

Myth, identity and ethnic boundaries

Abstract

Myth represents the narrative based on the particular historical event, which consists of both objective facts and fictitious elements. This phenomenon has an important social and political role, and represents the constituent part of ethnic and national identity. One of the basic functions of myth is its role in the strengthening of bonds within one ethnic or national community, and, at the same time, the establishment of the borders between that and other communities. The social and political power that some historical myths have especially gains importance in the periods of security crisis, when these narratives become the important part of ethnic mobilizations. Historical events, embodied in myths, are one of the most powerful “weapons” used by elites to manipulate masses, as well as to generate and control the process of ethnic mobilization. Members of the political elites who can revive the myth can also mobilize people, exclude those who do not belong to the group, suppress certain memories, establish solidarity and strengthen the hierarchy of statuses and values.

Key words: *myth, community, ethnic/national identity, history, ethnic boundary, ethnic mobilization*

Introduction

Myths represent inevitable parts of history, culture, society and politics of a great number of contemporary ethnic and national communities across the world. These real-fictitious elements created on actual historical events are not, however, just a superstructure of historical narratives and motives of nationally inspired poetry and prose; myths are much more – they are sources of collective memories and binding tissue of ethnic and national communities that have

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a great number of significant functions: myths inspire collective action; they provide answers to the most important questions of identity; they provide the standards of behavior through stories of heroes; they promise solidarity and brotherhood; they suppress the feeling of alienation and insecurity; telling us who we are and where we come from, the myths direct our action.² Myth has a self-renewing character that enables it to continuously “reappear” on the social, cultural and political stage, especially during the periods of crisis, during which the society passes through difficult moments and is often faced with difficult, sometimes fateful decisions. Myth, as pointed out by the anthropologist Bronislav Molinowski, is not “aimless effusion of useless fantasy, but a valuable, very important cultural power.”³ It represents an “essential part of each civilization and an integral part of all cultures.”⁴ According to the opinion of Saša Nedeljković: “Contrary to the beliefs that myth is the survival of earlier evolutive phases of human awareness which, in this era of nationalism, should be observed solely as part of folklore, there is a growing number supporting the opinion that “rationality“ and “irrationality”, aside from not being easy to determine where one ends and the other begins, with respect to myth are not mutually opposed: the ability of rationalization does not necessarily imply the ability of demythologization, which implies that myth is still alive, that we still need it and that it is still effective.”⁵

1. Myth, society and the state

The historical narrative of the majority of contemporary societies, although created on actual facts and events, has also suffered over the time the influence of numerous myths and legends. These historical myths, after several decades or several centuries of cultural shaping, essentially represent a combination of real and fictitious elements in which the fiction often dominates. This fact, however, does not diminish at all their social and political role; in the contemporary societies, myths often represent the explanation of a phenomenon that certain social

² Anthony D. Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 83-84, 88; više o društvenim funkcijama mita pogledati u: Bronislav Malinovski, *Mit, nauka, religija*, Beograd: Prosveta, 1971; Geoffrey Hosking and George Schopflin (eds.), *Myths and Nationhood*, Hurst & Company, London, 1997; Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Cosmos and History*, London: Penguin, 1954; Robert A. Segal (ed.), *Theories of Myths*, New York: Garland, 1996.

³ Bronislav Malinovski, *Mit, nauka, religija*, Beograd: Prosveta, 1971. p. 91.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 94, 126-127.

⁵ Saša Nedeljković, „Mit, religija i nacionalni identitet: Mitologizacija u Srbiji u periodu nacionalne krize“, *Etnoantropološki problemi n.s.god.1.sv.1*, 2006, str. 155.

groups already believe in.⁶ The function of myth, Malinowski states, “strengthens the tradition and provides it a greater value and significance, returning it to a higher, better, more supernatural reality than the initial events. Therefore, myth is an inevitable part of every culture.”⁷ Myth is a respected tradition and deeply rooted cultural notion that has a reproductive ability and is, therefore, continuously repeated in the present. Mythical discourses are founded at the place of “control of meanings, by which culture is produced and maintained, conveyed and received, implemented, presented, remembered and studied.”⁸

