

Tradition as a Useful Tool: New Patterns of Culture among the Bosniaks in Novi Pazar

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Within the scope of the project, the first field study data were provided by Abdullah Akat and Zdravko Ranisavljević in Novi Pazar in June 2022.

ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the KUD Mladih Novi Pazar Youth Culture and Art Association and the FolklorDaire music group, which play an active role in culture and music in Novi Pazar, Serbia. The core question that I try to understand in the context of these two cases is as follows. As new cultural patterns are formed, how do they gain sources of spirit, intellectual basis, and enthusiasm for practice? At this point, when I consider the historical and geographical positions of Novi Pazar, I underline that cultural and musical behaviors refer to tradition. Basically, I argue that tradition plays a role in the musical and cultural behavior of the city of Novi Pazar as a useful tool in both cases. Theoretically, I prioritize the concept of cultural intimacy borrowed from ethnography and the concept of revitalization movements in order to be able to explain the new cultural patterns produced based on the concept of tradition. The first fieldwork in Serbia, Novi Pazar provided data on getting to know the region, observing musical practices, ongoing cultural structures, and conducting in-depth interviews with active musicians in cultural music movements. In the second stage, netnography, an online research method, was used to study two refined samples.

Keywords: Novi Pazar, cultural intimacy, revitalization movements

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Introduction

The city of Ras, which was the capital of the first Serbian state, started to change both in terms of settlement and culture with the conquest by the Ottoman Empire at the end of the 14th century (Aruči, 2013, p.468). In the second half of the 14th century, Ras was renamed Trgovište, and a new fortification was formed near it, which was named Novi Pazar in 1461. Novi Pazar was established as a new city in the region by Gazi İsa Bey İshakbeyoğlu in 1459–1461, next to the old settlement that had been used by Illyrians, Romans, Byzantines, and Serbs. That is why its name is Novi Pazar (*Yeni Bazar*). In this process, some of the Turkish and Muslim people who came to Serbia from Anatolia and other Ottoman lands were settled in the region. In addition, many local Christian people converted to Islam for different reasons (Hacısalihioğlu, 2009, p.121–126). The peoples who lived for four hundred years under the rule of the Ottoman Empire have a common cultural heritage in terms of daily life practices, architecture, and language interactions. Novi Pazar and its surroundings are a region with a rich historical background, characterized by two prominent historical narratives. In medieval times, it was known as the region of Raška (Old Rascia) with the capital Ras, which held significant importance as the capital of the Serbian kingdom, the heart of the Serbian principality, and the center of the Orthodox Church. It served as a stronghold against the impending Ottoman domination, representing the last bastion of resistance against Ottoman rule. On the other hand, the region is also recognized as Sandžak, an Ottoman administrative entity. The borders of Sandžak were subject to frequent shifts, influenced by the political and military ambitions of the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian governments. The dynamic nature of the region's boundaries reflects the complex historical context in which it existed (Luke, 2018). These two historical accounts shed light on the underbelly of multi-ethnic and religious conflicts that have shaped the region. The coexistence of these narratives highlights the diverse and intricate nature of Novi Pazar's history, characterized by the interplay of different cultures, religions, and political powers.

Serbia today exhibits significant ethnic diversity. The population includes various ethnic groups, including Serbs, Hungarians, Croats, Roma, Slovaks, Bunjevci, Romanians, Ruthenians, Montenegrins, etc. These ethnic groups have different cultural traditions, languages, and customs, contributing to the multicultural fabric of the country. The Muslim community in Serbia is a significant part of the country's religious and cultural landscape. The community is diverse, consisting of various ethnic backgrounds, including Bosniaks, Albanians, and Roma, among others. Mosques and Islamic cultural centers are present in different parts of the country, serving as places of worship, community gathering, and cultural activities (Đurić-Milovanović & Đorđević-Crnobrnja, 2021). Ethnic identity and self-identification play a significant role in shaping the social, cultural, and political dynamics within the country (Raduški, 2023). The Bosniaks in Serbia have a strong connection to their Islamic faith and maintain their cultural traditions and practices, primarily because of the historical past during which they, as a Slavic people, accepted Islam. During the 20th century, Slavic Muslims searched for their identity, changing their names, until 1993, when they officially became Bosniaks. Serbs and Bosniaks use languages that are considered different dialects of the same language group. This language, which is differentiated into Bosniak and Serbian, actually references the same cultural codes and history (Catić, 2009, pp. 413–427).

