

SERBIAN EPIC POETRY AS A RESOURCE FOR RURAL CULTURAL TOURISM

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Abstract

In an effort to look into the possibilities which would innovate the tourist market in less developed branches of cultural tourism in Serbia, this paper explores the potentials of the travel piece Epic Serbia by the renowned Serbian novelist Milisav Savić for literary tourism development in the country and the region. Epic Serbia resulted from a sort of pilgrimage along the paths of Serbian oral poetry that Milisav Savić undertook from 2015 to 2016. He revisited, among other places, his own home region of Raška in south-western Serbia, the first capital of the Serbian medieval state and home to some of the most important UNESCO-protected structures in Serbia. Savić's poetic travel journey brought the epic heroes of the Serbian oral poetry into focus, linking them to the geographical places, churches, monasteries, battlefields etc., which are all important part of the Serbian cultural heritage today. The aim of the paper is to present the results of a tailor-made questionnaire concerning the level of potential tourists' interest in literary tourism, in this case epic tourism closely linked to religious and rural tourism. This would further lead to forming a new tourist "package" arrangement within the field of literary tourism, an almost non-existent branch of cultural tourism in Serbia, which would innovate the market and create room for an increase in the number of domestic and inbound tourists.

Key Words: *heritage, literature, tourism, travel, epic poetry*

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Introduction

This paper investigates Epic Serbia, a piece of travel writing by the prominent Serbian novelist Milisav Savić, as a potential resource for tourism product development in the field of literary tourism. From 2015 to 2016, Milisav Savić undertook a sort of pilgrimage along the paths of Serbian epic poetry.

Although a postmodernist writer, Milisav Savić took up this project to revisit, among other places, his own home region of Raška in south-western Serbia, home to the first capital of the medieval state and some of the most important UNESCO-protected structures in Serbia. His journey was the one of the revival of epic heroes and important places, some of them recorded in history and other not, mentioned in the Serbian epic poetry so esteemed by world-famous authors and cultural researchers such as J.W. Goethe and the Brothers Grimm.

In this paper, the authors are looking into the potential for turning "the home of epics" into a tourist destination. The aim of the paper is to present the results of a tailor-made questionnaire concerning the level of potential tourists' interest in literary tourism, in this case epic tourism closely linked to religious and rural tourism. This would further lead to forming a new tourist "package" arrangement within the field of literary tourism, an almost non-existent branch of cultural tourism in Serbia, which would innovate the market and create room for an increase in the number of domestic and inbound tourists.

Oral tradition in contemporary culture

Referring to the corpus of the Serbian epic poetry that he translated for the purpose of having it published in a comprehensive bilingual anthology in 1997, Geoffrey N. W. Locke asserted that the "value and appeal" of the Serbian epic poetry issue from the fact that it is not "mere artificial recitation of obscure and half-forgotten tales of bygone ages", unlike most other European folklore, including the English. "On the contrary," says Locke, it is "the product of a continuous living tradition extending over the last several centuries", which, according to him, makes the Serbian epic poetry "the richest oral epic material in any single European language." (Locke, 1997, p. 15)

Such view puts forward the idea of the Serbian oral tradition's strong relevance to contemporary narratives that engage with politics, culture and art. In 2018, at the time when the authors of this paper started thinking about investigating tourism potential in places with literary associations, several cultural and artistic projects grounded in the Serbian epic poetry were taking place in Belgrade - the shooting of a short film and an art exhibition, to name but a few.

The filming of Igor Simić's short film "Uzidani" ("The Built-in") was partially funded by the Film Center of Serbia through their programme for co-funding experimental films and video art. The story, situated in a contemporary corporate setting, is drawn from "Zidanje Skadra" ("The Building of Skadar"), the oral epic poem much admired by Jakob Grimm, who translated it into German in the nineteenth century (Dundes et al., 1996, p. 3). Both in the original poem and Simić's film, the young wife of a royal is sacrificed by being built into a stone fortress that her husband and his two brothers are building. Her death is a blood sacrifice that will make the building stand (Oinas et. al, 1978, p. 262).

