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RAKIJA-NATION'S WINE CULTURE EXPLORATION OF WINE PRESENCE AND ROLE IN SERBIAN CULTURE

The article discusses the presence of wine in Serbian culture as being rooted in the nation's history, the symbolic meaning the beverage has acquired, and the role it has played in the Serbian identity over centuries. The purpose is to show that wine can function as a marker of cultural boundaries and thus an instrument in the process of identification, as it was in the case for Christian Serbs under the Ottoman Empire. Wine remains deeply rooted in the culture even once it has apparently lost this function. Several juxtapositions with the role of rakija, another culturally meaningful beverage in Serbia, are offered. Given the historical perspective, the paper draws in the argumentation upon literature, both scientific and belles-lettres, supported by observation methods for current developments.

Keywords: wine, cultural identity, identification, Serbia, Balkans, symbol, rakija

INTRODUCTION

In his book about traditional wine production, Petar Bokun calls Serbs a 'rakija nation', as opposed to a wine or beer nation (2010). In fact, rakija, a strong alcoholic beverage produced by distillation of fermented fruit, known in Italy as grappa and in Hungary and Romania as palinka, is a flagship product of the whole Balkan Peninsula, associated with the cultures and cuisines of the region. When I arrived in Belgrade with a scholarship from the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) to conduct a research on the links between Serbian identity and wine culture, I heard this opinion from many Serbs, and there were few to dispute this self-definition of their compatriots. Soon this gave a rise to doubts whether I had mistaken the product, and the object of this developed identity-creating culture is rakija rather than wine. Some interviewed people even allowed themselves jokes like "rakija is the best wine of Serbia" or "rakija is the most popular wine among Serbs", adding playful phrases such as "rakija – connecting people", which is an obvious allusion to the slogan "Nokia – connecting people".

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Discovering the identity-creating function of rakija was a byproduct of the research. Even though there is a lot of consumer patriotism related to this beverage, the product's status in the culture does not diminish the meaning of older and deep-rooted wine traditions, present in literature, music, visual arts, and religious and historical symbolism.

Wine entered Serbian culture when the ancestors of today's Serbs arrived in the Balkan Peninsula and thus came under the influence of the Byzantine Empire. The particular role of wine in the ancient civilizations of the Mediterranean Basin was preserved to a considerable extent in the rituals of Christianity. It was one of the most significant agricultural products in the medieval Serbian empire. In the 14th century, under Dušan the Mighty, there were merchants mostly from the Republic of Ragusa (Dubrovnik), who traded it abroad. Their freedom of commercial activity was protected by law, as was the quality of the wine (Dušanov Zakonik / Dushan's Code 2002). It was also forbidden to mix wine with water for sale (Marjanović-Dušanić and Popović 2004). The area under viticulture was growing, and when the French traveler and pilgrim Bertrandon de La Brocquière visited Serbia in the first half of the 15th century, he wrote that:

[T]here is nothing but forests, mountains and valleys to this town [Belgrade] but the valleys are crowded with villages, in which provision and good wines are met with (de La Brocquière 1807: 280).

Even more than four centuries of Muslim Ottoman reign over the Balkans did not erase this heritage. On the contrary, for preservation of Serbian identity, supported by the institution of the Orthodox Church, both Christianity and its symbolism became a way of establishing cultural distinction.

There is a gap in the scientific literature concerning Serbian wine culture and its role in the process of identification. In fact, not much research on food culture throughout Balkan and Central Europe has been conducted. Not only foreign scholars, but also domestic researchers in these countries have paid relatively little attention to the phenomenon of food, and wine in particular. This article investigates the presence of wine in Serbian culture and presents a historical context that explains why wine acquired meanings instrumental to Serbian cultural identity. The paper offers a general view on the subject and may be the reader's first contact with this topic, but much research is needed to fill the aforementioned gap.

The data for this article was collected in the study of literature, both scientific and belles-lettres, as well as through observation (during interviews and in natural settings: wine-related events like fairs, tastings and conferences, as well as in wineries, wine bars, or restaurants) in the context of a larger research project.

