



ISSN: 1309 4173 (Online) 1309 - 4688 (Print)

Volume 5 Issue 4, Special Issue on Lausanne, p. 139-149, July 2013

## “Quite a Minor Killing”: A Crime at a Franciscan Monastery in Bosnia

“Oldukça Önemsiz Bir Cinayet”: Bosna'daki bir Fransisken Manastırı'nda İşlenen bir Suç

Prof. Ekrem Čaušević, Ph.D.

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb

Aleksandar Vukić, Ph.D.

Institute for Migration and Ethnic Studies, Zagreb

**Abstract:** In 1855, outside the Franciscan Monastery at Plehan, near Dervanta, in North Bosnia, a Muslim man was murdered and his corpse burned. Several friars and local villagers were accused of the murder and imprisoned by the Ottoman Bosnian authorities. On the basis of letters written by the Franciscans who were directly or indirectly involved in the incident, and some additional sources, the authors of this paper approach the case with the aim of understanding the way in which the members of a community, in this instance the local Franciscan community, developed and applied specific thought styles, how they differentiated themselves from their Others (Muslims and Orthodox Christians), and how they consequently interpreted the conflict situation which led to the murder, persistently absolving themselves of any guilt.

**Keywords:** Bosnia, Franciscans, Ottoman Empire, Interconfessional violence

**Öz:** 1855 yılında, Kuzey Bosna'da Derventa şehrine yakın Plehan Fransisken Manastırı civarında, bir Müslüman öldürüldü ve cesedi yakıldı. Bu cinayeti işlemekle suçlanan üç rahip ve dört Katolik köylü, Osmanlı Bosna makamları tarafından yakalandıktan bir yıl sonra adam öldürme suçundan hapis cezasına çarptırıldı. Bu makalenin başlıca amacı, adigeçen olayı incelemek, perde arkası edilen gerçekleri gün ışığına çıkarıp yorumlamak ve cinayetin arka plânını aydınlatmaktır. Makalede doğrudan veya dolaylı olarak cinayet olayına dahil olan Fransisken papazları tarafından bu olayla ilgili yazılmış mektuplar ve bazı ek kaynaklar taranarak yerel Fransisken papazların ve Bosna Katolik topluluğunun cinayet olayına yaklaşımı, farklı dini, kültürel ve medeni sebeplerden dolayı “Öteki” sayılan Müslüman ve Ortodoks Hristiyan topluluklarına nasıl baktıkları, işlenen cinayeti nasıl yorumladıkları, onu bazı geçersiz gerekçelerle ilişkilendirme gayretleri, kendilerini aklamak için ne gibi argümanlar ileri sürdükleri ve nasıl bir “düşünce tarzı” geliştirdikleri gibi konular incelenmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Bosna, Fransisken papazları, Osmanlı Devleti, dinlerarası çatışmalar

### **1-Introduction and Theoretic Framework for the Interpretation of the "Plehan Incident"**

The subject of this paper is "quite a minor killing" that took place in 1855 in Ottoman Bosnia, at a small place called Plehan, not far from Derventa.<sup>1</sup> On the property of the Franciscan monastery at Plehan, a local Muslim who had wanted to violently prevent the construction of a church there, was killed. The description of this event reached us as a virtual "message in a bottle", through the letters of the Franciscans. These letters obviously described the case from only one point of view, while mostly second-hand sources gave us insight about the attitudes of the participants on the other side, as well as of those who were involved later. The "Plehan Incident" is somewhat similar to an event that took place in Morocco during the first years of the French colonial administration. This was a conflict between a Jewish trader named Cohen and Berber tribes which was resolved according to then valid common laws, but finally via the arbitration of the newly established French authorities. It likewise concerned a killing, but also an entanglement that was so unusual that it merited to be conveyed to the anthropologist Clifford Geertz more than half a century later. Based on this case, Geertz developed his interpretative method, which had a strong influence on the development of new cultural history. He demonstrated that the science of history does not primarily deal with objective facts, but rather with "interpretations of facts, and the interpretation of these interpretations".<sup>2</sup>

