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THE EXHIBITION OF THE OTTOMAN HERITAGE – FROM COLLECTIVE MEMORY TO THE MUSEUM DISPLAY

Abstract: The article discusses the remembrance of the Ottoman heritage and presentation of Ottoman culture at the Ethnographic Museum in Belgrade. The study emphasizes the role and importance of memory and historical interpretation in the contemporary museum practice at the museum. The historical memories of a collection of 6 curators will be discussed and represented in order to examine the influence these recollections have on the exhibition of culture in the museum. The article gives the reader a further understanding of the mechanisms behind the continuous neglect and lack of appreciation of the Ottoman heritage in the Serbian society. In line with the current research within memory studies, this study focuses on a museum as a site of memory, or a “*lieu de mémoire*” in Pierre Nora’s term. The author concludes that there is the museum lacks awareness and emphasis on the Ottoman heritage. She also argues that the museum as a site of memory does little to provide for an arena where memories of different cultures and identities are channeled and presented in the society. Further studies should also emphasize museum presentations in other Southeast European countries in order to discuss the ways in which folk culture, cultural history, and memory are presented to the public.

Key words: *Ottoman heritage, Ethnographic Museum in Belgrade, collective memory*

Introduction

In this article I will provide for a further insight into the continuous historical oblivion towards the Ottoman past and the negative stereotypes connected with

“the Turks” in the Serbian society. The lack of interest in the Ottoman cultural heritage in the Balkans due to the Turks’ role as the negative “Other” in Serbian national identity discourses, has resulted in both neglect and destruction of the material and cultural heritage of five centuries of the Ottoman rule in Serbia.

This study is a result of an interest in getting a better understanding of the mechanisms between history and memory and the relationship between them in a country where history has been constructed and reconstructed in a profound manner since the socialist regime under Tito.¹ The overall aim of the study is to give the reader a further understanding of the mechanisms behind the continuous neglect and lack of appreciation of the Ottoman heritage in the Serbian society. The study emphasizes the role and importance of memory and historical interpretation in the contemporary museum practice in Serbia. It is not, however, a historical account of the Ottoman domination in Serbia. I will instead discuss the *remembrance* of Ottoman heritage and the role of this heritage vis-à-vis the conceptions and memory of Serbian “traditional culture”.

Museum practices in Serbia have been a part of a political tool in order to construct national narratives and memories which lack a critical attitude towards the question of nation and the concept of “national culture.”² An examination of the mechanisms behind memory and museum practices opens for a new understanding and discussion of the Ottoman past and cultural diversity in Serbia. By increasing and improving the capacities of museums in the region, they can in turn serve as important democratic arenas where difficult matters and cultural diversity can be discussed.³

The Ethnographic Museum in Belgrade is an important cultural institution where memories of traditional culture and history are produced and presented. In accordance with the theories of Pierre Nora, the museum can be understood then as a “heuristic device” which supplies the society with memories.⁴ This article, however, will discuss the presentation of the Ottoman cultural heritage at the Ethnographic Museum and the historical memory and interpretation of the Ottoman past among a collection of curators working at the museum. How is the Ottoman past in Serbia interpreted by the curators? How can their historical memory of the Ottoman period provide explanation for the exhibition and presentation of Ottoman culture and traditional culture in the museum?

¹ Dubravka Stojanović, “Construction of Historical Consciousness – The Case of Serbian History Textbooks” in *Balkan Identities – Nation and Memory* by Maria Todorova (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 327.

² Olga Manojlović and Aleksandar Ignjatović, “National Museums in Serbia: A Story of Intertwined Identities”, (Conference proceedings from EuNaMus, European National Museums in Europe 1750–2010: Identity Politics, the Uses of the Past and the European Citizen, Bologna, April 28–30, 2011), 781–784. Ljiljana Gavrilović, *Kultura u izlogu: Ka novoj muzeologiji*, edited by Dragana Radojičić (Belgrade: Akademska izdanja Beograd, 2007), 67–68.

³ Cultural Heritage Without Borders, “The Western Balkan Regional Museum Network”, *pamphlet*, 3–4.

⁴ Susan A. Crane, “Writing the Individual Back into Collective Memory”, *The American Historical Review*, 102, 5, 1997: 1383.

The article therefore discusses the transmission processes of memory and history, from personal recollections to the museum display; and from the museum display to the public. The main theoretical assumption which the study rests on is that memory is a social activity that is shaped and is constantly being shaped by impressions from our surroundings. Memory can thus be understood as a tool which serves to legitimate present social order and conventions.⁵

When I visited the museum in 2012, the permanent exhibition at the museum went under the title “Traditional Culture of Serbs in the nineteenth and the twentieth century” and was opened in 2001.⁶ My objective is to analyze the curators’ memories of the Ottoman past and to discuss the role these memories play in shaping the museum practice and the exhibition of traditional culture in the museum. The Ottoman heritage contrasts to what is commonly perceived as traditional culture in the Serbian society and the study will therefore touch upon the conception of “traditions” in a country characterized by ethnic diversity and multiculturalism.⁷ However, discussions of post-modernity and cultural hybridity remind us that the world at large is characterized by a fusion of cultures.⁸ Therefore, this essay raises criticism towards essentialist understandings of culture as well as the usage of “traditional” as an analytical tool of cultures.⁹

Methodological Framework

This study is an ethnographic field study where I have conducted qualitative structured and semi-structured interviews with 6 out of 22 curators at the Ethnographic museum. These interviews took place from the beginning of March till the beginning of April 2012. Out of the six individuals there were three women and three men.

My argumentation in the study rests on the assumption that museums are important opinion makers in the society. Museums serve as a channel where memories are transmitted precisely because museum stores memory of cultures and

⁵ Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (New York, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 3.

⁶ The Ethnographic Museum in Belgrade, “Folk Culture on the Territory of SR Serbia in the 19th and 20th Centuries”, *Museum pamphlet*.

