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THE ETHNOMYTH OF ŠOKCI

While this study intends to chart the present state of the ethnomyth of Šokci in Slavonia, it will also take some obligatory detours into Slavonian and Šokci literary *imagology* where the basic Šokci *mythologems* lie. I am going to analyze the most striking components: myths of origin of Šokci and of imaginary Šokci ancestral land, founding *memory figures* (“great Šokci”), established images of identity preserved in literary icons of the Šokci world (*Đuka Begović*, *Tena*) and recent Šokci cultural practices including the procedures through which the tradition is being renewed or constructed. The study attempts to point not only to the background of the rhetorical operations of the replacement of the Slavonian name with the Šokci name but also to contribute to a better understanding of the personal, non-Šokci *insider* position in Slavonia which is interspersed in the mesh of Šokci ethnomyths. For comparative and heuristic purposes a cursory overview of the fate of ethnomyth of Šokci in Serbia (Voivodina) is given.

Key words: Šokci,¹ ethnomyth, Slavonia, stereotypes, literary studies, cultural practices

Although it seems to us today that the age of myth as “story”, “consciousness” and “language” (Solar 1998) is a matter of the past and the language of myth is not our *mother tongue*, various mythic narrations are still shaping contemporary life. Myths nowadays do not constitute clear series, nor do they appear as homogenous mythologies, but are some kind of a *bricolage*, assemblages of chipped-off pieces of science, art, folklore, religion, politics and experiences of everyday life (Solar 1998:227). This does not annul the primary power of myth: to integrate all these heterogeneous factors into a relatively homogenous and enclosed system and to establish the appearance of absolute certainty – which demands unconditional trust in the *truth* and importance of the narration. Precisely because mythology occurs today within cultures that are non-mythical, it can easily end in dogmatism, concludes Solar (1998:220). Dogmatism then flows into ideology, whereas ideology tries, unsuccessfully, to return to mythology. Extant are the contemporary

¹ Šokci, pl., the Croatian ethnic group, settled mostly in the east of Slavonia; Šokac, sing., a member of the Šokci group.

myths of literature, of the avant-garde and the decadent (Solar 1985), of progress,² contemporary national myths and *ethnomylths* (Rihtman-Auguštin 1999:183-189), historical and political myths, myths of globalization, myths of Europe. Myth is simply a transhistorical sociocultural fact and contemporary culture, although primarily non-mythical and secular, does not abolish the active power of mythical narrations that incessantly circle and return through various forms of secular *mythologems* – either integrated in ideological and scientific systems or dispersed but aided by the industry of cultural production – to everyday culture.

The identity of every group, as suggested by Smith's *ethnosymbolism*, rests on a mythical-symbolic complex (Smith 2007:15; 2003:49, 184-186), where myths undoubtedly occupy the decisive role, especially if integrated into a motivation myth (*mythomotheur*). Symbols, according to Smith (2003:190), represent common experiences and values to the members of a group, while myths explain to them the meanings of their experiences and serve as examples of values in transgenerational transfer, having a homogenizing effect among the members of the group, and functioning as strong "border guards" against neighboring groups.³ Myth regains in this way the meaning of the exemplary, *sacred* story about origins in which everybody ought to believe unconditionally (Eliade 1970:9-11), both in traditional archaic societies and in modern societies which abound with half-forgotten myths, failed hierophanies and symbols devoid of purpose that abide in poorly "controlled zones" (Eliade 2006:24).

We can provide abundant facts to affirm the relevance of opening the question of mythical narrative and symbolic practices, which taken together comprise the ethnomyth of Šokci: not only folk ensembles of the traditional kind, folklore performances, traditional gastronomic specialties that would have to become a *brand*, but also soccer teams, given names,⁴ civic organizations and societies, cultural and scientific events,⁵ all of which increasingly carry Šokci terminology

² On the secularized myth of progress within the philosophy of history and on the inverting the Christian eschatological archetype (cf. Löwith 1990).

³ Smith draws on Armstrong's amending of Barth's term of the border comprising cultural contents (myths, symbols and communication patterns) as key differentiating elements encompassed by the border (cf. Smith 2003:189-190).

⁴ It would be quite interesting to find out in more detail about the frequency of the given names Tena and Đuka in Slavonia after the 1990s. My colleague Zoran Čiča testifies that his neighbor (in Zagreb) affixed next to his car's registration plate the metal sign "Šokac".

⁵ I would mention of all the recent Slavonian organizations of Šokci, the association *Vinkovački šokački rodovi* [Šokci Lineages of Vinkovci], founded in 2003, named after the book of the same name by T. Šalić (1999) and the group's rich activities: from Šokci parties and Carnival horse riding to publishing of their journal (*Kolivka*), and also the association from Osijek *Šokačka grana Osijek* [Šokci Twig Osijek] founded in 2005, which organizes once a year an international round table titled *Urbani Šokci* [Urban Šokci] and publishes an edited volume with papers given. The scientific meeting *Šokačka rič* [Word of Šokci] has been organized yearly in Vinkovci since 2003 with the aim of studying the speech of Šokci, with press releases of participants issued regularly, also in edited volumes.

and Šokci iconography. The fragments of scientific and pseudoscientific theories of the origins of Šokci, the autochthonous factors of Šokci traditional culture, the abundant literary *imagology* of Šokci and their *pastoral* homeland, accompanied closely by state of the art book design and publishing, including various cultural practices of Šokci – all are parts of the mosaic structure of the ethnomyth of Šokci, having an increasingly obligatory and apodictic meaning for the members of the Šokci group. The recent project of systematizing and “canonizing” the complete Šokci heritage (*Šokadija i Šokci* [Šokadija and Šokci] 1-4) indicates the seriousness of this process.



Figure 1. The photograph taken by Zoran Čiča

This kind of mythologizing of Slavonian-ness into *Šokac-ness*, which appears as quite “confusing” to Slavonians who are not Šokci and poses more strongly the question of cultural delineation between Šokci and Slavonians, is accompanied simultaneously by a regional cultural homogenization of Šokci as a Croatian ethnic group into an all-encompassing current of the *Šokci world*, and also by the political use of the ethnomyth of Šokci in Serbia, which additionally makes the already complex mythical elements of the ethnomyth of Šokci even more complicated.

Of course, each of these aspects is deserving of separate analysis and would yield interesting results within existing culturological, ethnological and anthropological paradigms. We have chosen to observe the contours of the Šokci ethnomyth in Slavonian everyday cultural life, this being justified particularly by the writer’s personal *insider* position. It would be appropriate to indicate here that the author of these lines does not find in the *Šokci world*, i.e., *Šokac-ness*, her personal identity “refuge”, neither at the emotional nor cognitive levels, but that at the same time her immediate exposure to the mythical symbolic and narrative practices of Šokci provides her with a sufficient amount of experiential knowledge

to talk about these practices. While I do not deceive myself that the answer to the question concerning the source and extent of the ethnomyth of Šokci can be found once and for all, which is, of course, truly impossible when wrestling with mythical narratives and practices, *Šokac-ness* revealed itself to me, simultaneously as both *close* and as *Other* – as an interesting mythical concept whose analysis and attempt to conceptualize it contributed to a better understanding of my own non-Šokci position in Slavonia, enmeshed in Šokci ethnomyths.

