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**“Conversation is a link
between People” — the
Interaction of Language,
Religion and Regionalism
in Meša Selimović’s
Derviš i smrt and *Tvrđava*.**

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In the 1960s and 70s Bosnia and Herzegovina was a region in change. Several developments in the fields of politics, culture, language and media led to a new sense of regional self. At the same time a revival of Islam can be noted. The search of the region's position and further future while being part of socialist Yugoslavia was a challenging task and discussed on various fields. Literature was one of them. By using the examples of Meša Selimović's works *Derviš i smrt* (1966; engl. *Death and the Dervish*) and *Tvrđava* (1970; engl. *The Fortress*) this paper aims to explore how the interplay of language, religion and regionalism are transcribed in literature.

REGIONALISM, RELIGION, ISLAM,
LITERATURE, LANGUAGE, MEDIA, MEŠA
SELIMOVIĆ, BOSNIA, YUGOSLAVIA

В 60–70-х годах регион Боснии и Герцеговины сильно изменился. Ряд изменений в областях политики, культуры, языка и СМИ привели к новому осознанию собственной идентичности. Другой особенностью этого периода времени является возрождение ислама. Входя в состав социалистической Югославии, поиск своего места и путей дальнейшего развития региона был непростым заданием и, соответственно, обсуждался в различных сферах, в том числе в литературе. Используя примеры из работ Мешы Селимовича «Дервиш и смерть» (1966) и «Крепость» (1970) цель данной статьи исследовать как взаимосвязь исламской религиозной и славянской языковой культур открывает различные возможности восприятия региона и как соответствующие точки зрения запечатлены в литературе.

РЕГИОНАЛИЗМ, РЕЛИГИЯ, ИСЛАМ,
ЛИТЕРАТУРА, ЯЗЫК, СМИ, МЕША
СЕЛИМОВИЧ, БОСНИЯ, ЮГОСЛАВИЯ

1
To facilitate readability of the text, I will refer to "Bosnia and Herzegovina" as "Bosnia" and to "Bosnian and Herzegovinian" as "Bosnian".

2
The national affirmation of the Bosnian Muslims was initiated by the population census of 1961, when they were recognized as an ethnic group. For a detailed overview of this topic see Malcolm (230ff.).

LANGUAGE AND MEDIA IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA DURING THE 1960S AND 70S

The 1960s and 70s in Yugoslavia can be regarded as the country's Golden Age (Jović 2011, 129). Being part of the socialist bond and idea was for most of the regions an answer to the national question. But at the same time there was discontent, and tendencies of regionalism became apparent (Jović 2003, 160f.). This also applies for Bosnia and Herzegovina.¹ The period was essential for several developments: the national affirmation of the Bosnian Muslims, the discussion on language emphasizing the Bosnian idiom, the emission of the first Bosnian news broadcasting, and the publication of several novels featuring Bosnia and its language.

During this period the question of the position of the Bosnian people among the Yugoslav Federation came more and more to the fore and became ultimately the predominant subject in various fields. The most significant developments are certainly the national affirmation of the Bosnian Muslims in 1971,² as well as the discussions on the "Bosnian literary language" in the 1970s (Lovrenović 175). Ivan Lovrenović describes this phase as a cognizant "rebirth of the country", where the former south Slavic identity transformed itself into a Bosnian identity (171). In this context the importance of religion, precisely Islam, in the fields of culture and politics increased and was used as a characteristic trait for defining identity.

Islam is part of Bosnia since its belonging to the Ottoman Empire from 1463–1878 (Imamović 71). The developments in the 1960s and 70s generated questions on the origin of the Bosnian people, their status quo and future, which turned out as problematic (Buturović 42). The

role of religion in these proceedings was not only important in the fields of ethnic politics but also in language politics.