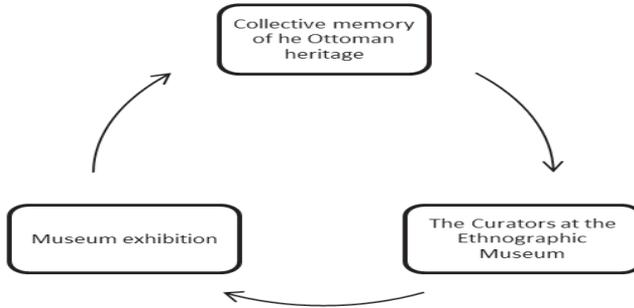
⁷ Dennis P. Hupchick, *The Balkans – From Constantinople to Communism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 12.

⁸ Peter Burke, *Cultural Hybridity* (Cambridge: Polity 2009), 1.

⁹ For more discussions on the concept of traditions and culture see Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (1992), Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (2006), J.C. Heesterman, *The Inner Conflict of Tradition: Essays in Indian ritual, Kingship, and Society* (1985), Richard Handler and Jocelyn Linnekin. “Tradition, Genuine or Spurious.” *The Journal of American Folklore*, 97, 385, (1984).

“fixes” memory through collection and presentation.¹⁰ However, a museum cannot in itself possess a memory, but the curators working in the museum can.¹¹ My method is therefore to investigate the memories of the curators in the museum. The curators are notwithstanding the ones which are in charge of what should be valued and what will in turn be presented to the wider public. The curators must also be understood and interpreted, not only as museum professionals, but also as Serbian citizens born and raised in Serbia. They serve in this context as cases of individual interpretation of collectively held memories.

A simplified model of the study’s logic:



The material for my analysis is first and foremost the conversations with the curators during the structured interviews which were recorded.

My thematic categorization in the analysis is drawn first and foremost from the topics that were current in the conversation with the curators. My method of analysis is based on techniques to identify themes prompted by Ryan and Bernard.¹²

Perceptions of the Ottoman Legacy in Serbia

As the Ottoman Empire started to lose its grip and power during the last two centuries of its rule in the Balkans, the 19th century in Serbia has been characterized as a period of Serbian uprising against the Ottomans in their quest for independent Serbian statehood.¹³ According to Maria Todorova, a process of de-Ottomanization started in Serbia after the First World War as well as in the other

¹⁰ Susan A. Crane, “Introduction to Museums and Memory”, in *Museums and Memory*, ed. Susan A. Crane (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2000), 3,4.

¹¹ Wulf Kansteiner, “Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies”, *History and Theory* 41 (2002): 185.

¹² Gerry W. Ryan and Russell Bernard, “Techniques to Identify Themes”, *Field Methods* 15, 85 (2003): 86.

¹³ Jasna Dragović-Soso, “Rethinking Yugoslavia: Serbian intellectuals and the ‘National Question’ in Historical Perspective”, *Contemporary European History* 13, 2, 2004: 170, Ferdinand

Balkan countries. The de-Ottomanization process was according to Todorova characterized by a constant effort to distance Serbia and the other countries from the former Ottoman/Muslim occupier. Todorova writes:

“The Ottomans have been unanimously described as bearers of an essentially different and alien civilization characterized by a fanatic and militant religion, which introduced different economic and societal practices and brought about the pastoralization and agrarianization of the Balkans.”¹⁴

As the period of liberalization from the Ottoman domination coincided with the growing romanticism of nationhood and national self-awareness, Turkey was perceived as the negative “Other” which served as an opposition to the Serbians national self-image.¹⁵ However, the negative perceptions of the Ottoman rule in Serbia must be viewed in light of the academic discourse in Western scholarships, in which the Ottomans and Eastern cultures are treated as the Oriental “Other” with which the European self encounters. In *Orientalism*, Said argues that the studies of Orientalism produced exact and positive knowledge of the Orient, but also what he calls “second-order knowledge”; “[I]urking in such places as the “Oriental” tale, the mythology of the mysterious East, notions of Asian inscrutability – with a life of its own[...].”¹⁶

Resting on Said, Todorova argues that the picture of Balkan and “balkanization” is an oriental variation on a Balkan theme, where “Balkan” and “balkanization” are understood as negative designators which run counter to perceptions of “civilized” and which is analogical with political instability.¹⁷ Todorova also argues that a common assertion in academia has also been that the Balkan and Eastern European Countries by-passed the Renaissance and Reformation which had severe cultural consequences.¹⁸ The idea of the “Ottoman disruption” of the natural development of the Southeast European countries towards humanism and the European Renaissance¹⁹ is also a contemporary historical notion in Serbia today. In a newly printed history book for Serbian 7th graders it is stated that after the fall of Byzantine, the Western Europe aroused as the “[h]eart of progress and of modern civilizations [whereas] Serbia was left outside the main course of European development. “The progress of countries and people that remained in the Balkans was thus interrupted by the Ottoman conquerors.”²⁰

Schevill, *A History of the Balkans – From the Earliest Times to the Present Day* (New York: Dorset Press, 1991), 323–324.

¹⁴ Maria Todorova, “The Ottoman Legacy in the Balkans”, in *Imperial Legacy – The Ottoman Imprint on the Balkans and the Middle East*, ed. L. Carl Brown (New York: Columbia University Press: 1996), 59.

¹⁵ Pintar and Ignjatović, “National Museums in Serbia: A Story of Intertwined Identities”, 781.

¹⁶ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, (London, Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), 52.

¹⁷ Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 8, 33.

¹⁸ Maria Todorova, “Spacing Europe: What is a Historical Region?”, *East Central Europe/ECE* 32, 1–2:2005:13.

¹⁹ Maria Todorova, “The Ottoman Legacy in the Balkans”, 70.

²⁰ Dušan T. Bataković, *Istorija za sedmi razred osnovne škole*, ed. Slobodan G. Marković (Beograd, Novi Sad: Stojkov, 2011), 11.

Against the backdrop of the ideas of “the Orient” in Europe then, and thus, the negative attributions to the Ottoman rule, the Ottoman domination which lasted almost half a millennium was perceived in Serbia as an incompatible and foreign imposition on the Serbian and Christian medieval society. This was also the view in which Balkan historiography was based on during the nineteenth century.²¹ As the example with the schoolbook shows, these manifestations of the images of Balkan are present in contemporary historical narratives in Serbia.

