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Mythic content in the concept of nation

There are folk tales that are so universal that we forget when and where we heard or read them, so they live on in us as a memory of our personal experience...they are necessary, as it is natural and necessary for us people to communicate and reveal ourselves to each other… (Andrić, 1977)

Introduction

It seems that man feels cramped or at least indifferent in the world of real things. In a myth, as in a dream, the real parameters are moved, renamed, enlarged or reduced. Nevertheless, the myth, as a kind of universal collective illusion, persists for thousands of years and interferes with the general effort of man to act in the environment. The impression is that myth, as a universal product of the human spirit, saves us from the challenge of free thinking and the responsibility of raids, especially in situations that are more complex than our conscious power of reasoning and action. As a refuge and saving solution, the myth offers the possibility of expanding consciousness, but also the possibility of sinking into irrational chaos. Historical, value and general-life crossroads and conflicts are numerous: from internal conflicts and identity issues to extremes in the social, economic and cultural-value environment.

Likewise, in the concept of nation, as an extremely complicated entity, mythical thinking survives, although it is camouflaged in various forms of historiography, ideology or politics. Especially in times of crisis, that is, in the situations of reduced awareness (conflicts, wars, natural disasters, epidemics, pandemics, economic crises) mythical thinking simply flourishes and fills a good part of the concept of nation. Thus, the national identity is filled with mythical elements: it is filled from the outside, through the manipulative influences of propaganda, and also from the inside, due to the fear of being lost and of hopelessness. The national identity takes on the strength of personal identity, and the fear of its endangerment is almost equal to the fear of death.

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Method of accessing the topic

A myth is not only a scientific problem – some product of the spirit of the past that needs to be explained and scientifically illuminated for the sake of understanding. It captivates even laymen with its mystery, especially in the situations and times when old, perhaps forgotten, myths suddenly come to life and gain wide social significance. It is certain that people created and are still creating the characteristics of their existence and the characteristics of what is, broadly defined, human nature. And is it possible to choose among a series of scientific beliefs and theories the one that would at least approximately encompass all the fusions of man with the natural world and all the separations of man from the world of nature? Man's world is also the one we built during long evolution, and it is a world articulated by culture just as man's world is also one determined by biological equipment. When we use the word culture, we mean everything that makes a person human a unique being, and everything in which a person is and moves, both physically and spiritually. Man's biological equipment, which includes awareness of the immediate reasons and purposes of actions, is not the only one that is always renewed and developed in a new way. Behind itself, let's call it the cultural nature of man, it hides deeper fields of being whose roots are found in various times and in various communities and places. It was, of course, necessary to wait until the middle of the 20th century for the paths that had been separated for a long time to cross: the path that leads to the physical world in a roundabout way, through communication, and the path that we recently know leads to the world of communication through physics. The entire process of human knowledge, thus, acquires the character of a closed system (Levi-Strauss, 1978: 339). In fact, what happened was that the laws of nature were changed to the laws of information, which also implies the reverse transition. By being open to this method of understanding, one can see that for thousands of years humans have been accessing the laws of nature through information. And *vice versa*, understanding the laws of nature, they created the world in which they live. Spiritual sciences eluded a more systematic and clear insight into the similarity between modern and Neolithic man. The changes were interpreted and explained outside of self-awareness, or, outside of the systematized awareness of what is happening with the contents of a spiritual nature that are recognized as mythical, primitive. Paradoxically, it seems that these contents are the depots and bearers of changes in the spirit. If they are inherently rich and full of philanthropy, they bring progress; if they are filled with fear, more than hope, they lead to regressive behaviour. A myth is like a dream. It is always present, always important. Of course, where that dream takes the dreamer, what it means, what it teaches or warns him/her, is not easy to decipher and even predict. The method of understanding mythical content in the concept of nation is certainly very complex in the methodological sense. Nevertheless, different scientific researchers and different approaches to the problem of myths bring a lot of common and, one would say, indisputable.

