

NEW INTERPRETATIVE APPROACH TO THE MEDITERRANEAN CULTURES

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Introduction

This essay examines most of the imagological reflections on the Mediterranean and the Balkans (as a sub-region of the Mediterranean), with the thesis that the Mediterranean cultural identity can be defined as a regional, transnational, and intercultural identity, and even as an active cultural intertext. Although the Mediterranean is a synonym for mixed races, religions, ethnicities, nations, and languages, it has its own-shared memories, its 'locus communi', and they are the foundation of the regional Mediterranean identity. Since spiritual, immaterial and movable culture does not know of state, ethnic, racial, or religious borders, it is shared by most Mediterranean peoples in the form of collective memory, mythical memory, folk traditions, folk culture, or folklore.

The author concludes that Mediterranean cultural inheritance has the character of an intercultural inheritance with dialogical, cross-cultural, and trans-cultural dimension, and calls for a new, sustainable interpretative turn in the sphere of the Mediterranean cultural hermeneutics, concerning the inherited cultural history and new cultural reality (linguistic, ethnic, and religious). The author sees an urgent need to actualize certain aspects of the inherited and the contemporary Mediterranean cultural identity, and to introduce a new, trans-national mapping of cultural identities/existences, since the actual cultural process transcend the traditional ethnic and state borders. The national Academies of Sciences and Arts of the Mediterranean could sign a Mediterranean Charter for Shared Cultural Heritage (a UNESCO project) and could design an actual map of the contemporary Mediterranean cultural existences, migrations, acculturations, and social integrations. The scientific dialogues or consensus may introduce better-shared cultural policies and interpretative paradigms. This would be of a strategic interest, particularly for the development of the Balkans in the Mediterranean and the European context.

Imagological Reflections on the Mediterranean

The geographical image of the Mediterranean is related to the image of a picturesque sea - (*la Mer Méditerranée*) stretched 'amidst three countries', i.e. between three continents (Asia, Africa and Europe), surrounded by dozens of coastal and island states, so it can be also treated as an intercontinental region.¹ In addition, the Mediterranean is a geomorphologically seismic and volcanic zone.

Because of the immense impact of the sea, this geographical image has created a Mediterranean image of the world, which is basically a marine/nautical image of the sensual sea and its network of connections. This is how Predrag Matvejević paints it in his pointillist *Mediterranean Breviary*², his travelling liturgical book for the Mediterranean. Aside from going through the maps and the glossary terms, in this book he goes in detail into the marine smells, sounds, tastes, and landscapes uniting the numerous Mediterranean peoples.³

Culturally, the image of the Mediterranean includes the reflections of both the Occident and the Orient/the Levant, of both the Latin and the Byzantine tradition, of both Christianity and Islam, but also Judaism, of both monotheism and polytheism, of both the conservative and the liberal worldview. The Mediterranean is a "cultural landscape"⁴, full of different identities and anthropological nuances, which is simultaneously open and closed.⁵

The mythical image of the Mediterranean is related to the image of the cradle and the birth of civilization (reflected in the positive stereotype of the Mediterranean - 'the cradle of civilization'), as well as to the *old world*, which is an image suggested by the name of one of its peninsulas, the Balkan Peninsula. In the 1930s, Paul Valéry wrote about it as the "factory of the civilizations".⁶ The mythical image of the world has survived even in conditions of developed technologies, which shows that the Mediterranean peoples, indeed, have an urge for mythological projections.⁷ The mythical image is trans-historic, utopian, plural, visual, archaic, mystical, and gives resistance to the pragmatic image of the world. The mythical image of the Mediterranean corresponds mostly to the positive stereotype of "the cradle of civilizations".⁸⁹

¹ Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le Monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*. Paris: Armand Colin, 1990; Renée Piettre Koch, "Fernand Braudel, *Les Mémoires de la Méditerranée*: une histoire à suivre", *Yod*, vol. 18, 2013, Le Proche-Orient ancien à la lumière des sciences sociales. Available at: <https://journals.openedition.org/yod/1798>.