The Workings of Collective Memory and the Concept of Traditions

Halbwachs’ notion of “collective” is first and foremost grounded in the perception that it is in the society that people acquire their memories.²² Consequently, collective memory in Halbwachs’ terms has roughly three implications. First, memory is a social phenomenon; I cannot recall anything without a social framework. Second, since memory is triggered by the social context the remembering always takes place in the present and must be perceived as a current phenomenon. Third, since memories take place in the present the meaning given to them is molded and constructed by the present circumstances.²³ The study of memory is important in order to understand why some beliefs and ideas are stronger manifested and inflexible, while others are more likely to change.²⁴

In terms of the transmission process of memory, or the memory “outlet” or “catalyst”, I also include the concept of “sites of memory” by Pierre Nora (*Lieux de Mémoire*, 1981), as my theoretical presumption is that the Ethnographic Museum as a site of memory in turn transmits and sustains the collective memory of Ottoman past in the society.²⁵ The Ethnographic Museum attempts to shape the memory of the past and it takes part in the constructing of the Serbian national identity, as the museum transmits values and traditions in line with the official national narrative.

When talking about tradition and cultural heritage today, we understand it as processes created in the present, where cultural heritage and tradition is selected and appointed.²⁶ This understanding rests on Eric Hobsbawm’s conceptions about the social construction of traditions. Hobsbawm’s theory of traditions can

²¹ Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, 162.

²² Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan, “Setting the Framework” in *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 23.

²³ Halbwachs, “The Social Frameworks of Memory”, 40.

²⁴ Susan A. Crane, “The Conundrum of Ephemerality: Time, Memory, and Museums” in *A Companion to Museum Studies*, ed. Sharon Macdonald (Malden, Oxford, Carlton: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2006), 103.

²⁵ Nora, “Between Memory and History”, 12.

²⁶ Selberg, ”Tradisjon, Kulturarv og Minnespolitikk”, 13.

be connected to the theories of collective memory as they rest on the assumption that memory is largely formed in the present and is driven by contemporary interests.²⁷ That is to say, by bringing forward “what once was”, traditions are also acts of commemorating the past in the present.

What is interesting in this regard is a closer assessment of the meaning and value given to tradition and cultural heritage in the society.²⁸ David Lowenthal argues that we favor heritage and celebrate it precisely because of their inherent biases – heritage is by large understood as something exclusive as it is “ours” and “for us alone.”²⁹ The concepts of traditional culture and heritage, however, can come in conflict with cultural expressions which do not fall under notions of “traditions” and “traditional culture.” Surayia Faroqhi notes that “[t]raditional culture” tends to mean a system relatively free of internal contradictions, or at least one in which those contradictions which do exist are not perceived as such by those living in it.³⁰ In line with the current theory of collective memory studies, these “internal contradictions” that Faroqhi mentions, can be understood as what Yael Zerubavel terms “counter memory” of cultures, a memory which directly opposes the master narrative. These are often views of marginalized individuals in society, whereas the master narrative represents the political elite’s construction of the past.³¹

Also Lowenthal points to the oppressive side of traditions: “Tradition generally omits, or prohibits the recounting of, facts about the past that might undermine ruling institutions.”³² Consequently, due to the symbolic value that cultural heritage and traditions represent it is inevitable to speak about heritage politics and “politics of memory”.³³ What should be considered heritage, and by whom? What heritage is considered important and what is included in discourses on national identity? What heritage is not?³⁴ It is also necessary to address the normative character of traditions as they seek to influence the conduct of people.

²⁷ David Middleton and Derek Edwards, “Introduction”, in *The Collective Memory Reader* ed. Jeffrey K. Olick, Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi and Daniel Levy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 44.

²⁸ Barbro Klein, “Folklore, Heritage Politics, and Ethnic Diversity” in *Folklore, Heritage Politics and Ethnic Diversity – A Festschrift for Barbro Klein*, et. al.. Anttonen, (Tumba: Botkyrka, 2000), 25.

²⁹ David Lowenthal, “Fabricating Heritage.” *History and Memory* 10, 1, (1998): 7, 8.

³⁰ Surayia Faroqhi, *Subjects of the Sultan: Culture and Daily Life in the Ottoman Empire*, (New York: I.B. Tauris&Co, Ltd, 2005), 16.

³¹ Yael Zerubavel, “Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israel National Tradition”, in *The Collective Memory Reader*, ed. Jeffrey K. Olick, Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi and Daniel Levy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 240–241.

³² David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 327.

³³ Selberg, ”Tradisjon, Kulturarv og Minnespolitikk”, 13, Barbro Klein, ”Folklore, Heritage Politics, and Ethnic Diversity”, 25.

³⁴ Helaine Silverman, “Contested Cultural Heritage: A Selective Historiography” in *Contested Cultural Heritage – Religion, Nationalism, Erasure, and Exclusion in a Global World*, ed. Helaine Silverman (New York, Dordrecht, Heidelberg, London: Springer, 2001), 24.

Recollections of the Ottoman Past in Serbia

In the following paragraphs I will present the curators' memories of the Ottoman rule in Serbia and their meanings attached to these memories. This is reflected in the theory of social framework by Halbwachs since social groups "maintain living relations to collective memory."³⁵ How do the curators relate to Ottoman history and how do they remember the past? The following sections will centre on two categories of important findings of the research. First, I will discuss the curators' historical memories of the Ottoman period in the Balkans and in Serbia. The themes which were present were the remembrance of a cultural diversity in the Balkans, but also the Orthodox antiquity which is closely associated to the Byzantium period. The Ottomans were, by and large, viewed as interrupting the Byzantine continuity through wars and new social realities.

The second finding relates to the present or current practice in the museum, and a discussion whether these memories influence the presentation of the Ottoman heritage in the museum. A recurrent response was that the Ottoman period and culture was not considered to be relevant, or of any interest, neither to the curators nor to the museum administration in general. Thus, Ottoman culture did not fall under the concepts of Serbian traditional culture. However, in the conversations with some of the curators it was clear that the distinction between "Serbian" and "Oriental" was a fine one, if not a non-existent one.

