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## NEO-TRADITIONALIST CONSTRUCTIONS OF NATION AND MASCULINITY: THE RULE OF PATRILINEAGE

**ABSTRACT** This article examines how reproduction, masculinity and nationhood intersect within the neo-traditionalist narratives and conceptions of the nation in Serbia. It is argued that within the neo-traditionalist narratives patrilineage serves as an organizing principle of the nation-state, designating masculinity as the carrier of the national. Thus, the rule of patrilineage is supposed to salvage the threatened way of life of the nation and the men alike. The focus of the article is a failed attempt in international matchmaking launched by the social organization *Seoski prag* (*Village Hearth*) in the late 1990s. This organization and its unusual project of marrying Serbian middle aged rural bachelors to foreign women tell a story of the national fall and renewal. On the one hand, it is a story about demographic fall of the nation and its threatened biological survival; on the other hand, it is the story of the rural family renewal, restoration of the patriarchal order and traditional masculinity as prerequisites for the renewal of rural Serbia and of the nation. While rural Serbia is designated as the hearth of the nation within this type of neotraditionalist discourses, the whole matchmaking project was actually founded against a backdrop of urban-rural hierarchy. As a result, it is argued here, instead of restoring rural masculinity the matchmaking project contributed to its subordination and marginalization vis-à-vis hegemonic masculinity.

**Key words:** gender, nation, patrilineage, neo-traditionalism, hegemonic masculinity, rural masculinity

On a cold February morning in 1997, a dusty white mini-bus arrived to a picturesque mountainous village in western Serbia. Eight visibly tired women who came out of the bus were greeted by a small number of elderly villagers, representatives of the local and national media and by representatives of the social organization *Seoski prag* (*Village Hearth*). As everyone gathered

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in a spacious former pub [*kafana*], temporarily reopened for this occasion, breakfast was served. It consisted of traditional homemade offerings brought in by villagers: various dairy products, pastries, smoked meat, tea, coffee and fruit brandy. In no time, a cordial and festive atmosphere was created while an ancient wood furnace heated the room managing only to take the edge off of the freezing cold.

Lidija<sup>2</sup>, who accompanied the group on behalf of the Association of Ukrainian-Serbian Friendship, was busy. Being a professor of Serbo-Croatian, she was the only person present on this occasion who could facilitate communication between the guests and the welcoming crowd. Thus she was translating everything - from welcoming speeches given by the representatives of the organization *Village Hearth*, to journalists' questions, to introductions between guests and the locals. Missing on the occasion, however, were middle-aged bachelors, purportedly the main reason of this visit.

Out of 48 unmarried middle-aged men who at the time lived in the village, not a single one came to greet the visitors. Why they did not show up, what were the motives of the organizers of this failed attempt in international matchmaking, what were the expectations and attitudes of various social agents - those directly involved and those at the margin of the event? Answers to these questions weave a story which serves as a backdrop against which this article examines how reproduction, masculinity and nationhood intersected within the neo-traditionalist narratives and conceptions of the nation in Serbia in the 1990s. The story of marrying rural men to foreign women was part of neo-traditionalist narratives on the national fall and renewal (see Naumović 2009). This story tells about demographic fall of the nation, about its biological survival, threatened by the lack of births. Low fertility here symbolizes 'unnatural' gender relations and the lack of masculine power. Thus the national fall is considered a consequence of alleged masculinity crisis. Consequently, the renewal of the nation presupposes a return to 'natural' gender relations while the rural family is seen as the most 'natural' place for that process to begin.

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2 The name is a pseudonym given by the author.

The first part of the article situates the organization *Village Hearth* and its matchmaking project within the broader discourses of 'population decline' and threatened biological survival of the nation. It is argued that there was a widespread perception that Serbian women were the main culprits for such a state of the nation and thus they became the main target of various discourses and projects aimed at stimulating birth rates. What makes the *Village Hearth's* project unusual and interesting is its attention to men.