The term Balkan, rather than a regional, geographical area, represents an area formed by many states shaped by different cultures and civilizations. It is not a coincidence that the definition the Balkan area is used instead of Southeastern Europe in cultural studies of the region. The area has its own cultural diversity and character in terms of language, religion, and behavior, because, rather than being a region, we are talking about productions that are distinctive in terms of cultural patterns and nuances, but intricate in terms of cultural layers (Lajić-Mihajlović & Jovanović; 2012, pp. 13–14). In her work, historian Maria Todorova (2009, pp. 29–36, 119, 184) introduces the concept of 'Balkanism' to describe a set of negative stereotypes and perceptions associated with the Balkan region. These stereotypes include notions of barbarity, tribalism, backwardness, inefficiency, and unpredictability. Todorova contrasts these perceptions with idealized classical and Judeo-Christian values, as well as the commitment to modernity found in Western European societies. Todorova's analysis highlights the tendency to view the Balkans through a lens of otherness, emphasizing the region's perceived deficiencies and deviations from Western European norms. This portrayal of the Balkans as a region plagued by inherent flaws and lacking in progress serves to reinforce a sense of superiority and exceptionalism among Western European societies. The phrase 'Balkan studies' is regularly employed in cultural studies, anthropology, sociology, and musicology to refer to the interdisciplinary field of study devoted to the Balkan region (Ficher, 2009; Kaser, 2014). In this context, literature on music and dance refers to the region geographically while discussing the difference between Balkan music (Medić, 2020) and music in the Balkans (Samson, 2013). Furthermore, there have been debates on the geopolitical axis, religious and ethnic interpretations, and assessments of contemporary music. The music culture of Novi Pazar is not isolated from ethnomusicological assessments in the Balkan region and Serbia.

My theoretical approach in this paper is composed of all of this geographical and historical data on the topic. Music and dance are the most prominent indications of cultural output in Novi Pazar, a city with a rich historical past, geographical integrity, and cultural diversity in southwestern Serbia. The information I have illuminates the notion of tradition as a beneficial instrument for creating cultural patterns that open the door to the new. What I am trying to emphasize with the examples of music and dance is that, although different cultural patterns emerge from different methods and practices, they both rely on the idea of tradition. Music and dance revised the long-held values associated with traditions. The concept of tradition is not just a reference to practices. It has implications that can be interpreted in terms of history, geography, ethnicity, language, faith, and selfhood. These foundations give to music and dance a sense of security as they develop new cultural patterns.

What is the meaning of tradition as a useful tool? Tradition is not a static and rigid concept but rather a dynamic and evolving phenomenon (Shils, 1981). It is through questioning and challenging tradition that it can be revitalized and adapted to the changing needs and values of society (Asavei, 2021, p. 131–132). This perspective aligns with the idea that tradition is not a monolithic entity but rather a complex and multifaceted system that encompasses various cultural practices, beliefs, and values. ‘Tradition as a tool’ refers to the concept of utilizing or employing traditional practices, customs, or beliefs as a means to achieve certain goals or outcomes. It suggests that traditions can be intentionally employed or manipulated to serve specific purposes, whether they are social, cultural, political, or economic. Rather than being seen as static or fixed, traditions are viewed as dynamic and adaptable tools that can be utilized strategically to address contemporary challenges or meet specific objectives. This perspective recognizes the agency and flexibility of traditions, allowing them to be employed as resources or strategies in various contexts.