Cultural Diversity in the Balkans

In the conversation with the curators the expressions "Ottoman", "Oriental", "Turkish" and "Turks" were used interchangeably.³⁶ The terms appeared to represent a variation on the same theme. This is important because it shows that the curators equate these terms, making them referents of the same thing. Some of the curators did scrutinize the meaning of the word "Ottoman". For them, the term is rather unspecific as it entails Ottoman legacy, Oriental legacy and involves by and large contemporary Turkish influences.³⁷

For instance, MS, RB and VS³⁸ emphasized that Balkan had always been a crossroad where many people had passed through.

³⁵ Crane, "Writing the Individual Back into Collective Memory", 1376.

³⁶ The reader should be aware that these terms will be applied next to one another in the following parts of the analysis.

³⁷ Interview with MS, 23rd of March, 2012.

³⁸ The initials of the informants are used with the informants consent.

“Everyone that came left some traces in terms of culture. [...] It’s difficult to tell you *what exactly* is Ottoman.”³⁹

VS, on the other hand, claims that Serbia is roughly characterized by the segments of the “Old Balkan Tradition” which she explains, originated before the arrival of the Slavs. But she also mentions that Serbian culture was influenced by the Greeks as well as the Turks.

“It means that from the beginning, it has been a clash of cultures in this area and it’s visible in every aspect of the culture and tradition.”⁴⁰

Therefore, one of the difficulties in being specific in regards of the Ottoman heritage has to do with the memory of a cultural diversity that, according to the curators, has always existed in the Balkans. By and large, Serbia and the Balkans are seen as an area stirred by different cultures due to its geographical and political location. It was therefore difficult for the curators to categorize and distinguish Ottoman heritage in Serbia. This was due to their memory of a cultural “turmoil” and diversity that has always existed in the Balkans, as well as the difficulties in specifying Ottoman legacy and culture vis-à-vis Serbian culture. The interpretations of a “turmoil” of cultures, indicates what is previously mentioned, namely, the problems in perceiving culture as free of internal contradictions.

Some of the curators also had difficulties speaking about Ottoman legacy with certainty because it was perceived as a more or less integral part of the Serbian culture. For MM it appeared to be difficult to say whether these “Oriental” influences could in fact be distinguished from what was Serbian. He emphasized that it was indeed something foreign, but which he now considered to be “ours”.⁴¹ This view reflects a merging of culture, thus, Serbian culture cannot easily be distinguished from Turkish or Oriental influences.

“Hardly anyone can tell you what is Oriental and what is not, maybe with the exception of our colleagues who study Oriental culture at the Belgrade University“, MM said.⁴²

VD also expressed her perception of the Ottoman culture as manifested and internalized in her own culture. She is “living with that culture”, she told me.⁴³ Such views, however, illustrate that there was also a perception of the Oriental existing simultaneously *aside* to their indigenous culture. This “foreignness” is also an example of the informants’ viewpoints of the Oriental. The “Oriental influences” represents thus ““Other” vis-à-vis the museum’s presentation and memory of “the traditional” Serbian or orthodox culture.

Although VD expressed a certain distance between her culture and the Ottoman culture when saying that she is living *with* it, traces of tangible Ottoman culture were also treated and understood as “Oriental influences” in the Serbian

³⁹ Interview with MS 23rd of March.

⁴⁰ Interview with VS, 27th of March, 2012.

⁴¹ Interview with MM, 21st of March, 2012.

⁴² Interview with MM, 19th of March, 2012.

⁴³ Interview with VD, 3rd of April, 2012.

“indigenous” culture. This is also exemplified in one of the museum pamphlets where it is stated that: “In the 14th century came the invasion of the Ottoman Turks and the long years of their rule, which resulted in the introduction of Turkish and Oriental elements in the life and culture of the population in these regions.”⁴⁴

The text indicates a prior life and culture to that of the Turkish culture which existed in Serbia before the invasion of the Ottomans. However, the paragraph also signals that these influences and cultural elements are recognized as characterizing Serbian culture and cannot be separated completely from the conceptions of traditional culture.

Orthodox Antiquity and Roots of the Slavs

Although the curators seemed to struggle in order to give specific accounts of the Ottoman culture and legacy, the informants’ historical memories of the Ottoman rule share many common characteristics. The memory of the Ottoman Empire as a foreign occupation was present among all of the curators although with different emphasis. Islam was also understood to be the most important attribution to their conception of “Orientalism.” It might even be possible to argue that Islam *is* the Oriental for the curators. This was evident as Islam particularly specified this period.

Their memories of Ottoman culture in Serbia were, however, also providing conclusions about their conceptions of Orthodoxy in Serbia and native culture. The Islamic Ottoman culture next to the Christian/Orthodox Slavic can be understood as conflicting. Islam was perceived as an oppressive power constellation in the Serbian society during the Ottoman rule and which hindered the Orthodox culture and people to flourish. This is important since it gives a good explanation for the treatment of the Ottoman as something “foreign” and do not correspond to the traditional narrative of the museum. The relationship between these two cultures, however, could also be interpreted as a “symbiosis” where the Ottoman culture reaffirms Orthodox values and gives life to ideas of ancient Serbian cultures.

The long duration of the Byzantine Empire was brought forward by RB, MM and MS which indicates a strong awareness of the Orthodox origin and life of the Serbs which existed prior to the Ottoman Empire. MS and MM’ responses trace continuity between the present Serbian cultures to that of the Byzantine period.