Having become aware of her ill fate, she pleads with the builders to leave her breasts outside of the stone wall so that she can nurse her infant son. After she dies, a miracle happens: her breasts continue to yield milk for centuries, for all the mothers who cannot feed their children. In Simić's film, however, there is an ironic deconstructive twist to the story: due to recession and economic hardship, the Government decides to privatize the source of milk, branding it the Miracle Milk (Janković, 2018).

At around the same time, at the residence of the Swiss ambassador in Belgrade, the artist Nikola Kolja Božović created a series of conceptual portraits featuring Kraljević Marko (Prince Marko), one of the most prominent heroes of the Serbian epic poetry, as a "disturbingly vulnerable and ambivalent character who wants to be liked". The exhibition posed some challenging questions of any epic hero's place in the postmodern non-heroic world of spectacle: "How would Marko Kraljević look today? Would he participate in reality programs? Would his prominent masculinity be thrown into question?" (Danas Online, 2018).

In both of these examples, we notice how the complexities of contemporary societies can be approached and deconstructed by exploiting themes and motifs from epic oral tradition, all the while affirming Locke's stand of it being "a continuous living tradition." Such exploitation "can incite a

creation of an insightful and humorous discourse that inspires critical thinking and provides relief through comic effect" (Kalaba, 2014, p. 2).

Previous texts, which "comprise a certain belief, attitude or emotion", are "re-employed" in a way that highlights their cultural relevance in the present moment (Kalaba, 2014, p. 8). Tourism development which relies on literature also implies the "re-employment" of literary figures, themes, motifs and narratives from the past, but also the investigation of how they fit into the spheres of interest of contemporary tourists.

Theoretical framework

In the paper on the semiotics of literary tourism, Barbara Schaff (2011) talks about the literary pilgrimage as the oldest form of a literary trail, which is usually "text-informed and author-focused, and they are deeply influenced by a sense of literary heritage and nostalgia" (p. 173). Referring to the work of Eric Hobsbawm, Schaff (2011) sees a very close connection between literary tourism and what Hobsbawm terms "the invention of tradition" which implies a strong "continuity with the past" (p. 178). If both tourism and literature, as Schaff (2011) asserts, are "the essentially modern way of learning about the world", then literary tourism can be defined as "a complex cultural practice, connecting different modes of experience and understanding" (p. 166). Schaff sees literary tourism as part of the heritage industry, but notes that experiencing literary places and trails implies more complexity than simple heritage sites, as literary places and trails "tell spatial stories, which means that places are experienced not only in a material sense, but also in the view of their literary representations" (Ibid.). In other words, the pieces of literature, read and admired by the literary tourist, are spatially materialized through the tourist's experience at the particular place or trail.

In light of that, Schaff also notices the growing tendency for the new forms of literary heritage representations which are less focused on the author's biography and more on "a factualisation of fiction by resignifying places in terms of their literary associations". The author's life, the place of birth and death etc. seem to be of lesser interest to contemporary literary tourists than the places where the plots of their literary works unfold, which is why, according to Schaff (2011), the contemporary literary tourist will rather go to the bar that the main protagonist of the book frequents than to the bar that the author himself frequented or frequents (p. 167). In that sense, the contemporary tourist will prefer a "text-informed" place to an "author-

focused" one. In the case of Serbian epic poetry, as in most works of oral epic literature, the author is rarely or not at all known. The intensified interest in the character, plot, setting and the story, all of which are, in the Serbian epic poetry, highly dynamic and surprisingly relatable for a modern man, may make this part of the Serbian literature a fertile ground for literary tourism development considerations. Furthermore, the absence of the author, as well as the specificity of information that the epic voice provides in all oral traditions (mythologized distant time, supernatural forces, little or no psychological delving into the literary characters' states and motives, etc.) offers many possibilities for storytelling, strongly grounded in the culture's epic narratives, as a means of cultural preservation, education as well as entertainment.

Creative imagination therefore makes important part of literary tourism. However, Schaff (2011) does not miss to notice that literary tourism is also material consumerism combined with creative imagination (p. 166). If we add the quest for the authentic (Schaff, 2011, p. 167-168), we can understand the challenge of creating a tourist product that is culture-preserving (authentic), while at the same being materially gainful (consumerist).