WINE AS INSTRUMENT OF CULTURAL IDENTITY

Together with language, religion, and dress, food and drinks belong to the main elements of culture applied in the process of identification (Benedyktowicz and Markowska 1979), a continuous construction or "fantasy of incorporation" (Hall 1996). In this process, they function as markers of social and cultural boundaries (Lentz 1999). Claude Fischler opens his

article on “Food, Self and Identity” claiming that “[f]ood is central to our sense of identity” (1988: 275), while Igor Mandić singles out wine as “a significant element of identification” (1989: 172). Fischler ends his text stating that food “recovers meaning and identity, and so also does the eater” (1988: 292).

For Massimo Montanari, “the system of alimentation contains and transports the culture of those who practice it” (2010: 153). He further compares the system of alimentation to a repository of group's traditions and identity or an instrument of identity. In this context, wine, along with bread and pork, is considered an alimentary symbol of European identity (Jansen 2001; Montanari 2010). Since identities are constructed through differences with others, a dichotomy of ‘us’ and ‘them’ (Hall 1996), this symbol was also a marker of cultural boundaries. This is particularly true for countries in Southern and Southeastern Europe, which border the Muslim world.

For two reasons wine has been a stronger boundary marker than spirits like rakija. First, in Christianity it stands for the blood of Christ, becoming symbolically even more potent than it is in Judaism. Moreover, the fact that Christians drink wine as a symbol of blood, considered in Islam as impure, is even more disturbing to Muslims (Jansen 2001). Second, in literature – both fiction (e.g. Andrić 1945; Selimović 1970) and non-fiction (e.g. Kleemann 1771; Bringa 1995) – we find many accounts of Balkan Muslims drinking alcohol. This seemed to be more often rakija than wine, which might also be explained by fact that traditionally the prohibition of alcoholic beverages in Islam was concentrated on wine. The ambiguous character of the prohibition (Kueny 2001) in different regions and periods allowed for interpretations that made spirits more acceptable (see Bringa 1995).

In literature we find evidence of wine consumption among the common people, both Christian and Muslim. Nikolaus Ernst Kleemann wrote in 1768 during his stay in Belgrade that his Armenian interpreter was so happy to be back in his homeland that within one day and a half he and his Muslim companions had drunk around 30 liters of wine (1771). Further he describes the low quality of the local wine, related to the fact that much of the production and the consumption was hidden and only tolerated by pasha's administration:

The wine from Belgrade on, in case of almost all sorts, is bad and barely drinkable, as it is merely must, or sour, turbid and nasty to see. Since the grapes are sweet, it could be good, if only the Turks would let it mature. But those tope it furtively, and the Janissaries and mob run to villages to pinch it from peasants (Kleemann 1771: 144f)¹.

A century earlier, Edward Brown, a British physician, had visited Belgrade and formed a completely different impression about the quality of wine:

[W]e wanted not Coffee, Sherbet and excellent Wines, such as the Neighbour Country affords [...] A Servia being a fruitful and pleasant Country consisting of Plains, Woods, and Hills, which might afford good Metals, not without stout Men, good Horses, Wines and Rivers, if it were in the Christians hands of the temper of those in the Western part of Europe, it might make a very flourishing Country (Brown 1687: 27).

¹ All translations from the non-English texts are made by the author of this article.

The quality could have changed according to the conjuncture for wine in the Ottoman Empire, whose level of tolerance toward alcohol varied over time, as did the tax rates. Also military operations could completely annihilate vineyards in some regions, with replanting coming immediately after the war, or not at all if the population left or was massacred. Though not to the same extent nor with the same importance, wine was continuously present on Serbian terrain. However, it seems that wine consumption was never fully tolerated by Muslim societies in the Balkans, as the Bringa's examples from Bosnia show (1995). Thus, it could remain a marker of cultural boundaries between Muslims and Christians.

WINE AS A CHRISTIAN SYMBOL

The Slavic tribes, which developed into the ethnic group that we today call Serbs, arrived in the Balkan area around the 6th century. The territory they settled on already had a long history of viticulture. In documents it could be traced back to the Roman times, although wine was already known to the Celtic tribes inhabiting this area. The Romans started to grow vines in Alma Mons (fertile hill), which is now Fruška Gora, in the 3rd century (von Taube 1778; Ratković 2008).