Historical myth plays a crucial role in the social memory and national ideology of a great number of contemporary societies. The significant role of myth in creating a culture and conveying the historical memories inevitably leads to it becoming one of the ways in which the collectivities, namely, in this case ethnic groups and nations, establish and determine the foundations of their own being, its systems of ethics and values. In essence, myth refers more to perceptions than to the historically corroborated facts, the ways in which specific communities consider certain ideas as normal and natural and others as depraved and alien. Myth creates an intellectual and cognitive monopoly by trying to establish a unique manner of experiencing the world and defining the observation of the world. For a society to exist as a society, this monopoly is of vital importance, therefore, its members must accept the myth as such.⁹ As emphasized by Anthony D. Smith: the myths, for all their differences, refer to the selfsame community and its history, different sections of the community find themselves enclosed within one national circle, a single orbit of common security and destiny, a clearly bounded social and territorial identity.”¹⁰

Myths constitute very important elements of shaping the national identity¹¹, whereas mythical identity of a nation is in fact the objectivization of fictions as an actual national trait. This is indicated by the contemporary theories of

⁶ Katarina Milosevic, Misa Stojadinovic, “Contemporary Political Myth Through the Prism of National Identity”, pp. 77-87, *FACTA UNIVERSITATIS, Series: Philosophy, Sociology, Psychology and History*, Vol 11, No 1, 2012, p. 78.

⁷ Bronislav Molinowski, “Myth in Primitive Psychology”, in *Theories of Myths*, Robert A. Segal (ed.), Garland, New York, 1996, Vol 2., pp. 101, 146.

⁸ George Schopflin, *Nations, Identity, Power: The New Politics of Europe*, Hurst & Company, London, 2000, p. 90.

⁹ George Schopflin, “The Functions of Myth and a Taxonomy of Myths”, in *Myths and Nationhood*, Geoffrey Hosking and George Schopflin (eds.), Hurst & Company, London, 1997, p.19.

¹⁰ Anthony D. Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999, p. 88.

¹¹ Više na temu nacionalnog identiteta pogledati u: Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, Blackwell Publishers, Cambridge, 1996; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, London and New York, 1991; George Schopflin, *Nations, Identity, Power: The New Politics of Europe*, Hurst & Company, London, 2000;

ethnicity, because the national identity and nation are based, essentially, on the awareness of common traits of the members of a society that differentiate it from other communities, such as language, race, religion, ethnos, mentality, culture, mythology, geographic characteristics, etc.¹² However, the notions of identity are not created solely on the basis of specific identifiers, such as language, religion or culture, but in the processes of mythification of basic parameters of human existence.¹³ According to Gordana Đerić: “There are many opinions claiming that regardless of the change of the national ideology a myth remains the main origin and model from which a nation draws its perception of itself... The essence of the link between the collective identity and myth is in that the myth allegedly preserves what is most important to a nation, the moral concept and the very truth about it. In other words, myth is the basic narration or story of a nation that survives in spite of the passage of time and variability of ideologies.”¹⁴

From the significant role a myth plays in forming the ethnic and national identity also follows its impact on creating the nation and the national state. As pointed out by Edgar Moren: “A national state is rooted in the material foundation of the country it supports and makes its territory, at the same time it finds its mythological grounds there.... Myth is not a superstructure of the nation: it is what creates the solidarity and community; it is necessary cement of every society, and in a complex society the only antidotes to individual atomization and destructive surges of the waves of conflict.”¹⁵ Morin concludes that “...in the self-generated revolution of the whole by integral parts and the integral parts by the whole, the myth creates that what creates it, in other words, the national state.”¹⁶

In order to have the potential for development of a nation, the mythical narratives must take up a significant part of collective memory of the members of

John Armstrong, *Nations before Nationalism*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1982.

¹² Јован Базић, „Улога косовског мита у обликовању српског националног идентитета“, *Српска политичка мисао*, бр. 4/2012, стр. 253-271, Институт за политичке студије, Београд, 2012, стр. 254.