Different views on the myth

First, it is indisputable that a primitive, say, still Neolithic man, creates a myth based on material taken from the objective world. He does not distinguish that world from his own, subjective world, and, thus, it can be said that the need for causality in primitive man does not exist. We assigned the attribute primitive to man in those ancient times precisely on the basis of data on undifferentiated consciousness and the lack of need for explanation. Later, the pharaohs they started a desperate fight against time with all their power and wealth, and they were apparently winning. The pyramids that remain testify to the brilliance as much as the nothingness of human life. The myth of the afterlife brought the miracle of pyramids, although, realistically speaking, we remain sad when we learn how many martyrs in sweat built that illusion of eternal life. Sometimes, it seems that a person can live as long as they have the strength to deceive themselves.

In the Romantic age (time of the Napoleonic Wars and the formation of nation states), it was considered that the understanding of mythology was conditioned by the spirit of the time in which that content was interpreted. In his journal, Johan Gottfried Herder wrote: "sailors brought religion to the Greeks. The Greeks could not have a mythology like the Egyptians and Arabs in the sandy deserts. Observing dolphins shaped nymphs, mermaids, etc. […] Grimm points out that a myth is a song of the whole people" (Bošnjak, 1971: 62).

Regardless of whether it is an allegorical, archetypal or other kind of interpretation of the myth, in the content of the myths of peoples all over the world, we find common motifs, and one of the most common is that life was born from death and that it is life that gives meaning to death itself. The most obvious is the myth of Jesus Christ. The creation of new, modern myths (Avatar, Big Brother, etc.) is related to the general inflation of consciousness in a world dominated by machines. In such an extreme cancellation of emotions of closeness and living communication, the myth of Christ as a child who fled to Egypt with his mother, on a donkey, in order to preserve his biological life, has almost been overcome today. It was translated into abstraction, into a ritual in churches, especially during holidays. God has been replaced by a mobile phone in which one prefers to look at one's own image and check the number of followers. Living myths about I-God embodied in selfies, influencers and followers point to the extreme cross of an essential feature of human nature, which is live, direct communication. The Egyptian pyramids, life before death and life after death in the mythical story of Christ and today's new idols that are often called immortal (for example Maradona) merge into some kind of transcendent, never seen life and are attributed to their own character or their own nation. Thus, through the work of myth, man's life is crystallized into a world of values that did not arise in a real, living dialogue of the Socratic type, but were imposed and dictated in advance. Big countries, big characters, big followers, big numbers... I can insert any myth into a fake smile and a prepared speech and that's the end of it. The end

of a better world and humanity. Nevertheless, it is good that at least there is a collision of different myths, because that is sometimes the hope that the world does not go in the direction of that joke: here is one suggestion for you, so choose. The cradle of European civilization, ancient Greece, too rich in myths, also gave birth to the dialogical method and balanced it, gave a measure to both rational and mythical in man.

Questions about the nation

Let's say, in the prose tradition of the Serbs, Marko Kraljević, who was both a historical and a mythical figure, did not die, but only retreated, together with his horse, Šarac, to some cave, or to some island, and there he bides his time: "when the hour of the resurrection of the entire Serbian tribe knocks, then Kraljević Marko will appear, gather all the Serbs under one banner and attack the Turks in front of them... and overcome the enemies" (Čajkanović, 1973: 413). Kraljević's words are remembered: "even the Sun has changed its faith, so it does not warm the same in winter as in summer, but I will not change mine" (Karadžić, 1969: 271-286).

Throughout history, national identities have often been forcibly threatened by being changed and named according to the territories that denoted certain states. Bronisław Malinowski believes that myth preserves and imposes morality, it is neither an intellectual explanation nor an artistic imagination, and myth is a pragmatic charter of moral wisdom (Malinowski, 1971: 237). Moral imperatives as vows of the people are most comfortably placed in the mother tongue. Just as blood kinship determines who is our brother or sister, aunt or uncle, so language, the mother tongue, determines kinship or belonging to a national identity. The most resistant barrier to the change of national identity is the mother tongue, despite the given opportunity for each individual to freely express his feelings about national affiliation. I personally know that my parents, their parents and their parents' parents, while living in the state of Yugoslavia, they declared themselves as Yugoslavs, without having mixed marriages and knowing that they were Serbs. Someone would say that it was because of the suitability that was required in the communist regime. But Yugoslavia was not always a communist creation. It was also the kingdom where my grandfathers and great-grandfathers lived. They were Serbs and they knew it, and they claimed to be Yugoslavs. I just want to point out that the tendency to choose belonging to a nation, for many reasons, takes over the choice of national identity based on the name of the country one lives in. Not only communist regimes, but also so-called democratic ones, more or less explicitly, suggest to the population how to declare themselves. The real identity is not forgotten, so today, like yesterday, it remains in the memory and in the mother tongue. Even then, as Yugoslavs, they knew songs and myths about Kraljević, historically a Turkish vassal. The historical fact is forgotten, and the kinship in religion and language is remembered. The myth of Kraljević's resurrection, similar to the myth of Christ's resurrection, connects the historical dis-