Šokci arrived here first

If you were to ask any Slavonian Šokac, “Who are Šokci?”⁶ you would get an unequivocal answer: Šokci are native Slavonian peoples, having lived in Slavonia since time immemorial, or at least since the arrival of Croats to this area. In other words, they arrived to this place first. Although Katančić’s thesis about Šokci as the aboriginal population of Pannonia and as descendants of Thracians has been long abandoned, and the prevalent opinion⁷ is that Šokci, according to their name, which stems from the Turkish roots of Medieval Bosnia, are Catholics who came to Slavonia “across the river Sava” from “Turkish Bosnia” just before the end of Ottoman reign or in larger groups after liberation from the Turks, a Slavonian Šokac would unwillingly and with indignation tie his *ancestral homeland* to Bosnia and would recognize in the question, put in this way, the non-Šokac status of the other speaker. Šokac ancestral land, *Arcadian Šokadija*, whose name one would look for in vain on all available maps, is according to the conventional wisdom not Medieval or Turkish Bosnia, but the fertile Slavonian-Syrmian area between the rivers Danube, Drava, Sava and Ilok, memorialized in song already in the invocation of Relković’s *Satir* with its hidden symbolic quotations and relations towards the Biblical rivers of the Garden of Eden: Pishon, Gihon, Tigris, Euphrates (Gen. 2, 10).

From the least reliable sources, such as Wikipedia, where it is explicitly stated “that Šokci are the Croatian ethnic group settled in Slavonia, where they arrived some time in the 7th century and replaced the old tribe *Sukci*, after which they got their name”,⁸ through the etymological derivation of the origin of the lexeme “šokac” from the Italian, Hungarian, Albanian languages, including the folk etymology whereby a Šokac is “the one who crosses himself with the fist”, (Croatian:

⁶ Šokci are the Croatian ethnic group most densely settled in the east of Slavonia and west of Syrmia, in Bačka and Baranja, whereas a separate group of Šokci lives in the Romanian town Rekaš, not far from Timișoara.

⁷ Cf. V. Rem 1993; Šalić 1999:63-67. Theories on the origin of Šokci are assembled in the chrestomathy: *Šokadija i Šokci I: Podrijetlo i naseljavanje* (2007).

⁸ Cf. <http://hr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Šokci> (accessed March 13, 2008).

ška) there are alluring theories about the Šokac *ethnos* and name,⁹ including humorous belletristic theories about Šokci people as members of the Neolithic *Starčevo* culture (Grgurovac 2003:8-9).

There is no final act when it concerns the origin of Šokci, as we can learn from Ante Sekulić, the editor of the recent chrestomathy *Šokadija i Šokci 1: Podrijetlo i naseljavanje* (2007:273), where he has assembled everything of value that the present-day Šokci must know about their history.

Although Sekulić, the editor of the texts on the origins of Šokci, has avoided mythological tales and has chosen texts that aspire to scientific attribution, it is not irrelevant to note that a head start was given to the text of Ivan Jurić on the topic of the genetic origins of Šokci. Mythical narratives about time *in illo tempore* were indeed avoided, but remaining unanswered is the question, were they not replaced with “biological eternity” and Šokci genetic patterns, i.e., the search for the oldest available haplotype.

The story of the origins and name of Šokci is an unfinished *saga* of exceptional significance for the identity of contemporary Šokci, to which numerous scientific and pseudoscientific discussions attest, devoted to an almost obsessive questioning of the origins and *ancestral lands* of Šokci. This is usually the first step towards getting a valid answer to the question Who are Šokci? It is time, therefore to provide, in this period of “trendy appropriations” of the Šokac name, so reasons K. Čorkalo (2000:107), a well-founded and fair-minded judgment free of passions and biases and at last present in the language of facts the truth about Šokci.

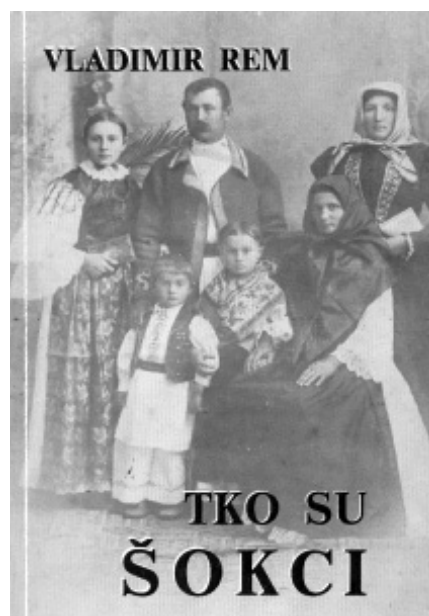


Figure 2. The cover page of the study of V. Rem, *Who are Šokci*, Vinkovci, 1993

⁹ The most comprehensive overview of the origin and usage of the lexeme Šokac is given in the Academy's dictionary, which is, though, mostly not being quoted in numerous theories on the origin and name of Šokac. Of the scientific contributions to explanations of the ethnonym Šokac, which are not included in recent Šokac chrestomathies, I would suggest Švagelj 2004. According to the entry Šokac (ARj s.v.) several meanings can be distinguished: a) ethnonym, name for the Croatian ethnic group, b) derogatory term used by the Christian Orthodox and Moslem population in Bosnia for Catholics (from it stem the terms *šokačka misa*, *šokačko pismo*, *šokačka vjera*), c) label for a peasant, farmer, to differentiate them from “fine folks” (cf. *Rječnik hrvatskoga ili srpskoga jezika*, 1959:711-712).

The attempt to remove mythical sediments from the story of the origins of Šokci, to separate the wheat from the chaff, should therefore – in keeping with the spirit of the times – provide a “firm” scientific and unbiased statement about Šokci origins and answer in this way the basic question of identity, even if at the margins, hidden, there might remain the dilemma concerning whether a coherent story about origins is at all possible apart from mythical narratives.

The noble but weary tribe of the Croatian people

The Syrmian Mara Švel-Gamiršek (1900–1975), who, according to presently known indicators comes closest to the ideal Šokac writer, an icon of literary Šokac-ness, was to Šokci what Selma Lagerlöf was to her Swedish folk several decades earlier. Švel-Gamiršek links the “first moments” of Šokci with the historical time of the liberation of Slavonia from Ottoman reign and the settling of “Bosnians” to new, “semi-wild lands”, where a new generation grew: Šokci (Švel-Gamiršek 1940:6).

Although in her prose (*Šuma i Šokci*, 1940, *Portreti nepoznatih žena*, 1942, *Hrast*, 1942, *Ovim šorom, jagodo*, 1969) Mara Švel writes about the second half of the 19th century, especially after the demilitarization of the Military Frontier (1873), to the end of the fourth decade of the 20th century,¹⁰ time, in her prose, remains in its structure mythical, dreamlike (Roth 2000:164–165), condensed and anchored to the most important event: the *settlement* of Šokci, which must be narratively fixed and embedded in collective memory. The “beginning of time” of Šokci is the time of their historical *exodus*, and with the thorough mythologizing of the Šokci world with a distinct nostalgic remembrance of a golden age of Šokac-ness (life in cooperatives!), Mara Švel reifies this “memory” while simultaneously providing a narrative backed by an abundance of ethnographic data. The rich Slavonian soil and expanse of forests lands were the most valuable wealth of the *Promised Land* of Šokci, which, along with horses and ducats, Mara Švel narratively records as symbols of Šokac identity, concisely explicating “There is no Šokac-ness without land” (Švel-Gamiršek 1970:543).