² Predrag Matvejević, *Mediteranski brevijar*, Zagreb: VBZ, 2007 [1987]. [*Mediterranean Breviary: A Cultural Landscape*, translated by Michael Heim, University of California Press, 1999]

³ Dragan Velikić makes a good critical overview of Matvejević's second edition of the *Mediterranean Breviary*: Dragan Velikić, "Dosije Mediterana", *Polja*, vol. 505, May/June 2017. Available at: <https://polja.rs/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/33.pdf>

⁴ Matvejević, *Mediteranski brevijar*.

⁵ Alain Kimmel, *Méditerranée: champ clos, champ ouvert*, 2008. Available at: http://www.lespectacleumonde.fr/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&catid=29:dossier&id=52:dossier2-547

⁶ Paul Valéry, "Méditerranéens", *Pesničko iskustvo*, Beograd: Prosveta, 1980, pp. 181-194. [2016. *Inspirations Méditerranéennes. Livre audio publié le 7 septembre 2016*. Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France, Gallica. Available at: <http://www.litteratureaudio.com/livre-audio-gratuit-mp3/valery-paul-inspirations-mediterrannees.html>; Variété III / Paul Valéry de l'Académie Française. Conférence prononcée le 24 novembre 1933. Paris: Gallimard, N.R.F., 1936, pp. 243-66. Available at: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k939071t/f253.image>].

⁷ Neal Ascherson, *Black Sea: Coasts and Conquests: From Pericles to Putin*, 1st ed. New York: Hill & Wang, 1995, [Ашерсон, Нил. 2003. Чрно море, Ксронје: Мароп].

⁸ Gülsün Sağlamer was President of the Council of Mediterranean Universities.

⁹ Gülsün Sağlamer, "The Mediterranean Sea: Cradle of Civilization", *UN Chronicle: The Magazine of the United Nations*, vol. 1/1, April 2013. Available at: <https://unchronicle.un.org/article/mediterranean-sea-cradle-civilization>

The Mediterranean can be defined as a cultural inter-text, and not just as a memorial palimpsest containing traces of old civilizations in the texture of the new cultures.¹⁰ Inter-text, because it suggests an active position, a critical relationship that constantly re-examines the situation in the field, changes the references and quotations, revises history if necessary, creates double value systems (one for the public, the other for the centres of power).

The Mediterranean is an integral complex (a whole, a structure) of worlds, so it should be also viewed as a *zone of interest* in which one change triggers a series of other geographical, strategic, political, economic, demographic, and cultural changes. Today, this rule has been confirmed in all the sub-regions of the Mediterranean: The Middle East, Maghreb and North Africa, the Balkan, the Iberian, and even the Apennines Peninsulas. And the shadow of Europe is being reflected on all of them, whether it is a nostalgia for Europe or an aversion to Europe. In the focus of both modes, nostalgia and aversion, is the reality: the Mediterranean is an integral part of Europe, and Europe is an integral part of the Mediterranean. Europe is what connects the Mediterranean peoples: geographically, historically, and culturally.

Although the Mediterranean is a synonym for mixed races, religions, ethnicities, nations, languages and historical narrations, it has its own shared memories, its 'locus communi', and they are the foundation of the regional Mediterranean identity. Spiritual, immaterial and movable culture does not know of state, ethnic, racial, or religious borders, so it is shared by most Mediterranean peoples in the form of collective memory, mythical memory, folk traditions, folk culture, or folklore.¹¹ The Mediterranean cultural inheritance has the character of an intercultural inheritance with dialogical, cross-cultural, and trans-cultural dimension. In separate parts of the Mediterranean, the familiarity between cultures is increased, so for example, in the Balkans, we can speak of Balkan cuisine, Balkan music (melos), Balkan mentality, Balkan language area in areal linguistics (similarities in grammar, syntax, vocabulary, and phonology among the languages of the Balkan, in spite of their different genealogies), etc.