In contrast to Geertz, who, due to the complete lack of written testimonies by the parties and eyewitnesses involved, interpreted a story that until his time had been transmitted orally, the authors of this paper had at their disposal sources written by the Franciscan friars who were directly or indirectly involved in the case. From this correspondence – i.e., from that which was said, but also from that which was not mentioned – one can determine their interpretations of this case, as well as the inconsistencies in their story and manipulations which they used so as to diminish the guilt of the perpetrators. "Peeling away" the layers of interpretation brought us closer to the core of the event, although we are aware of the fact that it is difficult to ascertain the full truth about why and how the killing in Plehan occurred. That which in positivist-oriented social sciences is called data, are actually, as Geertz succinctly formulated, "our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to."<sup>3</sup> Therefore our analysis will be directed towards the interpretation of structures of meanings that were constructed around the core of the event and towards connecting these structures to their social and symbolic basis. That which was stated in letters in order to provide information, that which was stated in order to hide something, that which was written without an understanding of the consequences of the claims made, and the criticism of all those who gave different interpretations of the case, enables us, from the perspective of later observers who sometimes know more about an event than contemporaries did, to reconstruct the particular *thought style* of members of the Franciscan community in Bosnia in the mid-nineteenth century. Our interpretation of the Franciscan letters concerning the "Plehan Incident" was made based on the theories of Clifford Geertz and Mary Douglas, and on "solid facts" pertaining to the political and social history of Ottoman Bosnia. From

---

<sup>1</sup> We would like to express our gratitude to Tatjana Paić-Vukić, who during our work on this paper provided us with stimulating ideas and useful suggestions.

<sup>2</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

<sup>3</sup> Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 17.

Geertz we adopted the method of thick description, which begins its analysis with the everyday experience of the members of a society, in an attempt to preserve, as much as possible, the integrity of the observed phenomena and achieve a deep understanding of the specific situation. Geertz's interpretation of culture proceeds from the conception that people are entangled in networks of meanings, which they themselves construct, and that the social sciences, as interpretative sciences, seek out these meanings. Furthermore, a theory of Mary Douglas is also relevant for our analysis. It is her theory on communities-institutions which, instead of individuals, perform many vital cognitive functions: classification, decision-making, direction, and the development of thought styles, the latter being the most important to us.<sup>4</sup> The concept of thought styles, which Mary Douglas developed under the direct influence of Durkheim and Fleck, pertains to the cognitive processes of individuals, which are directly dependent on the social stores of knowledge of the thought communities to which the individuals belong. Douglas called the dialectic link between a community and a thought style an *institution*. The basic characteristic of a thought style is that it is hidden to the members of the thought community and precisely for this reason acts upon individuals as an absolute force.<sup>5</sup>

## 2. The Plehan Incident

In early December 1855 the long-term anxiety and discontent of Muslims in Derventa, due to the start of construction on a church next to the Franciscan monastery situated on nearby Plehan hill, culminated in direct violence. A group of Muslims from Derventa took advantage of the absence of the district warden and planned an attack on the monastery. To carry out this task, it seems that the most appropriate person was the "dervish", Mula Sali [Salih] Hasanija, who before leaving for Plehan, said that either he would kill them, or they would kill him, and that, if he died, he should be buried at the location so that – according to Sharia rules – they would not be able to build a church there. With shouts and threats, Hasanija tried to remove the wooden cross. The Franciscan officiants Nikola Šokčević and Luka Kovačević supposedly tried to calm him down and turn him away, but since they did not succeed, one of them, probably Kovačević, shot and seriously wounded Hasanija. The Franciscan version of the story further states that the Christian villagers Mijat and Ivan Andrijanić, Antun Mijatović, and Ivan Bečina jumped in to help by finishing off the wounded dervish, and burning his body in order to cover up the evidence. Nonetheless, the killing was discovered, and all six ended up in jail in Derventa. After more than a month, they were transferred to the prison in Sarajevo, where they were also joined by the Franciscan friar Jako Džoić. It was said that Džoić had not been directly involved in the incident, but that upon the urging of his superiors in the Franciscan order, he had gone to Sarajevo to give a statement. Later, however, it would become clear that the authorities had charged him for encouraging the violation of the victim's corpse. He was the only one among all the accused who died during the trial proceedings.

The investigation and trial in Sarajevo lasted about a year. The Franciscans collected funds and paid an indemnity to the widow of the murdered man, yet the accused were nevertheless transferred to a prison in Istanbul. It seems that the efforts of Josip Juraj Strossmayer, the bishop of Đakovo, Bosnia and Syrmia, to whom the Franciscans turned for

<sup>4</sup> Mary Douglas, *How Institutions Think* (Syracuse: University Press, 1986).