continuity and is preserved in the language of the people – in the oral tradition and the written word. Are there better answers to eternal questions about life than those that help a person to live? And what a person expects from life can best be expressed in his mother tongue or the language spoken by their relatives? Just for example: Giuseppe Garibaldi and Camillo Benso di Cavour united Italy after about 13 centuries (Monsagrati, 2002). Today it is unthinkable that the language spoken in the south of Italy is not understood in the north. It is unthinkable that there is a Lombardian, Apulian, Latsia language (although the variety of dialects is very rich). It never would occur to someone to speak of various nations on the Apennine Peninsula and various languages. If such discords, caused by the war, were to happen, then the myths about the rebirth of a common Italy would probably be revived. It would revive the myth of the rebirth of unifiers of the Italian race.

During their stormy history, the Serbian people – being in the eternal historical whirlwind and spread over the entire Balkan Peninsula – were exposed to invaders from all sides. They learned that turbulent times must be lived in waiting. Freedom does not come when we need it, but when we are ready for it. Of course, freedom implies development – it is a process, not a state that can be established by force. In the mythology of Serbian people, waiting loses the character of an illusion and represents reasonable patience, listening to the voice of our own will and the nature of objective circumstances. A conflict or a struggle occurs in extremely challenged freedom, at the moment when the survival of the people is called into question. Then there is resistance or the appearance of Kraljević. In other words, slavery is endured as a crisis of freedom, and only when a threat of total destruction occurs, the myth of the rebirth of Kraljević is being revived. Of course, a long series of myths for which Serbian cultural heritage is known is being revived. To the rhetorical question: "Which kingdom will you please?", so frequent in Serbian mythology, the answer is given: "The kingdom of the Heaven". A rich heritage of mythic consciousness waits hidden and comes alive in full force when mere survival is called into question. Also, the image of his mother, Jevrosima, who often advises and admonishes him, is associated with the mythical figure of Kraljević: "Marko, don't you speak wrongly, neither according to you dad [his father was the Serbian king Vukašin] nor according to you uncles, but speak according to the justice of the true God" (Karadžić, 1969: 271-286). In the words of Jevrosima, the wisdom of work is summed up, which has the characteristics of universal morality. It is at the same time the basis of the nation's identity.

Myth and nation

The myth of life before death and life after death, therefore, the myth of God or the eternally living hero, can be considered the myth of myths. It is present always and everywhere and contains many other recognized myths. Neither allegorical, nor archetypal,

nor any other kind of interpretation is sufficient to capture the whole meaning of this myth. All scientific interpretations have their place in the effort to see the totality and potential of its meaning. Mythic content about rebirth, resurrection, is related both to the individual and to the entire human race. In this context, they are also related to the nation as something that, in the feelings of individuals and communities, has both a personal and a collective-personal character. The fear of disappearing and the hope of rebirth do not cease to exist simultaneously in a mythical image, maintaining the identity of both the nation and the individual.

As Karl Jaspers says: "being human means becoming human" (Jaspers, 1973: 180). Development is "some kind of flow here and there, some movement that encompasses the world" (Jung, 1971: 177). Mythic thinking, as well as rational consciousness, can be raised to the level of a highly differentiated function. If every rational act is in the phase of disintegration and negation of established rights and freedoms, mythical contents, on a more or less complex level, perform the job of protecting the right to life. The subjective experience of national identity, as well as personal identity, is linked to the mother tongue and the name of the nation to which one belongs. In the modern world, changes in national and personal identity are taking place either by free will or by coercion. How does the general principle of the importance of the majority free choice of nationality apply to all adult citizens of a certain country? There are also paradoxical cancellations of some national identities because people find it hard to accept declaring themselves as members of a nation that does not have a state (e.g., Yugoslavia and Yugoslavs) and are forced to choose an identity from those national identities that are offered. Then they return to their roots and to their near or distant ancestors and countries that come to life in mythical memory. The development of such national identities has a series of parallel trajectories and confusing choices. What will be realized in the course of history as spiritual and material progress, and what will be regression, is difficult to predict. The being of a nation is largely of a mythical content, just as the oblivion of being is the reality of many national identities. In some places, children are fed with fairy tales, lullabies, and treated with riddles, and in others they are fed with pictures of avatars, monsters from hell, and treated with psychotherapy. Some listen to myths, others watch infantile phantasms – revived archetypes of fairies, witches, heroes, talking animals.