Nostalgia for the Sea, Mediterranean Syndrome

Two factors influence the determination of a state as a Mediterranean: the first factor is the geographical - topographic, and the second is the cultural and civilization-al. The Mediterranean peoples are directed toward one another, both existentially (through trade, social, migration, tourism) and culturally (through their languages, religions, traditions, and memory). Therefore, a specific Mediterranean nomadism is created as a basic anthropological feature of the Mediterranean peoples.

¹⁰ Katica Kulavkova, "La culture méditerranéenne: mémoire et amnésie. Essai d'herméneutique", *Lo Sguardo Azzuro. Costanti e varianti dell'immaginario mediterraneo*, Maria Teresa Giaveri, F. Frediani, A. O. Zorini, V. Salerno & Massimo Scotti, (eds.), Mesogea by GEM, 2008, pp. 141-151.

¹¹ Katica Kulavkova, (ed.), *Interpretations: European Research Project for Poetics and Hermeneutics*, vol. 3, *The Black Arab as a Figure of Memory*. Skopje: MASA, 2009. Available at: http://manu.edu.mk/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Interpretations-Volume-3-Version-2_-Black-ARAB.pdf

The nations that lost the geographical access to the sea are cherishing the cult of the sea in literature and in fine arts, suffering from claustrophobia, nostalgia, and an excess of memory. The Mediterranean does have an excess of memory. The longing for the sea instigates these nations to be meditative, to develop their imagination, to dream, to constitute their imaginary space (chronotopos) as an over-compensation for the absent/lost sea and coast. From time to time, that longing for the sea may be interpreted as pretensions, thereby generating a feeling of endangerment, a fear of changing borders, a fear of the Other. In the oral tradition, we have some mutual mythical figures of the conqueror and of the Other. For instance, this is how the ambiguous Black Arab character was created in the Balkan, and especially, in the South Slavic traditions.¹²

A characteristic example for an essential, inherent, and immanent belonging to the Mediterranean area is the case of Republic of North Macedonia and its culture. Within its current borders, this state is landlocked and it does not have access to the Mediterranean Sea. Yet, it does belong to the Mediterranean region, climate, and culture in terms of geography, history, mythology and culture. This ought to be recognized by adding it in the list of Mediterranean states of all international organizations and associations.

Mediterranean Cultural Sphere

To talk about a ‘Mediterranean cultural sphere’ does not imply disputing the existence of any of the separate cultural identities (in regard to language, ethnicity, religion, customs, etc.). There are three prisms for interpreting culture: at a local, regional, or global level:

- At the global level, there is a co-existence of rich cultural diversity and it is difficult to build a universal image of culture.
- At the regional level (within the so-called regional cultures, cultural spheres, and zones), cultures existentially converge to one another, a tendency that was emphasized in some epochs because of the existence of empires that spread over entire regions (for example, Ancient Macedonia, the Roman Empire, Byzantium, the Ottoman Empire). The regional identities, therefore, could balance between the extreme cultural diversity of minority cultural identities (Lebanonization, Balkanization) and the policies of cultural imperialism.
- At the local level, it is desirable to foster a strategy of cultural integration and intercultural dialogue.

¹² Ibid.

Intercultural Mediterranean

Mediterraneanism sees the Mediterranean as a zone of culture which is not only a multicultural and “Babylonian” archive of various racial, ethno-cultural, religious identities, but also has a general, *regional, transnational, and intercultural identity*, recognizable by its anthropological, political, religious, psychological features. That is why it is legitimate to speak of a ‘Mediterranean identity’, and not just of the individual ethno-cultural identities.

Mikhail Bakhtin’s *great cultural dialogue* is characteristic of the Mediterranean, since the Mediterranean peoples share numerous historical and cultural realities, a common folkloristic, mythical, and ritual memory, a similar collective trauma, a similar fear of identity loss and conversion, a similar existential anxiety. Hence, interculturalism is a constant of the Mediterranean civilization and cultural sphere¹³ and their dominant paradigm, both in the past and today. Interculturalism implies mutual interests, tangential points, an exchange of cultural goods and values, mutual acculturation, and various degrees of integration of smaller cultures and communities into the larger and more dominant ones. The disregard and neglect for intercultural communication, mutual influence and silent, empathetic assimilation lead to the creation of labile states, which are easier to govern (by the principle of *divide et impera*). And radical multiculturalism leads to cultural disintegration, Balkanization, and isolation of the cultural and ethnical identities.

