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Evolution and competition of the myths of origin: Bulgarian and Balkan aspects

Abstract

The paper argues that historic myths and myths of origin, being an essential part of national mythology, are neither the first to emerge nor the only one. Furthermore, as a general rule, there are often several variations of the narration about the past of a nation that are evolving and compete for the dominant position.

In an attempt to evade the polemics the author analyses some Bulgarian aspects of the crucial problem about the evolution and competition among these variations of national mythology comparing them with analogical Balkan phenomena. In all these countries there are mythical narrations about the ancient times, about Christian Middle Ages and Byzantium, about the struggle for an independent state, etc. They were arguing for primacy in the beginning; later some ideologists of the nation managed to build one relatively stable synthesis.

Keywords: myths of origin, Bulgaria, Balkans, narrations

National mythology is relatively late, dynamic and not so homogenous structure. Ethnogenesis and myths of origin, being an essential part of it, are neither the first to emerge nor the only one. Furthermore, as a rule, there are often several variations of the narration about the origin of a nation that are evolving and competing for a dominant position. I will try to avoid the polemics and to reach the problem of that evolution and competition, bearing in mind the Bulgarian case and analyzing it in Balkan context. I will also try to present some of the factors that determine the plurality of national mythology.

The myths of origin that are actual today are primarily (but not only) national that means – they are connected with nationalism and nation-state.

The notions of 'Europe' and 'European' thought as one specific civilization, are rather new – they emerged somewhere in the late 18th and even in early 19th century in Western Europe and were imposed not so rapidly while the eastern border was drawn in the 19th century and is still disputable in one way or another. (Lukacs 1993; Spengler 1918; Wolff 2004) When ancient Helens used the word Europe, they were designating Asia Minor, at least in some periods. Early uses of this term that were circulating after the late 10th and early 11th century had not precisely the meaning in circulation nowadays.

Forging the mythology of nationalism is not a one-time act. It is an embodiment of a collective identity that uses the rich armory of a nation-state (and irredentist movements) and one could not expect to be fully uniformed. This is not the case and the reasons are multiple.

First. Members of a national community are also bearers of other identities (gender, religious, territorial, professional, social, supranational, etc.), they are simultaneously members of other communities. All these other identities and communities have, to one extent or another, their own mythology.

Second. There always exists synchronously different social groups that are in conflict. They actively argue with one another and among the preferred arguments in their polemics are different interpretations of the ethnogenesis, of the emergence and evolution of their nation-state. I would highlight that in some discussions different theories about the origin are only arguments, only weapons or instruments, while the reasons for the conflict should be traced somewhere else.

Third, but not less important. Nation-state itself evolves in time and many of the changes affect its mythology. (Being not so familiar with the details, I will dare to speculate that there should be some differences between Portugal national mythology from the 1930s and nowadays.)

Forth. The variations of the discourses about origin depend on their genre. Academic history, school textbooks, journalism have their specific manners of narration. Not to mention lower forms of folklore and cultural intimacy.

Fifth. National mythology uses elements from several older similar structures that could be assembled (through Claude Lévi-Strauss' *bricolage*) in different ways and in different proportions.

Finally, every narration inevitably became trivial for the readers; a need to be innovated overturned and even travestied emerges. The processes of problematizing of the dominant nationalistic discourses started shortly af-

ter its imposing and often mingle with it. In Bulgarian case, the great poet Christo Botev (1848-1876), who died in the irredentist movement was one of the men that forged the myth and at the same time problematized it.

One could generalize that two trends, two forces are active simultaneously in every national mythology – centripetal (unifying) and centrifugal (distinguishing). First of them is aiming at the commonly accepted structure that follows the universal pattern and its well-known variations; the other puts in the foreground some particular features, that by the way, also conform to familiar patterns.