When I observe these two fundamental examples, according to my initial impressions, it becomes evident that the cultural domains of dance and music, where new patterns are created, contain references deeply rooted in tradition that encompass all aspects of life. My fieldwork data reveals a recurring pattern where a significant number of sentences I encounter begin with phrases such as ‘this region’, ‘this geography’, ‘our history’, ‘our cultural heritage’, and similar expressions. This highlights that tradition serves not only as a foreground for inherited beliefs, but also as a directional tool that evolves and persists within dynamic institutional and political contexts.

In order to focus on the two original examples that are the subject of this article, in addition to the initial data obtained from fieldwork, I opted for the online research technique of netnography. Through this approach, I conducted in-depth interviews with my source Emina Brunčević to understand the activities of the KUD Mladih Novi Pazar Youth Culture and Art Association. In addition, I conducted interviews with two members of the FolklorDaire ensemble, Mersija Ramović Kolašinac and Muammer Hajdarpašić. I attempted to write about two different cases with varying interpretations based on traditional patterns. KUD Mladih Novi Pazar draws inspiration from traditional codes, showcasing cultural intimacy, and the FolklorDaire, through their performances, engages in revitalization movements that can be understood within the framework of Ottomanism, Turkishness, and Islam.

KUD Mladih Novi Pazar Youth Culture and Art Association

“We are [the] only group who research and represent both culture and tradition.

For example, choirs...or church music...or ilahi’s...”

(E. Brunčević, personal communication, August 04, 2022).

KUD Mladih Novi Pazar was established in September 2017. The association has a total of 550 members in several groups. The association can be described as a unifying platform that brings together young individuals based on a shared cultural foundation. Within this association, young people from diverse cultural backgrounds within the country can appreciate the variations in costumes, dance forms, and music as expressions of cultural diversity. This ability to interpret and embrace cultural differences is a distinct advantage for KUD Mladih Novi Pazar, representing a national privilege. The members of the association find a sense of cultural intimacy in their performances and rehearsals, stemming from their shared Balkan heritage and connection to Novi Pazar. In this case, tradition emerges as a valuable tool for fostering cultural intimacy and establishing patterns of unity. According to Emina Brunčević:

The entire folk cultural heritage of Novi Pazar is very diverse and rich, just like other varieties of tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Therefore, Novi Pazar has a long and rich history of cultural and artistic associations. [...] It has both a geographical indication and a heritage attributed to the Balkans. (personal communication, August 04, 2022)

The oldest culture and art association in Novi Pazar was founded in 1908. After the World War II, there was great increase in a number of culture and art associations (in 1950, there were 21 folk dance groups in Novi Pazar and Deževa). The ones that produced the most important results were Mladost, which was founded in 1977 but merged with

the Culture-Art Association under the Oslobođenje Public Education Center in 1983, and the City Folk Dance group, which was founded in 1978 and closed in 2016 (Aksić & Pantović, 2017).



Figure 1. KUD Mladih Novi Pazar [Photograph], personal archive of Emina Brunčević, August 2022.

According to Emina, the artistic and pedagogical work of the association is based on tradition. Traditional dances and music are the basis of stage adaptations and choreographies that they perform, as well as traditional singing. The tradition of the Balkan people is both unity and common cultural heritage.



Figure 2. KUD Mladih Novi Pazar dance groups in Serbian and Bosniak-style costumes [Photograph], personal archive of Emina Brunčević, August 2022.

Emina highlights the shared vision and purpose that comes with being from Novi Pazar. She emphasizes the importance of preserving and reinforcing this foundational knowledge in their present-day productions. In doing so, she underscores the significance of nurturing cultural intimacy between Serbs and Bosniaks.