The intercultural paradigm of the Mediterranean is a corrective for the radical multiculturalism. For example, the absence of a common language of understanding (*lingua franca*) in one state and the marginalization of intercultural communication contributes to the creation of states without internal cohesion. Interculturalism implies recognition of the common social interest of the citizens as a reality, not their marginalization in relation to the collective institutions and constructs. In an intercultural setting, the individualities are important, but the dialogue is always considered of principle importance, so interculturalism always includes a common language of understanding and policies for the promotion of the social and cultural integrity.

The Anachronism of Multiculturalism

In the Mediterranean area, which is marked by powerful inherited cultural identities, it is difficult to implement policies for relativization of identities. Among the Mediterranean peoples, there is a tendency to be conflictingly present in reality, stemming from the fact that ethnic identity has a cult place and it must constantly be proven vis-à-vis other identities. In such circumstances, the defence of one’s identity implies, on the one hand, personal endangerment, and on the other hand, negation and underestimation of the identity of the other. Perhaps, this is why regions like the Bal-

¹³ Valéry, Paul, “Mediteranska nadahnuća”, *Pesničko iskustvo*, Beograd: Prosveta, 1980, p. 193. [*Inspirations Méditerranéennes. Livre audio publié le 7 septembre 2016. Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France, Gallica. Available at: <http://www.litteratureaudio.com/livre-audio-gratuit-mp3/valery-paul-inspirations-mediterraneennes.html>; Variété III / Paul Valéry de l’Académie Française. Conférence prononcée le 24 novembre 1933, Paris: Gallimard, N.R.F., 1936, pp. 243-66. Available at: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k939071t/f253.image>].*

kans and the Near East are perceived as “powder kegs”, “zones for world conflicts”¹⁴ and the “apple of discord”.

Applied in such socio-cultural circumstances, radical multiculturalism would be an introduction to cultural isolation, Lebanonization and Balkanization of the Mediterranean states and its particular cultural communities. Isolation was never a productive cultural policy in the Mediterranean. The past has shown that any incitement of radical forms of multiculturalism and cultural isolationism will cause pathological processes in the region, which can be difficult to be localized and will reflect on the wider geo-strategic constellation.

Imagological Reflections on Barbarism

According to the imagological stereotypes, barbarism is an indication of the absence of a sense of moderation. The term barbarian is a synonym for the (Plutonian) syndrome of excessiveness, which induces a sense of endangerment among those nations that come in contact with the “barbarians”. However, an even larger endangerment has originated precisely from the immoderateness and the excess of ambitions (in terms of power, property, domination, love, hatred) within the nations that have considered themselves “civilized” in opposition to those considered by them to be “barbaric”. The immoderate disruption of balance within the Western European states, for instance, is already signaling of conflict situations across Europe.

In contemporary conditions, the excessive disturbance of balance in Western European countries, with the abrupt influx of migrants from Asia and Africa, for example, already generates some conflict situations across Europe at the level of public rhetoric, ethics, fashion, mentality, but also at a security level.

In fact, at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century, the post-colonial and post-imperial discourse of barbarism and Orientalism is being renewed as an antipode of Western civilization. Western civilization today, by inertia, usurps the right to be a paradigm of civilization, forgetting that the world is heteroglossic and polycentric. As a consequence of this misconception, reality creates dramatic and shocking situations for it. Today, precisely the Western European countries (France, Britain, Norway, Netherlands, Denmark) most explicitly face the dramatic changes that arise from post-colonial domicile conversions. They are faced with the mass immigration of Mediterranean peoples, who also carry across their civilization, cultural, linguistic, religious, and mental structure/code.¹⁵

With the emergence of new migration processes at the beginning of the 21st century, the dualisms between civilized and barbaric nations and between autochthonous (endemic) and aporic (incoming, exogenous) peoples are being revived. A whole imagological paradigm of civilizational, religious, and racial dualities is being built once again. Immigrants, as a synonym for contemporary “barbarians,” are of other

¹⁴ Paul Robert and Alain Rey, (eds.), *Le Petit Robert 2: Dictionnaire universel des noms propres, illustré*, Paris: SNL / Le Robert, 1979-1980.