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The Christian community in the Balkans, pressed by strong social processes and external influences, disintegrated gradually to separate national units. Newly emerged communities embraced the “national idea”; nation-builders defined the origin and drew the borders of the new ‘imagined’ entities. In this situation, the coherence and the continuity are problematic, so the genealogical narration is crucial. (Nation 1990) This was even more evident when ‘own’ state was still lacking, which was the case with all Balkan nations whose ideologists were aspiring for separation from Ottoman Empire.¹

Emerging nations intensely forged their mythology, that means also that they were reconstructing and sacralizing some variation of their past that had to legitimize their actual claims. This newly created mythical past was more historical than the sacral past in classic myths, but it was built on through similar mechanisms. On the other hand, narrations of national mythology are not only about the past, the sacral truth is coded in plots about contemporary times too.

Speaking in gross terms, the shift was from ecclesiastic to secular, ‘from the Cross to the flag’ (Kitromilides 1994), from universal to more concrete, from more distant towards more recent past. This shift was not as radical as it looks at first glance, because the new mythical structure (nationalism), at least in the Balkans and in Europe, did not reject the old one (Christianity); on the contrary, it declared that was in full harmony with it; newly emerged nationalism wanted only to replace the previous institution. Breaking from Ecumenical Patriarchate (1870) was one of the key

¹ About the particularities of the ‘ethnic’ (Eastern) nationalism, typical for Bulgarians, and its differences from ‘territorial’ (Western) see Smith (2000).

events in Bulgarian history; similar trends could be traced in other Balkan countries. In the 21st century, one can also trace the opposite trend – from the flag to the Cross and Crescent.

Newly emerged national mythology was build on the fundament of older structures, encoded in different texts, but performs similar functions, re-defining the bearer of the identity. From one point of view, this re-defining presents an attempt to synchronize the universal Christian identity (that was not fully adopted) and Christian community with one hypothetical, imagined variation of an older and more particular identity and community – the tribal one. From a different point of view, the imposing of nationalism was a rearrangement of the hierarchy of identities in which the previous dominant identity (the religious one) was outstripped by another identity (ethnic, linguistic).

The transition between these two structures had to be smooth; the ideologists of nationalism put the stress on continuity, on the antiquity of the national spirit that they were evoking for a new life. Searching own antiquity leads to pre-Christian ages, but in the Balkans and in Europe, this did not generate serious tension with the declared Christian identity.

Balkan nationalisms emerged as ideologies of oppressed minorities in Ottoman Empire. They influenced one another and at the same time competed furiously for territory and population. This was the motivation of the still dominant concept in Bulgarian humanities to highlight the ‘ethnic’, meaning ‘linguistic’, determinants of national identity, at to put the religion in a second place. I will come back to the topic of ethnicity, but let me first mention another less popular discourse that silently proposes an alternative perspective. In a sense, this approach tries if not to restore than to rehabilitate the Orthodox community, Byzantine civilization and the unity they had created, all this destroyed by nationalism. One should not neglect easily its arguments that are in accordance with some historical evidence and actual methodological patterns. However, there is one serious problem – the danger of a clerical image of the world, should I say – the danger of an Orthodox fundamentalism. Although not recognized, the similar trend really exists in Bulgarian society (not to mention Russian and Greek) and it often takes some simplified and distorted shape in public debate and infiltrates even scholarship.

The rational and secular variation (Каприяв 1990) of this approach draws a picture that suppresses the tensions and tends to idealize the past, to replace it with a retro-utopian construction. According to it, In Middle ages, Bulgarians and other Balkan nations were part of a Byzantium

that did not overlap with the Empire territorially or chronologically. This community was dominated by Christian universalism that neglected ethnic affiliation and for that reason offered opportunities for personal prosperity regardless belonging to the family (clan) or ethnic or social group. The language was an important distinctive feature, on which Bulgarians and other non-Greek ethnic groups put stress, but even it did not disturb the universal and non-problematic order. To a great extent, this structure was preserved during first centuries of Ottoman rule and was (regrettably) destroyed by nationalism.

Typically for a polemic, this generalized picture is rather harmonious, idyllic and non-problematic. It delicately goes around the question how deeply rooted was official Christian doctrine in the average people, in the mind of peasants – this question is largely debated in other contexts. Presentation of Christian universalism avoids the well-known fissions – first Eastern (Orthodox) versus Western (Catholic), then the split of the Western with the emergence of Protestantism, etc. (Catholicism and Protestantism were also presented in the Balkans, although in a more modest scale.)