Milisav Savić's epic Serbia: a postmodernist's take on oral tradition

The travel book *Epic Serbia* resulted from a sort of pilgrimage along the paths of Serbian oral poetry that Milisav Savić, a renowned postmodernist writer, undertook from 2015 to 2016. He revisited, among other places, his own home region of Raška in south-western Serbia, the first capital of the Serbian medieval state and home to some of the most important UNESCO-protected structures in Serbia. Savić's poetic travel journey brings the epic heroes of the Serbian oral poetry into focus, linking them to the geographical places, churches, monasteries, battlefields etc., which are all important part of the Serbian cultural heritage today. *Epic Serbia*, which can be said to be a collection of short stories, was published by Raška škola in 2017, both in Serbian and English, and the English translation of the book was provided by John and Ružica White.

If imaginary literary spaces are "filled with myths and nostalgia which serve to veil the fact that the real place has been changed, lost, or has never existed in the first place" (Schaff, 2011, p. 179), and as such inextricably bound to creative imagination, it is perhaps not that surprising that a postmodernist writer like Milisav Savić took upon himself the unexpected

mission of chronicling historical and imaginary places and events in the Serbian medieval history. Irony vs. nostalgia is an important postmodern dichotomy: the postmodernist writer will ironize the nostalgia of the urge to go back in time and idolize the times past. On the other hand, the postmodern writer knows that rummaging through the past may be the only way to deconstruct the present.

And so literary tourism, as part of domestic tourism, becomes what Susan Pitchford (2008) calls "identity tourism" "in which collective identities are represented, interpreted, and potentially constructed through the use of history and culture" (p. 3). In the "Introduction" to *Epic Serbia*, it is precisely the question of identity that Savić emphasizes when writing about his interest in the Serbian epic literature. "The old Serbian epic ballads were my first ever reading matter," says Savić, "nothing unusual about that, because I grew up in an area which was the home of epics. The language of those ballads was spoken at home. No one knew a thing about any other literature" (Savić, 2017, p. 5).

When considering whether a travel book of this kind can be used as a different, contemporary angle to embrace the heroic literary and historical narratives of a nation, as well as a tool for tourism experts and a basis for enriching the cultural tourism offer, it is important to understand the approach that Savić's *Epic Serbia* adopts in treating the heroic subject. *Epic Serbia* never falls into the trap of glorifying the heroic narratives of the past in a biased or non-critical manner and remains safely outside of revivalist and nationalist movements towards the past, managing all the while to present the Serbian oral tradition as probably the most worthy and culturally significant part of Serbian literature. Savić's treatment of epic characters and plots and their connection with the geographical places and religious structures situated mostly in rural Serbia is both humorous and deeply humane.

The focus is on the universal ideas and concepts that are found in Serbian epic poetry: love, war, beauty, morality, conflict, family ties, heroic deeds, ill faith, etc. In this very relevant, deconstructive approach to heroic narratives, Savić never fails to point out and comment on, from a contemporary point of view, one significant aspect of the Serbian epic poetry: characters, plots and plot twists that break the epic mould, which is the main expression of modernity that the Serbian epic tradition boasts. The decline of great narratives in the twentieth century has led to revivalist reaching for the past, for "the discourses whose authenticity in the past

times was unquestionable, but that were eroded and made obsolete by social, historical, economic and cultural circumstances" (Kalaba, 2019, p. 647). The relevance of this approach lies precisely in a complete absence of the glorification of mythology and pseudo-history, which is a great ailment of the Balkan societies today.

The language of the book resonates very much with the kind of discourse one normally hears when attending a well-prepared guided tour. It is both informative and absorbing, with a gist of interpretation and mystery. Savić either begins the story discussing an epic poem and then linking it to a geographical place or a religious object (where the plot is set, for example) or other way around: he provides historical and geographical data on the religious object and then links it to the relevant epic poem. "The Finding of the Head of Prince Lazar" ("Obretanije glave Kneza Lazara") can be taken as an example. It is a vivid outline of the poem's plot: how the body and the soul of the most important figure of the Kosovo myth, prince Lazar, were miraculously reunited.