The problem of language in Yugoslavia was always present and complex. The majority of the population spoke Serbo-Croatian as their mother tongue. A uniform standardization of the language as well as the discussion on this topic were ignored for a long time. This was due to the fact that in socialist Yugoslavia officially there were no national problems anymore, whereby a correlation of language and nation already is indicated (Cvetković-Sander 33f.). Consequently, the phase after World War II was affected by an effort to create a uniform language standard. This discussion was heated up by Serbian philologists and culminated in the agreement of Novi Sad 1954, where a uniform literary language was compromised. This language was developed in dependence on the Croatian and Serbian idioms and had two manners of speaking—Ijekavian and Ekavian (34). The development of an own "Bosnian language" or at least "variation" was discussed in Bosnia on the political field—since 1970 e.g. by means of the so-called "Bosnian and Herzegovinian politics of literary language" (Lovrenović 175). The legitimation of the Bosnian idiom as a discrete variant next to the Croatian and Serbian was carried out in 1971 (Cvetković-Sander 38f.). The Bosnian idiom is characterized by Turcisms, which have their origin in the Ottoman period (Lovrenović 175). Thereby, the Turcisms historically have a religious connotation. However, in the language culture of Bosnia they are part of the everyday speech. Nevertheless as a characteristic for the local idiom their importance increased in the 60s and 70s.

Generally oral idioms and regional dialects have an old tradition in the Balkans, which is especially visible in the characteristic folksongs of this region (Žanić 17ff.; Jakiša 315f.). This tradition can be traced back

to the time of the folk singers, which became popular in the Yugoslav area at the beginning of the 19th century (Slapšak 359f.). The so-called *guslari* told epic songs accompanied by the rhythm of the *gusla*-instrument. These songs were made of various fragments of narratives. A singer might have needed a few years to include them with the help of repetition into his repertoire (Illich 36ff.; Lord 104). They were passed on only orally. Slapšak describes this oral tradition as the "base of all national constructs in the Yugoslav region" (Slapšak 359). By means of their regional reference a specific culture and language are stressed.

Alongside the developments in the language politics, language experienced a boom by the media: The economic crisis at the beginning of the 60s had required actions on the part of the government. Numerous reassignments and constitutional amendments fostered regionalization also in institutional ways (Hendrichs 439; Robinson 39). The local emission centers got more power and could decide on their program. This applies also for Bosnia. At the end of the 60s "RTV Sarajevo" had several local emissions—many times having regional topics. In 1971 even the first Bosnian news broadcasting "TV dnevnik" was broadcasted (Zlobicki 87).

In the recent past, European research pointed out a linkage between language and regionalism, especially by focusing on dialects and regional idioms. This coherence is evoked by the characteristics of language, which serves as a basis or a notable element for collectivization (Liebersson 5f.), by providing a subjectively felt unity of a group (Weber 21). In several regions across Europe (e.g. in Spain or Switzerland), language and idioms are central criteria of regional identification, in which processes such as emancipation or autonomy can manifest themselves (Gerhards 45). Current research in the field of media sug-

gests that this context got a new input by the distribution of television, by fostering oral idioms and regional dialects (Holly 1996; Ong 1987; McLuhan 2003). McLuhan points out this occurrence best by referring to England:

One of the most extraordinary developments since TV in England has been the upsurge of regional dialects. [...] Such brogues undergo continual erosion from literacy. Their sudden prominence in England in areas in which previously one had heard only standard English is one of the most significant cultural events of our time. Even in the classrooms of Oxford and Cambridge, the local dialects are heard again. The undergraduates of those universities no longer strive to achieve a uniform speech. Dialectal speech since TV has been found to provide a social bond in depth, not possible with the artificial 'standard English' that began only a century ago. (338)

Jointly responsible are the emissions of regional programs and the utilization of regional idioms, which have an impact on the use of language. In Switzerland e.g., the increased usage of regional idioms in the media evoked a public debate about language (Ricker-Abderhalden 166).³

My thesis is that, based on the example of the described linkage of orality and regionalism and the media developments in Bosnia, the oral idiom got a boost with the help of television and that this correlation is reflected in literary works of that time.

Literature observes discourses about culture, politics, and language and at the same time actively takes part in it. In the 60s and 70s several novels were published focusing on Bosnia as a region and featuring its language. These texts are marked by poetic strategies, showing an

3 For a more detailed illustration of the correlation of orality and television in Yugoslavia see Murašov 2012 and Winkler 2014.

intensified turning towards the Bosnian idiom. Furthermore some of the authors were involved in the literature-critical discussion of turcistic-islamic and consequently linguistic subjects.

Taking Meša Selimović's *Derviš i smrt* (1966, engl. Death and the Dervish) and *Tvrđava* (1970, engl. *The Fortress*), as examples, this paper is going to examine how the correlation of Islamic religious culture and Slavic language culture and orality are transcribed in the novels and which perceptions of the region are provided.