The second section discusses the symbolic place of the rural in the national. It is argued that the *Village Hearth* reproduced discourses about rural Serbia as the hearth of the nation and as the place where the national renewal should begin. The renewal of rural family, restoration of the patriarchal order and traditional masculinity were considered prerequisites of the renewal of rural Serbia and of the nation.

The following section examines how the rule of patrilineage was supposed to salvage the threatened way of life of the nation and the men alike. Relying on Campbell and Bell (2000), this section discusses the ambiguous role of rural within the hegemonic masculinity. It is also argued that the neo-traditionalist assumption of reproducing the nation rested upon the mutual constitution of masculinity and rurality and their naturalized association. The rule of patrilineage designated masculinity as the carrier of the national. Thus, it is argued, the idea of saving Serbian rural family life by women from Ukraine was a logical consequence of rules of patrilineage, according to which only *Serbian men* could sire *Serbian children*.

In the final section, the article discusses the process of marginalization of rural bachelors' masculinity through the failed matchmaking project. Through the project, their masculinity was constructed as subordinate vis-à-vis hegemonic masculinity, masculinity of married rural men and vis-à-vis femininity of mostly urban Ukrainian women who visited the village.

The article concludes that while the idea to replace Serbian women by foreign women made perfect sense within the urban-born neo-traditionalist conceptions of the nation, the resulting matchmaking project designed to marry

middle-aged bachelors was destined to fail because it was based on urban-rural hierarchy and had very little to do with the living realities of those involved in it.

The article is based on discourse analysis of media reports about activities of the social organization *Village Hearth*, discourse analysis of the documents issued by this organization, and on participant observation of a week-long visit of eight women from Ukraine to a Serbian village that was organized by the social organization *Village Hearth* in an attempt to find potential marriage partners for middle-aged rural bachelors in Serbia.

## THE VACANT NATION

Biological reproduction plays a key role in the (re)production of ethnic and other social groups. Anthropologists have stressed the central role of kinship as an ideological concept that organizes social relations within groups and through the control of reproduction regulates ethnic boundaries. These organizing structures of kinship are important not only for families and lineages, but also for political entities (for example, the state), and for the construction of femininities and masculinities (McClintok 1993).

This article argues that within the neo-traditionalist narratives patrilineage served as an organizing principle of the nation-state in Serbia in the 1990s, and discusses the production of marginalized rural masculinity against this background. The focus of the article is a failed attempt in international matchmaking launched by the social organization *Village Hearth*. Even though this organization started a matchmaking project, it was not a typical international match-making agency. To begin with, *Village Hearth* was a non-profit organization, and secondly, unlike the for-profit agencies in the West which respond to a market demand, so to speak, catering to different needs of classes of individual women in the East and men in the West, *Village Hearth* was catering to what its leadership perceived to be the needs of the Serbian nation (Drezgić 2002). They believed that Serbian nation was in a desperate need for renewal, which was a common trope within the neo-traditionalist narratives (see Naumović 2009, 157-178) and were convinced that national renewal begins with the rural family renewal.

During the 1990s there was a widespread perception in Serbia that the nation and its very biological survival were threatened by the ‘population decline’. This perception – produced by political, religious and expert discourses – prompted an outpour of grass-roots and local initiatives designed to stimulate births and improve child care in Serbia. Grass-roots agents and local level initiatives, from concerned individuals to NGOs, and local governments, created discourses and, to a lesser degree, practices targeting primarily Serbian women in an attempt to increase the number of Serbian babies (see Drezgić 2004).

The *Village Hearth* stood out with an apparently paradoxical strategy: it circumvented Serbian women as a target group for intervention and turned its attention to Serbian men. Not just any men, though – this organization was primarily concerned with rural men. Ignored by rural women as potential marriage partners, rural men, it was argued, were deprived of the possibility to reproduce. The Program of the organization states:

“[In rural areas] there are many men aged between 20 and 40 who have no perspective of marrying and forming a family because there are almost no girls around them. The girls leave for the city in search of a nicer and easier life” (Seoski prag 1996).

