

Being ‘the European other’: Codification and commodification of Ottoman Heritage in Bosnia & Herzegovina

Abridged from the original paper.

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Abstract

This research examines the role of tourism in the construction of what ‘Balkan’ and ‘Ottoman’ means in modern European discourse. Empirical research, in the form of deep participant observation of the guided tours, and interviews with tour guides on the interpretation of Ottoman Heritage, namely Islamic, Jewish and Christian, took place in Bosnia and Herzegovina’s cities of Sarajevo, and Mostar. The research findings are in line with Zizek’s and Todorova’s argument that in modern European discourse the Balkans are presented as the ‘*European other*’, thus creating a binary discourse of what belongs to Europe and what is considered to be still internal, but European ‘other’. For the purpose of generic tourism interpretation and easy commercial gain, the complex and syncretic Ottoman history in Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H) is simplified and truncated so that it actually reinforces a wider binary discourse, i.e. the binary between east and west, whereas west is represented as Christianity and east is represented as Islam. Being unaware of the consequences of such a simplification, tourism may contribute further divisions in Europe, allowing the ‘seduction’ of decision makers with some dubious potential short-term gains. This practice overlooks reconciliatory aspects which tourism may bring with some more historically grounded interpretation which take into an account a syncretic nature of Ottoman laws. Through the lens of heritage codification, this research argues that Ottoman heritage should not be taken for granted, and tourism activities need to be recognised not only as an economic enhancer, but an interpretation of the religious heritage built during the Ottoman period in B&H, plays an important part of the total process of normalisation of social relationships, not only in B&H itself, but it also has implications on European identity. We thus investigate the interpretation of Ottoman heritage in order not only to enhance the possibility of deeper understanding of shared history and identity amongst the country’s people, but also to highlight the significance of B&H and the wider Ottoman context as important markers of ways of being European that need not depend upon binary spatial divisions of ‘east and west’ or ‘Christendom and Islam’. We note, however, the intersection of the utility of that binary both for certain strains of ethno-nationalist opinion in BH as well as a commercial heritage sector of tourism driven to offer the country up in a familiar, consumable narrative.

Keywords: Ottoman heritage, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Tourism

1. Introduction

This research examines the role of tourism in the construction of the meaning of the Balkans and its relation to the construction of European identity in modern European discourse. The starting point of this research is the premise argued by Jeffrey, (2008), Todorova, (2000), and Zizek, (1997) that European identity is created through imagining a binary between Europe and European *other*, i.e. the Balkans which was imagined as primordial and exotic part of Europe. In that particular context, Jeffrey (2008) explores European's discursive reactions, and the need to pose a 'Balkanist' anxiety (Todorova, 2009) in order to construct its own comparative identity, thus quarantining the Balkans as the land of 'primordial evil' (ibid). The research deploys the term '*Balkanism*', a term coined by Todorova (1996) which is analogous to Said's (1978) term '*Orientalism*' where Balkan is positioned as European '*internal other*' whereas Said's '*orient*' is '*external other*' thus cannot be a part of the concept. Jeffrey (2008) considers this particular narrative to be '*normative and mainstream*' in the European sense. This particular narrative, in its untamed sense, has unfortunately been used by some right wing nationalist Serbian and Croatian ideologies in former Yugoslavia for a purpose of keeping European identity by violently externalising Islam in Europe (ibid) through exterminating Muslim populations in the Balkans, specifically B&H. Similar narratives have also been utilised by some contemporary fascist movements around Western Europe [author observation]. In that sense this binary discourse could be positioned as a background and 'excuse' for doing genocide in Srebrenica for instance, so that Islam is externalised from European identity (ibid).

This Western European attitude towards the Balkans, is illustrated by Zizek (1997, 2008) in his analysis of films directed by Emir (Nemanja) Kusturica, which have the Balkans as their setting. According to Zizek (1997), the Kusturica's film *Underground* portrays the (perverted) fascination and secret admiration the west has while watching the portrayal of the Balkan as a spectacle of 'archaic ethnic passions'. The gaze of European fascination with this portrayal is the main obstacles to peace in ex-Yugoslavia (Pfeifer, 2012). Kusturica's film thus not only reflects the odd political discourse of Western politics, but in not being Western itself, uncritically complies with it.