¹⁵ Etymologically, the word barbarian has an onomatopoeic origin (babble, jibber-jabber, talk incomprehensibly in a foreign language).

culture, language, and religion, so they personify the image of the other. This image of the civilizational other encourages tectonic movements on the map of the Mediterranean and Europe. Whole communities are deciding to move out from their centuries-old homes (even die if necessary) and to move in to other, foreign countries. A revision of the status of the communities occurs: the people from the Middle East or the Balkans, for example, who belonged in their previous environment, in that sense were “civilized peoples”, are now deprived of their primary identity and acquire a new identity, which is alien to them.

Imagological Aspects of the Balkans

The Balkan Peninsula is a relatively new name for this Northeastern part of the Mediterranean. Namely, the old name of the Balkans is Haemus (Αἷμος, supposedly derived from an unattested Thracian word for mountain ridge), which is at the same time the archaic name of the mountain Stara Planina (Old Mountain). The same mountain range is known as the Balkan mountain range today. The names for this mountain range change depending on the perception of the people, as well as on the linguistic and cultural dominance in the geographical area (the Thracian Haemus/Emos, Aemon, Haemimons, Hem, Emus, the Slavonic Matorni gori, and the Turkish Kodzhabalkan), but the mountain has constantly been there, passing through central Bulgaria, horizontally stretching out for 530 km from the border between Serbia and Bulgaria in the east to the Black Sea in the west. The term “Balkan” denotes a mountain in Bulgarian, so it is said to have been introduced by the Bulgars in the 7th century. The use of the term was solidified during the Ottoman rule (from the Ottoman Turkish *Balkan*, ‘chain of wooded mountains’). So, its linguistic origins in both Bulgarian and Turkish most probably lie in the Persian *bālkāneh* or *bālākhāna*, meaning “high, above, or proud house”.¹⁶

The mythical image of the Balkans is ambivalent and points to the connection of good with evil, the birth of civilizations with the decay of civilizations, and peace with war, which is suggested by the negative imagological stereotype of the “powder keg”. Namely, according to some free interpretations, the name of the Balkans arouses a series of associations:

- euphonic, referring to a volcano and a balcony;
- semantic, referring to honey and blood (according to the Turkish *bal* ‘honey’ and *kan* ‘blood’), to blood (according to the Ancient Greek word for ‘blood’ *haima*/*αἷμα* and the Ancient Greek myth about a bloody fight between Zeus and the titan Typhon), and to mother (according to the old Macedonian name Hematia/Emathia/Mati, preserved in the tradition and in some records).

The stereotypical imagology of the Balkans and the Mediterranean, just like any other stereotypical perceptions, has both historical and ideological dimensions because the installation of positive or negative stereotypes is always accompanied by

¹⁶ Maria N. Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 27.

important political events and geostrategic projects. The negative stereotype of the Balkans describes this region as a “zone of world conflicts”¹⁷ and as a “powder keg”. It was made current just before the Berlin Congress in 1898 (following the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–78) when a new Balkan Map was drawn. It was then marginalized. It was re-actualized again one century later, during the 1990s, just before the breakup of SFR Yugoslavia, when the new geopolitical map of Yugoslavia and the Balkans was being drawn.¹⁸ Since the Balkans is seen as a miniature version of the Mediterranean, this negative imagological perception is transmitted and accepted as an image of the Mediterranean as well. Therefore, mapping the Balkans means mapping the Mediterranean, and talking about the Balkans means talking about the Mediterranean.