¹³ Gordana Đerić, „Mitski aspekti srpskog identiteta“, *Filozofija i društvo*, Београд, 29-20/2002, стр. 253; овде цитирано из: Јован Базић, „Улога косовског мита у обликовању српског националног идентитета“, *Српска политичка мисао*, бр. 4/2012, стр.253-271, Институт за политичке студије, Београд, 2012, стр. 254.

¹⁴ Gordana Đerić, *Pr(a)vo lice množine – Kolektivno samopoimanje i predstavljanje: mitovi, karakteri, mentalne мапе i stereotipi*, Institut za filozofiju i društvenu teoriju i P. Filip Višnjić, Београд, 2005, стр. 13-14.

¹⁵ Едгар Морен, „Појам националне државе“, у *Теорија политике*, Драган Симеуновић (ур.), Наука и друштво, Београд, 2002, стр. 110-111.

¹⁶ Ibid.

a society, as well as offer answers to their current needs¹⁷ Belief in the truth of a certain historical myth, however, is not necessary, because its true goal “is not to present an objective picture of the world as it is, but express the comprehension of oneself in the world in which one lives. Myth should not be interpreted cosmologically, but anthropologically or, better yet, existentially.”¹⁸ Myth is a true story in so far as it recalls events which have in one way or another shaped the society and its social order through emergence and consolidation of beliefs and norms. At the same time the myth transcends the truth of the events – a myth is not historiography.¹⁹ After all, the function of the myth is not providing “metaphysical truth” because its contents can be, among other things, irrational and untrue. Its effect lies in the myth providing the necessary “glue” of the social structure. It represents a symbolical statement of the social order and as such reinforces the social cohesion and functional unity, exhibiting and justifying the traditional order. Mythical discourses remind the society of its own identity through the public process of determination and defining of characteristic social norms. It is irrelevant whether the people believe or not in the irrational contents of the myth, considering that the mythical symbols have metaphoric value and fulfill the main social functions of maintaining the given social order.²⁰

2. Myth as a mechanism of creating the boundaries between the ethnic and national communities

Myths created on certain historical events revive the common heritage and therefore play a fundamental role in the process of defining “what we are.”²¹ Strengthening the relation and bonds within an ethnic or national community, using the historical myths, emphasizes in a great number of cases, however, the differences between that and the other, particularly opposed groups. Considering the fact that any form of identity, hence, ethnic as well, is constructed in

¹⁷ Mary Fulbrook, “Myth-making and National Identity: The Case of the G.D.R.,” in *Myths and Nationhood*, Geoffrey Hosking and George Schopflin (eds.), Hurst & Company, London, 1997, pp. 73-74.

¹⁸ Rudolf Bultman, “New Testament and Mythology”, in *Theories of Myths*, Robert A. Segal (ed.), Garland, New York, 1996, Vol.3, p. 38.

¹⁹ Sonja Puntcher Riekman, “The Myth of European Unity”, in *Myths and Nationhood*, Geoffrey Hosking and George Schopflin (eds.), Hurst & Company, London, 1997, pp. 61-62.

²⁰ Joanna Overing, “The Role of Myth: An Anthropological Perspective , or: ‘The Reality of the Really Made up’”, in *Myths and Nationhood*, Geoffrey Hosking and George Schopflin (eds.), Hurst & Company, London, 1997, p. 7.

²¹ Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, Blackwell Publishers, Cambridge, 1996, p. 202.

the very process of determining the differences between two or more collectivities, it is logical that myths, whose main function is strengthening the ethnicity and ethnic bonds, become the boundary markers within a society. Namely, the use of myths in ethnically divided societies almost always deepens the existing differences. Although it is also possible to imagine myths of civil belonging, they are very rare. On the other hand, it is much easier to use ethnic belonging in the capacity of identifier, exclude the members of other ethnic groups, or place them in the role of the “other”, namely, the object against which and because of which mobilization is necessary. The outcome of such a situation is that myths of a common life of its members are emphasized within an ethnic group whereby a strict boundary is drawn, at the same time, towards those that do not belong to the group.²²

