Ritual Kinship and its Betrayal: Kumstvo and Belgrade Politics

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Introduction

In *Serbia Through the Ages*, Alex Dragnich (2004) reviews the comparative strengths and weaknesses of Karađorđe Petrović and Miloš Obrenović during the Serbian uprisings against Ottoman oppression from 1804 to 1815. The princes' struggle stemmed from their contrasting political strategies. Karađorđe used forcefulness; Miloš diplomacy. Karađorđe was a mighty lion; Miloš a cunning fox. In *The Prince*, we read, "A prince must imitate the fox and the lion, for the lion cannot protect himself from traps, and the fox cannot defend himself from wolves." Karađorđe could not protect himself from a trap set by Serbian rivals; Miloš could not defend himself from wolves in the Ottoman empire. Machiavelli's famous counsel to the prince frames Dragnich's analysis.

Folk history tells us that Miloš set a treacherous trap for Karađorđe, resulting in Karađorđe's murder. Karađorđe was Miloš' godfather or kum. This means that Karađorđe served as witness at Miloš' Christian wedding. When Karađorđe returned to Serbia after exile in Austria, Miloš plotted against his rival. Miloš persuaded Vujica Vulićević, who was Karađorđe's kum and served as witness at Karađorđe's wedding, to murder Karađorđe, either by arranging for someone to kill Karađorđe or by doing it himself while Karađorđe slept in his cabin as a guest. (Folk history circulates both versions.) Karađorđe could not protect himself from this trap set for him. In this manner, the fox Miloš snared the lion Karađorđe. Such are the stories of folk history.

While the exact details surrounding Karageorge's death will never be known, historians believe Miloš played an integral role. In *Serbia*, L. F. Waring (1917, 102) writes:

> There are many versions of the fate of Kara George. It is said that Milosh informed the Pasha of his return and his political connection, and that the Turks said they would have his head or that of Milosh himself. The Serbian chiefs then deliberated about what was to be done, and one rose and said; 'Gospodar, we must do with Kara George as with the lamb on Easter Day.'

According to the Serbian chiefs, it was necessary for Karađorđe to be the sacrificial lamb. It was necessary for the future of Serbia. Although Miloš cleverly achieved power for a while, he maligned the honor of the kinship known as kumstvo to do so. He had his kum, a person to be revered and respected, murdered. Moreover, he persuaded the kum of his kum, Vulićević, to murder Karađorđe, taking advantage of the trust Karađorđe felt toward kum. Out of regret and atonement, Vulićević built a parish church for what he had done. In 1954, the church became a monastery and is called Pokajnica Monastery.

Dragnich and Waring's commentaries do not dwell on the treacherous way in which folk history narrates the assassination of Karađorđe, nor the betrayal of a revered kinship. While just a story, the story itself assumes historical significance as a national narrative.

Kumstvo

Kumstvo is a fictive or, better, a ritual kinship. It is fictive only in the sense that it is kinship neither by blood nor by marriage. Kumovi (the plural for kum and kuma) names several types of kin. Kumovi may refer to a best man at a wedding, a male or a female witness at a wedding, a godparent at a baptism, a witness at a circumcision, a witness at a child's first communion, a sponsor at a child's first hair cutting, someone who names a family's child, or a woman who nursed a child who was not her own. Because kumovi are not agnatic or affinal kin, kumovi give agnatic kinship a horizontal structure in the larger community.

Kumstvo, the collective noun for kumovi, has cultural prestige, social organization (kumovi cannot inter-marry), and ethical expectations among Serbs. Vera Stein Erlich reported

that the kum at a Serbian Orthodox wedding is the one who declares, “Ja ih vječavam,” meaning not so much “I marry them” but “I would let them be married” or “I make them to be married.” One saying that points to the kum’s special status is: Bog na nebu, kum na zemlji (God in Heaven, the kum on earth). The kum’s role in time of trouble is that of a savior figure. Another saying is Kad kum dolazi u ku’u i semplja ispod praga se trese) (When the kum comes into the house even, the ground under the threshold trembles). Another is kum nije dugme (the kum is not a button). The kum cannot be used and lightly tossed away like a button. [sayings cited and translated in Hammel 1968, 79].