Zizek coined the term '*reverse racism*' in order to explain the popularity of Kusturica's movies, especially the movie '*Underground*' in the west. Zizek (1997) argues that because the Balkans are a part of Europe, they can be spoken of in a racist clichés which no longer acceptable when applied to Asia or Africa. Zizek states, 'political struggles in the Balkans are compared to ridiculous operetta plots.' Fascist radical atrocities which some of the paramilitary Serbian formations did in Bosnia were actually downplayed in the movie thus presenting the war in the carnivalesque way, as Bosnian novelist Aleksandar Hemon pose it, '*as a collective savage madness*' (in Halpern, 2005). Zizek (2008) argues that European self is actually constructed through positioning and imagining the Balkans as European lower self: 'when discussing the Balkans, the tolerant [European] multiculturalist is allowed to act out his repressed racism and treat the Balkans in a racist clichés'. One of the issues which allows to speak about Balkan in racist clichés is Islam which acts as a point to strengthen the binary between what belongs to Europe and what does not.

'The Orient' is, as Said (1978) argued, constructed as a European *external other*, whereas the Balkans is constructed as Europe's *internal other*. What both Balkans and Orient have in common is several centuries under the rule of the Ottoman Empire. We conceptualise our research by taking Todorova's argument (1996) where Balkan is represented *as the Ottoman legacy*, and not to conceptualise it in a sense of an Ottoman legacy *in the Balkans*. Further, we supplement Delanty's (2003) argument of the Ottoman-Islamic constellation as being

essentially European. The full scope of an enquiry into the interplay of these prevailing and potential narratives of Europe(s) is beyond the scope here. Our focus is moderated to an extent by the fact that Bosnia and Herzegovina (as is the rest of the Balkan region) is a former Ottoman Eyalet (province) where the socio-cultural legacy of Ottoman imperial rule as '*management and maintenance of difference*' (Barkay, 2008) is particularly pronounced.

Through this research, we study the role of tourism within these processes. We study the codification of Ottoman heritage in B&H and its commercialisation and representation for tourism purposes. Our empirical focus is B&H cultural heritage sites dating from the period of Ottoman rule (15th-19th centuries). We do not approach these studies through classifying them by their individual religious and ethnic attribution as Muslim, Jewish, Orthodox, Catholic or Bosniak, Sephardic, Serb or Croat but as 'Ottoman' in terms of the historical period and legacy they date from. Its focus is on how the entire mode of organisation across religious, language, and class boundaries that can collectively be called 'Ottoman', can be represented as heritage. Before we move on to our empirical data, we briefly review the historical circumstance and points related to the representation of Ottoman heritage in B&H.

2. Ottoman heritage in the Balkans

The Ottoman state expanded by the decline of the existing Muslim and Christian imperial powers in Anatolia and southeast Europe; the Seljuq Sultanate of Rum and the Byzantine Empire, i.e. East Roman Empire which contradicts the simplistic narrative driven by some of the Western European authors which constitute 'the Turks' as part of an undifferentiated Islamic offensive on Christendom (İnalçık, 1994; 2006; Almond, 2009). Rather, it was an intrinsic component of geopolitical events within a Euro-Mediterranean '*greater Western world*' (Goffman, 2002: 7-9). Ottoman expansion in South-Eastern Europe, i.e. West Balkans was done rapidly. By the late fifteenth century, it incorporated Macedonia, Greece, Albania, Bulgaria, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldavia, Wallachia (modern Romania) and a significant part of current Croatia (İnalçık, 1994; Lopasic, 1994).