Balkan Identity/Identities of the Balkans

The separate Balkan cultural identities, as a sub-regional projection of the Mediterranean ones, have been complex for centuries: on the one hand, they have an ethnocentric dimension, but on the other, they also cherish the common, supra-ethnic, regional, Balkan identity. They entered an intense cultural, linguistic, social, political, and even psychological dialogue with neighbouring cultures. Thus, cultural identities with a recognizable regional and sub-regional Balkan marker were created.

The mutual Balkan cultural identity could be described as a *book of memories*, in which all the small and great peoples of the Balkans left their *signature*. The ethno-cultural identities that are the basis of national and state identities in the Balkans are inconceivable without the spiritual, cultural, and civilizational heritage and shared places of memory between the Balkan and Mediterranean peoples (historical figures, mythological and folkloristic figures, writers, artists, literacy, etc.). These shared places of memory constitute a sublimated hybrid that is recognizable as a transnational “Balkan identity” and “Balkan culture”.¹⁹ The Balkan movable and immaterial culture is nomadic and open for the people living in this region.

Potential Regional Cultural Projects:

1. Promotion of new interpretative approaches and inclusive developmental strategies of cultural integration and dialogue, since there is no doubt that the exclusive cultural policies and development strategies generate tensions, isolations, and conflicts. Therefore, in times when individual cultural and state identities are legitimized, it would be necessary to practice inclusive, empathetic, and tolerant intercultural policies, and accordingly, appropriate interpretations of the past.

¹⁷ Robert and Rey, (eds.), *Le Petit Robert, 2: Dictionnaire universel des noms propres, illustré*.

¹⁸ Katica Kulavkova, “From a Balkan Image of the World to a Balkan Model of the World”, *Balkan Image of the World: Proceedings of the International Scientific Workshop Held in Skopje on 5-6 December 2005*. K. Kulavkova, (ed.), Skopje: MASA, 2006 [Кулавкова, К. 2006. Од балканска слика на свет до балкански модел на свет. Балканска слика на свет: зборник од меѓународната научна работилница одржана во Скопје на 5-6 декември 2005 година. Кулавкова, К., прир. Скопје: МАНУ.] Available http://aleph.lsl.lviv.ua:8991/F?func=find-b&request=000261594&find_code=SYS; Katica Kulavkova, *Balkan Narratives*, Skopje: TRI Publishing Center, 2018.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

The shared and mutual places of memory (myths, legends, historical events, linguistic and artistic creations, etc.) should be re-actualized and interpreted through a contemporary lens, with a contemporary interpretative methodology. There is a need for an interpretative turn and revision of the exclusive and ethnocentric stereotypes around the separate Mediterranean cultures, in order to identify the trans-cultural substrate of the “Mediterranean culture” and “Mediterranean cultural areal” (and of the sub-regional Mediterranean trans-cultural complexes within it, like the “Balkan culture” and “Balkan cultural areal”).

2. Adoption of a scientific consensus on the shared Mediterranean memory, and in this context, also on the shared Balkan memory. This consensus can have a positive effect on the current cultural policies (which are often exclusive, adoptive, and ethnocentric), in order to promote inclusive, tolerant, and regional ones. Such cultural policies would relax the relations between the Mediterranean and the Balkan countries and would unite them in recognizing the regional Mediterranean and Balkan interest. For this purpose, the scientific institutions should adopt a Mediterranean Charter for Shared Cultural Heritage (a UNESCO project).
3. Development of a mutual cultural history of the Mediterranean, and of the Balkans. An objective picture of the cultural history of the Mediterranean and of the Balkans could enrich the stereotypical and imagological notions of the Mediterranean and Balkan identities. It would be good, therefore, to initiate sub-regional cultural history projects, following the model of the Nordic project, in order to develop mutual cultural histories of the Balkans, the Maghreb, the Middle East, and of all individual sub-regions, and to integrate them into a history of Mediterranean cultures. The defining of the more general, regional, and transcultural Mediterranean identity (and the sub-regional identities, like the Balkan identity) as mosaic identities could provide a better future identifying model for the young descendants of all the old Mediterranean peoples in order to substitute their need for obsessive glorification of the past and of their cultural uniqueness. The Mediterranean, just like the Balkans, lives in the past, instead of living out of the past.

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