Christos Mylonas (2003, 94) writes, “Kumstvo is probably the most prominent and enduring form of Serbian quasi-kinship relation, propagated by cultural, religious and historical traditions.” Mylonas (2003, 94) adds, “While the secularising pressures of communism contributed to the decline of formalised rituals in Serbia, the practice of kumstvo retained a position of social and cultural prominence.” Kumstvo protected the Serbian ethnic identity and held the Serbian nation together against the secularizing and modernizing pressures of Yugoslav communism.

In “Serbia in a Broken Mirror,” Miloš Vasić (1994) writes, “The Church teaches us that the institution of godfather goes back to times when the Christians were persecuted: there were no baptismal books, so that it was necessary to have a sponsor at baptism before God and before men.” During times of persecution, the kum played a crucial role in the preservation of the Christian faith in the Serbian Orthodox Church.

Serbian Politics and Kumstvo

Kumstvo has become a problematic feature of political alliances between Serbian nationalist leaders as well as wealthy business men. The leading politicians in Serbia, who have strong

nationalist ideologies, are connected to one another not only politically, but also familiarly through kumstvo. “Although folk theory warns strongly against close contact or business dealings with the sponsor, the relationship is often exploited in so-called *cigansko kumstvo* (gypsy *kumstvo*)” (Hammel 1968, 9-10). Politicians protect themselves and advance in their careers and fortunes by offering and accepting kumstvo from one another. The political relations, moreover, become as treacherous as the relation between Karađorđe and Miloš. When converted into utilitarian and pragmatic political functions, an important cultural heritage is deformed.

One example is the relation between Ivan Stambolić, president of Serbia till 1989 and Slobodan Milošević, who ousted Stambolić and served as President of Serbia from 1989 to 1992 and within the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia from 1992 to 1997, and then as President of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia from 1997 to 2000. Stambolić had wanted to hold Yugoslavia together after Tito’s death and resisted emerging nationalist politics and practices which were lead by Milošević. Milošević manipulated the Serbian people into wars in former-Yugoslavia and was subsequently indicted for genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. He died of a heart attack during his trial.

Stambolić was kum to Milošević. Stambolić served as witness at the wedding of Slobodan Milošević and Mirjana Marković. They were quasi-family. In the Communist Party, Stambolić was Milošević’s sponsor and supporter. Stambolić was murdered in 2000, and it was Milošević and Marković who arraigned to have their kum killed, mirroring the betrayal trope in folk history when Miloš arraigned to have Karađorđe killed. The betrayal trope becomes a part of history and lives in the consciousness of the Serbian people as a part of a national narrative. Vasić (1994) describes the digression of morality and of kumstvo’s traditional honor:

> American ethnologist Eugene A. Hammel, is the author of one of the most exhaustive studies of the institution of godfather or godparenthood in these areas. In his book "Alternative Social Structures and Ritual Relations in the Balkans," he studies the stability of the institution of godparenthood in Serbia and Montenegro. Hammel has reached an interesting conclusion: the institution of godparenthood is stable in stagnant, remote and poor environments; it deteriorates in mercantile, economically active and politically active environments.

Milošević and his wife acted out the legacy of Miloš; they ignobly arraigned for Stambolić, their kum, to be assassinated. In his political career, Milošević was a fox as well as a lion. Through evil, Milošević retained his stature as a Serbian prince of the Serbian people.