This representation of Serbian rural men as victims of Serbian rural women’s actions echoed the discourses created by experts, politicians and religious leaders, which represented Serbian women, and their reproductive behavior, as the inimical to the nation.<sup>3</sup> Here, rural women who were leaving villages were added to the list. The leadership of the organization came up with the idea to find a replacement and fill in the void created by outmigration of rural women.

## NATION AS RURAL FAMILY

The organization *Village Hearth* was founded in the town of Užice in western Serbia, in the Fall of 1996. Its name, *Village Hearth* (*Seoski prag*), evokes ideals of family and belonging. Thus, the very name of the organization carries multiple

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3 More on this in Drezgić 2010.

symbolisms: on the one hand, the village replaces the home and as an idealized community becomes an extended family. On the other hand, organization's focus on *Serbian* villages extrapolates the family and the community into the nation and designates *rural* Serbia – and not any other – as the hearth of the nation.

This multiple symbolism is evident in the organization's written documents. For example, in a letter issued in 1998, to solicit donations and public support, it was stated that

*[we] can halt the dying of Serbia only if we build young families, tie people to villages and create conditions for those who have a difficult life in the cities to return to the hearth of their ancestors.*

This statement simultaneously defines the organization's aims and creates a romantic image of the true Serbianhood as *rural* and *family* life. "The overall prosperity of Serbia – states the letter further – depend[s] on the survival and progress of the rural family" (Seoski prag 1996). It is worth noting that the family assumed here is the classical heteronormative, reproductive unit with a married couple. It is not a family of a single parent such as a divorced woman, or a woman with a child born outside of 'wedlock'.

The leadership of the organization invested most of their time, energy and resources in the project of Serbian-Ukrainian marriages. Still, they rarely failed to depict these activities as anything but a segment in a much broader and complex plan for the revitalization of rural Serbia.

However, the marriage and the starting of the family, and the revitalization of the Serbian village(s), were actually two inter-related discourses that weaved a narrative of an endangered, falling nation: a nation represented by the (broken) ideals of the rural life and Serbian men and women who, each in their own way, did not live up to their expected gender roles, and national duties. This was the nation in a desperate need of renewal, hence the rural Serbia was represented as the hearth of the nation, that is where the renewal was supposed to begin. The precondition for the rural renewal was the renewal of rural family and the restoration of the patriarchal order and traditional masculinity which implied, among other things, reproducibility and continuation of the family line.

Apparently, *Village Hearth* espoused a neo-traditionalist concept of the nation, within which rural areas are constructed as spaces of “health, normal gender relations and naturally high fertility” (Horn 1994). Thus revitalization of rural family was considered a precondition for revitalization of the Serbian nation. But this family was dying out because „women are leaving villages for a better and easier life in the city“ (Seoski prag 1996). Women were thus considered responsible for creating unnatural conditions in this natural rural environment. Moreover, they deprived, it was argued, rural men of the possibility to reproduce at a time when reproduction was considered a national/patriotic duty.

## RURAL MASCULINITY AND THE RULES OF PATRILINEAGE

This story of marrying off middle-aged rural bachelors, as a precondition for ‘revitalizing’ the village and the nation, is an example not only of the ambiguous place of rural within the national but also of the complex relationship between rural and hegemonic masculinity - which is inherent to most nationalist projects.

According to Campbell and Bell (2000), “masculine rural” refers to masculine identities of rural men, while “rural masculine” signifies rural aspects of the dominant (hegemonic) concept of masculine identity in a specific society (Campbell and Bell 2000, 532).

They argue that rural “images and realities of the lives of rural men play central roles in the social construction of masculinities of all sorts, as well as in the gendered construction of rural life” (ibid., 540). Rural images are often used in images of “real men”: a logger cutting a tree, the Marlboro cowboy cantering over the plains, the hairy warrior, the soldier defending the fields of the motherland... At the same time, this specific type of masculinity becomes the symbol of the rurality. Especially important in all these images is how the “association with the rurality brings an air of the natural to masculinity legitimizing it as allegedly in touch with truths that are deeper than the merely social” (ibid.). Thus, rural “images and realities of the lives of rural men play central roles in the social construction of masculinities of all sorts, as well as in the gendered construction of rural life” (ibid.).