MEŠA SELIMOVIĆ'S DERVIŠ I SMRT AND TVRĐAVA

Meša Selimović's novels *Derviš i smrt* and *Tvrđava* were very popular in former Yugoslavia and were awarded with several prizes (Burkhart 44). They are part of an unfinished "Bosnian trilogy", whose story lines are located in Bosnia in the 17th and 18th century, in times of the Ottoman period (Pavešić-Hirschfeld 152f.). Selimović himself stated that the novels are related to each other (Halač 89); furthermore there are several analogies regarding the setting, period and other motives.

Derviš i smrt is a novel centered on the sheik Ahmed Nurudin, whose usual life is disturbed by the imprisonment of his presumably innocent brother Harun. Thrown out of his inner peace, where divine and profane justice correlate, Nurudin starts to plead for his brother. He tries to find out about the circumstances that led to Harun's detention. On his journey Nurudin encounters a system of injustice and corruption. This religion based regime, judging over right and wrong, arrested Nurudin's brother for revealing some intrigues of the establishment itself. Nurudin's faith is deeply shaken. Questioning his former, present and future life and faith he becomes a "mind in between, a man

that cannot recover his old self, but is not to become a new one either“ (Buturović 43).

In *Tvrđava* Ahmed Šabo, a war survivor, lost his family during his absence due to the plague. Feeling lost without home and destination he finds stability in his love to Tijana, a Christian. Similar to *Derviš i smrt*, the protagonist finds himself unexpectedly faced with the authorities: during a festivity Ahmed, under the influence of alcohol and provoked by other people, complains about society and the establishment. His subsequent punishment becomes manifest in the loss of his employment as a writer and the difficulty of finding a new engagement. He is expelled from society. Being spied on by the police informer Avdaga intensifies the menace of his existence. Eventually Ahmed finds his place outside of society in the milieu of the oppositional student and agitator Ramiz. After the imprisonment of Ramiz into the fortress Ahmed too gets involved into the intrigues of the system.

POWER IN THE RELIGIOUS SETTING

By writing a historical novel placed in Bosnia during the Ottoman period Selimović puts Bosnia into focus and responds on the region's situation during the time the novels were written. He thereby is enabled to reflect on the rediscovering of Bosnian identity and to broach the issues of religion and language and the belonging to socialist Yugoslavia. Not only does the Ottoman setting facilitate the comparison on Bosnia's situation in the Socialist state, it also provides the possibility to address the Islamic issue.

The role of religion is very depicting in the novels. The quotes of the Koran in *Derviš i smrt* which are introducing every chapter are very

striking examples for how religion is framing the novels on a structural level. But also through the settings, subjects and protagonists presented in both novels, the impact of religion becomes apparent. What is striking is its relatedness to power. Power in the novels is linked to Islam, which is shown in the constant conflict of the protagonists with the judicial system, which is Islam based. In the context of power and religion the role of the written language is important:

The Ottoman state was characterized by an organized political system, in which the written language was a significant aspect. Because of its dimension, the centralistic administration needed an enormous amount of correspondence (Faroqhi 113). Most people, as Mula Ibrahim's writing office demonstrates (*Tvrđava*: 22ff.), did not know how to write. But life itself was transcribed into the writing form. The instrument of the written language decisively explains the establishment of the Ottoman state. In this context the written language is constantly symbolically and characteristically exposed as power (Murašov 2002, 181ff.).

MYSTICISM AND THE SOUND OF SILENCE

A different view on religion is provided by the existence of Mystical topics and experiences in the novels. Mysticism, the "consciousness of the One reality—be it called Wisdom, Light, Love or Nothing" (Schimmel 2011, 4) is of great significance, especially in *Derviš i smrt*. Numerous references and conversations of the literary characters attend to it. Ahmed Nurudin belongs to the order of the Mevlevi. This order was generated in the 13th century in Anatolia in the Ottoman Empire. The order is famous for its cultivation of music and poetry. It was generated under the influence of one of the most popular Islamic mystics—Jalaluddin Rumi. Around the same time another famous mystic lived,

Ibn Arabi. He is primarily known for his extensive literary works and his teachings of the „unity of being“ (Schimmel 1990, 102ff.). During a conversation between Ahmed Nurudin and Mula Jusuf in *Derviš i smrt* Ibn Arabi is mentioned:

«Bio sam u Sinanovoj tekiji. Abdulah-efendija je govorio o spoznaji.» «Abdulah-efendija je mističar. On pripada bajramijskom redu.» «Znam.» «Šta je govorio?» «O spoznaji.» [...] «Zapamtio sam stihove koje je tumačio.» [...] «To su Ibni Arabini stihovi. Govore da je spoznaja božje mudrosti moguća samo odabranima, samo rijetkima.» (Selimović 1975, *Derviš i smrt*: 41f.)