At the time of the Ottoman conquest in the late 1500s, the Bosnian Kingdom nobility was mainly Catholic, tied to Rome, Venetian Dalmatia and Hungary (Lopasic, 1994). Yet, majority of peasant population and indeed some of the nobility, adhered to the '*heretical*' schismatic and dualist Bosnian Church whose teaching resembles Manichaeism to some extent. Through undermining the legacy of the existing feudal elites, the Ottomans offered an improvement in the material situation of the peasants, (İnalçık, 1954) which makes it clear that 'Islamisation' of the Bosnian population was not mandatory, (Lopasic, 1994) setting aside the '*devşirme*' levy periodically replenishing the Ottoman military and bureaucracy with Christian peasant boys forcibly converted to Islam at their young age. Voluntary conversion proceeded gradually, becoming more intense during the mid 16th century peak of Ottoman military success in Central Europe.

The height of Ottoman expansion in Europe culminated under Sultan Suleiman I (r: 1520-1566) where the territory of Southeast Europe remained relatively stable military frontier between Ottoman and Habsburg lands from the end of Suleiman's reign until the first significant Ottoman reverses in the region after 1683 (Murphey, 1999). A set of relatively stable, and at least managed social relations developed amongst Muslims, Christians and Jews which can be identified as specifically Ottoman (Barkey, 2008). The legacy of Ottoman social organisation includes institutionalised interrelationship of religion, social class and state employment (Bieber, 2000). Islam was a supreme, the religion of the ruling class, with subordinate, yet legitimate status reserved for Christianity and Judaism, which crosscut with

socioeconomic status. Finally, society was divided between those occupying positions in the state administration, inclusive of *Askeri*, representatives of three recognised religions, and the large population of *Raya* (*the flock*), a general word for subject people regardless whether they are Muslims, Christians or Jews. The main difference between the Muslim and non-Muslim population is in certain privileges, but also the responsibilities given to Muslim population. While exempt from the 'head tax' levied on Jews and Christians, Muslims were instead obliged to serve in the army. Yet, many Christians served voluntarily (Barkey, 2008). Communities were largely self-regulating under the *Millet* system, wherein one was born into a recognised community, submitted to its 'spiritual, financial and administrative authority' and could not exit it other than by conversion to Islam (Ortaylı, 2004: 18). Yet people crossed these 'boundaries' in pursuit of their social, economic and legal interests. The Roman Catholic and post-Reformation Protestant churches did not occupy the same formal positions within the governing apparatus of the Ottoman state, as was the case with the Orthodox Church and Judaism (Barkay, 2008, Bieber, 2000). However, legal provision was made for the toleration of both in separate cases, as is the case of an *Ahdnama* (contract based on *Sharia*), giving religious freedom to Catholics within the boundaries of Ottoman secular law (*kanun*), under the provision of Sultan Mehmed II given to the custodian of the Franciscan order in B&H, Fra Angelo Zvizdovic. The document was also a template for subsequent *Fermana* (decrees) for the protection of the non-Muslim population more generally (Čaušević, 2005). From the late 15th to late 17th centuries, the Ottoman state successfully developed and implemented this policy of toleration towards its non-Muslim population (Vickers, 1999). However, Barkey (2008) argues that although the instances like *Ahdnama* testify to certain humanistic characteristics of the Ottoman legacy, minorities *within* Islam, i.e. Shi'a, Alevi and certain Sufi 'heresies' and the emerging Sunni Wahabi movement in the 18th century were repressed. After the conquest of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, the Ottoman legacy legitimised itself as a guardian of *Sunni* orthodoxy, thus the minorities within Islam itself constituted an existential threat to Ottoman legitimacy (Newman, 2006). This is due to the the recognised subordinate status of Jews and Christians as *Zhimmi* (Peoples of the Book) within the schools of Islamic jurisprudence recognised by the Ottomans which did not recognise competing legitimacies within Islam itself.