The recounting of the wondrous occurrence is told in compelling words, with some historical and geographical suppositions as well as a subtle metatextual twist, when the narrator refers to the "poetess", the author of the poem, and her skill, praising her for knowing "how to slow the story down" and build the suspense around her story. An excellent writer himself, Savić produces interpretative gems fragmentarily distributed in his documentary work.

Another example is the "Banović Strahinja", considered one of the most important literary pieces ever produced in the Serbian literature. It is an epic ballad about a man who neglects his young wife and then goes looking for her after she has been taken away by a Turkish aristocrat Vlach-Alija, although her father and her brothers tell him to forget about her. Savić (2017) begins the story by discussing the possible birthplaces of the poem's author known as Old Man Milija, and goes on with the geographical characteristics of Banović Strahinja's hometown, "little Banjska" in Kosovo and Metohija, which "gave birth to a hero who will be the only one in Serbian poetry to bear the epithet 'Someone'" (p. 189). Savić dispels the image of once prosperous, mythical Banjska comparing it to the actual one, stating that it is "just like ... in the poem. Ruined, smashed up" (Ibid.).

Savić's poetic nostalgia is not about the glorified past, but about the destruction of invaluable cultural heritage in the tumultuous history of the

whole region. As for Savić's take on the story, he emphasizes the poem's superior ways of remaining outside of any kind of epic mould: there is a neglectful and then cuckolded husband/main protagonist, a likeable antagonist, and a wife who sides with her lover during his duel with her husband. Still, there is a happy ending, as the husband and the wife remain together in the end. Banović Strahinja is a Christian hero, a husband who sees his own fault in the fact that an intruder and a stranger could love his wife better than he did, so he forgives and does not take revenge. "And why not?" concludes Savić. "It's never too late to love someone as they deserve. And it's always nicer to drink wine à deux" (Savić, 2017, p. 195).

Data collection

This research paper used a quantitative methodology that authors implemented in the territory of the Republic of Serbia in the period June - October 2018. The questionnaire was developed on the basis of research into tourist destinations (Almeida & Garrod, 2016) and consisted of 39 questions related to the cognitive and emotional reasons for examining Serbia as a rural cultural tourism destination. In addition to specific destination-related questions, the questionnaire also includes socio-demographic issues such as gender, age, region in which the respondent lives, income, education, or country of residence. The questionnaire was completed by 150 respondents from all parts of Serbia, which resulted in some observations.

In order to distribute the questionnaires correctly, the researchers distributed questionnaires in all parts of Serbia, so that all regions were represented equally. Out of 270 questionnaires distributed, a total of 150 valid responses were obtained. The results from the questionnaire were processed in the SPSS statistical package commonly used for analyzing the questionnaire.

Descriptive analysis in Table 1 shows that the survey of Serbia as a rural cultural tourist destination attracted mostly tourists aged 19-30 years (45%) and 31-40 years (33%), while middle-aged tourists (41-50) were only 11% and only 5% of tourists aged 51 and over. In terms of gender, the structure is similar, with 45% of men surveyed and 55% women. In terms of income, the highest percentage of respondents earns EUR 250-500 per month (29%) and EUR 500-1000 (23%). One can get the impression that the personal income of tourists in Serbia is rather modest, given the rest of Europe.

Table 1: *The survey sample*

Variable	Total
Gender	
Male	45%
Female	55%
Age	
18 and younger	1%
19-30	45%
31-40	33%
41-50	11%
51-60	5%
over 60	5%
Region where you grew up	
Urban	58%
Rural	42%
Living area	
Urban	81%
Rural	19%
Current occupation	
Student	19%
Self-employed	14%
Employee	55%
Pensioner	5%
Unemployed	5%
Other	1%
Education	
High school	31%
Undergraduate degree	37%
Master degree	27%
PhD	5%
Income	
up to 250 EUR	10%
250- 500 EUR	29%
500-1000 EUR	23%
More than 1000 EUR	11%
I don't want to make a statement	27%
Nationality	
Serbian	91%
Macedonian	1%
Bosnia&Herzegovina	3%
Austrian	1%
USA	1%
Slovakian	1%
Slovenian	1%

Source: *Author's own elaboration*

In terms of educational qualification, a considerable number are academically educated (37%), 31% secondary school graduates and 27% have completed master's degrees, while 5% have a doctorate. When it comes to the current occupation of the respondents, more than half of the respondents are employed by the employer (55%), while the smallest number of interviewed respondents is unemployed (5%) or retired (5%).