The development of a Slavic-Byzantine culture only enhanced the symbolic and thus cultural significance of wine, which is to be attributed to wine's ritual role in Christianity, which had spread among Serbs in the 9th century. With Christianity, the biblical symbols of wine, vine and grapes entered Serbian culture, both in its oral tradition and literature.

These new Christian meanings are visible in texts like the *Hymn to Thy Glory* by Stefan the First-Crowned (1165–1227):

Rejoice, O fertile vine,
From which our joy overfloweth.
Rejoice, O ripened grape,
From which drippeth sweet must
That taketh away the drunkenness of sin
(Dragić Kijuk 1987: 11).

There is an interesting paradox in the poem: wine does not cause the drunkenness, but rather "taketh away the drunkenness" (of sin). This becomes, however, less surprising in the light of the Christian symbolism. Wine stands here for the blood of Christ, which in turn – as a symbol of the new covenant – is poured out for the forgiveness of sins. Thus, in his poem, Stefan the First-Crowned brought wine into connection with liturgy, particularly with transubstantiation, and thus with the celebration of salvation offered by Jesus' sacrifice. There is a lot of beauty in this comparison of Christ and vine.

Wine grapes play their role again in the symbolism of sacrifice around two hundred years later, when Andonije Rafail Epaktit (14th/15th century) writes his *Lament* addressed to prince Lazar, the leader of the Serbs, clearly alluding to the defeat in the Battle of Kosovo (1389):

[w]hat noble's detail
Shall be drawn forth
As grapes from out
The wine-press of battle?
(Dragić Kijuk 1987: 149).

The national epic poems (*epske narodne pesme*) related to the battle provide us with literary evidence for both the very existence of vineyards on Serbian lands and their symbolic importance in the culture. On the eve of the Kosovo battle, which from the Serbian perspective was a fight against an invader and an enemy of Christianity, one of the epic poems has Prince Lazar putting a curse on those who will not join his army:

Nothing shall thrive in hands of those,
Which won't come to fight in Kosovo:
Neither white wheat on fields,
Nor vine branches on hills!
(Danojlić 1995: 157)

According to Branko Letić, the curse, expressed in the form of a toast with a chalice of wine, is symbolically comparable to the Last Supper, as it became a 'new testament' which saved the nation (2011). In the Serbian tradition, Lazar chose to save souls instead of the empire, leading Serbs to martyrdom for Christianity.

Wine is also used by the legendary Kosovan Maiden (*kosovska devojka*) to "serve the sacraments"² to the soldiers after the battle:

And when she found a warrior yet alive
She washed his wounds with water, pure and cool,
As though she served the sacraments to him,
And gave him wine to drink and bread to eat
(Locke 2011: 161).

There is again substantial biblical symbolism, not least because of the Mediterranean roots of Christianity. Both white (wheat) bread and red wine³ take part in the liturgy, becoming in the transubstantiation Christ's body and blood. At the same time, they are among the few products comprising the basis of Mediterranean diet, shared by all cultures in this region, and gaining symbolic meaning (Montanari 2010). These symbols also appear in celebrations of the Serbian holiday of *slava*⁴. Among the obligatory elements used in the

² The original word used is *pričestiti* from *pričešće* – communion.

³ While sacramental wine in the Eastern Orthodox Church is still red, other churches, for example, the Catholic one, have used since at least the 15th century both red and white. In the original text of the poem, it is indicated that the bread is white and the wine red: "Pričešćuje vinom crvenijem/ I zalaže hlebom bijelijem" (Locke 2011: 161).

⁴ *Slava* or *krsna slava*, in English 'celebration' or 'christened celebration', is one of the most celebrated holidays in Serbian families. Its origin can be traced back to the pre-Christian times, when every family or house had its protecting deity. With the introduction of Christianity, saints replaced deities (Vuković 2004).

festivities, we find *kolač* (cake), candle, *žito* (boiled wheat), incense and wine, each bearing its own symbolic meaning.