The reality was, of course, quite different. Numerous data support a hypothesis that nationalism imposed from relatively thin elite, find and combined some forms of proto-nationalism and dominant popular Christianity, quite different from canonical one professed by a relatively narrow elite. Most widely practiced was a folk mythology, which is actually relatively not well known today by the wider audience, as it was quite consistently edited many decades by nationalist elites.

Historic plots

Plunging in particular national mythologies (Bulgarian and of other Balkan nations) shows that plots about ethnogenesis and even narrations about glorious deeds of great ancestors took relatively small part of the whole structure. The Khan Krum' victory over Byzantine Emperor Nikephoros I (807 AD) and the legend that he then had Emperor's skull lined with silver and used it as a drinking cup, King (Tsar) Simeon and the siege of Constantinople (913 AD), King (Tsar) Kaloyan and his victory over the Crusaders (1205 AD)... these all are presented in historical writings, school textbooks, etc, but, at least in early periods, rarely generated elaborated narrations in literature and in other popular texts.

The presence of depressive traumas, the narrations about defeats, misfortune, and downfalls are even more important. One eminent instance

is the image of the blinded by the Byzantine Emperor Basil II “the Bulgar-slayer” soldiers of Tsar Samuel (1014 AD) crucial for both Bulgarian and Macedonian national mythology. Similar is the case with the battle of Kosovo (1389 AD) in Serbian national mythology, the fall of Constantinople (1204 and 1453) in Greek mythology, etc.

The central traumatic event in Bulgarian history and national mythology (and in mythologies of other Balkan nations) is the Ottoman conquest (1393 AD) that was part of a chain of events in which Christians suffered a defeat by Muslims. Presumably, this problem is well known in Iberian countries. Obviously, this presents a problem that cannot be easily neglected or forgotten. It needs a mythical explanation, for example, the story about the misunderstanding between the rulers that has clear analogies in folklore. One could also trace variations of the well-known myth about the last king and his dead that could be reversed in a miraculous manner. As legends demonstrate, the hero – King Arthur, Prince Marko – could come back from a cave and restore the previous harmonic world. The dead of the last ruler has also another analogy – the widely spread in different mythologies sacrifice of the Divine King. (Frazer 1890)

The most important traumatic event in Bulgarian national mythology is the Islamization of Christians after the Ottoman conquest that happened in several waves. There are many legends and other text reflecting this process, some of them with questionable authenticity. These plots are still alive in mass consciousness and determine political actions and preferences. To a lesser degree, the same is the truth for other Balkan Christian national mythologies.

One could suggest some kind of succession in the emergence of mythical plots – the more early emerged were predominantly traumatic, later – predominantly heroic; then again traumatic come in front or both types coexist, complementing and competing one another.

The main event in the history of Bulgarian state(s) - its establishing - relatively late became part of national mythology, and the founder (Khan Asparukh) relatively late find his place in the national pantheon. As a matter of fact, the first really very popular narration about him in literature emerged in the late 20th century – the novel *Predicted by Pagane* (1980) by Vera Mutavchieva and moreover its screening *681 AD: The Glory of Khan*, 1981, director Ludmil Staykov.

Monk Paisiy Hilendarski (1722-1773) generally recognized as the father of Bulgarian historiography, of Bulgarian nationalism and its mythology did not mention the name and blurred the event. For him and for all

the other authors of history books from late 18th and early 19th century the key event was the baptism of the state (by Prince Boris-Mihail, 864) followed by adopting Cyrillic Alphabet (created by St. Cyril and Methodius). This was an instrument to highlight two great communities (Christian and Slav); the first was dominant in the previous period, still silently opposed to the newly created ethnic community, which existence was problematic in the time of baptizing (9th century). In fact, the first new construction proposed by nationalism was Slav community.

On the other hand, in several recent mythical narratives, the baptism of Bulgarians is re-interpreted in a rather different way. It is presented as the tragic story of the pagans – the authentic Bulgarians – defeated by the faith of their alien evil enemies. Similar opposite interpretations generate also the heretics and at first place the Bogomilism. From one point of view, they were unique religious movement, aspiring for social justice, protecting the oppressed and lancing important philosophical ideas; from the other, this was something that weakened the state and undermined social order.