<sup>5</sup> Douglas, *How Institutions Think*, 23-24.

help, bore fruit only afterwards. Under the pressure of the Habsburg minister of foreign affairs, Count Boulu-Schauenstein, and Ambassador Prokesch-Osten, both interned friars were set free.<sup>6</sup> Several months later, Nikola Šokčević wrote to his friend Andrija Torkvat Brlić from Rome, and as for Luka Kovačević, it is known that he died in Dubrovnik in 1859, so we can assume that he was released from prison together with Šokčević. Two of the four villagers, Mijat Andrijanić and Antun Mijatović, died in the Istanbul prison, although it is not known when. The fate of the other two men is not mentioned in the sources available to us. Because of the murder in Plehan, the construction of the church did not begin until fifty years later.<sup>7</sup>

### 3. Bosnia and Herzegovina in the Mid-Nineteenth Century

A review of the conditions in Bosnia and Herzegovina at the time of the Plehan killing provides the broadest interpretative framework from which we approach the incident.<sup>8</sup> In the first half of the nineteenth century, the backward and feudally organised Ottoman Empire attempted to overcome its crisis via legislative, administrative, and fiscal reforms, as well as through modernisation efforts modelled after the example of European countries. The Imperial Rescript issued at Gülhane in 1839 guaranteed to all subjects, regardless of their religious affiliations, personal safety, security of property, and equality before the law. These reforms encountered resistance among Bosnian Muslims, since they annulled some of their privileges, especially their superior status based on adherence to the Islamic faith. Muslim opponents considered that the provisions on equality were contrary to Sharia principles. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Muslim elite experienced these changes as a betrayal by the Porte, and thus armed uprisings erupted several times in the province. The 1850 rebellion was quelled by Omer Pasha Latas, who established a new administration and new bodies of authority, although not a permanent peace.

As the crisis deepened, the major powers, especially Russia and the Habsburg Monarchy, increasingly meddled in the internal affairs of the Ottoman Empire, hiding their political aims under the guise of concern for the religious and human rights of Christians in the Balkans. French, Austrian, Russian, English, Prussian and Italian consulates were set up in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Bosnian Franciscans vigilantly monitored events in Croatia, but also in Serbia, hoping that a "general insurrection" against the Ottomans would flare up in Bosnia and Herzegovina as well. The ideas of the Croatian national revival had a strong influence on them and aroused their hopes of being liberated from under the "Turkish yoke".<sup>9</sup> Relations between Muslims and non-Muslims would become additionally conflictive whenever Muslims evaluated that they were being threatened by danger from "infidel"

---

<sup>6</sup> Mirko Cepelić, *Josip Juraj Strossmayer – Biskup Bosansko-đakovački i Srijemski* (Zagreb: Dionička tiskara, 1904), 732.

<sup>7</sup> Andrija Zirdum, Marko Karamatić & Vjeko-Božo Jarak, *Plehan* (Plehan: Slovoznak, 1987), 32.

<sup>8</sup>For detailed analysis of social, political and economic circumstances in the then Bosnia and Herzegovina see: Galib Šljivo, *Omer-paša Latas u Bosni i Hercegovini 1850–1852* (Sarajevo: Svjetlost, 1977); Mark Mazower, *The Balkans: A Short History* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2000).

<sup>9</sup> For spreading of the ideas of the Croatian national revival movement see: Zoran Grijak & Zrinka Blažević, "Korespondencija fra Martin Nedić-Ljudevit Gaj 1839 – 1841. Prilog proučavanju odjeka ilirskog pokreta u Bosni i Hercegovini," *Prilozi 41* (2012): 21-58.

countries (primarily Austria and Russia), or with every new wave of Muslim refugees that received refuge in Bosnia after the Serbs expelled them from territories that they had occupied.