In the later epic ballads, wine's role in the preservation of Serbian identity is even more evident. Among the ballads about Prince Marko we find one which explicitly presents drinking wine as a protest against the Turkish (Ottoman) political and cultural domination. The refrain of the ballad enumerates some of the bans related to the Muslim culture of the Ottoman Empire:

No man should drink wine during Ramadan
No man shall wear a coat that's colored green
No man shall bear a sword of tempered steel
No man shall take a Turkish maid to dance
(Locke 2011: 173f.).

The protest of the popular hero Marko clearly points toward the difference between the imperial Muslim culture and the local Christian identity, when Marko explains to the sultan why he drinks wine despite the sultan's ban:

If I drink wine in Ramadan, my Faith
Allows me: I am not a Mussulman
(Locke 2011: 177).

The ballad is in fact glorifying the courage of Marko to oppose the sultan's decision, which symbolizes the imposition of foreign rule over Serbian society.

When Johann Gottfried Herder wrote about Slavic nations waking up from their historical sleep, he meant – among other things – the oral tradition of epic ballads in Serbia, which kept the cultures and identity of stateless Slavs alive. The fascination with these poems at the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century finally brought about their recording in a written form. They have always played an immense role in preserving the cultural identity of Serbs living under foreign domination for almost four centuries. In Vojvodina, Serbs shared their Christian faith with other nations of the Habsburg Monarchy and defined their identity through belonging to the Serbian Orthodox Church. But in the south, under the Ottoman Empire, both wine and Christianity could be easily used as a distinctive element. Thus, wine and pork functioned for Serbs there as *kashrut* for Jews and *halal* for Muslims, that is, as a cultural distinction of their respective communities (see Cesaro 2000). Indeed, the former laws, religious in their origin, often act in addition as cultural laws on which an identity is based. In consequence, wine maintained a special position in this unwritten dietary code of the Serbs.

WINE MOTIFS IN SERBIAN CULTURE

Regaining their political and cultural sovereignty in the 19th century, Serbs started to develop a modern literary language, which began with didactic activity of Dositej Obradović and reforms (“write as you speak”) implemented by Vuk Karadžić. On the one hand, there

are plenty of modern texts pointing to the fact that vines could be found anywhere in Serbia, including the city of Belgrade. Whether for fresh grapes or for homemade wine, the grapevine is mentioned in many literary descriptions of the city, for example, in Zinaida Gippius' poem *Belgrade* and Ivo Andrić's novel *Gospođica*. On the other hand, wine preserves its symbolic meaning and appears in dozens of lyrical texts. Miloš Crnjanski compares blood to wine in the fourth strophe of his *Lament over Belgrade (Lament nad Beogradom)*:

In you a ploughman sings, even in winter's gloom,
For he has poured life's blood into new skins, like wine.
And in my final hours, my weary head bent low,
You will give me a tender mother's kiss, I know
(2010: 43).

Religious-mystical aspects may be found in all those poems, where wine is considered a sort of consolation and a way of transcending reality, for instance, in *Sadly leaves me all my virtue (Sva mi tužnom krepost ode)* by Sava Mrkalj, and *Mother of all (Opšta majka)* by Sima Milutinović Sarajlija. Also similar in its character is a short text by Ivo Andrić, *Wine*, where the author asks:

And who then was not comforted and supported by wine? And who does not owe anything to it? (From these words occur the hope, bold and undreamt, that suddenly wine from brittle plant will smoothly and truly become merely invisible aroma, and then this ephemeral and changeable aroma of a fruit of the earth will become pure spirit, which lasts and rests on us in some way not known to us, without end and change...) (2012: 5).