The righteous, exalted gods from the myths about heroes and the new mythical heroes – all-powerful machines with a more or less recognizable human face – merge in the unique identity of the hybrid nation and the new, almost unknown phenomenon of the myth of happy and unhappy nations. Of course, through the multiplication of so-called influencers and the mythologizing of one's own character in the new narcissistic culture, the myth of the I-hero cancels the myth of the general hero who is a virtue in itself but also a model of values. What could be said, in layman's terms – God is dead, and there are billions of narcissistic I-heroes who are happy, smiling, rich and have numerous followers. Whoever believes them has plunged deeply into the nothingness and

meaninglessness of existence, and yet, whoever regrets the time of their grandmother's stories about Kraljević and his justice, may laugh when they are happy and cry when they are sad, but still, although authentic, they remain wondering how to live their lives in a world of pretended values, set emotions and programmed nations. It is difficult to accept the belief in the existence of alternative worlds as it often seems. Are the East and the West really two worlds and what is the secret of this widespread myth? Are the nations, in an everyday sense, today reduced to the states bearing their name: Hindus live in India, Pakistanis live in Pakistan, Germans live in Germany and so on indefinitely? The maintenance of the identity of nations that remained or found themselves in other countries outside of their home countries is reduced to folklore and customary, that is, religious rituals and possibly their mother tongue. Just as the individual question, "Who am I?", constantly arises in the course of life, so, at the level of communities, the question of "Who are we?" revolves around the same parameters in the course of history: language, religion, customs. But, then it changes and when what we were is no longer "we" and it turns into "they", the work of the mythical potential of the spirit of nation takes place. For example, in the today's Bosnia and Herzegovina, the same language is spoken, and it is the mother tongue of all three entities: Bosnian, Serbian and Croatian, though it is called Bosnian. Since in Yugoslavia, a country that no longer exists, a significant number of inhabitants were Yugoslavs, atheists, or of different religions (a large percentage of mixed marriages), their heirs, with the disappearance of Yugoslavia, were given the opportunity to freely express their nationality. Of course, free choice does not have to coincide with personal feelings. Again, a personal feeling is related to upbringing and – what we call in the individual development – knowing oneself through others. Just as a newborn child learns about itself under the influence of its environment, also newly created nations receive imputations and messages that teach them to know who they are. This is where myth comes into play. Among the Serbs, these are myths about a lost paradise, the heavenly people, and rebirth, gathered in the image of a saviour, in the image of Christ. As for the so-called Bosnians (formerly called Muslims), there is a mythical focus on customs and Muslim laws that are more or less suitable for a Muslim man. What is more pleasing to Allah? On this question, orientalist literature, just like everyday practice, differentiates between the modernists and traditionalists in the roughest systematization. Myths, as moral songs of the people, are related to customs approved by Allah. Among Serbs, the myths are linked to heroic deeds of heroes or moral imperatives of the nation's mythically rooted value system.

Topic in the context of social capital

Social capital is an old concept that dates back to the 18th century and has only recently been revitalized in the midst of the debates about civil society. A useful understanding of social capital is as "a system of norms and networks (within the community/society)