All these and other competing variations of different myths (Bulgarian, Balkan, but not only) have their motivation. They promote different variations of the past that are important for the plans about the future; they are also models for identification and strategies for intercourse with other civilizations, aspirations for participation in one or another large supranational community. Each of them has not only own variation of the past and the national ‘Self’ (national ‘We’), but also an own variation of the Other, of Allies and Enemies, of Europe. These trends bear also collective unconscious fears and desires.

Let me try to list these competing trends in chronological order, according to their appearance. This is not an easy task, because they are fluid, evolving in time and often pretend to be something quite different. The observer could also be misled by his own predilections and preferences. At the beginning, some of these trends coexisted peacefully in one text. This was exactly the case of the above-mentioned monk Paisiy Hilendarski and his famous manuscript *Slavo-Bulgarian History* (1762). Dominant in this famous book was the attempt to put Bulgarians in the framework of the Bible (using an ethnogenetic narration that starts with Noah from the *Old Testament* that was known also in other traditions). Doing that the author and all of his followers insisted that Bulgarians were part of **Christian** and European civilization, opposed to Muslim and Asiatic, having in mind Ottoman Empire. At the same time, most of the other tendencies were presented in embryo in *Slavo-Bulgarian History*.

The mightiest other trend highlights **Slav community** and insists on reconstructing Slav antiquity tracing in it the ethnogenesis of Bulgarians. For various reasons, part of them obvious, this trend dominates in scholarship and popular consciousness. Sometimes it even pretends to be the only one. Its discourse draws a large-scale picture but still lacks a detailed story, an elaborated plot with generally recognized figures of gods, heroes, evildoers, etc.

The third trend that could be traced in Bulgarian culture, insists on other legacy and membership in other community. Analyzing evolution of the translated in Bulgarian literature in the 19th century I named it a **renaissance** trend, not without an exaggeration, I am afraid. It embraced the corps of literary texts from ancient Greek, Latin, also more recent texts that had something to do with classical Antiquity. The general picture, created by this discourse is not at all elaborated and generally recognized, but nevertheless there are plots and figures, putting Bulgarians in the framework of Antiquity, that have their important place in popular consciousness, such as Alexander the Great, the Byzantine general Belisarius (500–565 AD), etc. The suggestion here was that Bulgarians are (or should be) part of modern European civilization.

Historiography had a long time ago determined **Proto-Bulgarians** (Bulgars) as the second component of the Bulgarian nation. They came to the Balkans led by Khan Asparukh and together with Slavs created Bulgarian state. It is curious topic to investigate the naming of this merging in different texts, as Albena Hranova did for school textbooks; in one case historians claimed that Bulgarians ‘conquered’, in other they ‘united’ or ‘liberated’ local population, predominantly Slavs. (Hranova 2005) Their ethnic origins are uncertain, but most scholars posit that they were a Turkic people, there is also the hypothesis that they were Iranians or Arians. Paisiy and other early historians did not mention them or thought they were Slavs. The attitude towards Proto-Bulgarians varied in time. In some periods, they came to the fore, in other they were sent in the background of national mythology.

Another not so popular concept elaborated on the **Hun’s origin** of Proto-Bulgarians. It was promoted by Gavril Krastevich in his *History of Bulgarians under the name of Huns* (1871). This was curious attempt to oppose the Slav idea and indirectly even to seek some kind of kinship with Turks and more friendly relations with Ottoman Empire (Krastevich was the high-rank officer in it). Exactly, for this reason, it was rejected by the dominant trend in nationalism. This was curious because the author

claimed that Huns were, in fact, Slavs and reconstructed one different variation of the past in which Attila was the main figure.

In addition, another trend insisted on the Hindu-European origin of ancient Bulgarians. Georgi Rakovski (1821-1867), inspired by the respective development in linguistics elaborated a whole theory that works on some problematic etymologies and analogies in folk songs, real or forged. According to this seducing theory, Bulgarians are the most ancient people if not globally, at least in the Balkans.