MS told me:

When the Turks came, Serbia was a part of the Byzantine Empire and what we today speak of as “Ottoman” is actually a mixture of elements of both Byz-

⁴⁴ The Ethnographic Museum, “Folk Culture on the Territory of SR Serbia”, museum pamphlet.

antine and Ottoman. The government remained the same as it was before their arrival together with the same praxis of the administrative structure.⁴⁵

He also suggests that the period of Ottoman rule in Serbia was a process of Islamization where the main important difference from Byzantine was the Islamic religion and their organization of the military. "All the rest remained the same" "Byzantium lasted for one thousand years", MS added.⁴⁶

In contrast to MS and MM, VS and RB were more explicit in their conceptions of the Ottomans being intruders and who threatened the Orthodox traditions and structures. They remembered the Ottomans as invaders which represented a break with the societal structure and traditions.⁴⁷ RB talked about Serbia as a developed Christian mediaeval state a par with Britain and Germany before the arrival of the Ottomans.⁴⁸

He, however, emphasizes the negative consequences of the advent of the Ottomans:

"[...] The legacy of Europe and the Old Slavonic culture [Orthodox] which existed in the Middle Ages; the Turks interrupted that. It was an interruption of the society and we went in a direction opposite to that of Europe."⁴⁹ RB then stressed that "the Turks did not bring anything good to the Balkans."⁵⁰

For VS the violence and wars which resulted from the Ottoman invasion contributed to impede the development and the organization of the society. She also viewed the end of communication which was caused by the advent of the Turks with Western Europe as a fatal consequence to progress similar to the rest of Europe.

"I don't know what can be said to be an important legacy, but it is negative in that sense. It was a disruption to progress",⁵¹ VS stated.

These recollections addresses both the negative conceptions related to the advent of the Ottomans in the Balkans, as well as contrasting it to a more positive and prior "glorious" past. What is also important, however, is that the historical memory of all of the curators places the Orthodox culture and religion back to an historical time before the arrival of the Ottomans. These memories might help explaining why the Ottoman legacy is not perceived as traditional today. This results from the emphasis on the long duration of Orthodox traditions, and where the conception of Orthodox antiquity is vested in their historical memories. This might also be a sign of the importance attributed to the Orthodox culture for the Serbian social identity.

Recollection of beginnings and origins are particularly important for the identity of nations and groups since it justifies the claim of groups having roots in

⁴⁵ Interview with MS, 23rd of March, 2012.

⁴⁶ Interview with MS, 23rd of March, 2012.

⁴⁷ Interview with RB, 5th of April, 2012, interview with VS, 27th of March, 2012.

⁴⁸ Interview with RB, 5th of April, 2012.

⁴⁹ Interview with RB, 5th of April, 2012.

⁵⁰ Interview with RB, 5th of April, 2012.

⁵¹ Interview with VS, 27th of March, 2012.

a distant sacred community.⁵² It is therefore possible to argue that the memories of the Ottomans as intruders and as an obstacle to the already existing Orthodox culture and tradition in Serbia, can explain why the Ottoman legacy does not surpass as “traditional culture” in the museum.

In the next section I will argue that Islam has also come to represent a break with the Orthodox traditions by being forced upon the Balkan population.

Turks as Enemies and Invaders

The historical memory of Turks as enemies of the Serbs who suffered due to Islamic oppression, can also explain why the heritage from this period do not surpass as traditional culture. The memory of the Ottoman rule in Serbia was largely interpreted as a negative epoch in Serbian history.

MM recounted, for instance, a legend passed to him by his grandfather where the flight from the Turks was a theme.

There is a legend; Serbians fighting the local Turkish authorities in the nineteenth century when the pressure on the farmers intensified as the Turks started to lose power and therefore tried to retrieve as much taxes as possible. The pressure was too hard on them, and the legend goes that they simply had to kill some of the local authority persons. [Turks] As a consequence, they had to flee to the woods to escape their revenge.⁵³

MM stressed however that as an anthropologist he perceived the story to be a “heroic tale” and remained doubtful whether the killings of the Turks ever took place.

RB remembered the arrival of the Turks as an invasion followed by “genocide”. He could also tell me about his ancestors all the way back to the fifteenth century and he described how they had “to flee from the Turks”.

“It was an invasion! [...] They destroyed everything. They first committed genocide in Serbia, not only in Serbia, but in all of the Balkan countries.[...] They took the women and children as prisoners, they killed people, they attacked...”⁵⁴

The negative attribution to their historical memory of this period in Serbia was overall not so explicit among the younger curators. MS, MM and MC told me instead that they were taught in school that the Turks were enemies of the Serbs, although questioning the negative representation. MC also mentioned that she was sad to learn that her daughter had negative preconceptions towards Tur-

⁵² Zerubavel, “Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israel National Tradition”, 32.

⁵³ Interview with MM, 21st of March, 2012.

⁵⁴ Interview with RB, 5th of April, 2012.

key and Turks as they were still portraying a negative image of this period in her daughter's history classes.⁵⁵

"The Turks and the Germans have always been portrayed as the main enemies of the Serbians", MS tells me in one of the interviews, although he stresses that this should be considered a myth.⁵⁶

The enemy picture also stemmed from the memories of Serbs being slaves under the Ottomans.⁵⁷ These perceptions could be traced back to the role of Islam during the rule of the Ottomans. The consequences of not being a Muslim and accepting Islam deprived the Orthodox Serbs for many rights. The Serbs did not have the opportunity to hold higher administrative positions as well as moving forward in the society unless they converted to Islam.

VS particularly emphasized that the Serbs were slaves as they were part of the "rayah" under the Turks and commented that every nation should have its own freedom.⁵⁸ The "rayah" was the non-Muslim population [zimmis] in the society, and thus belonged to the lower strata and were accorded worse treatment than to that of the Muslims.⁵⁹

RB is more explicit: "They kept the Balkan people as slaves and with their Jihad they wanted to change the whole manner of life."⁶⁰

Although there were different points of views attached to these historical memories, their memories from the Ottoman rule in Serbia were characterized by violence, hard conditions for the Orthodox Serbs which in turn led to upspring and an image of Serbia always being in a war-state with the Ottomans/Turks.⁶¹ The perceptions of intruders into the Old Slavonic culture is particularly interesting as it can explain the ideas of the Oriental existing alongside the native or "traditional" culture. The historical memories also portray the Ottomans as threatening the peace and stability that existed before the Ottomans arrival. However, the historical memories of the Ottoman Empire in Serbia were negotiated and questioned by some of the curators, which remained skeptical to what they had learned at school. VD also questioned the factuality of history and if it could ever be a true representation of past events.⁶²

⁵⁵ Interview with MC, 16th of March, 2012.