The great discontent and occasional violence of part of the Muslim population towards Christians, was provoked also by reform provisions that permitted Christians to repair old churches and build new ones. The 1850s were marked by a building drive, especially among Bosnian Catholics, who constructed new churches and elementary schools. The degree to which Bosnian Muslims were sensitive to every such novelty is also illustrated by events surrounding the finalisation of the building of the church in Sarajevo. The *Zagreb Catholic Newspaper* (*Zagrebački katolički list*) wrote on 10 May 1856<sup>10</sup> that a steeple is being built on that church, which is "a thorn in the eyes not only to Sarajevo [Turks], but generally to all Turks".<sup>11</sup> A similar situation, the announcement of the construction of a church on Plehan hill and long-term diplomatic preparations to obtain firmans and permission to do so, in a certain way "prepared the scene" for the killing that is the theme of this paper. The Porte requested that the vizier, Kamil Pasha, help in the implementation of this plan. In February 1853, the vizier sent the imperial surveyor Ešref Effendi to visit and examine the locations planned for the construction of the monastery. Before his arrival Martin Nedić bought the land for the monastery from a bey and informed the council of Derventa that construction would begin as soon as the firman arrived. At the same time, among some Muslims who were opponents of the reform, discontent increased due to the open displaying of crosses and the sound of church bells. This was proof for them that the central Ottoman government had betrayed the fundamental principles of Islam, and they were ready to undertake radical actions against Christian houses of worship.

As we have said, our interpretation is based on the correspondence of Franciscan friars from Bosnia and Herzegovina in the period between 1850 and 1870.<sup>12</sup> For our interpretation of the "Plehan incident", in an interpretative framework in which the Bosnian Franciscans are observed as a social institution, letters are especially important, since they enable us to "look behind the stage", so to speak, of that institution. Of course, in our examination of sources such as letters we have kept in mind that they do not in any way constitute a mirror of the thoughts and feelings of those who wrote them. Their contents often were the result of calculations in order to achieve certain goals. Being aware of the limited credibility of the letters as historical sources, in our interpretation we will attempt to maintain a critical stance towards them.

#### 4. Telling Stories of the "Plehan incident"

The only source from an eyewitness and participant in the "Plehan incident" is a letter from Luka Kovačević to the bishop/apostolic vicar in Mostar, Rafo (i.e., Rafael) Barišić, dated 16 October 1856. Almost a year after the killing, on the day that he learned that he was to be transferred together with the other detainees from the Sarajevo prison to Istanbul, he wrote to the bishop, asking for money for this long journey. In the letter he almost tersely reminded the

<sup>10</sup> Andrija Zirdum, *Pisma bosanskih franjevacu 1850–1870* (Plehan: Slovoznak, 1996), 29.

<sup>11</sup> "Turks" was a term to denote Balkan Muslims. This name did not have linguistic or ethnic connotations, but was primarily a religious definition. It applied to the population of the Muslim faith.

<sup>12</sup> Andrija Zirdum's book *Pisma bosanskih franjevacu 1850–1870* (Letters of the Bosnian Franciscans 1850–1879), presents 240 letters, which make up the greater part of the sources for this paper. In further references, we shall use the abbreviation *Zirdum*.

bishop of the Plehan incident on 5th November 1855, in which the "Turkish" conspirators launched an attack on the monastery. In continuation, he added that "...one man, during the assault on the house, named Mula Salih Sahaniić (sic!),<sup>13</sup> a dervish from Derventa and originally ("in olden days") from Sarajevo, died. The villagers, the neighbours from the area, ran to the site and, finding him dead, threw him on a fire and burnt [him] *ad occultandum* (in order to hide this)."<sup>14</sup>

Other letters contain interpretations from the Franciscan superiors. In them they attempt to present the case in a favourable light for the Order. They show that "a positive self-image", often excludes the possibility of self-critical reflections and moral doubts, even when a murder is the issue. Thus the provincial of *Bosna Argentina*, Martin Nedić, on 28th November 1855, informed bishop Strossmayer via Fra Filip Kunić about what he called the unfortunate incident in Plehan. Several days later, on 4 December, he sent Strossmayer a letter from which we can infer that the bishop had in the meantime already contacted the Austrian and Ottoman governments in connection with the incident.<sup>15</sup> In this letter, Nedić describes what happened in Plehan as follows: "The killed Turk was instigated by the Derventans to go to Plehan Monastery and kill if not all three, at least one priest, and if this same brigand would be killed, the said Turks promised — as people say — to erect a memorial to him and to honour his bones as a true martyr. Such a man, therefore, indoctrinated by fanaticism, could not be driven away from our house; he wanted, it appears, to fall at Plehan, sacrificing himself for his faith. Since, therefore, all the Turks are indoctrinated with similar fanaticism, it will be difficult for the administrator, even if he so wished, to protect our [people]. Everywhere, on the streets, in taverns, inimically-disposed Saracens are weaving stories and saying that the Franciscans killed a man who shared their views, [who was] just, devout, innocent, who wanted to remove Islamic blasphemy, i.e. crosses, from our chapel. And thus now we are threatened by great distress, and there are only a few Saracens who say: Hasania, *valah* [my God], that which he sought, he found. I would hit, *valah*, even the grand vizier if he wanted to kill me without any guilt on my side!"<sup>16</sup>