In the late 20th century Thracian archaeology, **Thracian legacy**, and even Thracian ‘substratum’ in Bulgarian culture became more and more popular. Several types of discourses have to do with this trend and they can be interpreted in various ways, they surely have enough analogies in another Balkan and not only Balkan national mythologies. In a sense, these discourses are some kind of silent but yet permitted opposition of the dominant Slav discourse. One could associate them with inferiority complex or plunge in the curious history of building this contribution to national mythology; one could examine the Neopagan attempts to revive old rituals, etc.

These and some other similar ideas alternate and merge with each other in various ways, offering different discourses and myths of ethnogenesis. They did not emerge synchronously, their kernels were in different layers of culture, their intensity, productivity, and presence in texts vary in different periods, each of them had its picks and falls in time, according to social, mental and other circumstances. They always affect political ideas and affiliations of their bearers and vice versa; quite often such global ideas about human civilization appeared to be the only device for expressing and attaining some political aims. (Cf. Апетов 1995) Should I say that this is not at all Bulgarian or Balkan particularity but rather a general rule?

Other Balkan mythologies

A variety of national mythology is not something peculiar for Bulgarians. Other Balkan nations (and not at all only Balkan) also have their different variations of their discourses about their ethnogenesis. Nationalism here emerged first and had its accomplished structures among Greeks who offered the model that other proto-nations followed, consciously or not, gaining at the same time some anti-Greek forms, especially among Bulgarians and Turks. Greek culture, at least for other Christians in the Balkans, to a great extent, served as a laboratory that elaborated the notions, used by

Balkan nationalists, mainly Greeks were who first posed the more general philosophical questions related to national identity, origin, etc. They posed the question about the continuity and mapping the national territory, they created the first in the Balkans complete national program - *Megali Idea*. (Данова 1980; Velkova 1996)

There are two major competing variations in **Greek** national mythology. The first of them lean on Byzantine past and Orthodoxy. It is more traditional and had emerged gradually and in an evolutionary way. The other is more recent, secular; it emerged not without influences from Western Europe and was orientated towards more remote past to ancient Hellas. Contemporary Greek nationalism strives to combine these two elements and to add important historical events from 19th and 20th century. (Cf. Liakos 2008) In regard to more recent history, Greek national mythology has also both heroic (War of Independence, 1821-1830) and traumatic resources – so-called Asia Minor Catastrophe (Greek: Μικρασιατική καταστροφή) from 1922 when Greece gained and then lost vast territory in favor of newly created Republic of Turkey. (Cf. Велкова 2003)

There are two trends in **Rumanian** national mythology, connected to the similar Greek phenomena. Here too the more traditional is close to Orthodoxy and was generated in the circles of so-called Phanariots that ruled Wallachia and Moldavia up to 1820s. The more recent and more secular variation traces the origin of the Rumanian nation back to Dacians and their wars with ancient Rome. The accent in the medieval period is the rule of Michael the Brave (Mihai Viteazu,) in the 16th century who managed to unite Rumanians for a while and even defeated Ottomans. Exotic theories did not lack among Rumanians too. Some historians elaborated the hypotheses about the ‘Pelag(g)ian Empire’; according to it Rumanians and ancient Helens were descendants of these Pelasgians that around 6,000 BC, allegedly succeeded, under two great rulers, Uranus and Saturn, in extending their rule over Europe, the Mediterranean, Egypt and North Africa, and much of Asia. (Cf. Boia 2001)

Serbian national mythology seems to be relatively uninformed, at least according to the viewpoint of Bulgarian scholars. (Cf. Тодоров 2000; Иванова 2005) It had its relatively early written program, or action plan – the famous *Načertanije* by Ilija Garašanin from 1844. Bulgarian nationalists severely criticized this text and almost undisguised envied their Serbian counterparts for it and are still trying to create something similar.

Serbian preferred past is the time of Tsar Stefan Uroš IV Dušan (14th century), crowned in Skopje, conqueror of Bulgarians and Byzantines.