Therefore, toleration of religious difference was a pragmatic means for an Islamic empire to exercise control in regions with significant non-Muslim populations. As Barkey (*ibid*: 120) maintains, '*difference was perceived as the norm, a condition that need not be altered, but managed*'. Islam was not only supreme in terms of its position as the 'state religion' but provided the legal framework, within which difference was tolerated, regulated and, if necessary, suppressed. So, what emerged in the Balkans, perhaps most obviously and throughout the empire more generally, was a situation where Islam constituted 'the primary marker of [political] inclusion' and whose legal tenets towards Muslims, Jews and Christians formed a framework of relations best described as 'separate, unequal and protected' (*ibid*). So, the 'classical' Ottoman period was one in which 'religion was considered more important than the linguistic and cultural group to which [people] belonged', as distinct from later 'national' identifications emerging in the 19th and 20th centuries (*ibid*: 80). This is neither to set aside the genuinely felt intensity of ethno-nationalist identities around which resistance to Ottoman rule in Europe and subsequent, related emergence of Turkish nationalism emerged nor their more recent manifestation in the break-up of Yugoslavia. Rather, it is to question the *timelessness* of such ethnic discourses, to argue that the expansion and consolidation of Ottoman rule occurred under very different conditions and that, therefore, an associated codification of the heritage legacy ideally should not be framed simply within nationalist or

binary 'civilisational' rubrics. Later periods, when national identities *did* provide the symbolic basis for resistance to imperial rule, Barkey (*ibid*) argues, clearly do not represent the eruption of latent inter-ethnic tensions, but the diminished ability of the Ottoman state to manage relations of difference and participatory access to power as well as interactions between imperial centre and provinces. This Ottoman social legacy renders problematic 'mainstream' European discourses and their explanation and construction of the 1990s conflict in Yugoslavia as the logical consequence of embedded, 'timeless' ethnic hatreds, subsumed by a regime in which discrete nations were artificially woven together. This narrative posits that repressed hatred was unleashed in the early 1990s as the Yugoslav state unravelled, causing brutal inter-communal war (see for instance Malcolm, 1994, Simms, 2001 on this critique). However, as Kovač (2006) argues, the non-existence of ethnically based politics for most of the Ottoman era created a heterogenic social texture in BH, constituting a 'normality' of social experience for centuries.

2.1 Research approach

Our research explores the role of tourism in creating the particular constructs and narratives of the Balkans, its meanings and representations. We study the representation of the Balkans in the context of the formation of its own identity. We question the role of tourism and specifically Ottoman heritage codification in B&H and interpretation of that heritage in constructing the notion of identity formation and belonging. In doing so, we have done both textual and visual semiotic analysis of written tour guides and brochures and websites. Further to this, a series of semi-structured interviews were conducted in the cities of Mostar, Pocitelj, Travnik and Sarajevo with tour guides, museum custodians as well as overt participant observation of city tours. The bulk of these interviews took place in Sarajevo and Mostar because of both cities' popularity as tourism destinations partly associated with their rich Ottoman built heritage.

Although critical theory is a very convenient tool to be deployed as a research approach when normative assumptions need to be challenged, it is still rarely deployed in tourism studies. However, more and more tourism researchers have started using this particular approach in order to emancipate usually silent tourism voices, challenged meta-theories and create emancipatory knowledge (Causevic and Lynch, 2011). According to Kincheloe and MacLaren (1998, 2005), there are many different approaches to critical theory. Critical theory is not a uniformed approach, yet features common characteristics including interdisciplinarity, dialecticism, epistemological reflexivity and emancipation theory (Habermas, 1978). Tourism, correspondingly, is an interdisciplinary field of research. Hollinshead (2009) argued that tourism is actually a postdisciplinary study context. In any case it is a field of study, which fosters dialogue amongst disciplines and in such a way creates new knowledge. Further, this particular kind of research creates knowledge, or at least new interpretations of knowledge, through epistemological reflexivity (Bourdieu, 1986). This encourages reflection upon our assumptions about the world and helps us to think about the implications of such assumptions for the research and its findings (Willig, 2001: 32). According to Bauer and Roth (2003), the knower and the known are in a dialectic unit, thus the knowledge created bears the mark of the epistemic subject and that particular relation which in fact is reflected upon through the epistemological reflection. Emancipation is always imbedded as one of the main characteristics of critical theory. However, as Kincheloe and MacLaren (2005) argue, emancipation should be used very carefully in postcolonial and neo-colonial narrative when the term in a particular theoretical context has a meaning which can easily be subjugated to

‘emancipation’ understood as liberation from colonialism (Jack, 2008). In this case, the emancipatory concept comes from challenging the normative perspective and technical knowledge (Habermas, 1978) through which the binary discourse was developed.