Methodology

The questionnaire was divided into three key parts where each section contained relevant statements and assessments for examining Serbia as a rural cultural tourist destination. These questions / statements are divided as follows:

- I. Socio-demographic details
- II. Interest in cultural tourism
- III. Interested in getting to know the epic poetry and heritage of a particular place

Testing the validity of the theoretical model of perception and attitudes of students in relation to working conditions in the tourism industry was performed using SPSS 17.0 software package. The value of R^2 in this case is 0.477 which means that almost 50% of the variance is explained by optimal and appropriately scaled attributes. The F value is 44.312 and the p value is 0.000, indicating adequate model performance. The most influential factor in interest in cultural tourism is "Would you go on a trip or a tour that is primarily oriented towards cultural tourism?" with a mean of 3.96.

Table 2. *Model Summary*^b

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	0.690 ^a	0.477	0.466	0.782	2.334

a. Predictors: (Constant)

b. Dependent Variable: Are you interested in cultural travel?

Analysis of results

As part of the analysis of results, the authors focused on the three key issues mentioned above related to the research statements of Serbia as a rural cultural tourism destination.

Table 3 and Table 4 represent mean values and standard deviations for variables related to interest in cultural tourism. Based on the very well-known Likert scale, tourists rated their interests on a scale of 1 (unattractive) to 5 (very attractive).

Table 3: *Interest in cultural tourism*

Attributes	Mean	Standard deviation
Are you interested in cultural travel?	4.15	1.07
Would you go on a trip or a tour that is primarily oriented towards cultural tourism?	3.96	1.13
Are you interested in literature as part of a cultural offer?	3.52	1.25
Are you interested in the literature of a particular region as part of the cultural offer of that region?	3.35	1.19
Are you interested in epic poetry related to the cultural heritage of a particular region?	3.11	1.30
Are you interested in finding out about the links between epic poetry and history and tradition of a specific region?	3.29	1.33

Source: *Author's own elaboration*

As can be seen in Table 3, the majority of respondents are indeed very interested in cultural travel. It should be noted that authors surveyed the population in rural and urban areas. Furthermore, a mean of 3.96 identifies respondents' 'desire' on a scale of 1 to 5 for primarily culture-oriented trips.

A slightly smaller but still a considerable number of respondents are interested in literature as part of the cultural offer (3.52) or part of the offer of one region (3.35). Respondents' lowest level of interest relates to epic poetry as part of the cultural heritage of a region (3.11). However, given that the sample was not selected but the sample was random, it can be said that it is possible to form this type of cultural tourism offer in the future, given that there are a considerable number of interested ones. Such a result confirms the view of Stylianou-Lambert (2011) that cultural tourists are categorized as specific and general cultural tourists.

It is also interesting to specify that in an age of new economy, economic and sociological crisis, epidemics and struggles between nations in order to achieve competitive progress in regional development intangible national wealth can be considered as a defense tool against possible threats

to globalization (Petronela, 2016). With this in mind, the study further examined the interest in epic poetry and heritage of a particular place, and the results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: *In what form would you be interested in getting to know the epic poetry and heritage of a particular place?*

Attributes	Mean	Standard deviation
Literary evenings	3.10	1.38
Reading poetry at festivals and other events	2.83	1.32
Presentation of literary characters, themes, historical facts and attractions related to a particular tourist attraction (monastery, church, fortress, etc.)	3.68	1.24
Presentation of literary themes and motives (love, war, heroism, family relations, male-female relations, way of life, humor of time in which the work was created) from epic poetry of a certain region.	3.63	1.24

Source: *Author's own elaboration*

If we look at Table 4, we can see that respondents are most interested in presentations related to literary character (mean 3.68). These include topics, historical facts and attractions related to a particular tourist attraction (monastery, church, fortress, etc.). Immediately followed by stories about literary themes and motives (love, war, heroism, family relations, male-female relations, way of life, humor of time in which the work was created) from epic poetry of a certain region (mean 3.63).