Myth-creators add, on one hand, previous events connected with the founding of Serbian state and its wars with Byzantium, and more recent, connected with the struggles against Ottomans. In the mid 19th century key event in Serbian national mythology became the traumatic memory of the Battle of Kosovo (Cf. Malcolm 1998; Караџозов 2006) and Prince Lazar of Serbia legendary assassin of the Ottoman sultan Murad I. Hagiography and folk songs, collected (and edited) by Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, the epic poem *The Mountain Wreath* (*Горски вијенац* or *Gorski vijenac*) (1847) by Petar II Petrović-Njegoš and other texts kept this remembrance. In more recent times Slobodan Milošević and its propaganda deliberately reactivated the Kosovo myth. In it the ruler preferred the Kingdom of Heavens, not the terrestrial one; this is an important peculiarity of this myth.

Croatian and, to a certain degree, **Slovenian** national mythology legitimizes their nations through so-called “Illyrism” – a theory that associates the genesis of South Slavs with ancient Illyrians, presented as Slavs. The name was revived by Napoleon for the “Provinces of Illyria” that were incorporated into the French Empire from 1809 to 1813, and the Kingdom of Illyria was part of Austria until 1849, after which time it was not used in the reorganized Austro-Hungarian Empire. The Illyrism reached its pick in the first half of 19th century in Croatia due to the work of the poet and journalist Ljudevit Gaj (1809-1872) and the poets Ivan Mažuranić, author of the epic poem *Smrt Smail-age Čengića* (1846), Petar Preradović, etc. The rise of Slovenian Illyrism was associated with the poet and enlightener Valentin Vodnik (1758-1819) who, during the Napoleonic wars wrote the enthusiastic poem *Illyria Reborn* (*Ilirija oživljena*). An eminent figure in Illyrism was also the Croatian-Slovenian poet Stanko Vraz (1810-1851). Besides of ancient Illyrians, Slovenian national mythology highlighted also St. Cyril and Methodius, who, according to so-called Pannonia theory descent from Pannonia, that is to say, Slovenia. Notable Slav scholars such as Jernej Bartol Kopitar and Fran Miklošič (also known in German as Franz von Miklosich) promoted this theory.

Macedonian national mythology is a particular case. Its pantheon has clear structure enveloping the essential elements of other similar Balkan phenomena: ancient heroes (Philip and Alexander), cultural figures (St. Cyril and Methodius), the medieval state of Tzar Samuel, and struggle for independence (Ilinden uprising, 1903). They came to fore in an inverted chronological order - last to appear was the identification with Alexander the Great, promoted firstly by Macedonian Diaspora in America and fully accepted not until late 20th century. Some scholars traced one seemingly

peculiar but in fact also known to other mythologies (including Bulgarian) tension between two structures, two legacies – political and ethnic. (Cf. Marinov 2010)

Turkish national mythology emerged relatively late. Several trends are competing in this field – traditional Ottoman imperial idea (Ottomanism), Islamism from the age of Sultan Abdul Hamid II and nationalistic ideology of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (Turkism) that forged myths about the Central Asian roots of the nation and its provenance from Oghuz Khan, and the Sun Theory about the most ancient language. (Cf. Smith 2000) This dynamic process of competition and merging is still actual. (Cf. Er-sanlı, 2001) Scholars, journalists, and politicians emphasize on deferent variations of an ideal past, starting from prehistoric ages and ending with Atatürk's time and, probably even further. This process developed in the 20th century and is well documented, especially in the minutes of the first congresses of the Turkish historians in the 1930s.

