence from Ottoman rule (Judah, 2000). Coincidentally, or perhaps intentionally, the importance of Vidovdan has grown since to become the most important day in Serbian history. It was on this day in 1876 that the war of independence against the Ottomans was declared and on this day in 1881 that a Secret Convention with Austria-Hungary was signed.

Furthermore, on Vidovdan 1914, a Serbian nationalist killed the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, thereby initiating the First World War and, importantly, Vidovdan was also chosen to sign the Versailles Peace Treaty in 1919, which was to end the War (Kule & Laustsen, 2006). Moreover, it was on Vidovdan that the 1921 Yugoslav Constitution was proclaimed, and the 1948 resolution of the Cominform was declared. However, it was only with the reign of

Slobodan Milošević that Vidovdan became the occasion for yearly celebrations of national identity coupled with “an appeal to Serbian leaders never again to permit the defeat of Serbian arms” (Duijzings, 2000).

The ethnic Albanians who comprise of the vast majority of the population in Kosovo have also been brought up to believe that their nation is the oldest in the Balkans. They see themselves as directly descending from the ancient Dardanians, a branch of the Illyrian peoples, who had allegedly inhabited most of the western Balkans (including Kosovo) for many centuries before the arrival of Slavic “interlopers” on the scene during the seventh century (Bideleux & Jefferies, 2007). This in turn has encouraged the ethnic Albanians to believe that their ethnic group rightfully has a prior claim to several partly Slav inhabited areas of the western Balkans, especially Kosovo and the north-western Macedonia, and to regard the Slav inhabitants as relatively recent military usurpers of these “ethnic Albanian homelands” (Poulton, 1991).

In addition, Kosovo has been important to many ethnic Albanians because of the pivotal role it played in the Albanian national awakening which took place between the 1850s and 1912. Selami Pulaha (1997) points out that the ethnic and cultural continuity between the early Illyrians and the medieval Albanians is legitimate and well established. According to the Albanian source, it was only in the twelfth century that the Serbs began to populate the land of the Albanians in an organized way. The aim of the Serbs and Montenegrins ever since they colonized a part of the Balkan Peninsula has been to occupy the land of the Illyrians-Albanians. Selami Pulaha (1997) states that the expansion of the Serb state in Kosovo during the twelfth century was an annexation and occupation of Albanian territories.

From all available indications, part of the factors for the Kosovo conflict can be understood from a different perspective of the contending and conflicting mythical recounting by the Serbians and Albanians of their past. Both asides’ arguments for

right over Kosovo are based on a complex interpretation of a combination of historical, legal, and demographic details (Daskalovski, 2003). Although the Albanians as well as the Serbian side claim their right to Kosovo as being specific, both give a very similar argumentation in favour of this right.

On the one hand, the Serbs state that their right to Kosovo is based on the fact that Serbs migrated to the region in the tenth century, founded a great medieval empire, the Serbian Orthodox Church and a number of churches and monasteries etc. The Serbian side refutes the Albanian claim that the Albanians are descendants of Illyrians. The Serbs maintain that even if the link between Illyrians and Albanians is true, it does not count since every claim of territorial rights that relies on the ethnic map of pre-migration Europe is simply impossible, for in that period there were no states or nations as we know them today (Enuka, 2011).

The Serbs' argument of historical right over Kosovo is one of first occupancy: we were first. Although in Kosovo there might have been other ethnic groups in the time of their migration, they had not had any meaningful forms of organization neither did they have national consciousness. The Albanians note that Illyrians, the predecessors of present day Albanians, were the majority on the territory of Kosovo and that Serbs began migrating there from the tenth century. Despite Serbian colonization, mass deportations, killings, and other methods of oppression, Albanians remained the bulk of the population of Kosovo to the present day. Refuting the Serbs claim, Albanians explain that the fact that they, as the biggest ethnic group in Kosovo, did not have a state or national consciousness adds to their right to claim Kosovo.

Although they do not agree on the question of what counts as meaningful presence in the region, both Serbs and Albanians state that they were the first inhabitants of Kosovo. In order to support their claim, Serbs explain that it was exactly in Kosovo that they formed their medieval state, the patriarchy, many monasteries, churches, and so on. Even though the

Albanians rely on numbers, while Serbs use numbers plus institutions as proofs of their right to Kosovo/a, obviously both sides want to present it as being historically theirs in similar fashion.

These opposing perceptions of Kosovo and claims of its ownership also inform the interpretations of subsequent political and legal developments in the area. As Zidas Daskalovski (2003:21) puts it, "*The interpretation of the legal developments in the exists as part of the jurisdiction of both Serbian and Albanian nationalists of the right to rule over Kosovo no matter which side actually is right as far as law is concerned*". Legally, the Serbs argue that Kosovo is an internal affair of Serbia and that Kosovo Albanians can be granted some sort of autonomy but certainly not independence. Actions by the KLA (Kosovo Liberation Army) were, therefore, categorized as terrorist deeds, while the operations of the Serbian police and the paramilitary units were seen as legitimate.