[...] The tradition of community and coexistence among the residents of Novi Pazar, along with the harmonious neighborly relations, particularly in terms of shared traditions, art, and culture, serves as a behavioral model that requires nurturing and development in today's context. This serves as the primary objective of our ensemble: to promote and cultivate the tradition and culture of both Serbs and Bosniaks, fostering their successful coexistence [...]. (E. Brunčević, personal communication, August 04, 2022)



Figure 3. Stylistic adaptation of Serbian and Bosniak dances and music on stage (choreographer Ibiš Kujević) [Photograph], personal archive of Emina Brunčević, August 2022.

KUD Mladih Novi Pazar brings together the traditional knowledge of the Balkans with the cultural codes of Novi Pazar, with the goal of preserving and promoting Serbian national values. Cultural intimacy serves as a significant aspect of their work. Herzfeld (2005, p. 3), calls this cultural intimacy, “[t]he recognition of those aspects of cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality”. The association provides a platform where Bosniak and Serbian children and young individuals residing in the city come together on the same stage. Through the expressive mediums of dance figures, music, and costumes, the members of the KUD Mladih Novi Pazar engage in a process of exploration and learning that leads to a profound understanding and appreciation of their shared cultural heritage rooted in tradition. These artistic elements serve as powerful tools for delving into the depths of history, allowing the participants to connect with the narratives, customs, and values that have shaped their collective identity. By immersing themselves in the rich tapestry of their cultural traditions, they not only gain knowledge but also develop a profound sense of connection and pride in their shared cultural legacy. This process of exploration and learning through dance, music, and costumes fosters a deeper understanding and appreciation of their cultural heritage, strengthening their bond as a community and preserving their traditions for future generations. In my perspective, the paradigm of tradition can be regarded as a valuable and restorative tool. It establishes a space for cultural intimacy that resonates in the present. In contemporary times, it plays a significant role in shaping new cultural patterns. The initiatives grounded in tradition establish a flexible framework that promotes convergence and cultivates a profound sense of intimacy.

FolklorDaire Ensemble

Based on the information provided by Mersija Ramović Kolašinac and Muammer Hajdarpašić, FolklorDaire is a dance and music ensemble that was established in Novi Pazar in 2016. The group actively participates in various cultural events and ceremonies organized by the Muslim minority, including henna nights (*kına*), circumcision ceremonies (*sünnet*), and marriage ceremonies (*düğün*). During these rites of passage, FolklorDaire incorporates a range of cultural symbols, adding depth and significance to the festivities. In these parades, FolklorDaire orchestrates a series of customary rituals that commence from the moment the bride, groom, or circumcised child first enters the community. These parade rituals, accompanied by music, dance, costumes, and traditional instruments, embody cultural codes that are deeply rooted in Bosniak traditions. The incorporation of these elements serves to enrich the cultural significance and symbolism of the parades, creating a vibrant and immersive experience for all participants.

The FolklorDaire ensemble is composed of two male members who skillfully play the *tapan* (a type of drum also known as *davul*), accompanied by a minimum of four female members who play the *daire* (a circular drum also known as *def*). FolklorDaire has established themselves as specialists in delivering exceptional performances at a wide range of celebratory events within the Bosniak community. They prepare their shows according to the wishes of the families who invite them, but most of the time, they direct the families on how the ceremony should be. Mersija underlines “[...] We provide information on many subjects such as making [the] bride cry songs and applying henna, especially at henna nights [...] only on henna nights, when henna is applied to the bride’s hand, traditional folk songs are performed without instruments to [cause people to] shed tears and make her cry [...]” (M. Ramović Kolašinac, personal communication