⁵⁶ Interview with MS, 23rd of March, 2012.

⁵⁷ Interview with MC, 16th of March, interview with VS, 27th of March, interview with RB, 5th of April, 2012.

⁵⁸ Interview with VS, 27th of March, 2012.

⁵⁹ Maria Todorova, "Conversion to Islam as a Trope in Bulgarian Historiography, Fiction and Film", in *Balkan identities – Nation and Memory*, ed. Maria Todorova (New York: New York University Press, 2004),

¹⁴⁷ Wayne S. Vucinich, *The Ottoman Empire: Its Record and Legacy*, (New York: Robert E. Krieger Publishing Company, 1965):47–48.

⁶⁰ Interview with RB, 5th of April, 2012.

⁶¹ Interview with MM, 21st of March, Interview with VS, 27th of March, Interview with RB, 5th of April, 2012.

⁶² Interview with VD, 3rd of April.

Exhibition and Treatment of the Ottoman Heritage in the Museum Memories and Presentation of Ottoman Culture

The lack of scientific treatment of the Ottoman heritage in the museum was explicitly announced by the curators, since most of them told me that Ottoman heritage was “not their topic.”⁶³ With the exception of MC, all of the curators emphasized that they have never specifically concentrated on the “Oriental” influences in the Serbian culture.⁶⁴ Some of the curators seemed actually rather puzzled by the fact that I wanted to focus on the Ottoman heritage in Serbia. The latter was something which in MM’s phrase did not need any “special consideration.” “The Ottoman heritage is part of the culture which you don’t have to emphasize in any specific way.”⁶⁵

VS, whose area is folk costumes, told me that she was not familiar with any specific literature on Ottoman history or anything considered being “Turkish”. “It’s not my topic of reflection”, she says.⁶⁶

When I asked if anyone specifically deals with the Ottoman legacy or Oriental legacy, she tells me that everything in the museum is divided according to topics such as economy, costumes, architecture, housing and so on, and that nobody specifically deals with “Orientalism”.⁶⁷

What is of great significance in this regard, is that some of the curators mentioned that there had been no special classes or courses offered about this period and legacy during their university studies. It is apparent from their answers that the information they have on this period is gathered both from formal education, through research they have committed in relation to their work at the museum, as well as impressions collected in different situations in their life. On the question where he found literature on the Ottoman rule in Serbia, MS answered:

“That is just, like I told you, incidental. I have never directly dealt with the Ottoman influences; however, it is also in relation to my own experience; in relation to the house where I live, in the Cafes where I have been, in any case. It is [...] something that I have gathered from my experiences. So, when I am faced with it I am thinking: ‘Aha! And this is Ottoman heritage.’”⁶⁸

As with MS, VD also tells me that her knowledge of the Ottoman culture and history is collected from various impressions and sources throughout the years.

“Studying, reading books, watching films; whatever is available. We have been learning about that more or less. I finished the faculty more than 30 years ago and I can’t exactly remember what literature it was, but there was literature.

⁶³ Interview with MS, 28th of March, MM, 19th of March, VS, 27th of March, VD, 3rd of April.

⁶⁴ Interview with MS, 28th of March, MM, 19th of March, VS, 27th of March, VD, 3rd of April.

⁶⁵ Interview with MM, 19th of March, 2012.

⁶⁶ Interview with VS, 27th of March.

⁶⁷ Interview with VS, 27th of March.

⁶⁸ Interview with MS, 28th of March.

I performed research once on wedding customs in the Sjenica area [located in the Sandžak] where more than 50 per cent of the inhabitants are Muslims.⁶⁹

For these reasons, I perceived that the curators by large based their information and knowledge of the Ottoman period and culture on random encounters with literature and approaches towards the question. This was emphasized and explicitly expressed by them.⁷⁰ It was, therefore, apparent that the Ottoman heritage was not treated within a theoretical and methodological framework at the museum.

MS told me that discussions concerning Ottoman heritage had never taken place in the museum: “That [discussion] is something which doesn’t exist... That period is not properly dealt with in terms of museology in the Ethnographic Museum.”⁷¹

This also became clear in one of the interviews with MM. He told me that they had once discovered some Arabic inscriptions on a door, when they had prepared it for an exhibition. He stressed, however, that the historic elements were not important in this particular context as the exhibition dealt with the meaning of doors and what they represent in the society. Consequently, where it came from or whatever wood it was made of were of less importance.

MM: In principle, like I told you, we seldom concretely think about what are the Ottoman influences.

Me: When you mentioned that you discovered some inscriptions in Arabic on one of the doors you exhibited, maybe then you discussed some of these influences?

MM: There was no discussion, *we were just asserting the obvious* [...] There were vegetal ornaments which we recognize and which we know from literature. [...] I cannot come to think about any particular scientific conversation about Ottoman influences in our culture.⁷²

A Southern Phenomenon

Another possible explanation why the curators did not engage in any specific examination of the Ottoman heritage in the museum was that they regarded this cultural heritage to be more present in the south. When I was asking about the traces of Ottoman material culture, all of the curators regarded it to be more of an issue in the Sandžak region, together with Bosnia and Kosovo which were also

⁶⁹ Interview with VD, 3rd of April, 2012.

⁷⁰ Interview with MM 19th of March, 2012, Interview with MS, 23rd of March, 2012.

⁷¹ Interview with MS, 28th of March, 2012.

⁷² Interview with MM, 21st of March, 2012.

particularly mentioned.⁷³ In other words, it was not something which was considered to be most particular in Serbia. It was also suggested that I should travel to the south if I really wanted to study the Ottoman legacy. The curators told me that the Ottoman imprints were more evident in terms of architecture and organization of space, as well as the house interior. MC also considered the “mentality” to be more “Oriental” in Bosnia and Kosovo, than in Belgrade.