that facilitate collective action" (Poteyeva, 2024). Another useful understanding is the comprehension of social capital as a "social (common) resource that facilitates and/or hinders an individual's access to other social, economic or natural resources" (Poteyeva, 2024). Social capital, in its concept and the ultimate origin of various definitions, is a measure of social cohesion based on mutual respect, trust and support. At the same time, this mutual familiarity is significantly different from tribal interdependence. At the macro level, namely, it includes the principle of autonomy, i.e., the right to connect with members of other networks and communities, apart from the basic one. On the micro level, on the other hand, mutual familiarity is supported and developed by the synergy between the activities of a certain community and the interests of its members, as well as the existence of integrity, that is, the ability of institutions to function autonomously. As such, social capital is a good that derives from the essence of man as a relational being. On the one hand, it is based on human solidarity, rooted in the awareness of a common human destiny, and on the other hand, the awareness of the strength of association, of the benefits brought by joint ventures. The mythical opinion has survived precisely thanks to these contents, which are woven into the concept of social capital. The nation, as a unique entity, finds its characteristics in the content offered in the native language and the written or spoken word, but what we hear that we are is always subject to change if our intra-national communication does not connect us with other nations. A person feels cramped if they are not connected to the world, and they feel joyful and energetic, if they have the opportunity to exchange experiences and enrich their lives. Ratio, which is open to myth, in the constant flow of mythical images and experiences, finds new creations and advances in its own expansion and wealth of possibilities. From God, or the hero of the nation, virtue and strength are taken as inspiration for a life that was once too heavy a burden. Unity is recognized in the nation. When it is broken and disintegrated, the nation acquires divine features and religious content. This is also evident in everyday life when one can hear that the personal name of a successful athlete is replaced by the name of the nation to which they belong. Sports commentators often say about them: "Look at what the Swiss did" or "The Serb is invincible". On the other hand, the creations of combining myth with the need for communication and connection take place in the most obvious way in the field of art and culture. The music of Goran Bregović connects not only the peoples of the Balkans, but also the wider Europe and even the world because it combines incompatible myths: the Serbian glory, suffering in the Second World War, a girl with a Muslim name, a Russian weapon (the Kalashnikov)., and finally, the name his band is called – Orchestra for Weddings and Funerals. This musician has been acting as an ambassador of myth and promoter of all nations in the Balkans for decades. Although he was born in a Serbian-Croatian marriage in Sarajevo, and married a Muslim woman, all three of his daughters are of different religions: Orthodox, Catholic and Muslim. If it weren't for numerous interviews testifying to this, we would think it was another myth. So, myth and nation can go hand

in hand and complement each other in the glory of life and the increase of social capital. It is possible that revived myths overwhelm the notion of nation so much that their contents are equalized. Then the community remains closed within itself, with low social capital. The potential of such a community is of a modest character, and the apparent closeness of its members is burdened by real mutual friction and paranoia. There, everyone is a danger to everyone, and everyone is at risk of being declared a traitor to their race. In such an environment, mythical contents in the concept of nation have a significant influence on political elites and decision-makers who use them in everyday rhetoric and, thus, maintain community cohesion under the patronage of the policy of exceptionalism and the importance of the nation. Politicians meet the masses and shape the already existing concern, that is, the already existing collective inflation of consciousness, into mythical social capital. Of course, real cohesion is that which facilitates community and individual access to material and spiritual resources. In the circumstances of the dominance of the mythical determination of the nation, national minorities and ethnic groups, if they have the right to vote, maintain their identity more through religious and ceremonial rituals, folklore and mother tongue (e.g., the possibility of schooling in the mother tongue) and less through an authentic traditional value system inherited from ancestors. Usually, due to funding, they are favoured by political elites in power or their mentors from influential states. Basically, they are more or less integrated communities that ritually remember their origins and have little in common with the values of their roots.

Conclusion

In times of crisis, the use of myth increases as a means of mobilizing the nation and preserving a kind of social cohesion, measured by number of people identifying with it (majority). In this chain of factors that define the life of communities, mythical thinking is woven into the notion of nation, which is only one of the links in that chain. Other links, that do not belong to the domain of this topic, concern the proclamation of values, and the hierarchy of human rights and freedoms: from the right to life, the right to work, the right to health and social protection, a healthy environment, education to rights and freedoms about gender and sexuality, etc.

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Abstract: A myth, as a kind of universal collective illusion, persists for thousands of years and interferes with the effort of people to live in a community and in syntony with their environment. The article studies various psychological, sociological and political aspects of the role of mythical content in creating and maintaining the concept of a nation. The myth of Serbian hero, Kraljević Marko, takes the central place in this analysis, as it is used as a case study, contextualized in determined socio-historical events and compared to other regional and European examples.
Keywords: myth, nation, identity, mythic content, human spirit

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