With incredible insight, this Šokac writer displays in her prose work, *Iva Abramov*, how ducats in particular, as powerful symbols of Šokac cultural identity, become impenetrable *borderlines* for “newcomers”: “Tie huge ducats to your flags”, declares Iva Abramov while staging her own Šokac funeral, “for the newcomers to see whom they have beaten to death” (Švel-Gamiršek 1940:147).

¹⁰ For a thorough description of the relationship between the fictional, documentary and biographical material in the prose of Švel-Gamiršek cf. Detoni-Dujmić 1998. On historical-ethnographical contents in the prose of Švel-Gamiršek cf. Erl 1998, and for the literary-historical monographic portrait cf. Lončarević 1968, 1969:19–30.

By cataloguing in her prose unpleasant phenomena of the Šokci world, such as idolatrous worshipping of material wealth and its displays, like *strutting and ducats*, arranged marriages, infidelities and adulteries, carelessness and indolence, isolationist tendencies and low birth rate and, continuing in this way in the footsteps of Josip and Ivan Kozarac, Mara Švel contributed to the myth of the “noble but weary tribe of our people” (Švel-Gamiršek 1940:105) and to the longevity of the nostalgic myth of Šokci as a *noble tribe* dying out. Through the modus of nostalgic remembrance, in a fictional dialogue with Josip Kozarac in her vignette *In the Footsteps of Josip Kozarac*, she brings forward the concise characterological contours of Šokci focused in the consciousness of the *sickly park keeper* of Vinkovci.

According to Mara-Švel, Josip Kozarac was looking for Šokac-ness in “a chosen gentry”, and found it in the *wayward* Šokci sons: those who would not “settle down with their wives” and would not have children, who would not get jobs as foresters, as notaries and in other public services when their “bitter Šokac bread” would become too hard, who could not restrain themselves, who drank, spent, scattered about and remained proud, those who were led astray by the “fire of creation” (Švel-Gamiršek 1970:542-543). The nostalgic myth of Šokci *who were going down but never fell*¹¹ was renewed in time by adding layers to the old truth on the ways of Šokci, which informs us, according to the writings of Vladimir Kovačić, that “Šokci are indeed one of the most noble Croatian tribes, the brightest and the smartest: that they are rich in spirit, precisely of which riches throw them out of balance” (Kovačić 1942:4).

The fable of the *old, weary and noble tribe* of the Croatian people has its extended life in contemporary Šokac blogs and Šokac monographs. The defense of Šokac *ethnos* is, sometimes openly, but more often hidden, conducted through negative imagological constructions of *newcomers*:

Šokci never lived off of others' blisters and misfortunes. They never reached their goals inconsiderately or by walking over corpses. They never begged or pleaded for themselves. They never wanted to rule over people, especially not in politics, state governance, but also, aside from the land, they never wanted to serve anybody. (...) How is it possible that the most capable Croatian cadres are from Herzegovina, from two or three tiny towns? Do Šokci women not bear any more bright sons and daughters? Or has their blood gotten thin at the battlefields, in fields growing grains, deep furrows, biting brandy? (Frković 2007:43)

¹¹ Cf. Šokac blogs of Baća Iva: <http://bacaiva.blog.hr> (accessed March 13, 2008).

“Great Šokci”

Beyond doubts that the story of the origins of Šokci might be permeated by mythical narrative which would affect its coherence and verity, talk of the origins and prominence of Šokci frequently shifts to talk of Šokci *civilization* which consists of “appropriate figures”, from J. Pannonius to M. A. Relković, Kozarac, Cesarić, Tadijanović, Radauš and others. “There is a whole legion of them”, notes Šimo Frković at the end of his essay, which is included in the Štokavian monograph (2007:43) to which he gave the lengthy title: *Šokci never lived off of others’ blisters and misfortunes and aside from the land, they never wanted to serve anybody or to write about Šokci*.

Mythical stories are like rumors – *Fame*, feathery Ovid’s “female demon” (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, XII, 39–46), in whose entourage are, among others, Gullibility and Fear – immanently oral and anonymous so that it would be pointless to search for the author’s “signature”, which quite likely would disrupt the *sacredness* and obligatoriness of the narrative. Still, traces of Šokci mythical narratives have been discernible in the literary texts of Slavonia-Baranja writers since the end of the 19th century and it is completely irrelevant whether we explain them as final processes of narrative recordings of everyday Šokci mythical, symbolic and narrative practices or as motivators themselves of the “big story” about Šokci. In literary texts, beginning with the inauguration of Šokci terminology in Okrugić’s folk theatrical piece *Šokica* (1884) and *the most Šokac-like* novel of Ivan Kozarac, *Đuka Begović* (1909), over the prose and plays of Joza Ivakić and Josip Kosor, culminating in the complete prose opus on Šokci of Mara Švel-Gamiršek, and later in the contemporary neotraditional layer of Slavonian literature, more “high” than “folk”, with the production supported by literary studies and publishing – *Šokac-ness* has been becoming ever stronger a label of cultural identity, with more visible mythologizing contours, which have gradually replaced and finally pushed out the Slavonian name.

There is little wonder why the core of “great Šokci”, among whom are bishops, theologians, governors and assemblymen, consists of writers from Slavonia and Syrmia. Among these writers, judging by recent attempts at systematizing the corpus of the Šokci literature and by the accompanying rhetorical attributes (*more Šokci-like, the most Šokci-like*), a hierarchy is being established with the end purpose to construct the *canon* of the chosen, those who conquered the peak of the Šokci *Parnassus*. To be Šokac, explains the editor of the lexicon *Veliki i poznati Šokci* [Great and Renown Šokci] M. Grgurovac (Grgurovac 2007:151) in his concept of “great Šokci”, means in the “essence of our being”, to be a Croat and a Catholic. Suspecting that this identity framework might be somewhat too wide, the author brings from the outset other more specific determinants: Catholicism, ethnic and ethnological-customary belonging and the mentality typical of

the plains, and then gives the spatial determinants of Šokci habitat: major part of Slavonia, the Bosnian Sava river basin (from Orašje and Tolisa to Odžak and Gradačac), Syrmia and Bačka in Serbia, the environs of Pecs in Hungary and Rekas in Romania. The lexicon *Veliki i poznati Šokci*, which is supposed to become a great *sum* of Šokac-ness, follows a customary paradigm: the value of cultural capital of the past is measured by the number of notables.

For *great Šokci* the past is compressed into symbolic *figures of memory* (Assmann 2006:53-57). Literary writers are *the most Šokac-like* “exemplary figures” of the imaginary Šokci ancestral land. It is not surprising that included among the *great Šokci* in that lexicon was nobody less than Janus Pannonius, a humanist and poet who was born near the confluence of the river Drava into Danube in 1434, centuries before the majority of Šokci decided to move to Slavonia.