Their viewpoints might be explained by the fact that the Ottomans were longer present in the south of Serbia than in the north, as the first uprising started in 1805 and the northern part of Serbia gained some autonomy already in 1830, whilst the Ottomans did not leave indefinitely the south of Serbia and Kosovo until after the First World War.⁷⁴ “The Danube was the border”, VS tells me, emphasizing that the northern province, Vojvodina, for a long time was under the Austro-Hungarian Empire.⁷⁵ This interpretation also reflects the history writing in the 19th century which, as argued earlier, was colored by the events that took place in this time period.

Regardless of whether the Muslim population and the Ottoman cultural imprints are more visible and obvious in the Southern parts of the Balkan Peninsula, it appeared, however, that according to the curators’ statements the Islamic culture or features do not suit the narrative and exhibition in the museum. The aim of the exhibition which is to present the unity of the Serbs, indicates that traces of other cultures and people do not serve any purpose in this regard.⁷⁶

Curators as Memory and Opinion Makers

Since exhibitions in any museum are the results of the curators’ work and interpretation, the theoretical assumption was that the collective memory of the curators would have an effect on the exhibition of culture in the museum.

By far, the curators’ responses portray a situation where the Ottoman heritage is excluded from scientific interpretation and investigation at the museum. However, it is not possible to understand the lack of attention to this heritage by only giving light to their remembrance of Ottoman legacy. What became particularly evident during the conversation with the curators was that they had very little authority and thus little impact on the museum practice. This is important to emphasize because the curators had less power and authority in terms of being

⁷³ Interview with MC, 16th of March, interview with MS, 23rd of March, interview with VD, 3rd of April.

⁷⁴ Jasna Dragović-Soso, “Rethinking Yugoslavia: Serbian intellectuals and the ‘National Question’ in Historical Perspective”, *Contemporary European History* 13, 2, 2004: 170.

⁷⁵ Interview with VS, 27th of March, 2012.

⁷⁶ The Ethnographic Museum, Information placate, visited August 4, 2012.

“meaning makers” and “memory makers” than what was initially assumed before I embarked on the field research. My choice of cases was based on the assumption that these workers represent one of the important branches of cultural workers and interpreters within a society.

By talking with the curators it became obvious that the hierarchical power structure in the museum, as well as the importance of party affiliation hindered the curators’ ability to affect the decision-making regarding exhibition and museum presentation. This was exemplified on several occasions as well as explicitly pronounced by more or less all the curators.⁷⁷ On the question on how they regarded their importance as opinion makers in terms of cultural representation in the Serbian society, most of the curators said they did not have any authority. MS and MM argued that in principle their position as curators should also be attributed with cultural authority, but only “if the museum functioned the way it is supposed to.”⁷⁸ Since the museum is a public institution and is funded by the Ministry of Culture in Serbia⁷⁹, “guidelines” from political parties can be said to be more important for the practice and choice of exhibitions and research at the museum.

MC and MM emphasized how the power of the curators depends on their political position, and not according to their qualities and professional skills. What was also mentioned by many of the curators was that the importance of party affiliation and loyalty came in the foreground for museological creativity and innovation. “I can be the best curator in the museum, but I might get fired if you have a problem with me.”⁸⁰ MM also explained that the socialist legacy present a continuous obstacle to innovation and progress in the Serbian society.

Creativity died during the age of socialism, not only in the Ethnographic Museum, but in terms of the museum practice in general. Why would I try to make something special and good, when I would be paid the same amount as someone who does not contribute at all?⁸¹

More or less arbitrary allocation of power and positions also indicates that there is little connection between de facto power and formal position. VS, who held a position as a museum councilor, told me for instance that she had no authority what so ever over the organization and practice at the museum. That was left to the director of the museum and the museum administration.⁸²

Since the curators had little ability to affect the museum practice, one may wonder whether the importance of their memory of Ottoman past makes any

⁷⁷ Interview with MM 19th and 21st of March, Interview with MC, 16th of March, interview with MS, 23rd and 28th of March, interview with VS, 27th of March, interview with RB, 5th of April, 2012.

⁷⁸ Interview with MS, 28th of March, 2012.

⁷⁹ Interview with VS, 27th of March, 2012.

⁸⁰ Interview with MM, 19th March, 2012.

⁸¹ Interview with MM, 19th of March, 2012, For more research on museums and the socialist legacy see Ljiljana Gavrilović, *Култура у излогу: Ка Новој музеологији*, 29.

⁸² Interview with VS, 27th of March, 2012.

difference at all. The employees in the museum were largely appointed due to their political loyalty and not as a result of their professional qualities. This created tensions and poor relations, and can explain the lack of emphasis, not just in terms of Ottoman legacy, but on innovation of the museum practice as a whole.

What is important to emphasize is that in such a working environment where decisions are top-down and where there is little room for creative independency outside the political party structure, a politicized issue such as Ottoman heritage has few chances to be represented. This was exemplified in one of the interviews with MS. When I asked him why they did not have more meetings with the curators and more discussions concerning the museum practice, he told me that this was not favored by the administration because people will start to ask “difficult questions.”⁸³

If there would be a meeting and people starts asking questions, for instance about the Ottoman heritage, it will get problematic when people ask why we don't portray more of this culture. The question then arises: Why haven't we done this sooner and in the course of the last hundred years?⁸⁴

However, he also emphasized that there was “no need” to start any discussions about the Ottoman culture or question any current museum display at the museum since the public profile and position of the museum is “Serbian traditional culture.”

“Ottoman culture is far away from [their] conceptions of traditional culture. It is complicated.”⁸⁵

He also explained how a previous exhibition during the 90s which focused on the battle of Kosovo in 1389 would stand in a stark contrast to any museum practice which would now portray the Ottoman legacy in a more friendly light.⁸⁶ This would entail contradictions in terms of the narrative of the museum and previous exhibitions of traditional culture. It, however, also exemplifies one of the contradictions of heritage promotion and promoters, who, in Lowenthal's words, “feel obliged to confirm popular error.”⁸⁷

“In fact, many people consider something to be Ottoman or Turkish which is not,”⁸⁸ MS told me.