The mutual constitution of masculinity and rurality and their naturalized association are the grounds upon which rests the assumption of reproducing the nation. In other words, as much as the rural is extended into the national, masculinity is the carrier of the national. In the discourses created by *Village Hearth* the nation was constructed through the classical assumptions about territory and blood. But clearly, not just any blood.

Serbian blood could be reproduced primarily through the male blood line; thus only *Serbian men* can sire *Serbian children*. Since the nation in such discourses is represented by metaphors of family (see McClintok 1993; Verdery 1998), that family is a patrilineage and as in a true patrilineage, women are, and can be, brought in from outside, i.e. from other patrilineages. Even though belonging to the family is determined exclusively through birth, the role of the mother in this matter is rendered insignificant by the dominant kinship ideology. Thus, the apparent paradox of saving Serbian rural family life by women from Ukraine is not a paradox after all: it is a logical consequence of an assumption about patrilineage.

Since marriages serve to establish alliances between patrilineages (see Denich 1974; Erlich 1966), it is far from insignificant where the wife comes from. The marriages between foreign women and Serbian men were supposed to establish alliance between Serbia and another state-cum-patrilineage creating kinship ties between men and organizing them into networks for exchanging favors and obligations (Drezgić 2002). Given that both ethnicity and faith were constitutive of nationhood, men of Slavic ethnic stock and Orthodox background were considered the most 'natural' allies.

Thus, for the *Village Hearth* representatives Russia was their first choice. In addition to being predominantly Slavic and Orthodox, Russia was also a military power and a major player on the international political scene. The latter feature made Russia a perfect and desirable 'kin-state' at the time when Serbia's international standing and reputation was very low due to its role in wars through which Yugoslavia disintegrated.

However, *Village Hearth* could not find support for its matchmaking project in Russia, and Ukraine turned out to be the second best choice: also a Slavic country and, while religiously more diverse than Russia, still predominantly Orthodox. Whereas no organization in Russia expressed an interest to take part in *Village Heart's* matchmaking project, the Association of Ukrainian-Serbian Friendship offered its assistance in Ukraine.

The *Village Hearth's* perception of the Serbian nation was that of patriarchal, *zadruga* type family. This type of family produces gender images according to which women are inherently polluting and represent a constant threat for the group's cohesion. Ukrainian women in this context had an advantage. While inherently dangerous and polluting, unlike Serbian women they had not been corrupted by "too much modernization".<sup>4</sup> In addition, as their nationality was irrelevant, their main task was to secure married and reproductive status of Serbian men and thus restore the patriarchal order. Ukrainian women might have presented a lesser threat for the patriarchal order because they were – apparently – willing to marry Serbian men, while Serbian women were not. Better yet, they were able to restore the patriarchal order through their perceived inferior and hence submissive status within an orientalised hierarchy of nations on the west-east and north-south axes.

The structures of gender relations and specific notions of masculinity and femininity are firmly embedded in the notions and ideals of the nation. In the case of failed marriage arrangement of Serbian men and Ukrainian women, the national and gender identities met in a specific way: the rule of patrilineage was supposed to salvage the threatened way of life of the nation and the men alike.

## SUBORDINATED RURAL MASCULINITIES

The neo-traditionalist conceptions which imagine the nation as a rural family, represent rural men as physically strong and superior but simple-minded and deficient in intellectual capacities when compared with their urban compatriots:

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4 Within the discourses on 'population decline', the socialist project of women's emancipation, i.e. the allged over-modernization of Serbian women was often blamed for low birth rates. More on this in Drezgić 2004.