Kosovo Albanians do not want even to consider being granted autonomous rights by what they see as being a Nazi-like regime. For them, Serbia unlawfully abolished the autonomy of Kosovo in 1989. Following the disintegration of former Yugoslavia in which the other federal constituent units (Slovenia, Croatia, Macedonia, etc) disassociated from Belgrade, the legally established Assembly of Kosovo declared independence and proclaimed the constitution of the Republic of Kosovo, based on the principles of self-determination, equality, and sovereignty. The claim to independence was supported by the general will of the population of Kosovo which was and is overwhelmingly ethnic Albanian.

For Serbs, the abolishment of Kosovo's autonomy by the Serbian parliament in 1989 was a legal step, an act considered illegal by the Kosovo Albanians. Notwithstanding the dispute over the legitimacy over the abolishment of Kosovo's autonomy within the Yugoslav federation, it is apparent that the claims of Serbs and Albanians to have a legal right to rule the province are "ubiquitously similar" (Daskalovski, 2003:21). On the one hand, the Serbs

interpret that after the fall of Communism, Kosovo became Serbia's internal matter and that based on that fact, they can decide whether to give Kosovo Albanians rights to self-rule or not.

Kosovo Albanians on the other hand, construe that due to the disintegration of former Yugoslavia, Kosovo's autonomy was upgraded to an independent status, and that therefore, Serbia has nothing to do with the province and should withdraw its occupational forces. Obviously then, Serb and Albanian interpretations of the legal developments and status of the region are irreconcilable. Both claim that the other party has "*nothing to do with us, we have the legal basis to rule over Kosovo*" (Enuka, 2011:14).

One clear point is that we cannot rely on the particularized nationalistic claims, for they are conflicting and difficult to adjudicate. Neither narrative leaves space for the existence of the other. The big problem that needed to be overcome was how to reconcile the two diametrically opposing interpretations of historical and legal developments in Kosovo. The failure to achieve a harmonization of the two mythological accounts exacerbated the hotly contested indigeneity question, leading Kosovo and its inhabitants into a catastrophic war that claimed several thousands of lives.

Another aspect of the Kosovo myth as a causal explanation and factor in the Kosovo War is its manifestation in what has been regarded as the Slobodan Milosevic's misrules. On campaign to consolidate his power and firm control of the Serbian Republic, President Slobodan Milosevic championed Serbian nationalism and became a strident advocate of Serbian territorial ambitions. Being an ardent believer of the Kosovo myth, he preached the Serbian God-given right to Kosovo and organized many anti-Albanian rallies (Judah, 2000).

He presided over a massive rally on the 600th anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo, attended by more than a million Serbs at Kosovo Polje the exact location of the historic

battle fought in 1389. Slobodan Milosevic's presence at the place where Prince Lazar had been defeated 600 years previously seemed to be a spectacular attempt to unite the Serbian people in a common cause. By posing as the heir of Prince Lazar, Slobodan Milosevic urged the Serbian people not to behave like Vuk Brankovic and give in to their enemies (Albanians), but instead to choose the role of Milos Obilic and be loyal to their leader (cited in Ruga, 1999).

Slobodan Milosevic wanted to draw a parallel between the fragmentation of the Serbian forces in 1389 and the state of affairs then in Serbia. The speech was thus a warning to those who want to tear the Republic apart. Two audiences were addressed by that speech: the Serbs, who should prepare themselves for war, and other ethnic groups like the Albanian majority in Kosovo, who should be aware that secession would imply war with a Serbia unflinching in its commitment to territorial sovereignty (cited in Kule & Laustsen, 2006).

As it is written, "*the Kosovo myth was Milosevic's claim to fame*" (Judah, 2000:26). In a famous speech that was televised all over Serbia, Slobodan Milosevic told the Serbs in Kosovo, "You will not be beaten again" (cited in Ruga, 1999:1). Having consolidated his power through such appeals to Serbian nationalism, he made serious moves towards *Serbianizing* Kosovo, "cleaning" it of the Albanians. One of his first acts was to rescind the autonomy enjoyed by Kosovo and instituted draconian martial laws in the province of Kosovo.

During and immediately after his rise to power, Slobodan Milosevic emerged as an advocate for the rights of ethnic Serb minorities who lived outside the Serbian Republic proper, especially in Kosovo. He gained considerable support for his very public role in championing the rights of Serbs against transgressions, perceived and real, perpetrated by the Albanian majority (Gibbs, 2009).

In December 1990, Slobodan Milosevic won the presidency again after winning in 1989 and the Serbia's Communists won

194 of the 250 seats in parliament. This electoral success was partly due to his successful rallying of Serbian nationalists whom he promised to "make Serbia great again" (Kirkpatrick, 2007). The first step was the adoption of the Programme for the Attainment of Peace, Freedom, Equality, and Prosperity in Kosovo. The programme provided the ideological and legal framework of a new political orthodoxy in the country. Under the pretext of protecting all national communities in Kosovo (Serbs, Montenegrins, Muslims, Turks, Romanies, and Croats), and while pointing out that Albanians enjoyed rights unparalleled by any other national minority in the world, it claimed that Serbia, as a legal state should be used to protect endangered nations and nationalities in Kosovo from further menace.