Andrić chose words like 'invisible', 'ephemeral', and 'spirit'. All this seems to remove wine from the sphere of merely everyday culinary experiences, suggesting aspects of wine that transcend its physical form. Marko Nadalin quotes in his *Wisdoms about wine (Mudrosti o vinu)* two other authors: Dobrica Ćosić, who said that "vineyard is a holy place and vine is a holy plant" (Nadalin 2008: 57), and Igor Mandić, claiming that "wine is to be drunk by soul, and not by stomach" (2008: 64). Such expressions of perceiving wine as a particular drink point toward its role in the culture, a role unlike that of any other product. Drinking in an elegant and cultivated way, or not, people attach to wine certain ideas and concepts. They associate wine with meanings that do not directly come from the realm of eating and drinking, but other areas of life, like religion (Barthes 1982). Thus wine often acquires a 'divine' character, as in the wordplay by Massimo Donà, in which he exchanges the Italian adpositional phrase 'di vino' (of wine) with the adjective 'divino' (divine), a suggestion of synonymy, already rendered hackneyed by numerous wine bars (2003).

Wine presents a motif not only in Serbian literature. In the recent decades it has been also entering the popular culture through songs such as *Krčmarice još vina natoči (Inn-keeper, pour more wine)* by Aca Matić; *Vino točim a vino ne pijem (I'm pouring wine but not drinking)* and *Zoveš me na vino (You're inviting me for wine)* by Miroslav Ilić; *Crno Vino (Red wine)* by Dobrivoje Topalović; *Opilo nas vino (Wine inebriated us)* by Merima Njegomir; *A ja sam negde rujno vino pio (I drank somewhere purple wine)* by Tozovac; *Ja*

noćas vino pijem (I'm drinking wine tonight) by Šaban Šaulić; and *Dajte mi vino (Give me wine)* by Đorđe Balašević.

The common motif of the majority of these songs is wine in its cheering and encouraging role. Aca Matić sings about wine that “warms bosom and awakes new hope in life”, Miroslav Ilić – in turn – that “there is no wine to alleviate his suffering”, while Šaban Šaulić “drinks wine” for a new life, new love, and a better tomorrow for his lost lover. As a matter of fact, in popular music wine is most often linked to love, bringing passion and enthusiasm, or – again – consolation for those with broken hearts.

Some of these songs were already written before World War II and make up part of the ‘*kafana* culture’. The very concept of *kafana* is of Turkish origin, the word coming from Serbian *kafa* – coffee. In Southern Slavic languages, it designates a traditional coffeehouse or inn, which serves both coffee and alcohol, often with live music (Culture Serbe 2010). In the 19th century places of this character became meeting points for artists, writers and journalists, in the 20th century bringing a culture often called bohemian, with a difficult adjective as bearing a different meaning in every country. In the Central and Eastern Europe, where many national communities had recently gained their independent states or were still striving for them, coffeehouses were focal points of revival and development of national cultures and identity. Dagmar Kostálová wrote about coffeehouses and wine locals in Slovakia, which – *mutatis mutandis* – could be generalized for the whole region:

[...] coffeehouses and wine locals as centers of communication, which – as I observed – are closely connected to the most important development phases of Slovak national culture (2004).

In Serbia as well a large part of modern literature, created in a language much closer to the vernacular than ever before, was written in company of wine and coffee, the first one connecting the writer with muses, the second one bringing him back to reality. The fact is that *kafana* combined wine, music, and intellectual work. With other people of free professions joining the artists, it soon became the center of public life in Belgrade and in other major cities of the region. Wine was present in the process of creating culture, and so it was often raised to the topic of many works. Although the culture of *kafana* has changed nowadays, people in Serbia still talk about its myth, with its magic also fascinating the young generations.

Being present both in the higher culture and in everyday life, wine entered the Serbian language through sayings and proverbs. To name just a few: “bez vina nema ni razgovora” (without wine, there is not even a talk), “ludi boj biju, a mudri vino piju” (the crazy fight, the wise drink wine), “vino otvara vidike i smiruje nemire” (wine opens (new) perspectives and composes disputes), “drž’ se starog vina i starog prijatelja” (stick to old friend and old wine), “samo vino i žene ulepšavaju ovu zemlju” (only wine and women make this earth more beautiful), “pored vina nema nikakvih tajni” (apart from wine there are no mysteries), “oni šta ne piju vino, ne znaju šta je uživanje” (those who do not drink wine cannot know enjoyment).