The existence of myths strengthens the claim of differences, generated on more or less realistic foundations. According to Pal Kolsto, in some cases the factors because of which members of opposed groups see each other as different are more “mythical” rather than “factual”. The differences are located in the “head”, as it were, in perceptions, rather than in any observable social or cultural traits. Myths enable group members to ignore the obvious similarities, at the same time, assigning great importance to certain differences between themselves and others. This is not to say, of course, that there are no objective differences between cultures and societies. There certainly are, but such differences are rarely spread out in neat, clear-cut patterns as is the case with cultural boundaries.²³ “Subjectivity” of mythical differences, can be ascribed to some other phenomena as well, such as, finally, ethnic and national identity and the nation itself. The key and, most probably, most significant trait of national identity is the “belief in the common origin” as well as “common destiny”, which would be difficult to subsume under the notion of “provable” factors; however, this fact does not diminish in any case their importance and weight – the “feeling” of ethnic and national identity is, to a great extent, a subjective and emotional category and this is what, in fact, gives it the greatest weight and power.

For a myth to act as a mechanism for generating a boundary between different societies, it is necessary for the group members to accept its contents and messages. Such generally accepted myths then become the key factors in differentiating those that belong to a group from those that do not.²⁴ The main im-

²² George Schopflin, *Nations, Identity, Power: The New Politics of Europe*, Hurst & Company, London, 2000, p. 85.

²³ Pal Kolsto, “Introduction: Assessing the Role of Historical Myths in Modern Society”, in *Myths and Boundaries in South-Eastern Europe*, Pal Kolsto (ed.), Hurst & Company, London, 2005, p. 3.

²⁴ Refer to: George Schopflin, “The Functions of Myth and a Taxonomy of Myths”, in *Myths and Nationhood*, Geoffrey Hosking and George Schopflin (eds.), Hurst & Company, London, 1997.

portance of myth, therefore, lies in its role in the processes of “creating boundaries“ and “maintaining boundaries”.²⁵ Once the boundaries are “created”, it is necessary to maintain them by emphasizing specific traits of a specific group, as well as the difference between it and the others, which is achieved by combining objective facts with mythical presentation. The myth emphasizes the character traits of important individuals, but also of entire communities in certain historical periods; it glorifies the main events from the national histories; it additionally intensifies the boundaries between courage and cowardice, good and evil, justice and injustice and thus presents individuals, events, peoples and histories in more or less black and white terms. In such a process the powerful historical myths instill special power and provide the necessary “emotional support” to the narratives in public discourse. They maintain the historical continuity of existence of a society, effectively “erase” the boundaries between different time periods, carve in the collective memory selected events crucial for basing the ethnic specificities and provide a higher meaning to the very existence of a specific collectivity. Such myths – about one’s own society as well as about one’s neighbors – help to create order in an untidy cultural landscape.²⁶

3. Use of myth in the process of ethnic mobilization

Certain significant historical myths represent continuous phenomena in public discourse. Namely, regardless of the social and political situation within a certain society, tendency of a great number of people to rely on myths in explaining certain concepts, ideas and issue, leads to these phenomena appearing frequently as parts of different narratives. Manifestation of a tendency to mythologization at institutional level, is carried out through cultural projects and ideas, political actions and speech, headlines in the media, etc.²⁷ The influence of myths, however, is not linked only to their institutional use, nor dependent on it. In a great number of ethnic and national groups myths are part of the lives of their members, even when they are not aware of it; myths can be systems of value, notions, beliefs, convictions, prejudices, attitudes, fears and hopes, which are an integral part of our daily lives.

²⁵ Pal Kolsto (ed.), *Myths and Boundaries in South-Eastern Europe*, Hurst & Company, London, 2005, p. vii.

²⁶ Pal Kolsto, “Introduction: Assessing the Role of Historical Myths in Modern Society”, in *Myths and Boundaries in South-Eastern Europe*, Pal Kolsto (ed.), Hurst & Company, London, 2005, p. 3.