“Farm work affords the farmer with his exceptional physical characteristics, his robust, muscular body. But farm work is also responsible for his lack of skills that require a finer adjustment of the muscles. Because his physical work dominates his life, farmer does not use his full intellectual potential and for that reason he represents more of a muscular than of a brain type... The countryside has primarily material-reproductive function because it produces food for the national community... It also regenerates society culturally and morally...” (Vojnović 1995, 114).<sup>5</sup>

This kind of marginalization of rural masculinity was implicit to discourses created by the organization *Village Hearth*. The whole matchmaking project was actually founded against this backdrop of urban-rural hierarchy. Its creators, while prizing the “purity” of rural life and its potential for rejuvenating the nation and its essence, were at the same time denying agency to the rural population – including the rural men who otherwise, in nationalist discourses stand as pillars of protection and provision for the family. For the creators of the marriage project, only the city had the potential for creating and leading progress, while the village was assigned “material-reproductive function”. Since middle-aged rural bachelors were deprived of the possibility to reproduce and continue the family line, they could not fulfill this function, and their (rural) masculinity was at stake. The *Village Hearth’s* matchmaking project was meant to restore that masculinity. It, however, only contributed to its further subordination and marginalization.

Masculinity of village bachelors was actually challenged every step of the way during the visit of women from Ukraine. To begin with, they were ridiculed in the Serbian national press for not showing up at the welcoming ceremony. This prompted some unbecoming titles in the Serbian press implying their skittishness as a reason: “Ukrainian [Women] Have Arrived, Bachelors not to be Seen” (*Blic*, February 11, front page); “Brides have arrived, Bachelors not to be Seen” (*Blic*, February 11, pp. 9); “The Prospective Brides from Ukraine Have Arrived, Serbian Guys Not to be Seen” (*Dnevni Telegraph*, February 11, 1998, 10).

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5 Within the discourses on ‘population decline’, the socialist project of women’s emancipation, i.e. over-modernization of Serbian women was often blamed for low birth rates. More on this in Drezgić 2004.

At the local level, many villagers believed that the majority of the 48 middle-aged bachelors in the village was not suitable marital partners for anyone any more, being long past their prime and deeply engrained in their bachelor habits. Drinking was often mentioned among those.

The description that villagers gave resembled those found in Lévi-Strauss's descriptions of bachelors in a central Brazilian village – one of his deepest impressions was of a man who looked pathetic and unkempt, almost excluded from the community, only because he was not married (Lévi-Strauss 1967, 46).<sup>6</sup>

“I don't know, child, but the girls are too nice [fine] for those lads of ours”, replied an elderly woman when I asked for her opinion regarding the matchmaking attempt.<sup>7</sup>

“I would not give my sister in marriage to any of them”, said a young man in his mid -twenties and added:

“This arrival of potential brides opens up a conflict between the older, unmarried lads and young men of my generation. The old guys are afraid that we, young guys, will pick up all the girls”.

This in a way, turned out to be true at the party that was organized in the village on the second day after the arrival of the Ukrainians. The aim of the organizer was to provide an opportunity for local, unmarried middle-aged men and Ukrainian women to meet and socialize.

The party was attended by the Ukrainians, young and middle-aged single men from the village, elderly men and women, mostly those who hosted the Ukrainians, a few elderly relatives of the middle-aged bachelors and the organizers. Bachelors themselves, however, were either too shy and/or uninterested to attend.

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6 Cited according to Papić 1997, 269 n. 7.

7 Two women from Ukraine stayed in her house and she accompanied them at the party organized by *Village Hearth*. I talked with her at the party.

The evening started off in a rather uncomfortable atmosphere with little or no communication between the locals and the guests.

For the generation of the middle-aged bachelors the *kafana* is a space where they primarily communicate with other men, and in various ways assert their masculinity vis-à-vis one another. This includes heavy drinking and bragging about (hetero)sexual advances (Simić 1969). Thus, at the party, the middle-aged bachelors stuck together. When someone put on the tape with Serbian folk music, they got up to dance and formed an all-male circle dance, *kolo*.

This is when the Ukrainian women broke the homosocial male circle by joining them. And this was only the beginning of the appropriation of space by the Ukrainian women. When the *kolo* ended they scattered throughout the *kafana*, starting conversations and initiating contacts. Thus, in more ways than one, the Ukrainian women breached local rules of etiquette and gender norms. Prohibition of women taking initiative in heterosexual contacts was certainly one of them. After all, women were brought in, in order to salvage rural men's masculinity – already perceived as threatened by the 'abandonment' of Serbian women. Ukrainian women threatened them in an opposite way – by taking away male privilege in initiating the contact and choosing women. Ukrainian women decided to be those who choose.