The imaginary *ancestral land of Šokci* as *topofilia*

The search for Šokci identity, immanently oriented towards the past through the complex processes of collective memory pointed toward the incessant search for and marking of the boundaries of the imaginary ancestral land of Šokci, which without a strong foothold in real maps and with political and territorial borders crosscutting the numerous habitats of Šokci, led to the drawing of an imaginary Šokci homeland map with an equally imaginary toponym: Šokadija. Collective memory, according to Assmann (2006:54-55), is concrete regarding identity, it necessarily yearns for concrete spatial and temporal determinants, needs places, ties to spaces and a determination of *sacred places*.¹² The lexeme, Šokadija, in this way for Šokci, in spite of all attempts to provide them with toponymic meanings, does not have the meaning of a precisely delineated space but primarily the symbolic status of a *sacred place*. Vladimir Rem, an expert on “Šokci issues”, reveals the first traces of the geographic determinants of Šokadija precisely in literary texts from the end of the 19th century:

There is no written and reliable proof about when the geographic determinants of Šokadija appear. We can with certainty only say that such naming of the Slavonian Sava river basin occurred in literature between the 19th and 20th century when writers from the area of the former Military Frontier entered the Šokci terminology into their writings. (V. Rem 1993:8)

The decisive motivating factor for stabilizing the lexeme Šokadija into the meaning of a toponym was the rhetorical operation of synecdoche: the narrowing of the too wide toponym, Slavonia, to the narrower, Šokadija, which was done precisely in the discourse of literary study (see Julije Benešić, Josip Bogner, Vladimir Kovačić

¹² While it is necessary for a nation to actually possess a delineated territory, the ethnia Homeland, according to Smith’s explanation (2007:28-29), has primarily a symbolic meaning of a *sacred place* and does not implicitly include possessing certain territory.

and Ante Kovač). This narrowing went in the direction of drawing the border of the *literary Slavonia*¹³ and its setting apart from the existing charts of the region of Slavonia. Precisely this literary Slavonia with its exemplary literary texts and authors (Josip and Ivan Kozarac, Joza Ivakić, Josip Kosor, Živko Bertić, Ante and Julije Benešić, Ante Kovač) would by its perimeter and contents correspond to the imaginary toponym Šokadija:

Of course, this literary Slavonia is not comprised of Slavonia in its geographic sense, but is only that small land from Vinkovci and Brod to Županja and Syrmia, that Šokci frontier region – more often and more justifiably known under the name of the rich, desolate and unruly Šokadija, with its capital in Vinkovci, rather than under the too broad name of Slavonia. (Bogner 1994:25)

The noun, Šokadija, would be used further on in the sense of an ethnonym, as a personal noun, as visible in the oral lyric:

*When the lone Šokadija dances
The Earth under it twists.*

The noun Šokadija appears in Mađer's "Šokac Hymn" in the same meaning:

*Sing, mother of ploughmen and able drinkers
The song black which deludes our lives.
Šokadija saddles raven horses
Screams the song from amber and flames.*

("Pjevat će Slavonija" [Slavonia Will Sing], *Šokačka čitanka* [Šokci Reader] 2006:193)

Nevertheless, the ever stronger stabilizing of the lexeme Šokadija in the sense of a toponym (cf. Šalić 2007:425), and especially the rhetorically marked attributes, the *heart* of Šokadija (Đakovo) or the *capital/metropolis* of Šokadija (Vinkovci), attest to some kind of a Šokac *topofilia*, a need to focus on the center of the *sacred space* which would be *fons et origo* of all Šokci. Poetical-mythical spiritualization of the space and the archetypal connection between the Šokac and the land, as well as the thorough intimacy with the space, are the determining footholds of the Šokci part of Slavonian literature and at the same time their most precious literary expression. Šokadija has therefore become, as an imaginary *topoconstruction*, an outstandingly creative mythical matrix which was preserved and renewed in literary texts, and its imaginary center, *capital* and *metropolis*, is of course there where the center of literary Slavonia/Šokadija is: in Vinkovci. According to Josip and Ivan Kozarac, Joza Ivakić, Vanja Radauš and Vladimir Kovačić, Vinkovci becomes Šokci *metropolis*,¹⁴ while the sacral status of Vinkovci is confirmed among Šokci with the special microtoponym: Krnjaš is, as the place of birth of both Josip and Ivan Kozarac and Joza Ivakić, the exact *genius loci* of Šokac-ness.

¹³ Cf. with the depiction of the narrowing of the term Šokadija in literary criticism (V. Rem 1993:30-31, 2001:14-18, 2007:243-244).

¹⁴ Cf. *Čitamo vinkovačke pjesnike* (1992), *Čitamo šokačke pjesnike* (1992). Cf. literary-historical overview of *šokci* writers from Vinkovci in Markasović 1999.

Slavonian-ness – Šokac-ness

The literary historian Dragutin Prohaska published in 1906 an interesting essay under the title *Slavonština u našoj književnosti* [Slavonian-ness in our literature]. In his review of the Slavonian literature, from M. A. Relković to “the most contemporary writers” (A. Benešić, J. Ivakić and J. Kozarac), Prohaska noticed that such a dominating distinctiveness of “moods, styles and contents” existed that one could talk about the specific phenomenon of *Slavonian-ness*. He further explained, based on Taine’s theory of “race, milieu et moment”, the historic and climatic elements that made the Slavonian the way he was. *Slavonian-ness* is according to Prohaska primarily the “lack of will”, “torpor”, “reflexivity”, “self-comfort”, “secret cult of the heart”, “conservativeness”, “sentimentality of the soul”, *boringly the same again and again* (Prohaska 1994:6-7).¹⁵ He found that the most important historic factor responsible for such characteristics was the long pressure of the “Turkish hegemony”.

Prohaska’s *Slavonian-ness*, in which it is not difficult to detect the recognizable thesis of the Slavonian as “noble savage”, “in a tender mood under mother nature’s wing”, still at that time without invoking the name of Šokac, appears in a somewhat modified form in writings of Vladimir Lunaček from Vinkovci, who used explicitly and a lot more self-consciously the term Šokadija in 1924. Šokadija is, according to Lunaček, a *residium of paganism* that got baptized and what a pity that playwrights (J. Ivakić and J. Kosor) with their “unnecessary moralizing under the influence of Christian morality” disrupt repeatedly this last remainder of the pagan world (Lunaček 1994:114-115).

The tropological operation of narrowing *Slavonian-ness* to *Šokac-ness* indicates that the first snapshots of the mentality of Šokci should be looked for in stereotypes of Slavonian men and women and in unbridled Slavonia, whereas their first contours, later reinforced as negative auto-stereotypes, can be found in the *old Slavonian writers*: M. A. Relković (*Satir iliti divji čovik*) or V. Došen (*Aždaja sedmoglava*).¹⁶ As long lasting phenomena these continue in the literary

¹⁵ We find similar formulations on the *Slavonian soul* by Josip Kozarac (1950:66): “That was a prototype of the inert and sneaky Slavonian soul, the soul that bursts sometimes into flame, but burns with the flame of hay. Why should it be different when it can be as it is! Nowhere takes that soul deeper root: not in good, not in evil; everywhere half-heartedness and tepidity.” The same by Ivan Kozarac (1947:113) on the *Slavonian race*: “You understand by it (bečarac – humorous-ribald song!), how from the soft, skeptic, pessimistic and bleak soul of the Slavonian race, the soul drunken and wasteful uncoils, greedy for the life of pleasure, soul that does not measure a word nor a deed, but goes, rushes like a whirlwind, with abandon, untamed, whether leaving traces like weeping or laughter, tears or blood, love or adultery, debauchery or incest.” On “frisky” Slavonian women in Slavonian folk songs cf. Bošković-Stulli 1982.