²⁷ Saša Nedeljковиć, „Mit, religija i nacionalni identitet: Mitologizacija u Srbiji u periodu nacionalne krize“, *Etnoantropološki problemi n.s.god.1.sv.1*, 2006, str. 161.

The social and political power held by certain mythical narratives, however, is particularly pronounced at the difficult and dramatic moments, the ones that resemble the times when the myth was created. Namely, a great number of historical myths, actually represent mechanisms for creating and maintaining boundaries between different, often opposed, ethnic and national communities; for a myth to be able to have such a role, it must be based on “irreconcilable differences” which are manifested by antagonisms, conflicts and armed clashes. Myths were created throughout history at difficult and fateful moments for the survival of the entire nation, during the period of major social and political crises, conflicts and wars; the wars always played a key role in the historical memory and even the oldest myths and traditions are based on topics of struggle and killing. A significant role of political violence in the historical memory can be observed, in fact, on the example of historical myths which were based, in the majority of cases, on the topics of struggle and conflict. In the periods of ethnic mobilization these narratives represent significant mobilizers of social action, projecting dramatic events from the recent or remote past on the contemporary antagonisms, conflicts and clashes.

As emphasized by Anthony D. Smith, the past, or its parts, embodied in the myths, are one of the most powerful “weapons” used by the elite to manipulate the emotions of the masses, as well as generate and control the process of ethnic mobilization.²⁸ Likewise, George Schopflin notices that those that can revive a myth can also immobilize people, exclude those that do not belong to a group, hide certain memories, establish solidarity and strengthen the hierarchy of statuses and values.²⁹ Myths and symbols chosen by each new generation as its national traits, may differ from those that had existed in the previous generations, but must be based on a historical period. The past defines the present of a nation and orients it to the future, but the current needs and future goals also affect the way the past is reconstructed and this is the reason why myths play a key role in the process of development of a nation.³⁰

The power certain myths contain is often “tested” during the period of political and security crises, when these narratives become the engine of ethnic mobilization of conflicting communities. The powerful presentations of great historical wars, created on actual facts and embellished with various fictitious elements, instigate the already existing interethnic antagonisms, intensifying the

²⁸ Anthony D. Smith, “The ‘Golden Age’ and National Renewal”, in *Myths and Nationhood*, Geoffrey Hosking and George Schopflin (eds.), Hurst & Company, London, 1997, pp. 36-38.

²⁹ George Schopflin, *Nations, Identity, Power: The New Politics of Europe*, Hurst & Company, London, 2000, pp. 82-83.

³⁰ Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, Blackwell Publishers, Cambridge, 1996, pp. 206-208.

feeling of common identity, but also the historical debt to the generations that have sacrificed themselves for the future of the community. During the periods that precede the conflicts the myths serve to construct the narratives which are repeated anew and exercised in order to begin to create order instead of chaotic reality of war at the moment of direct armed conflicts, providing a “higher” national importance. The bleak reality of wars is transformed in accordance with mythical narratives by identifying the actual characters and events with the contents of the myth. The reality is simplified, the differences intensified, and the contrasts emphasized. The power of the great historical myths is often so great during the period of ethnic mobilization and conflicts that the boundary between various historical periods is “erased” and the events that are distanced from each other by centuries are brought closer in the public discourse. The mythical projection of the past to the present does not create just a historical continuity of certain events important for the survival of the community, but also the belief that there is a chance to finally amend certain historical “injustices”, revenge the victims after many decades or centuries, and the nation and its state finally obtain the place which, in the minds of its members, always belonged to them.

During the periods of political crises and conflicts, the use and control of myths represents a key part of ethnic mobilization, considering that, as already pointed out, the mythical narrative has a significant power to mobilize the emotions and enthusiasm which, then, can be used in the defense of legitimacy and strengthening of power.³¹ The myths may be used to provide legitimacy for using power as an instrument of change, to characterize a certain regime as tyrannical and thus justify the violence against it, to minimize the importance of incremental changes as useless (cowardly) and characterize compromise and negotiations as dishonorable acts that cause the contempt of the community.³² For this reason, having essential control over myths, symbols and rituals is one of the most important conditions for the control of the entire society. By emphasizing certain memories, marginalizing the importance of others, as well as promoting certain symbols, values and models of behavior, those in the position of power can reinforce mutual solidarity and mobilize masses.³³

When the myths begin to be used in the process of ethnic mobilization, it is very difficult to cease or even hold this process under control, because it is mainly dynamic, polarizing and, once commenced, difficult to stop. The myths

³¹ George Schopflin, *Nations, Identity, Power: The New Politics of Europe*, Hurst & Company, London, 2000, p. 89.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 95.

