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On Visiting Špionica and ?ekani?i – Villages between Srebrenik and Gra?anica

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During my wanderings and tours of the beautiful hills and valleys of northeastern Bosnia, in the area boarded by rivers Spre?a, Bosna and Tinja, I noticed that the former periods of Bosnian culture still live in the toponyms of these regions and certain localities. ¹[Toponym means the study of place names.]

For example, in the example of *Pana?urište*, a village that has an incredible mountain view, we can talk about the Middle Ages when Greek traders passed this route and left that Greek name for *Pazar*. Near the same ancient road, there is the hill called *Monji*, which tells us of the time of the first and second centuries of our era when the Romans ruled and traded in this country. The Roman name for hill was *Mons*. Also, the presence of numerous localities throughout Bosnia, now deserted, with the name *Klisa*, tell us that, while there is nothing here now, there used to be an Early Christian church (*ecclesia*) there in the Middle Ages.

On Špionica

Recently, when Djedovi? and I were on a small “safari” to a now abandoned house, in the old Bosnian-Ottoman style, near Srebrenik, I asked how this place was called. ²“Špionica” he replied with a smile on his face as he began to explain how local people are trying to interpret the name with stories about some “spies” who used this place for some spy in the old days. I interrupted him right there, proudly. “It has nothing to do with spies,” I said ... “This is the word from the old-Indo-European root ‘spil’ meaning the ‘cave.’ Is there any cave near here?” This is when one of Djedovi?’s former students, who owns one sixth of the estate on which the old house stood, interrupted us with the words, “There is one big cave nearby.” I could not hide a smile of triumph. I elaborated on my analysis of the word Špionica. This is a general-Slavic word “spilnica”, which later lost the semivowel and became a “spilnica,” and when, in the Shtokavian dialect, “l” in the final position became “o,” then the “spilnica” became “spionica.” That this “spil” comes from the Indo-European language can be confirmed by the fact that there is a German form of “speelunking,” and that there are also Greek words with similar forms and meanings.

On ?ekani?i

?ekani?i is a very nice and cultivated village, no more than 20 minutes drive from Gra?anica. ?ekani?i is also the homeland of the Djedovi? family, which can explain why my friend has taken me several times to this beautiful area. The road to ?ekani? goes through the cultivated lands and

gradually climbs into the hills.

Sometimes, Djedovi? used to stop on one of the hills with an incredibly beautiful sight to show me that Serbian villagers from remote villages had tried to expel the Bosniaks from their land. Even after having visited Bosnia for some fifty years, I find it impossible to understand how such a beautiful sight could be the scene of bloodshed and fierce attacks by neighbors who up to recently called themselves “friends.”

We entered the village of ?ekani?i by a narrow, curvy street, passing by new houses, and old ones, with old fences and barns. Then we came to the local mosque. There was a small cottage called *turbe* next to the mosque. We sent a local boy to find *muteveli*. The boy came back soon followed by a tall, slim, and modestly dressed man.

Muteveli soon opened the door to this *turbe*. I was amazed when I saw two graves inside, one with typical green cloth covered with gifted clothes and money, and the other without any covers, but, so beautifully made, as if an important person lies here as well. Djedovi? asked the *muteveli* to explain the history of these two graves in a common *turbe*. *Muteveli* talked in a calm and peaceful manner about these two graves, one belonging to Sheikh Dede and the other one to his friend and blood brother, a Christian, whose name has been forgotten in the distant past. He told us one of several legends related to this old *turbe* and Sheikh Dede from ?ekani?i.

When Sheikh Dede felt he was about to die, he sent a message to his friend, and his blood brother, a Christian, mounted the horse right away and rode day and night just to arrive in time to see his friend while he was still alive. He was late. Sheikh Dede had already died and it was his funeral. When the people turned to the left angel, the Christian was alive, and when they turned to the right they noticed he was lying dead on the ground. So they buried both together, Sheikh Dede from ?ekani?i and his Christian blood brother.

In this old and culture rich village there are many legends about Sheikh Dede. They say he was *evliya* or “the good one.” Such people have the ability to be at the same time in two different places. Thus, according to one legend, when Sheikh Dede cut the grass on his land at ?ekani?i, at the same time he participated, in interpreting stories, at the famous battle under Banja Luka, which took place in 1737.

?ekani?i obviously has a very old culture and tradition, which is reflected not only in many stories about: Sheikh Dede, his Christian blood brother, *turbe* and two graves, the man who was evil and fell from the minaret when he finished building it, but in many toponyms which point to religions (pre-Christian and heretic-bogumil). Such an example is a toponym *Kapak*, next to the old cemetery in ?ekani?i, which is very common in this part of Bosnia and preserves the tradition of an ancient cultural site. The name ?ekani?i can also be linked to the Medieval surname ?ekanovi?. The Bosnian medieval feudal family named ?ekanovi?, appears in the old charters of the Bosnian state. And according to the general tradition in ?ekani?i and its surroundings, the Djedovi? family is the oldest family in this settlement and is also related to the famous Sheikh Dede.

Translated by Bojana Vukovi?

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Note: Thomas Butler had a PhD in South Slavic languages and for some fifty years he has been visiting and exploring linguistics, literary history and folk-oral tradition of southern Slavic countries in the Balkans. For the past five years, as retired professor at the Harvard University, he regularly visited and explored the areas of north-eastern Bosnia, especially Gra?anica and Srebrenik. We sadly share that he passed away in January 2014.

Notes

1. My trips to the area around Gra?anica, Srebrenik, and beyond, I conducted with prof. Rusmiro Djedovi?, an expert of the past of the mentioned regions. ?
2. It is about the former house of Begefendi?, the branch of Gradaš?evi?, and now Suljagi?. ?

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