¹⁶ More or less negative imagological constructions of foreign travel writers, Piller, Mitterpacher, Engel and Taube, fit into the already existing construction. On married life of Slavonian women on the basis of their notes cf. Kožić 1982.

tradition of short stories about Slavonian villages (Josip Kozarac, Živko Bertić, Josip Kosor, Iso Velikanović, Ivan Kozarac, Joza Ivakić), where in spite of the attempts towards the “moral rehabilitation” of a Slavonian village (Ž. Bertić, J. Ivakić)¹⁷ the stereotype of a beautiful and *unruly* Slavonia/Slavonian woman becomes irrevocably reaffirmed with Ivan Kozarac’s *Tena*. J. Ivakić openly said in his lecture, *Village in the Croatian Literature*, that in Slavonia “every woman is lascivious and unrestrained” according to the “common opinion of our public” and the responsibility for it is borne by not only “public opinion” but also Slavonian writers (Ivakić 1914:17). Julije Benešić found a few years earlier (1911) that the causes of the widely accepted epithet of “unbridled” attached to Slavonia lie in the systematic neglect of Slavonia by *Zagreb-centric* Croatia (Benešić 1995:122). As much as Croatia “around Zagreb” is *persecuted* and Bosnia *proud*, Slavonia is, in accordance with customary stereotypes, *unbridled*. A good-natured Kajkavian imagines, reasoned Benešić, that in Slavonia people only “enjoy, drink, dance and err”, that there is a plenty of “tempting newly married women with round hips and tempting kisses”, Gypsies play wildly, people dance in round dances, ducats clank, eves of spinning yarn and small-talk parties are thrown all the time, adultery and crime flourish (1995:119). There is no actual justification for maintaining the opinion of “infected and ailing Slavonia”, passionately and apologetically explains Benešić, and Babina Greda is not any different than other towns in the world by the occurrence of venereal diseases and the number of prostitutes. Nevertheless, reveals Benešić, the images of Slavonia as of the land of *lotus-eaters* and *island of sirens* are mostly literary constructs (Benešić 1995:123).

Benešić did not cite the names of the “modern” Slavonian writers responsible for this image/prejudice about Slavonia, although in the introductory part of his essay, when speaking of Slavonia in which the inebriated “fight and kill and then fill penitentiaries”, it is not hard to recognize the main “culprit”: *Đuka Begović* of J. Kozarac. Ujević that same year in his review of Kozarac’s novel rated it as a “thin short story” with completely cursory characters, completely explicit:

Our writers comfortably created a certain Slavonia that is completely conventional, so that it can be very easily reconstructed with a few inevitable stereotypical epithets: Say about it that it is unbridled, effeminate, sumptuous, light-minded and similar; mention Slavonian blood, rakes, Gypsies, makeshift folk violins, drunken partying, Šokac and, forget it not, village hypocrisy (...) and you can be fully aware that your official immortality in the Croatian (and Serbian) literature is guaranteed. (Ujević 1965:24)

Although *Đuka Begović*, probably the best novel of late Croatian literary modernism, fared pretty poorly in Ujević’s critique, by lucidly seeing through the literary staging of existing stereotypes as a trivial means towards rapid literary success,

¹⁷ Ivakić’s instructive feature films, *Birtija* (1929) and *Grešnice* (1930) cover typical “Šokci” topics: alcoholism and low birth-rate.

Ujević hit the very center of the great story about Šokci, mythical Šokadija and fatal Šokac: Đuka Begović himself. In fact, the big story about Šokci did not start with the first Slavonian classic (M. A. Relković) or with the most renowned writer of Slavonian realism (J. Kozarac), since they both wrote about Slavonia and not about Šokadija, whereas Kozarac's *Tena* did only later, as a female variant of Đuka Begović, fit into the imaginary world of Šokci. It did not start with the original folkloric oral literary material either, which in itself, without the additional *metafolkloric* installations¹⁸ could not provide a closed and apodictically mythical system, not even with I. Okrugić – with whose folk theatrical piece, *Šokica*, Šokci issues and Šokci terminology were for the first time overtly used in our literature. The mysterious question of Šokac-ness, through the thesis on (Slavonian/Šokac) *rotten blood*, was set for the first time with an incredible mimetic strength by Ivan Kozarac in *Đuka Begović* and only since then did *Šokac-ness* start pushing out *Slavonian-ness*, conquering gradually the Slavonian literary and cultural space. As a synthesis and prototype of all Šokci – as rakes and bon vivants, Đuka Begović shaped the core of the ontological matrix of *Šokac-ness* (Šokac soul!) into which then could be included *Tena* and *Mrtvi kapitali* of Josip Kozarac, *Požar strasti* of Josip Kosor, *Ženski udesi* of Ž. Bertić and *Šuma i Šokci* of Mara Švel, because all of them, according to Šokac comprehension, point to the center: the beauty and tragedy of the Šokci *ethnos*.

Thoroughbred Šokac: Đuka Begović

All sporadic literary characterological outlines of Slavonian/Šokac men in Slavonian literature pale in comparison to Kozarac's *Đuka Begović*. An outstanding expert on Slavonian literature, literary critic Josip Bogner, commenting in his review of Joza Ivakić on the thematic range of the Slavonian short story, explicitly stated what was already imprinted into the collective consciousness of Šokci:

All problems of Slavonia, from “dead assets” to the low birth-rate, are going to find their reflection in that literature, will find in it (the short story of the Slavonian village) their solutions and illuminations. The character of Slavonians and Šokci, their racial characteristics, their negative and positive sides, their complete psyche – are reflected in that literature, and Joza Ivakić, along with Josip Kozarac, the writer of our most thoroughbred novel *Đuka Begović*, is the most significant representative of modern literary Slavonia. (Bogner 1994:26)

Although any serious semantic analysis would show that *Đuka Begović* is an extremely ambivalent character which on the one hand embodies to the extreme a particular kind of a “lascivious” Šokac, and on the other hand appears as a radical anti-Šokac who iconoclastically ruins and mocks whatever is sacred to Šokci

¹⁸ On political usage of folklore cf. Rihtman-Auguštin 2001:87-94.

(property, hedonism, *strutting*), he simply got chosen and accepted by selective cultural memory as the key *memory figure*, *exemplary model* (Assmann 2006:55) who defines and determines the sole being of the Šokac ethnic group, essential for how the entire group perceives itself, with the unique normative and formative strength of the sacred. From *Đuka Begović* onward the stereotype of the hedonistic Slavonia/Šokadija will be hard to shatter, which Ivan Kozarac condensed in his novel into a succinct formula: “Live in wellness, leisurely, in joy, in the story for the story, well-fed and no longer thirsty – that’s the best life. A man doesn’t need any other heaven.”

The unannounced search for the real prototypes of *Đuka Begović* in a Šokac from the neighborhood, and the special care and attention given later by Slavonians to Kozarac’s unrequited love, the beautiful relative Marija Kozarac, for whom, according to oral transmission, he wrote the lyrics of his most renowned love song, *Milovo sam garave i plave* [I caressed black and blond] – helped to mythologize Kozarac. Clear shifts towards mythologization and the creation of the cult of Ivan Kozarac, to which the writers from Vinkovci (Joza Ivakić and Vladimir Kovačić) wholly and predictably contributed – while the death, alone, of the talented writer in his early twenty-fifth year was suitable for the symbolic transformation into a myth – were eventually completed by literary critique and the transposition of it all into a public cultural space, a functional social memory. Anniversaries, monuments, street and school names, cultural events, literary awards, everything is under the sign of Kozarac and *Đuka Begović*. Theatrical and film presentations of *Đuka Begović*,¹⁹ which further increased the strength of the myth, reaffirmed *Đuka* as a beacon of identity of all Šokci. As a double of its creator, the essence of *Šokac-ness* as an “ontological” term, the hidden echo of the *Šokac soul*, the personification of *Šokac blood*,²⁰ a representative and nostalgic refuge of all Šokci, the literary character crossed into vivid reality, became a myth.