2.2. Selected Research Findings

We provide a selection of more extensive research data available here, to illustrate particularly potent effects of the binary discourse that is inscribed on B&H. Tourists coming to B&H are exposed to tour guides and official promotional material created by both public and private tourism associations and enterprises located in the country. Most of the material is consistent with an interpretation of the Ottoman heritage that reproduces the east-west binary, i.e. orient, and occident, whose ‘meeting point’ is in B&H.

As for instance illustrated here,

Bosnia and Herzegovina has emerged from the ashes of war to become one of the most exotic destinations of southeast Europe, an ancient crossroads where east meets west.

Bradt Guide

Furthermore, it is very common that travel agents and tour operators advertise the trip to Sarajevo in this way;

Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina, is known as a place where East meets West ... the European Jerusalem, as many call it.

Both local and foreign tour guides, tour operators and the official tourism association of B&H actively feature the slogan that Sarajevo is the place where East and West meet. Another, very popular slogan, which is especially popular among local guides is the comparison between Sarajevo and Jerusalem. Although many tour guides feature this comparison in the guided tours observed, some tour guides are reluctant to offer it. Locals want to promote their city as a peaceful place where different religions co-exist. As related by one tour guide who visited Jerusalem and experienced very frequent check points, difficulties to enter into the main Al Aqsa mosque for non-Muslims and the threat of violence, both in structural and physical terms (Galtung, 1996). The situation, however, in the cities is qualitatively different. Sarajevo and Jerusalem are comparable at a superficial level because in a very small radius, one can find the religious heritage of Judaism, Islam and various Christian denominations. Both are consequences of the Ottoman mode of social organisation and its legacy to varying degrees. Sarajevo is a more concentrated case derived from specific methods used by the Ottoman state to manage both newly converted Muslim, immigrant Jewish and existing Christian populations. Jerusalem, is a far more ‘recent’ sense where the Ottomans adapted their social model to accommodate already existing and longstanding syncretic arrangements. In order to make this comparison work, some important characteristics of both Jerusalem and Sarajevo need to be truncated, losing the complex contingency that actually differentiates them. Therefore while it may make superficial marketing ‘sense’ to compare these two cities, it is empirically dubious in historical terms.

Another significant point of interest is a so-called binary between the east and the west, as noted by Said (1978). In this particular context, the binary is constructed through its constant reproduction. This can be very dangerous for local communities. For instance, the tour guides in Mostar advertise themselves as ‘*Mostar-where east meets west*’ which can be very problematic in a post-Dayton B&H where Mostar is officially divided into Croat East and

Bosniak West Mostar. Such a representation of Mostar solidifies this east-west binary, giving the sense of historical timelessness that is itself *ahistorical* and does not allow the normalisation of more fluid social relationships to take place.

The data show that, for commercial tourism purposes, a rich and complex Ottoman Heritage in Bosnia is interpreted in a way that it actually needs to 'make sense' to international visitors, or at least those saturated in the teleological assumptions of 'the West'. In this context, tour guides interpret Ottoman heritage in a deliberately simplified way, often driven by limited time. Further, visitors are often subjectively immersed in often sensational popular historical narratives where speaking about a brutal conquest from the east makes 'sense' and to which guides complicity respond in a commercially driven sense. Tour guides, especially these in Mostar, constantly report that they do not have enough time to explain the complexities of Ottoman heritage. They use the binary discourse between east and west because '*it is something the tourists are familiar with*' (*Interview transcript*).

For pragmatic reasons, tour guides use the binary discourse. To many visitors the binary is recognisable and easily received. The historical concept is simplified into a binary because only in such a way it 'makes sense' to the western visitors. Talking about the syncretic characteristics of Ottoman legacies in the Balkans is complex and, often, western (and indeed sometimes Turkish and Israeli) visitors are not familiar with such rhetoric. According to one museum custodian, Turkish and Israeli visitors appear not to be very familiar with the syncretic nature of the Ottoman Empire. While visiting a Sephardic synagogue and museum in Sarajevo dating from 1566, many Turkish and indeed Israeli visitors have very similar understanding of the Ottoman Empire heritage as their Western counterparts, i.e. a binary one. This particular exemplar shows that both Turkey, Israel and Western European countries in fact have very similar understanding of the past largely as a result of their contemporary politics. Again, in this context, complex historical legacies are deliberately simplified and condensed to both accommodate pragmatic, operational circumstances as well as the historico-civilisational subject positions of visitors.