The results of this inquiry, both in terms of the curators' memory, as well as their attitude and perceptions towards this legacy are however not straightforward. From the few cases which are selected for this analysis there are some differences in the curators' attitudes and interpretations of this legacy, as well as meanings attached to their historical memories. Some of the curators mentioned that it would be interesting to portray and exhibit more of the Ottoman legacy and devote more attention towards these issues; however, there were no efforts

⁸³ Interview with MS, 28th of March, 2012.

⁸⁴ Interview with MS, 28th of March, 2012.

⁸⁵ Interview with MS, 28th of March, 2012.

⁸⁶ Interview with MS, 28th of March, 2012.

⁸⁷ Lowenthal, “Fabricating Heritage”, 13.

⁸⁸ Interview with MS, 23rd of March, 2012.

to realize these claims.⁸⁹ It can largely be explained by the hierarchical power structure where the curators' ability to affect and influence the museum practice is very limited.

It should also be emphasized that it was obvious that there existed a conflict and disagreement concerning the presentation and exhibiting of culture in the museum. Some of the curators expressed the need for modernizing the museum practice and departing from the traditional ethnological discipline which favors origin and antiquity instead of introducing new museological approaches.⁹⁰

Conclusion: The Ethnographic Museum as a Site of Memory of Ottoman Heritage

The intention with this study was to give the reader further insight to the treatment of Ottoman legacy in the Ethnographic Museum and to present the museum as a channel of memory which have the potential to impact and shape the interpretations of Serbian collective identity.

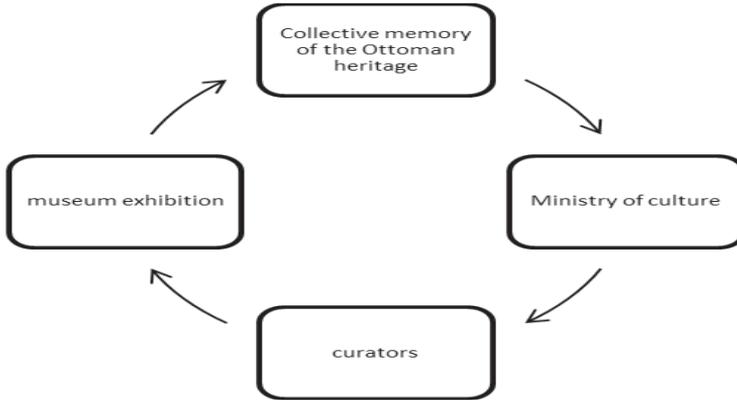
Following my argumentation throughout the article, my conclusion from this inquiry is that the Ethnographic museum as a site of memory transmits and sustains the oblivion and neglect of the Ottoman heritage. Potential visitors of the current exhibitions are not presented with any alternative and new perspective regarding the Ottoman impact and heritage in Serbia.

The importance of the curators' historical memory can explain the lack of interest and focus of this heritage. The curators' historical memories in large portray the Ottoman rule in Serbia a negative period in Serbia. Some of the curators view the Ottoman Empire as a foreign imposition which threatened the life and culture of Orthodox and Old Slavonic culture in Serbia. The association of Orientalism and Islam was in large, thus, understood as standing in contrast to their memories of traditional life and culture of Serbs. The collective identity and memory of traditional culture is not associated with Ottoman or Islamic culture, but instead orthodox culture and tradition.

However, the personal interpretations and memory of the curators cannot alone explain the lack of scientific treatment. The issue of "politics of memory" is also at stake in the museum. The impact of the Ministry of culture and political parties in the decision making process must also be taken into consideration when making any assumptions between the correlations and causal effects in the presentation of culture in the museum. Therefore, the model presented in the introduction has been attributed with some modifications:

⁸⁹ Interview with MS, 23rd of March, 2012, interview with VD, 3rd of April, 2012.

⁹⁰ Interview with MM 19th of March, 2012, Interview with MS. 23rd and 28th of March, 2012.



One of the most important findings, however, is that the ambivalence and reluctance to investigate these matters further might also stem from the lack of knowledge and consequently, interest in this heritage. It was clear that very few of the curators had engaged in any scientific inquiries regarding Islamic material culture and history, and that these matters were not part of their university studies. This also indicates the importance of investigating memories further in communities where records of past events rely heavily on memory in the transmission of heritage. When these memories remain unchallenged, however, they can serve as an obstacle to new historical perspectives which might facilitate liberation from “outworn rules and age-old tyrannies.”⁹¹

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⁹¹ Lowenthal. *The Past is a Foreign Country*, 411.

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Сири Терез Соли

СЕЋАЊЕ И ПРЕДСТАВЉАЊЕ ОСМАНСКЕ БАШТИНЕ – ТЕРЕНСКО ИСТРАЖИВАЊЕ У ЕТНОГРАФСКОМ МУЗЕЈУ У БЕОГРАДУ

Резиме

Чланак је скраћена верзија мастер тезе „Сећања и представљање османске баштине у Србији – Теренско истраживање у Етнографском музеју у Београду“. Ауторка разматра негативне интерпретације османског наслеђа у Србији и концепте традиционалне српске културе. Посебан акценат је стављен на представљање османске баштине у музеју. Главни аргумент је да је негативно сећање на османско наслеђе средство којим се оправдава садашњи друштвени поредак и конвенције. Сећање на османску културу и наслеђе у супротности је са схватањима традиционалне српске културе и зато се не уважава и не представља као српско културно наслеђе у Етнографском музеју. Као важна културна институција, Етнографски музеј има улогу у преношењу сећања на културу и обичаје у друштву. Тврди се да негативно сећање и непредстављање новог тумачења овог наслеђа спречавају приказ нових перспектива и информација о османској прошлости у Србији. Такође се тврди да би информације о османској прошлости у Србији могле допринети бољем разумевању и уважавању османске историје и културног значаја и богатства региона. Ауторка закључује да ово наслеђе није предмет пажње и научних истраживања у музеју. Традиција схваћена као „српско“ или „православно“ препоручује се као непоуздано аналитичко оруђе за тумачење културе, посебно у погледу дотичног региона, где постоји сложен склоп културних израза, религија и народа.