Literary critics²¹ appropriated the function of the mythical storytellers and like “clairvoyant intermediaries” exposed the essence and destiny of *Šokac-ness* itself. Mythical speech does not pose questions, but gives almost apodictic answers; moreover, it forecloses the possibility of raising questions, repeating the same expected messages. From the position of the literary critic, a researcher, especially

¹⁹ Of the theatrical and film presentations worth mentioning is the drama *Đuka Begović* directed by Ivan Marton (premiered in the Croatian National Theater in Osijek in 1973, featuring Fabijan Šovagović in the title role), the theatrical remake and film adaptation of M. Mađer, monodrama of Fabijan Šovagović (1976) and Ivo Gregurević (2004) and especially the feature film *Đuka Begović* (1991), directed by B. Schmidt featuring Slobodan Ćustić in the title role, which marks the final fixating of *Đuka Begović* as an icon of Šokac/Slavonian.

²⁰ It should be mentioned that in the title of Kozarac’s first collection (1906) is Slavonian and not *Šokci* blood.

²¹ About the place of Ivan Kozarac in literary critique, cf. Vukovac 1984.

if he considers himself to be a Šokac, unknowingly slides into the role of a mythographer; from the analysis of Kozarac's process of the characterization of the main hero, to the nostalgic myth of Šokac ethnos, there is just a minute step.

Đuka Begović and Tena: icons of Šokac mentality

Judgments of literary works shift into universal utterances and attributes contingent on cultural codes becoming transposed into natural, essential and eternal attributes. While the literary-critical discourse is in itself vulnerable, changeable, disputable and short-lived, by taking over the role of a mythographer/mythologist the literary researcher exhibits incontrovertible “truths”. Everything is in its place: we have an answer to a question, a confirmation, and not the sources. The myth of Đuka Begović as a genuine and “thoroughbred Šokac”, promoted by literary critique and then canonized in literary history books and textbooks, became as a “sunken culture heritage”, the property of all Šokci, a pivotal element of the ethnomyth of Šokci, a ready answer to the tragic Šokci ethnos. It is not possible to imagine an opening ceremony of a Vinkovci Autumn Festival without a thundering echo resounding from the stage of a fragment or two from *Đuka Begović*.

In the Slavonian cultural imagination there are no Čeh, Leh and Meh, but instead there exist completely fixated literary stereotypes, *images in heads* (Roth 2000) which functioned firstly as icons of the Slavonian and nowadays of the Šokac mentality. To put it very briefly and in complete harmony with common knowledge, they can be labeled with the names Đuka Begović and Tena. The fact that the names Đuka Begović and Tena simply function as reliable shortcuts to the Šokac mentality, self-understood and unquestionable, testifies that they have finally ossified into myth. This has happened through the complex processes of *eponymy*, Vossian antonomasia and with the steady change of meaning from the specific to the common. Personal names become in that way reliable verbal stereotypes of fossilized meaning, while literary texts with titles carrying the same names enter the canon and become *sacred* – being renewed as creative mythical matrixes intertextually and through quotations in literary texts with “Šokci themes” and by rituals in Šokci cultural practices. Sober attempts at cooling down and waking up to the reality of existing stereotypes, starting with Benešić and Ivakić,²² did not bear much fruit. With Matoš's condensed linguistic hint about Ivan Kozarac: *Beautiful like a newlywed woman and ill like Slavonia*,²³ Ivan Kozarac and his

²² Cf. the recent literary-historical description of the stereotype about unbridled Slavonia with undisguised yearning to become more realistic about it and to revalorize cultural values of Slavonia (Bilić 2007).

²³ Cf. *Misli i pogledi of A. G. Matoš* (1955:268).

Duka, as well as *Tena* of older Kozarac, earned a symbolic aura, as parts of the imaginary universe of *Šokac-ness*.

Cultural practices

The neotraditional direction of Slavonian literature (cf. G. Rem 2007:240-242),²⁴ especially prominent since the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, points to the unused reserves of heritage – which as a symbolic resource was creatively used in contemporary prosaic and poetic texts by writers of the middle and younger generations who have strong ethno-lyrical leanings. Inclusion of Slavonian/Šokci mythologems into current literary production was accompanied by a parallel literary-scientific systematization, a “big spring-cleaning” of the homeland component of Croatian literature, which all yielded valuable scientific publications such as edited volumes and monographs.²⁵ Everything indicates, as Brešić (2004:87) summarized, a planned, systematic approach to the phenomena of literary regionalism within the now postmodernist paradigm.

In new cultural circumstances, amidst which the most significant are the tectonic shifts in Slavonian cultural reality caused by the Homeland War, the calls for the mnemonic renewal of the Slavonian classics are getting louder, with an apologetic intention to prove that Slavonia has “great writers”. In a noticeable competition against “southerners’ superiority”, evidence was being offered demonstrating the literary continuity of the millennium-old Slavonian literature.

On the one hand it is clear that the experience of the Homeland War (Slavonian war letter!) was the basic mobilizing factor for the realistic approach to one’s own cultural past in which the relationship to the present is found in key memory figures, and in this way the image of continuity, distinctiveness and permanence is built. On the other hand ever more evident incongruities between the periphery and the center of the national sociocultural reality reanimated the *frontier spirit* as the foundational Slavonian anthropological model (Sablić Tomić and Rem 2007:260-261), which through the long-term neglect of the Slavonian literary corpus widely opened the space for diverse cultural practices of a neotraditional character: from cultivating Slavonian traditional culture to initiating a series of significant literary and scientific events and ambitious publishing projects of the homeland kind. Regarding projects in publishing, one must not neglect the private publishing house *Privlačica*, in which under the editorship and production of Martin Grgurovac a series of significant literary Slavonian texts (mostly reprints) were published. Of particular note are those with names that invoke the symbols of Slavonian identity

²⁴ Significant in that respect is the title of the book collection of the Osijek branch of Matica hrvatska: *Neotradicija*.

²⁵ Cf. the complete literary background of Slavonia (Sablić Tomić and Rem 2003).

(*Dukat, Mali dukat*) and especially the book edition, *Slavonica*, introduced as the “biggest publishing project in the young Croatian state” (Grgurovac 2000:45), within which more than one hundred books were printed in barely more than a year (1994–1995). *Privlačica* became in that way *spiritus movens* of the neotraditional awakening of Slavonia and with an elaborate marketing strategy it “surprisingly” found ways for the homeland book to reach target users. *Slavonica* entered in this way into all “Slavonian schools, churches, museums, archives, libraries, better homes”, into every “Croatian home in Slavonia” (Grgurovac 2000:48). The same publishing house soon announced and finalized the “project of the century”: a monographic series of five luxuriously produced books (*Šokadija and Šokci* 1-4) and thereby closed the whole circle of the renewal of heritage. At that, the change in the terminology from Slavonia to Šokadija was evident.