Ibn Arabi in general is regarded as a representative of pantheism (Schimmel 104). Pantheism regards the world as divine and sees God as the totality of all that exists (Vondung 27). With reference to Ibn Arabi a connection of mysticism and nature is given. On the one hand this correlation is highlighted in the repeated mention of the garden and the nature in the tekke, on the other hand, and primarily, with reference to its silence, which presents itself as the silence of all people and things. Towards the end of *Derviš i smrt* the importance of nature becomes very clear:

Potom sam se spustio u šumu, udarao čelom u koru stabala, razbijao koljena o kvrgave žile, zaustavljao se u raširenim rukama žbunja, grlio se s bukvama, i smijao se [...]. [...H]odao ravnom obalom i gazio u riječni plićeak, ulazio i izlazio, kao pijan, omamljen tihim gregorom brzaka [...]. [...N]ada mnom žubori matica, oko mene zelenkasta tišina, lelujava trava mi se omotava oko nogu, lelujav sam i ja, kao vlat, ribice mi ulaze u usta i izlaze kroz uši, rakovi se hvataju štipaljka za moje

nožne prste, o bedro se lijeno češe velika spora riba. Mir. Svejedno.
(*Derviš i smrt*: 459)

Ahmed Nurudin experiences a fusion with nature through total silence. He unifies with everything around him. The sample text shows that religion in the sphere of Mysticism creates a sense of community. The linkage of Mysticism to silence and nature in the novels is illustrated. The creating of a sense of community through the unspoken word stands in contrast to the writing-based Islam presented in the novels. The community is constantly preferred over the political system. Selimović refers to the relationship between people or the individual and the state (Wachtel 11).

REDISCOVERING BOSNIAN HISTORY BY THE SOUND OF LANGUAGE

Similar to the sound of silence the sound of language acts as an indicator for creating a sense of community. In *Derviš i smrt* "conversation is a link between people": "Razgovor je spona među ljudima, možda i jedina" (*Derviš i smrt*: 326). This sentence can be read as a metaphor for Bosnia's belonging to Yugoslavia. It addresses the state's federal principle and linguistic union through the south Slavic language.

In *Derviš i smrt* Harun, living in the far-out Stambul, remembers his home country by hearing "his" language: "Tada je čuo Dubrovkinju i njenog muža, pored jednog bazara, govorili su njegovim jezikom. Nikad mu se ljudski jezik nije učinio ljepšim, niti mu je iko bio miliji od te vitke žene gospodskog izgleda i debelog dubrovačkog trgovca." (*Derviš i smrt*: 341)

Especially in the foreign land the most beautiful language is the South Slavic, Yugoslavian one. In the distance where all regional linguistic differences become smaller, a common linguistic identity and belonging presents itself.

Another example can be found in *Tvrđava*, when the rich man Šehaga lies on the deathbed in the foreign Venice and in the last moment before his death asks his assistant Osman Vuk to speak to him:

*«Želio je da pjevam naše pjesme, pjevao sam. Želio je da govorim naše riječi, govorio sam. Ne znam više.» [...] Osman me pogledao. Klimnuo sam glavom: govori, šta bilo! [...] «Jedan, dva, tri, četiri, pet...» Nešto kao olakšanje prešlo je preko blijedih obraza, sjenka tužnog zadovoljstva pokrila je samrtničko lice, a ispod spuštenog očnog kapka kliznula je suza. Još je bio živ, još je držao Osmanovu ruku, još je želio to govorenje, tu skrivenu ljubav. [...] U Šehagi se javila potreba za zavičajnom toplinom, ovdje u tuđini [...]. (Selimović 1975, *Tvrđava*: 409)*

Selimović emphasizes the beauty of the spoken word. But as shown, it is the beauty of the South Slavic, Yugoslav word. This language is connected with warmth, humanity, and home. Thereby Yugoslavia can be annotated with these attributes. By putting the characters in foreign lands, a perspective of home is provided, which is connected to the South Slavic culture.