June 19, 2022). In Haris Hadžić's (2015, p. 102) empirical study on the rites of passage of Bosniaks in the region of Sandžak, it was found that these rituals are closely connected to Islamic tradition and customs. According to Emina (E. Brunčević, personal communication, August 04, 2022), the ceremonies held in Novi Pazar today are closely tied to Ottoman culture, and the rituals performed during these ceremonies are shared among Muslims throughout the Balkans. Brunčević highlights the enduring influence of Ottoman traditions on the contemporary practices observed in Novi Pazar and emphasizes the widespread nature of these rituals among Muslim communities in the region. While these customs remain an important part of Bosniak wedding ceremonies, they have undergone some modifications in urban settings (Hadžić, 2015, p. 108). The influence of city life has brought about changes in the way these customs are practiced and perceived. Symbols such as the Qur'an, Ottoman Sandžak Flag, fez, shalwar, throne, and henna songs sung among women hold significant meaning within the Bosniak community, representing traditional codes and cultural heritage. However, the evolution of these practices from traditional customs to extravagant displays in contemporary ceremonies held at hotels and restaurants can be seen as a manifestation of revitalization movements.



Figure 4. At the commencement of a wedding ceremony, the bride and groom make their grand entrance into the hall accompanied by the FolklorDaire group. Folklordaire [@folklordaire]. (n.d.). Posts [Instagram profile]. Instagram. Retrieved August 4, 2022, from <https://www.instagram.com/folklordaire/>



Figure 5. As part of a henna night ceremony, women from the FolklorDaire group participate in a special ritual where they place the Qur'an on the bride's face and delicately apply henna to her hands. This symbolic act holds deep cultural and religious significance, representing blessings, protection, and the start of a new chapter in the bride's life. Folklordaire [@folklordaire]. (n.d.). Posts [Instagram profile]. Instagram. Retrieved August 4, 2022, from <https://www.instagram.com/folklordaire/>



Figure 6. A moment from the henna night ceremony. The women of the FolklorDaire group encircle the bride, engaging in a captivating dance while holding daire instruments in their hands. FolklorDaire [@folklorDaire]. (n.d.). Posts [Instagram profile]. Instagram. Retrieved August 4, 2022, from <https://www.instagram.com/folklorDaire/>



Figure 7. Sunnet ceremony. The circumcised child sits on the throne and enters the hall like a sultan. FolklorDaire [@folklorDaire]. (n.d.). Posts [Instagram profile]. Instagram. Retrieved August 4, 2022, from <https://www.instagram.com/folklorDaire/>

Wallace (1956) defines the revitalization movement as “a deliberate, organized, conscious effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture”. According to this perspective, members and leaders of societies actively and intentionally pursue revitalization when their fundamental needs are unmet. Through a deliberate and conscious effort, they aim to create or anticipate a more fulfilling culture as a result of organized attempts to revive and restore the deteriorated aspects of their previous culture. In this context, FolklorDaire should not be regarded as a mere entertainment group established by young individuals from Novi Pazar who contribute to the transient aspects of popular culture and the entertainment industry. While FolklorDaire may not operate based on a deliberate principle, their aspirations extend beyond mere entertainment. The vibrant rituals and ceremonies observed within the Bosniak community can be understood as expressions of revitalization movements, both for those who create them, like FolklorDaire, and for those who participate in them. These cultural phenomena are supported by the influence of Balkan policies that incorporate Muslim, Turkish, and Neo-Ottomanist concepts. Additionally, the film, television, and music industries originating from Türkiye and spreading globally play a significant role in highlighting the community’s ancestry, religion, and ideological messages, thereby exerting a profound impact.

FolklorDaire draws upon its cognitive power from tradition and enduring cultural codes while organizing the more spectacular and visible processions of the Bosniak community. With this example, I want to emphasize that the revitalization movements of the Bosniak community in Novi Pazar can be interpreted as efforts to repair the disruptions they have experienced in the history and geography of the Balkans, particularly in the history and geography of Serbia. The community explores labyrinthine paths to bring historical, societal, and identity-related voids to a more satisfying level.