With the literary-cultural and scientific event *Days of Josip and Ivan Kozarac* in Vinkovci (1995), again through the initiative of *Privlačica* and supported by the Croatian Writers’ Association (DHK), and with a whole series of performances – from round table discussions about chosen *landsman* and hardcover edited volumes, through the ceremonial event, *Live Assets* and award ceremonies, where, as defined in the rules, the awards were to be handed exclusively to authors who were by birth, life and work linked to Slavonia, and by giving plaques with figures of Josip and Ivan Kozarac, to commemorative ceremonies of laying wreaths on the graves of literary leading figures and memorial walks through the forest – the values of the Slavonian/Šokci area, followed by constant reminding about “duties” and “obligations” of the *inheritors*, were made present, and their cultural markers clearly made visible.

Cultural-scientific performances and meetings, controlled by rules, at first carrying Slavonian names and, since more recently, explicit Šokci names (*Šokci World, Urban Šokci*) – through the permanence of its factors, repetition and customary formulative patterns with noticeable performative effects – grew unnoticed as ritual practices (Connerton 2002:62) in the public Slavonian cultural space and, as indisputable *cultural autobiography*, attained a mandatory identity character. In an almost religious hoarding of the remains of the original Šokci culture, especially those which belonged to “great Šokci”, preserved footsteps do not represent only reified memory but become true *relics*. In a separate glass cabinet in the Ethnological Department of the Town Museum of Vinkovci is kept the complete traditional costume of Marija Guttman, born Kozarac,²⁶ the unrequited and fatal love of Ivan Kozarac, which is in itself an endearing mnemonic gesture. However, when in the front of that cabinet, as occurred at the presentation of *Šokci* monographs (in Vinkovci on February 19, 2008), the verses of Kozarac’s cult poem *I caressed brunettes and blondes* are recited – it is certain that processes of

²⁶ The description of the costume and the circumstances in which the costume was presented to the Town Museum of Vinkovci (cf. Gligorević 1995).

mythologization and thorough sacralization of *Šokac-ness* indeed occur. It is easy to check by the reactions of the audience whether emotive signs were being transmitted and received or not. While non-Šokci might have either laughed or stayed cold or indifferent, Šokci, recognizing why these verses were recited in front of that cabinet, were probably able to see in that *ritual* act the appealing emotional and cognitive rays of a risen *Šokac-ness*. In the background of ritual activities lies of course mythical narration: ritual is the embodiment of the same cultural values that in other media are expressed in mythical language (Connerton 2002:75).



Figure 3. Writer Ivan Kozarac (1885–1910) in military uniform, in a photograph taken in Novi Sad. Marija Kozarac kept it in her prayer book till her death. (The photograph is in the Town Museum of Vinkovci.)



Figure 4. Young Marija Kozarac (1886–1979), later married to Franjo Guttman, was a big love of Ivan Kozarac, who wrote for her the poem *I caressed brunettes and blondes*. (The photograph was taken in Zagreb, colored by hand; now in the Town Museum of Vinkovci.)

The process of canonizing Šokci writers in Slavonian cultural reality is completed: Šokci textbooks and monographs are systematized, “Šokac energy” has reached its apex. For those who want to know more, it suffices to look in the phonebook, for the pages of Šokac associations, which flourish again after a lengthy pause since the first big Zagreb association *Šokadija* was founded (1911), or it might be enough to check the names of the art ensembles and cultural events of Šokci traditional significance, soccer teams, names of pastries and gastronomic specialties with noticeable inclusion of Šokci iconography into potentially high-demand products which ought to become *brands*. When entering Vinkovci, on the official sign board with the name of the town, you will be greeted by a “fat Šokac with a slanted hat”, while echoing in your ear will be the well-known hip-hop tamburitza *bećarac* (humorous-ribald song) by the rapper from Vinkovci: *Dođi u Vinkovce!* [Come to Vinkovci!] Diverse events fit into the same matrix – from the promotion of books of Šokci classics through performances of original folklore and folk plays, scientific conferences and round table discussions about Šokci literature or Šokci utterances, theatrical and film staging of Šokci canonical texts to popular tamburitza compositions (*Our branch mustn't perish!*), all as a heightened mnemonic gesture: to save it from oblivion. According to all indicators, Šokci are in Slavonia, and especially in Vinkovci as the “Šokci capital”, linked through a relatively dense network of mythical, symbolical and narrative practices. Damjanović reminded us in the foreword of the book *Šokadija i Šokci u književnoj riječi* of the passionate character of *boiling Šokac-ness* and the possible causes of bustling narratives on Šokci and Šokadija, “sometimes real and more often idealized”:

Still, what is teeming out of them (Šokci), that passion with which they display their folk costumes and their folklore, their blankets and šlinge-tablecloth, their ducats and sausages, their songs and Šokci word, is not contingent only on counter-globalizing processes, but also has a lot to do with the fact that their homeland, Slavonia, is inevitably turning from the first Croatian region into the last, that certain fear of disappearance has settled into the Šokac sub-conscious and therefore, as in other lands and other times in similar circumstances, a solution is sought in stories about times past because that story, sometimes realistic, more often idealized, offers some chance of wrestling with the unsatisfactoriness in which the elements of hopelessness are being increasingly seen. (Damjanović 2007:5)

The construction of the tradition

We are far from disputing the objective cultural capital of Šokci as a Croatian subethnic group. However, when the fictional continuity of *urban* Šokci or especially an idyllic rural past is insisted upon and the search for the oldest and deepest *natural roots* of *Šokac-ness* goes on, one cannot help but take note of the idea of *primordialism* and also the concept of the construed or invented past, with

its allegedly obligatory ritual repetitions being constructed anew in a completely different, essentially urban situation. Of course, memory is, like remembrance, always a reconstruction; we learn about the past only in relationship to the present, and collective memory is always a question of the distribution of knowledge that the group shares among its members, having the effect of establishing cohesion among its members and drawing borderlines against others. However, in the religious hoarding of remains and footsteps and *souvenirs*, renewals of the past, with noticeable support by certain intellectual circles, toward the creation of a coherent story about *Šokac-ness*, and especially in recent Šokci cultural practices with all ritual and symbolic ornaments, the contours can be seen of the construction of tradition which would have to bridge the gap between once rural²⁷ and now *urban* Šokci, in which one can eventually look for an answer – as Damjanović hinted – to the highly disturbing situation of an unrecognized and neglected *Šokac-ness* headed toward extinction.

The question remains open, in Hobsbawm's sense, which any Šokac would have difficulty facing: Is the tradition not being invented, in these pronounced reinstalations and *renewals* of Šokci heritage? *Invented tradition*, explains Hobsbawm (2006:139), marks the “group of practices of ritual or symbolic character, governed in principle by public or implicit rules whose goal is to instil certain values and norms of behaviour”.²⁸ Repetition, he says (2006:142), automatically implies a continuity with the past, and it can be therefore expected that traditions will be invented more frequently when fast transformations of the society weaken or destroy social patterns for which “old traditions” were made while at the same time the newly created patterns cannot use the “old traditions”. That happens also when old traditions and their institutional holders and promoters are not sufficiently adaptable. In short, traditions are invented when sufficiently big or fast changes in the supply and demand of traditions occur.