Relating to Yugoslavia in the 1960s and 70s Selimović creates a community of the sound of language. He thereby not only addresses discussions on language and the boost the oral idiom got by means of the media but also broaches the issue of regionalization in Bosnia.

CONCLUSION

In the midst of the regional changes in Bosnia regarding the ethnic and later national affirmation of the Bosnian Muslims as well as the discussion on language, Selimović chooses Bosnia and Herzegovina in the Ottoman period as the setting of his novels. He thereby creates a metaphorical image of Bosnia, which reflects the region's situation in times of socialist Yugoslavia.

Selimović addresses the subject of Bosnia without detaching it from Yugoslavia, but integrates it, by means of the sound of the language, into the South Slavic region. Both, the region's Islamic religious culture and the Slavic language culture correlate and reflect an area of conflict between the Bosnia's own search for a new path and its belonging to the Yugoslavian bond. Against this background the role of orality in the novels can be regarded as very substantial. By emphasizing the oral idiom the author reflects on the growing popularity of the spoken word in the 1960s and 70s, which was reinforced by the discussions on the Bosnian language and the boost it got by means of television. ♡

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Резюме

В первой главе представлены общие сведения о языковой ситуации и расхожие практики СМИ в Боснии в 60–70-х гг XX века. К наиболее важным изменениям в регионе в 70-х гг относятся официальное признание боснийских мусульман и зарождение дискурса о «боснийском литературном языке». В этом контексте особое место принадлежит религии как важному элементу в определении не только этнической, но и языковой политики. Проблема языка на территории Югославии адресована в соглашении, подписанном в Нови-Сад в 1954, и признании боснийской идиомы отдельным вариантом наряду с хорватским и сербским в 1971.

Вторая часть первой главы статьи посвящена взаимосвязи языка и регионализма. Стоит отметить, что эта связь значительно усилилась с распространением телевидения. Это подкреплено предположением, что телевидение способствует развитию устной идиомы и регионального диалекта. Для подтверждения этого взаимовлияния в статье процитирована выдержка из работы Маршалла Маклюэна «Понимание медиа: Внешние расширения человека», которая демонстрирует как телевидение в Англии содействовало развитию и популяризации местных диалектов.

Я считаю, что данная взаимосвязь также имела место в Боснии и что стимулирование устной идиомы посредством СМИ запечатлено в литературных текстах, опубликованных в то время. Целью статьи является доказательство этого тезиса, используя примеры из романов Меши Селимовича «Дервиш и смерть» и «Крепость».

После краткого изложения содержания романов фокус следующей главы направлен на такие темы как власть и религия.

Возможность прочтения романов как аллегория на Югославию 60–70-х гг отображена в выборе автора Боснии во времена Османской империи. Выбор именно этого периода истории также позволяет сфокусировать внимание на роли религии. Основанный на письменности ислам, который предстает в романах в основном в юридическом и религиозном контексте, прочно связан с властью. Постоянные конфликты протагонистов с властями символизируют отношения между индивидом и социалистическим государством.

В следующей части работы контрастно показано, что религия в мистической ее сфере, напротив, создает чувство общности. В романах подчеркивается связь мистического с тишиной и природой. В «Смерти и Дerviше», например, Ахмед Нурудин испытывает слияние с природой через абсолютную тишину. Он и все вокруг него становится единым целым. Создание чувства общности посредством несказанного слова контрастирует в романах с основанным на письменности исламом.

Последняя глава посвящена взаимосвязи языка и общества. На примерах из романов показано как автор использует звук несказанного слова как связующий элемент. Кроме того, устный язык играет важную роль в развитии и сохранении чувства общности. Таким образом, Селимович рефлектирует и фиксирует в своих романах стимулирование устной идиомы в 60–70-х гг и отображает ситуацию Боснии в Югославии.

Katrin Winkler

was a student of Eastern European studies in Konstanz and Zagreb. Currently she works as a scientific assistant in the project "Slavia Islamica", financed by the Center of Excellence Cultural Foundations of

Social Integration, University of Konstanz. Her dissertation focuses on the revival of Islam by means of television and literature in Bosnia and Herzegovina during the 1960s–80s.