Figure 8. In a family photo from the circumcision, members of the FolkloreDaire ensemble are prominently featured, adorned in a fez, and holding the traditional musical instruments the *tapan* drum (*davul*) and *daire* tambourine (*def*). Folklordaire [@folklordaire]. (n.d.). Posts [Instagram profile]. Instagram. Retrieved September 10, 2022, from <https://www.instagram.com/folklordaire/>

Conclusion

This article draws inspiration from the initial encounters with a significant and extensive project. It primarily encompasses the initial observations made during fieldwork in Novi Pazar. The focus of this study centers around two notable examples that play an active role within the cultural milieu of Novi Pazar. One of these examples pertains to the commendable efforts of the KUD Mladih Novi Pazar. The other example involves the FolklorDaire ensemble, which is prominent in organizing events in Novi Pazar.

The topics that I have tried to emphasize in the article are interconnected concepts, like links in a chain. The concept of tradition, which I cannot think of independently from the history and geography of the region, plays a triggering role in shaping the societal attitudes that exist today. I define all of these as elements that constitute tradition. Therefore, the historical background of Novi Pazar, the influence of the Ottoman Empire, the prominence of Balkan studies in the region, and the concept of Balkanism sequentially form the foundation of my research field and theoretical perspective. These form the foundation of the cultural fabric that allows me to approach my two cases within the framework of tradition. Tradition internalizes the geographical fabric and history in which it is formed, interacts, transforms, and persists. The concept of tradition could have been extensively discussed in this article. However, I chose to draw attention to the dynamic formation of tradition, which is an argument I frequently make. It has a cycle of continuity, loss, growth, occasional disappearance, and subsequent reproduction. Therefore, it has a highly useful and flexible pattern. For the two cases I have presented as examples, traditions serve as the foundation of ‘things’. This is because traditions persist parallel to the historical memory of the region, in line with political and economic changes. They are a valuable tool to evoke memory, identity, cultural practices, music, dance, and more in the present day, and to create space for the formation of new cultural patterns. Traditions not only foreground inherited beliefs but are also tools of orientation that evolve and persist in dynamic, institutional, and political contexts.

The sources of tradition seem to be a very useful tool for KUD Mladih Novi Pazar, which is the first example in my case study, in terms of cultural intimacy and the formation of new cultural patterns. Why this association, which appeals to children and young people, seeks to restore this sense of cultural intimacy is a separate and profound geopolitical question. However, at this point, I would like to express my opinion that the region’s need for the restoration of their cultural heritage for a shared future can be linked with Serbia’s policies designed in accordance with its national values, particularly regarding multiculturalism and minority rights. The new cultural patterns staged by KUD Mladih through their choreographies, music, costumes, and dance can serve as markers of cultural intimacy for Bosniak and Serbian youth.

FolklorDaire Ensemble, which plays an active role in rites of passage such as weddings, henna nights, and circumcision ceremonies, holds a significant position in the cultural life of Novi Pazar, particularly for the Bosniak community. This ensemble serves as another remarkable example in my case study. In this particular instance, it was evident to me

that the Bosniak community orchestrated ‘extravagant’ and ‘symbolically rich’ festivities on significant occasions. The traditional rites of passage, which had mostly been conducted in homes or local neighborhoods, are now being organized in hotels and restaurants. In this regard, cultural practices in rural areas have become more organized and systematic. During these ceremonies, the FolklorDaire Ensemble, serving as a reminder of traditional themes, carries out various practices that resonate with the core values of the Bosniak community. Examples such as accompanying the circumcised child brought into the hall on a throne during circumcision ceremonies, and dancing with drums and tambourines during the entrance of the bride and groom to the hall demonstrate the grandeur and splendor integrated into traditional rites of passage adapted to urban life. Symbols such as the Qur’an, Ottoman Sandžak Flag, fez, shalwar, throne, and henna songs are indispensable elements of these performances.

The Bosniaks of Novi Pazar are actively engaged in a deliberate, organized, and conscious endeavor to construct a more satisfying culture. The dynamic rituals and ceremonies witnessed within the Bosniak community can be interpreted as manifestations of revitalization movements, encompassing both the creators of these traditions, such as FolklorDaire, and the individuals who actively engage in them.

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