²⁷ The lexeme “šokac” is rare in Lovretić, and even when he uses it, he writes it in small letter in the meaning of peasant, which is visible from the following statement: “Wealthy women remain unwed longer because they pick. Rich young woman from Otok wants to wed a gentleman or a craftsman, and only if she cannot get one then she marries for šokac” (cf. Lovretić 1990:277). Matoš (1939:151) also uses as similar and synonymous the terms “Šokac” and “paor”, which is visible from the statement: “(...) my ‘civility’ remained only on the surface, on my suit, and now I understand more clearly than ever that I am in my soul Šokac and paor.” About Šokci (rural-patriarchal-frontier) culture as some kind of the subculture in tiny Vinkovci of the 19th century witnesses an excellent “definition” given by Matasović (1994:54): “Šokci-frontiermen lived away and apart from gentlemen and craftsmen and lived a strict life of a Christian-cooperative and the military.” On folklore symbols of Šokci identity cf. an interesting study of V. Ivakić 1940.

²⁸ Translated back to English from Hobsbawm, Eric. 2006. “Izmišljanje tradicije”. In *Kultura pamćenja i historija*. M. Brkljačić and S. Prlenda, eds. Zagreb: Golden marketing, 139-150.

Šokci in Serbian political folklore

The never more frequent exchange of the Slavonian name for the Šokci name indicates a certain attempt at the cultural segregation of Šokci from other Slavonians, and relatively sharply stresses the difference between the native Šokci population and those other “uninvited newcomers” to whom negative imagological constructions are regularly attributed, pointing to some latent regressive shifts towards mythologization of *Šokac-ness* as an ontological term, and sometimes, by exaggerated emphasis on consanguinity and biological heritage of *Šokac lineages*, undervalues the significance of cultural affinity, the latter probably being the main cause of unconscious resistance of non-Šokci towards Šokci presentations. In Slavonian everyday life, however, the flourishing of the Šokci ethnomyth does not disturb the given relationships in cultural and social space or lead to *ethnoregionalizm*,²⁹ does not homogenize but enriches the total cultural life and, in the end, offers urban Šokci through the *nostalgic myth* on the extinction of *Šokac-ness* one possible refuge of identity.

These mythical symbolic and narrative practices are soaked into Slavonian everyday life and integrated into an existing cultural system. We can observe for comparative purposes the shape of the Šokci ethnomyth in neighboring Serbia (Voivodina). Some components of the Šokci ethnomyth (myth of independence, myth of antiquity) are in Serbia linked to completely anachronous theories on Šokci as a “separate South-Slavic nation” or the loudly proposed ideas of Vuk Stefanović Karadžić on Šokci as Serbs who are by their religion Roman Catholics. By entering into the space of *political folklore* as an exemplary *mythomoteur* in Smith’s sense, Šokci ethnomyth leaves Šokci (as well as Bunjevci) in Voivodina, in a completely schizophrenic situation of a choice between either Šokac or Croat. Šokci ethnomyth has therefore two faces, one of Šokci in Croatia (Slavonia and the Croatian part of Sylvania) and one of Šokci out of Croatia.³⁰

While one can talk of a certain instrumentalization of the Šokci ethnomyth in cultural production in Slavonia, the ethnonym Šokci is in Serbia being promoted as an aggressive, and in the media, strongly aided tool of ethnic identification (Šokci as a separate South-Slavic people!) in the better case scenario, or more frequently – Šokci are being added to the Serbian “biological tissue”. In the media and in scientific papers, books and studies, with the support of the highest scientific institutions, to the statement of Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, *Serbs all and everywhere*, was given an even more grotesque syntagma: Croatian Lands without Croats (Žutić 2005).

²⁹ On modalities of ethnic and regional identification cf. Banovac 2001.

³⁰ On identity controversies of Šokci and Bunjevci in Serbia cf. Černelić 1994, Žigmanov 2006.

Conclusion

Šokci as a Croatian (sub)ethnic group fulfill all necessary conditions for ethnia in Smith's sense (2007:22-31). They have their own collective name, common myths, preserved memory of common history, common culture (language, religion, customs, folklore etc.) with strong integrative forces between the members of the group and at the same time strong differentiating borderlines from "others". They also express a strong emotional connection with certain imaginary spaces (Šokadija) and possess a feeling of mutual solidarity and loyalty. In a differently conceptualized discussion, Šokci mythical narratives could be classified into recognizable models (Kolstø 2003): a *myth of antiquity* (Šokci arrived first), a *myth of independence* (Šokci possess a strong autochthonous traditional culture with strong folklore symbols of identity, and when lacking sufficient differentiating factors from their closest neighbors, Slavonian non-Šokci, they affirm their independence by invoking a distinct biological heritage), a *myth of the frontier's outer wall* (Šokci as frontiersmen). In the analysis of cultural markers special attention should be given to *Šokci utterances*, with which Šokci as with some kind of Croatian *félibrige* consciously neglect the zones of Štokavian speech³¹ with a different long reflex of the Common Slavic vowel *yat* – especially ekavian – affirming their distinctiveness and drift from existing Croatian and Serbian language standards. However, for the purposes of this paper I concentrate on a synoptic snapshot of the present situation of the Šokac ethnomyth in Slavonian everyday life with only necessary excursions into the literary past in which, according to the proven connection of myth and literature, it was not difficult to find the supporting mythologems of *Šokac-ness*.

Our personal *insider* position convinces us that various mythologems, perpetuated and somewhat *heated*, settled into Slavonian everyday cultural life and created a relatively complete integral *ethnomyth*. Sizzling *Šokac-ness* in everyday Slavonian life does not leave anybody indifferent. With a strong emotional charge it is an equally strong cohesional factor to gather all Šokci into imagological borderlines of Šokadija as it excludes quite strictly those Slavonians who cannot prove that their genetic code fits into Šokci genealogy. In forewords and afterwords of Šokci chrestomathies it is common to mention well-intentioned readers and others from whom benevolence is demanded ahead of time. To talk about Šokci nowadays, as confirms Čorkalo (2000:105), an outstanding expert in Šokci literature and faithful promoter of Šokci identity, it is quite hard not to go to the extreme, either to overstate or understate.

³¹ Dialectological description of "Šokci languages" (in dialectology better known as old Štokavian Slavonian dialect/Posavina basin speeches) (cf. Kolenić 2006).

Šokci ethnomyth in Slavonia is submerged into the culture of everyday life and it evokes mythical consciousness even without strong monologues, just through the play of mythologems built into given (auto)stereotypes and ritually renewed in Šokci cultural practices. Because of this, the syntagmas “Šokci blood”, “Šokci anthem”, “Šokci governor”, and “Šokci cathedral” do not have to be viewed in dead seriousness. In any case, soft, fluid and dispersed identity frames of *urban Šokci* offer *Šokac-ness* one of the layers of identity, and while supported by a nostalgic myth of *Šokac-ness* in extinction it is more of a *simulacrum* of a disappearing world with visible characteristics of the *construction* of tradition than in any way a support for the ideological ossifying of a myth. In spite of the visible mythological framework, the effects of this ethnomyth are undeniably positive, firstly in the more intensive cultivation of original Šokac cultural heritage, and then in systematization, promotion and partly the canonization of Šokci literature.

A brief comparison of Šokci ethnomyth in Slavonia and Voivodina points to two faces of the Šokci ethnomyth: latent and manifest. While we can talk about the cultural mythologization of *Šokac-ness* in extinction, at the same time, with the support of the centers of political power, the mythical-symbolical complex of independence and antiquity of Šokci is being used for national “coming to their senses” of Šokci and Bunjevci as Serbs of the Roman Catholic religion. One ethnomyth has its extended duration in cultural production and in the culture of entertainment, the other is at its end and cannot return any more from ideology back into folklore.

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