Visible are associations between wine and concepts like peace, joy, pleasure, beauty, wisdom, and mystery. Wine – as opposed to rakija – should calm the temperament and thus bring peace, honest communication, and distance from unneeded conflicts. Indeed, there is a distinction made between the effects of wine and rakija on the moods of those who drink them. This is to be found in old proverbs as well, such as: “vino čoveka venčava, a rakija

razvenčava” (wine makes people get married, rakija makes them divorce), “vino je veselo, rakija je svađalica” (wine is cheerful, rakija is a bully), “vino je božansko piće, rakija đavolje” (wine is a divine beverage, rakija a satanic one). In all three sayings, it is the form of inebriation caused by wine and rakija that are different, even opposite – the former bringing joy, cheerfulness, and conviviality, the latter aggression and quarrelsomeness.

CONCLUSION

As Montanari wrote, the system of alimentation with its elements – and wine in particular – conveys symbolical meanings. It transports cultural contents, which provide a basis for identity of a certain group. These contents are an instrument of identity. In Serbian culture, which developed on the rich soil of Byzantine Christianity, wine plays the role of a powerful and multifaceted symbol, which makes it even a more “significant element of identification” (Mandić). It is related to the religious symbolism of covenant, sacrifice, and comfort. This aspect is visible in the majority of the quoted texts. But through its Christian character wine also acquired a new function in the process of cultural division. The beverage becomes exactly that “significant element of identification,” a marker of cultural boundaries, when the popular hero Marko refuses to respect Ottoman law and provocatively drinks wine during the holy month of Ramadan.

This function should have lost its *raison d'être* for Serbian identity after the country gained independence. Still, once granted its special position in the culture, wine continues to play a role of a common motif in literature and arts. There are sayings and popular pieces of wisdom about the effects of drinking wine, poetry both frivolous and solemn, songs, and decoration motifs. In *kafanas*, it accompanies the process of creation and often itself becomes the object of literary texts. The symbolic meaning is retained in the Serbian Orthodox Church and the celebrations of *slava*, as well.

While the choice of the cited texts shows the symbolism and role wine plays in Serbian culture, the quantity points to the importance of the beverage. I have found around two hundred literary texts in Serbian dedicated to wine as a topic or containing some motif related to wine: wine grapes, vine, vineyards and the like.

For further research, an analysis of the data used for this brief study from an alternative theoretical perspective would be interesting. Wine in Serbian culture could be treated as Roland Barthes' sign and mythos (1982), which could contribute to the discourse about its symbolic meaning. Wine and other victuals as instruments of cultural distinction, dividing people between 'us' (Christian Serbs) and 'them' (Muslim others), could be analyzed applying, for instance, the *Core-Fringe-Leguminous-Model* by Sidney Mintz (1992), since the core elements of every cuisine become part of the “political and ideological representation of the people” (1992: 25). This presents a challenge, considering how many elements the cuisines of all successor countries of the Ottoman Empire seem to share. Further research is needed to better understand the role of wine in the Serbian society today, with topics like consumption patterns, cultural meaning of other beverages, or comparative studies juxtaposing Serbia and other countries falling within the scope.

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KULTURA WINA W NARODZIE RAKII.

EKSPLORACJA OBECNOŚCI I ROLI WINA W SERBSKIEJ KULTURZE

Artykuł omawia uwarunkowaną historycznie obecność wina w serbskiej kulturze, symboliczne znaczenie, jakim naładowany jest ten trunek, oraz rolę, jaką odgrywało przez wieki w serbskiej tożsamości. Celem jest pokazanie, że wino może pełnić funkcje znacznika granic kulturowych i stąd też instrumentu w procesie identyfikacji, jak to miało miejsce w przypadku chrześcijańskich Serbów w Imperium Osmańskim. Wino pozostaje zakorzenione w kulturze nawet wtedy, kiedy traci już ono te funkcje. Tekst oferuje również kilka porównań z rakiją, innym kulturowo istotnym trunkiem w Serbii. Zważywszy na historyczną perspektywę, artykuł sięga w argumentacji do literatury, zarówno naukowej, jak i pięknej, popieranej metodami obserwacyjnymi w przypadku aktualnych zjawisk.

Słowa kluczowe: wino, tożsamość kulturowa, identyfikacja, Serbia, Bałkany, symbol, rakija