Under such circumstances the museum custodian actually challenges these assumptions by highlighting the position of Jews in Sarajevo as a community valued for its skills and knowledge, and an important part of the Ottoman mode of social organisation. Indeed, the Sephardic population was invited to settle in the Ottoman Empire after their expulsion from Spain deliberately for this purpose (Barkey, 2008). The custodian highlights to tourists that, '*this museum shows the life of the Jewish community in Sarajevo and also how well integrated the community was*'.

Another Sarajevo tour guide, explained that in the beginning of his career, he said that for him, thinking of Bosnia in a syncretic terms is '*normal, something what we take here for granted, the way we grew up in Sarajevo*' he commented that at the beginning of his career he was not aware of the importance of presenting that 'normality'. Further, while visiting Despica House which represents the life of bourgeois Christian Orthodox families in Sarajevo, tourists feel perplexed because the first floor of the house is designed in 'Ottoman style'. The custodian said that the tourists bring a lot of prejudices and he also points out how important it that through this particular ethnographic presentation to show this home '*as it was, this was fashionable at that time, and comfortable too. So, wealthy people would be able to afford it, having lots of cushions was like having plasma TV now*'. This statement, indeed, corresponds with Sugar's (1977) account of the diffusion of elite taste in Balkan cities up to and including the late Ottoman period: 'because the Muslims had both old and new rich among them, this group automatically enjoyed the highest prestige and gave the tone to "*high society*".

3. Conclusion

The richness of the heritage in B&H is that it is simultaneously Christian, Jewish and Muslim, yet, the organisational framework underwriting it in its historical and legacy terms is, of course, Ottoman. Nevertheless, Ottoman heritage in B&H is now summed up under exclusionary ethnonationalisms internally and binary constructs that drives commodification and codification of the country's heritage in the binary between east and west (Islam and Europe), and also the binary between Europe and European other, i.e. the Balkans. Commodification and codification of Ottoman heritage plays an important part in the process of building European identity. Žižek (1999, p. 4) argues that Balkan is the most suitable for the construction of European superiority, arguing that European rhetoric applies 'reflexive' politically correct racism. We are dealing with an imaginary cartography, which projects onto the real landscape its own shadowy ideological antagonisms, in the same way that the conversion-symptoms of the hysterical subject in Freud project onto the physical body the map of another, imaginary anatomy, where according to Žižek (2008) Balkan is constructed rather as a backward and primitive 'self' rather than an alien 'other'.

The story of 'the meeting point between the east and the west' is a part of the tourism offer in Sarajevo; it is also inscribed, most famously, Istanbul as well, in both cities, the differentiation between 'East' and 'West' is Islam. However, the entire story of Islam in Europe generally and the Ottoman case specifically, is far more complex than this discourse suggests (Almond, 2009; Goffman, 2002). Similarly, the simplification of the Balkans as the European 'other' is also rather more complex than it is presented in the normative discourse. This shows further simplification; as to some tourists, the Ottoman past in Bosnia may be more easily understood as a Turkish imperial occupation of Bosnian territory, rather than presenting and explaining the active participation of Slavic, Albanian, Greek, Hungarian and Romanian populations in an Ottoman context (Barkey, 2008). It appears that presenting it as simply 'Ottoman' does not 'fit' with Western understanding of how this empire 'worked'.

We understand that historically locatable modes of social organisation in particular spatial contexts do not sit within the standard definitions of 'intangible heritage' as reviewed by Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2004). Nonetheless, we suggest that the conceptualization of the social organization and management of the multireligious societies during the Ottoman period becomes codified as a form of sublimated intangible heritage in the grandest sense. It provides a framework for particular forms of narrative-associational understanding of built heritage sites that retain the potential to be recovered and redeployed.

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