Undoubtedly, correct are the words of the authors Rodzi et al. (2013) that every tangible culture must be supported by intangible value, and we emphasize that every intangible culture relies on presentations and teachings about it. This is also shown by the medium interest in learning about a particular culture.

In further research, the authors wanted to find out from the respondents what is most important to them when choosing a destination. Within the questionnaire, there were 15 offered attributes, which, according to the literature, were the most important when choosing a destination. The results of the descriptive statistics of these 15 attributes are shown in Table 5.

Table 5: *How important is your particular factor when choosing a particular destination?*

Attributes	Mean	Standard deviation
Natural beauties	3.47	1.649
Traditional gastronomy	3.02	1.348
Cultural attractions	3.20	1.361
Good infra-structure of hotels and apartments	3.02	1.435
Transport cost	3.13	1.344
Good price (with overall cost advantages)	3.19	1.596
A safe place to visit	3.40	1.695
Practicing outdoor activities (ex. hiking, fishing)	3.12	1.331
To escape daily routine	3.29	1.552
Looking for change and novelty	3.48	1.583
To seek adventure and pleasure	3.36	1.551
Intellectually enriching	3.32	1.467
Have a good time with family/friends	3.40	1.647
Relationships with local residents	3.19	1.368
Opportunities for children	2.99	1.599

Source: *Author's own elaboration*

Interestingly, all mean values of the observed attributes are above 3 or nearly 3 (Opportunities for children). It can be concluded that the most important factors when choosing a destination for tourists are: Looking for change and novelty (3.48), Natural beauties (3.47), Have a good time with family / friends and A safe place to visit (3.40).

Factors that are a little less important when choosing a destination are: Opportunities for children (2.99), Traditional gastronomy (3.02) and Good infra-structure of hotels and apartments (3.02). These factors are not insignificant either, the respondents said that they were important, but, in comparison with others, they received a lower mean score.

Conclusion

Contemporary travel books such as Milisav Savić's *Epic Serbia* prove to be a valuable resource for developing the cultural and literary tourism offer of a country. The book offers a postmodern understanding of the nation's heroic narratives, which are often a founding element of the nation's identity, and sheds a new light on the epic literary tradition of the Serbian people. The development of the literary tourism offer that rests on epic

literary tradition should entail close cross-border cooperation between the Balkan countries with Christian tradition. However, there may be obstacle to this kind of cooperation due to still problematic national, territorial and religious narratives in the Balkans. In the long run, such cooperation would have a noble purpose, as it would promote the joint history of the peoples in the Balkans.

The tourism industry has a great impact on the economic, social, functional and physiognomic structure of rural areas (Sagić et al., 2019). This paper has included special topics in the field of epic and cultural tourism in the cultural and tourism offer in a way that is both educational and receptive to people of different interests. For this reason, it can be said that this paper represents a unique and original basis for the further development of this type of tourism, especially in rural areas that are rich in cultural and historical heritage.

Although cultural heritage management is a recent phenomenon (Filipović, 2018), we agree with the authors Lakićević & Durkalić (2018) that strategy for tourism development of the Republic of Serbia can be formed based on competitive advantage, sustainable tourism and knowledge-based tourism. However, such an endeavor would support the approach to Serbian epic literature in an innovative and interesting way that would actualize the timeless themes contained in the epic poems and at the same time bring them closer to the audience through cultural offerings.

On the basis of all the above, a noble task can be set for the future based on resources of rural cultural tourism, which can be reflected in the promotion and presentation of the culture of a nation or particular destination. Particularly tourism, which is economically, politically, historically and socially important, can become a matter of promoting tours that represent a common history of the Balkan people that have clashed in the past. Also, routes like these have a good basis for becoming Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe one day.

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