A second example of kumstvo as a political alliance is the relation between Aleksandar Ranković and Josip Broz. Ranković was kum at the wedding of Josip Broz and Jovanka Broz. Ranković "fought alongside Tito during the war and was devoted to him" (Judah 1997, 143). Ranković was Tito's heir apparent. In 1963, Tito ousted Ranković for political reasons and ordered him into retirement in Dubrovnik. Serbs saw Ranković as their spokesperson in the inner circle of Yugoslav communism and protector of their ethnic interests. Tim Judah (1997, 144) writes, "It is impossible to underestimate the effect of the fall of Ranković." Judah, however, does not formulate the effect of the fall within the context of kumstvo. Although after his fall in 1963 Ranković had lived in obscure retirement in Dubrovnik, twenty years later in 1983 his funeral in Belgrade was an awakening for Serbian nationalism. "Everyone was taken aback, then, when tens of thousands turned out to mourn him, some of them shouting nationalist slogans such as 'Serbia is Rising!'" (Judah 1997, 157). Tito was a Yugoslav/Croat; Ranković a Yugoslav/Serb. Their kumstvo was intra-ethnic rather than interethnic, representing the ethos of multi-ethnic socialism.

Think of the phrase, kum nije dugme (the kum is not a button). The kum cannot be used and lightly tossed away. In the eyes of nationalist Serbs as well as some Yugoslavs this is what Tito did to Ranković. Ranković became a martyr not unlike the lion Karađorđe, exposing to the

mind of Serbian nationalists, the flaw of multi-ethnic communism. The Serbian State Security Service has proclaimed Ranković as one of its founding fathers and "introduced a ritual of bowing before his grave" (Čolović 2002, 169). The Serbian State Security Service in this manner redeemed Ranković for the Serbian nation.

There are more contemporary examples of kumstvo in treacherous political alliances. We will mention two. First, Vuk Drašković, a leading advocate of Serbian nationalism throughout his political career, is kum to Vojislav Šešelj, another leading advocate of Serbian nationalism. Šešelj was found guilty of war crimes at the ICTY but remains a popular vote-gatherer in Serbian elections. Although close political allies, Drašković and Šešelj had a dramatic falling out that was sensationalized in tabloids.

Second, Šešelj, a convicted war criminal, is kum to Aleksandar Vučić, the president of Serbia, giving Šešelj an honorific and dominate position over the Serbian president, an office that Šešelj himself coverts. When politicians accept kumstvo with one another, their relations become personal and take on shameful proportions. The result is the revered traditional kinship is deprived of its meaning in the political spectacle. The politicians use, misuse, and abuse a valued cultural tradition that has its roots in everyday life and folk culture. The original culture becomes disfigured when transformed into an instrumental tool of political power.

It is possible to do a network analysis of the many kinship alliances between Serbian politicians and wealthy business men, conducting internet searchs with the key words, kome je kum, and describing these relations, connections, and different variables quantitatively. A more fruitful track to take at this point, however, is to review the relevant literature in the social sciences that provides "terministic screens" through which to understand better the kinship alliances in Belgrade politics and see their relation to Serbian nationalism. "We *must* use

terministic screens, since we can't say anything without the use of terms; whatever terms we use, they necessarily constitute a corresponding kind of screen; and any such screen necessarily directs the attention to one field rather than another" (Burke 1989, 121). We will use three different terministic screens. We will review how Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the aristocracy of culture, Steven Lukes's theory of the mobilization of bias, and Florian Bieber's analysis of institutionalized ethnicity direct attention and say something particular about the ritual kinship alliances among Serbian nationalists.

Pierre Bourdieu's anthropological notion of the aristocracy of culture is one terministic screen. Nationalist politicians invite the Serbian people to judge and measure their conduct according to the traditional authority of kumstvo. Nationalist politicians give the authority of kumstvo an aesthetic character that is charismatically persuasive. Bourdieu formulates the principle behind the persuasiveness as "the absolute primacy of form over function." Political actions, whether they be betrayal, assassinations, slander, or graft, achieve the status of a work of art, which Serbs are asked to judge in these terms. Tabloids become windows through which the people gaze at their aristocratic politicians and their tacit claim of absolute power. The reification of kumstvo's honor and integrity in this aesthetic manner moves kumstvo apart from the people and everyday life and makes it a unique and exclusive heritage of the "aristocratic" politicians. Kumstvo is deformed; it becomes both morally beautiful and spiritually grotesque, each sideundercutting the other in a negative dialectic. Through an aristocratic simulation of kumstvo, politicians demand that the Serbian nation defer to their moral and spiritual authority.