The role reversal, however, was not the only unintended outcome of Ukrainian women's visit. Many things turned upside down from what had been intended by the organizers. For example, most of the men who contacted the organization looking for a wife from Ukraine appeared to have been older, divorced or widowed men – not interested in having more children. Similarly, the majority of about 200 women who allegedly contacted the *Village Hearth*, expressing interest to marry in Serbia, were urban women, married, with at least one child (again probably not interested in having more). The local middle-aged bachelors proved to be rather passive and appeared uninterested. The younger men, on the other hand, who neither were the primary target of the project nor interested in marrying, proved more active and outgoing at the social functions organized by *Village Hearth*. The middle-aged men whose

masculinity was already at stake were overpowered by the actions of both younger men, and the Ukrainian women.

It was no wonder then that the all-male leadership of *Village Hearth* wanted to distance itself from the marriage project at the end of the visit. They did not want to be a party to effeminizing men whose masculinity, measured by marriageability and/or reproducibility and initiative in social and sexual encounters, they had set out to restore.

## CONCLUSION

The matchmaking project launched by *Village Hearth* was unique with its idea that Serbian women could simply be replaced. In that respect, their neo-traditionalist concept of the nation was inclusive of „other” women due to the reduced concepts of womanhood – women being regarded as mere vessels for biological reproduction. As a consequence, mother’s nationality is rendered irrelevant since only man can transfer national prerogatives to the offspring. Thus the seemingly paradoxical matchmaking project was not paradoxical at all; it was founded on the rules of patrilineage and made perfect sense within the neo-traditionalist narratives. At the same time, being based on urban-rural hierarchy, it was destined to fail. Its organizers designed the project applying ideas about rurality, gender and nation that had little connection to lived realities of both the bachelors (and other villagers), and the women from Ukraine.

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## Neotradicionalističke konstrukcije nacije i maskuliniteta: obrazac patrilinearnosti

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**Sažetak:** Tekst ispituje kako se u okviru neotradicionalističkih narativa i diskursa u Srbiji prepliću kategorije rađanja, muškosti (*masculinity*) i nacionalnosti (*nationhood*). U okviru ovih narativa, kako ističe autorka, nacionalna država se temelji na patrilinearnim principima, što znači da su muškarci nosioci nacionalnosti. Poštovanje patrilinearnih pravila je, stoga, preduslov za obnovu trenutno ugroženog načina života kako nacije tako i muškaraca. U središtu pažnje ovog teksta nalazi se neuspeo pokušaj međunarodnog bračnog posredovanja koji je krajem devedesetih godina prošlog veka započela društvena organizacija *Seoski prag*. Ova organizacija i njen neobični projekat ženidbe sredovečnih seoskih momaka strankinjama, posmatra se kao primer neotradicionalističke priče o nacionalnom padu i obnovi. To je s jedne strane bila priča o demografskom padu nacije i njenom ugroženom biološkom opstanku; a s druge strane priča o potrebi revitalizacije seoske porodice i obnavljanja patrijarhalnog poretka i tradicionalne koncepcije muškosti koji se smatraju preduslovima za obnovu i ruralne Srbije i nacije. Autorka primećuje da u okviru ovog tipa neotradicionalističkih diskursa ruralna Srbija i ruralna muškost imaju ambivalentan status. Tako za *Seoski prag* ruralna Srbija predstavlja biće nacije, ali je istovremeno čitav projekat revitalizacije sela i ženidbe sredovečnih seoskih neženja, zapravo, počivao na hijerarhijskom odnosu u kome urbano ima superioran status a ruralna muškost marginalizovan položaj u odnosu na hegemonističku muškost.

**Ključne reči:** nacija, rod, muškost, neotradicionalizam, princip patrilinearnosti, ruralna muškost, hegemonistička muškost