³³ George Schopflin, “The Functions of Myth and a Taxonomy of Myths”, in *Myths and Nationhood*, Geoffrey Hosking and George Schopflin (eds.), Hurst & Company, London, 1997, p. 22.

and symbols penetrate the political discourse on both sides, which results in difficulty in communication between the opposing groups, considering that the language of myths functions within the community, but not also beyond its boundaries. In the communication across the boundaries myths distort the perspectives and confuse the participants, because their role lies in strengthening the common solidarity, and not mediating in contract with the other community.³⁴

The basic function of a myth is to protect the integrity of an ethnic or national group, among other, by identifying its (historical) enemies; considering that the majority of myths were created during and after the major armed conflicts, presenting the enemy side in these conflicts in the negative context makes an integral part of these narratives as well. The timeless character of myths, however, leads in some cases to their “return” to the social and political stage, together with the negative typologization of the historical enemies; such cases, however, almost always take place when the former antagonisms and conflicts are renewed, namely, when the “mythical” enemies appear again as contemporary (and real) opponents. It is difficult to conclude based on general observation whether strengthening of the role of myths in a certain society comes about after the first signs of social, political or security crisis, or the mythical narratives “are used” in order to contribute to cause political changes. One thing is certain that myths could not have a more significant mobilizing potential without the involvement of “real” factors; in other words, where there is no actual need, actual danger and actual threat, there is no room for intensifying the influence of mythical narratives in the public discourse and among the broader population.

Conclusion

Myth is a phenomenon that serves as a primary cultural systematization, orientation and stabilization, dealing with a relative narrow realm of issues related to the basic existential questions of man, using superrational (or irrational) mechanisms. Myth represents in more than one sense a unique cultural form, hence, the great attention paid to it in science is neither accidental nor unjustified. Myth has accompanied mankind since the earliest times to this day, and is an inevitable factor in almost all situations in life; the tendency to poeticizing and mythologization of social reality is a universal and permanent trait of the

³⁴ George Schopflin, *Nations, Identity, Power: The New Politics of Europe*, Hurst & Company, London, 2000, p. 86.

human societies.³⁵ Historical myths, similar to nations and national identity, owing to their constructive potential and emotional power, are phenomena that withstand the time, technological development, globalization and numerous social and political changes that have spread over the world in the 20th and the 21st century. Just like identity, myth provides security and strengthens the unity within a group, thus responding to the need of a great number of people to belong to a certain collectivity; it stimulates solidarity and creates empathy, national awareness and orients the members of a certain community.

This process of strengthening the relation within the community, however, at the same time closes the boundaries set around the group, separating it from the other, especially opposed groups. As pointed out by George Schopflin, boundaries are set up within the group by a myth, but also in relation to other groups. As a rule, those that do not share the myth are excluded. All the communities recognize these boundaries. Therefore, myth represents a key element in creating the closed collectivity.³⁶ Considering the fact that the ethnic group is not and cannot be observed as an independent, self-generating mechanism, but represents a social structure that requires continuous maintenance, the role of historical myths gains particular importance in this process. Actually, myth is one of the strongest mechanisms for closing the boundaries between different ethnic groups and its "value", especially during the period of social and political crises, often greatly exceeds the importance of material factors. Similar to the way it is done with certain historical events, myths give power, value and sense to current events which would be difficult, if not impossible to obtain fully by rational explanations. These narratives strengthen the solidarity, intensify emotions, incite antagonisms and justify conflicts. For this reason, historical myths often represent key elements of public discourse during the periods of ethnic mobilizations, conflicts and wars in the world today.

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