Steven Lukes's theory of the mobilization of bias is another terministic screen through which to examine the function of kumstvo in the kinship alliances of Belgrade politicians. First, Lukes (1975, 302) describes the position of the neo-Durkheimians.

> What exactly do these neo-Durkheimian analyses claim to be the role of ritual in contemporary politics? They turn out on inspection to make a number of distinct claims: (1) political ritual is an *index* or evidence of (pre-existing) value integration (it indicates 'deep-eated values and commitments' and provides 'evidence of 'primordial religious commitment'); (2) it is an *expression* of such integration ('society reaffirms the moral values which constitute it as a society'); (3) it is a mechanism for bringing about such integration (serving to 'mobilize deep levels of personal motivation for the attainment of national goals'); and (4) it itself *constitutes* such integration (consisting in 'the progressive integration and symbolic unification of the group' and functioning 'periodically to unify the whole community'). Thus these various relations are claimed to exist between ritual and value integration.

This neo-Durkheimian position seems to apply. Kumstvo appears as an index of pre-existing value integration. It appears as an expression of such integration. It becomes a mechanism for bringing about such integration. And, finally, it itself constitutes such integration. Political alliances take on aa mythological air in a quasi-religious manner. The reification empowers Serbian politicians. Social integration appears to be strengthened.

The neo-Durkheimian position is tempting, but Lukes discourages us from being seduced it. For understanding of what kumstvo alliances means in Serbian politics, the neo-Durkheimian of analysis is idealistic and unconnected to the political realities embedded in "a class-structured, conflictual and pluralistic model of society." The ritual kinships do not serve "to unite the community but to strengthen the dominate groups within it." They do not promote value integration but are "crucial elements in the 'mobilization of bias.'" The 'mobilization of bias' promotes aggression and intolerance toward others. By triggering the 'mobilization of bias,' nationalist politicians become the most powerful leaders and the strongest fighters for the nation. For Lukes, this second position offers a better explanatory account than the neo-Durkheimian one.

Florian Bieber's (2014) analysis of institutionalized ethnicity is another terministic screen to explain the role of kumstvo among nationalist Serbian politicians. Participation in government

is a key instrument and moral imperative to overcome group exclusiveness for modern democracies. The impact of kumovi relations between nationalist politicians, however, insures ethnic privilege and sustains ethnic entitlement. Although kumovi relations exist independently of government functions and institutions, kumovi relations implicitly control and fuel government decisions as well as institutional practices, especially critical ones that come up in time of crises. The result is what Bieber (2014, 15) describes as over-institutionalized ethnicity where institutions serve ethnic particularity and government is limited by ethnic heritage. The ritual kinship of kumstvo captures democratic institutions and prevents the realization of democracy's promise. Over-institutionalized ethnicity through kumstvo results in state capture. Ethnic identities do not wither away under the sun of modernity, as Bieber imagines; they instead blossom under the aesthetic light of a cultural custom that is co-opted in the political alliances of nationalist leaders. While Bieber argues that modern democracies and government need to break from the past, the barely concealed presence of kumstvo and its role in political alliances enable nationalist politicians to cling to the past as a way to maintain their unbreakable grip on power.

Culture is a decisive rather than secondary variable for understanding how it is that nationalism sustains itself in Serbia today. In 1975, Andrei Simić made a prescient comment.

> The cultivation of family and kinship ties can be said to constitute a "national vice" among South Slavs . . . many Yugoslavs themselves have characterized this behavior as an impediment to the rationalization of economic and bureaucratic life.

Cherished kinship ties are fundamental to ethnic identity and genuine social solidarity. At the same time, these very ties may become an impediment to social progress and enlightened government. In "Serbia in a Broken Mirror: The Role of "Kum" in Serbian Politics," Vasić (1994) imagines a positive and natural historical solution: "The institution of godparenthood, as an act of taking on responsibility for someone's spiritual life and a substitute for blood

relationships, is older than Christianity and the Serbs, and as such will probably survive all our follies."

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