The programme foreshadowed specific measures for preservation of order, peace, freedom, equality, and the constitution and integrity of Serbia, and empowered the Serbian Assembly to annul any laws and decrees of the Assembly of Kosovo judged contrary to the programme. New republican laws and regulations soon mushroomed. Within a year, more than 20 new laws were adopted (Daskalovski, 2003). They abolished nationality rights in Kosovo in the spheres of education, health care, self-government, information, economy, culture, sport, etc.

A key early step was the Law on Actions of the Republican Administration in Exceptional Circumstances, which allowed temporary and emergency measures to be introduced in the province (Kegley & Raymond, 2003). Using this law as a legal shield, the Serbian government replaced the entire ruling Albanian political and managerial elite with Kosovo-Serbs. This law and the Law on Labour Relations in Exceptional Conditions, allowed more than 100,000 Albanians to be dismissed from their jobs (Guzina, 2003). These draconian acts were justified by reference to alleged serious violations of public interest, failure to fulfill legal obligations, and severely disrupted self-management relations.

In sum, from the beginning of the time of Slobodan Milosevic in Serbia, a formal

depreciation of the status of Kosovo-Albanians permeated all Serbian laws and regulations governing economic, social, cultural, and political life in Kosovo. The politics of oppression was fully institutionalized and it amounted to formal, ideological, and informal discrimination against the Albanian population. Almost on a day-to-day basis, the Serbian police in Kosovo used physical violence, open threats, insults, and other forms of intimidation against Albanians. The Albanians were ideologically discriminated against by the Serbs in Kosovo who supported that Kosovo be *Serbianized*, and "cleansed" of the ethnic Albanians. This was based on the ideas of Serbian sacred land and ethnic superiority as mythologized by the historic Battle of Polje.

Responding to the Slobodan Milosevic's many misrules and the regime's attempt at full colonization of the province, Kosovo-Albanians organized their own parliamentary and presidential elections in May 1992. These were deemed illegal by the Serbian administration. Yet they were the act as Miranda Vickers (1998) puts it, of a "mini-state in the making". The Albanians opted for active opposition to the Serbian domination. Being disenchanted, the young Kosovo-Albanians formed militant underground group, the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). The KLA orchestrated a series of guerrilla actions that destabilized the province. Few months into 1998, the intermittent snipping and skirmishing of the previous years, escalated to fierce fighting. The situation worsened in the following year, 1999, leading to an outright war situation that took tolls.

CONCLUSION

Mirrored by this article is the place of myth in the Kosovo War of 1999. Though the immediate cause of the war was Slobodan Milosevic's misrules and oppression of the ethnic Albanians in Kosovo, which gave rise to violent opposition, but antecedent of the war stretches back to the mythologized defeat of the Serbs' Prince Lazar centuries before the 1999 war. In the acclaimed 1389 battle of Kosovo in the field of the

Blackbirds, near Kosovo's present day capital of Pristina, the Serbs attempted to fend off the invading Turks. Prince Lazar's refusal to submit to the powers and suzerainty of Ottoman Empire, incurred the wrath of invading Ottoman forces.

The Sultan resolved that "we cannot both be rulers" and therefore invited Prince Lazar to a battle. The Ottoman Turks defeated the Serbs and ruled over Kosovo for centuries. The defeat suffered by the Serbs at Kosovo Polje was a milestone in the evolution of Serbian national self-consciousness. It spawned a foundation myth.

Historically, it is impossible to verify the scenario presented above. It has been argued that there is no evidence that Vuk Brankovic betrayed Prince Lazar or even that Milos Obilic is a historical figure, but more crucially, it is possible the Serbs were not even defeated. The significance of the Battle of Kosovo Polje lies, therefore, not in the fourteenth century but in the way it has shaped later Serbian history, and exacerbated the already Serbs-Albanians strained relationship, leading to war over the ownership of Kosovo.

The Albanians who comprise the vast majority of population in Kosovo also constructed their myth, establishing that they are the oldest in the Balkans. Through the lens of their myth, they see themselves as directly descending from the ancient Dardanians, a branch of the Illyrian peoples, who had allegedly inhabited most of the western Balkans, including Kosovo for many centuries before the arrival of Serbs interlopers on the scene. The mythologized recounting of their origins encouraged the ethnic Albanians to believe that their ethnic group rightfully has a prior claim to Kosovo, and to regard the Serbs as usurpers of ethnic Albanian homeland. The question that remained was, therefore, "who owns Kosovo?" These opposing perceptions of Kosovo and claims of its ownership fuelled the violent eruption that engulfed the region in the period under study.

Though NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization)'s pressure on Serbia and the 82 day sustained bombardment of

Belgrade has since ended the Kosovo War and Kosovo's independence achieved, but the centrality of the Prince Lazar myth in the wars over Kosovo poses the question of whether peaceful coexistence between people who have come to see each other as historical enemies is liable at all. As long as the Serbian people continue to see themselves as victims of suffering, the myth of Kosovo is likely to remain a centrifugal force that will continue to eat deep into the fabric of Kosovo's peace. The question of reconciliation and stable peace will, therefore, by necessity include reference to the continued relevance of the Kosovo myth.

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