In the late 20th century, Turkish national mythology strives to cover the legacies of the Hellenic Antiquity (including Troy) and of Christian culture in Anatolia. The continuity between different civilizations is highlighted – from Hittites, the Empire of Alexander, Byzantium, and Ottoman Empire to modern Turkey; key figure in this unity is Sultan Mehmed II the Conqueror (Fatih) (1432 – 1481). This trend is obvious in the presentation of archaeological artifacts and has its theoretical base in the book, published by the ex-president of the Republic Turgut Özal in French and in Paris - *Turquie en Europe* (Özal 1988)². Some of these ideas were already presented in Turkish literature through the texts of authors as Halikarnas Balıkcı (1886-1973). Along with Hittites, Trojan War, Amazons, migration of philosophy from Anatolia to Hellas (Ancient Greece), the last days of Virgin Mary, etc, one of the key topics in Turkish mythology is the European prejudices and misunderstanding of Turkish civilization and its humanity. Particularly interesting is the legend about the Greek's request for help against Crusaders addressed to Ottomans that offers radically dif-

² This book provoked animated discussions and variety of criticism. (Cf. Vryonis, 1991). Vryonis analyzes in dept Turkish national mythology, constructed by Atatürk' – so called Turkish historic thesis (Türk Tarih Tezi) and the Sun linguistic theory (Güneş Dil Teorisi), the Özal's ideas and the role of state propaganda in implementing these myths both at home and abroad. Sometimes Vryonis himself also go close to Greek national mythology in his justified as a whole criticism; his concepts of the continuity of Greek civilization are also debatable.

ferent attribution of the role of the evildoer in history.

Albanian national mythology (Cf, Албания 2000)³ emerged in the late 19th century and was centered on several key points. Most distant among them are again the ancient Illyrians (their South branch), who have created state formations in 4th century BC. Sami Frashëri (1850 - 1904), one of the ideologists of Albanian nationalism, affirmed: “We are the most ancient European nation and we have the right to be in Europe more than every other nation.” (Sami Frashëri, *Albania - What it was, what it is, and what will become of it*, 1899). In addition to this, there are legends claiming that modern Albanians are compatriots of Alexander the Great and about Thracian elements in modern Albanian language.

The main text that legitimizes Albanian identity is the *Kanuni i Lekë Dukagjinit* - set of traditional Albanian laws, recorded and published in the early 20th century by Shtjefën Gjeçovi - Franciscans priest, missionary, ethnologist, and archaeologist. This text goes back to 15th century, the time of the local ruler Lekë Dukagjinit who (like the Bulgarian Khan Krum) codified the laws to his people. Searching the roots of the ideas that formed the basis of the *Kanuni* some scholars do back to the ancient Indian norm (the Laws of Manu) – a trend that is similar to the theories of Bulgarian Georgi Rakovski.

George Kastrioti Skanderbeg (1405 – 1468) and his epic struggle with Ottomans is yet another mighty centripetal knot in Albanian national mythology. There are links between the ancient and the medieval kernels – the name of the hero in Turkish is İskender Bey, meaning ‘Lord Alexander’, or ‘Leader Alexander’, referring to Alexander the Great.

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Several particularities are in evidence and could be interpreted as specific features in the evolution of (Balkan) national mythologies. First of them is the initial emergence of separate kernels of identification from different layers of the past. As a rule, they are associated with some kind of Antiquity, with Middle ages and with irredentist movements. There are discourses that go even further back in pre-historic times. There are always people ready to claim that “We are first (Europeans, Christians, autochthon

³ Cf. This text is adopting the information and some of the ideas from the studies of A. Zhelyazkova, Y. Ivanova, R. Hristova-Beylery and especially that of P. Krastev.

population of the region, etc.) In the more early stages, these kernels were opposed to a certain degree, later they started to coordinate but are still charged with potential tensions. In most cases, the rhythm of shifts to and from pagan legacy and to and from prestigious ancient predecessors is very interesting topic. Second, every kernel, every perspective on national past is formed or forms some kind of historic theory. Generally speaking, such theories were forged somewhere outside the region and were imported, adopted and developed according to the local nationalism. Third, there are several ethnic groups (Thracians, Illyrians), figures (Alexander, St. Cyril and Methodius, St Clement of Ohrid, Prince Marko) and events (battle of Kosovo, the fall of Constantinople) that different and opposed nationalisms recognize as their 'own'. Finally, all these trends are still actual in one way or another; in academic discourses, they gradually leave apart some obviously unacceptable elements; on the other hand, they still find new arguments and fresh champions. Mock variations also gain some popularity, maybe not as large as one could expect in the context of the postmodern situation that according to some opinions is also going into the past.

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