Fra Nedić further reported to Strossmayer that the accused, Sokčević and Kovačević, still had not arrived in Sarajevo, and that Jako Džoić, upon his urging, appeared before the vizier and explained to him what had happened in Plehan. No punishment was allotted to him, and he resided, under surveillance, in the home of a Christian in Sarajevo. Yet to Nedić, more important than the killing was that, because there were no officiant friars in the Derventa area, great confusion had occurred, since it was the wedding season, and there was nobody there to baptize children or conduct funerals. He reported that he had appointed as a substitute a certain Fra Martin to conduct these activities, but that without the vizier's letter, which, it seemed, would never arrive, it was not safe to go to Plehan.

In a second letter to Strossmayer, dated 26 February 1856, Nedić, for whom the "Plehan incident" was a difficult ordeal, attempted to place the event in a broader context. He stressed that this was a conspiracy on the part of "some evildoers among the Derventa Turks" who did not like the firman of the "Sublime Sultan" which permitted the building of the church in Plehan.<sup>17</sup> These people provoked and persuaded the fanatic and malicious person, Salih

<sup>13</sup> Kovačević probably by error wrote Sahaniić instead of Hasanić.

<sup>14</sup> Zirdum, 120.

<sup>15</sup> Zirdum, 107.

<sup>16</sup> Zirdum, 107.

<sup>17</sup> Rastislav Drljić, *Prvi Ilir Bosne fra Martin Nedić 1810-1895* (Sarajevo: Trgovačka štamparija M. Ramljak, 1940), 151.

Hodža, to go armed with two guns, a rifle, and a long dagger to Plehan.<sup>18</sup> Nedić added in passing – most likely to enhance the impression – that two years before, the dervish had greatly desecrated the "Greek Non-Unified" [i.e. Eastern Orthodox] church in Derventa,<sup>19</sup> and that he had spoken throughout Derventa that he would not return without the head of at least one monk. He demolished the cross in front of the door of the parish rectory and, according to Nedić, dishonoured the Christian religion by shouting out against and cursing Christ. Fra Luka Kovačević tried to calm him down, but this additionally enraged Salih, who fired his rifle, and Fra Luka, reciprocated in self-defence and wounded him. Then Fra Nikola Sokčević arrived and supposedly, fired a bullet into the air in order to calm down the wounded Salih, whom this, in Nedić's words, only enraged even more and he continued to shoot. In self-defence Luka Kovačević shot the dervish once more and seriously wounded him.<sup>20</sup> Then, Nedić writes, the villagers came running to the scene and started to lament that because of this incident they would, first of all, suffer from the authorities: "Woe now to us and our children, and the little that we have will be lost (...) The Turk has died, now for one Turkish head (according to Turkish custom) they will seek ten Christian [ones]." The villagers supposedly proposed, and the friars agreed, that the corpse be burnt. During the night, four villagers carried this out.<sup>21</sup>

This version of the story is extremely far-fetched. In every way possible, attempts were made to eliminate the guilt of the friars and accuse the villagers, after it became clear during the hearing and trial in Sarajevo that the authorities primarily held the friars responsible for encouraging the cruel killing of an already wounded man and the desecration of his corpse. A shameless attempt was made to attribute all the blame to the villagers. Provincial Nedić also visited Huršid Pasha to lodge a complaint against the Derventa Muslims who had armed the "fanatical Hodža" and sent him to Plehan. The Pasha asked for witnesses who could confirm that there had been a conspiracy in Derventa to be brought forward, but there were none. Nedić also visited the villagers and asked them why they had testified that the friars had persuaded them to burn the corpse, whereupon they replied, supposedly in tears, that the Derventa "Turks" had urged them to do so, and that they had wanted to save themselves by shifting the blame to the friars.<sup>22</sup>

Due to the activity and correspondence of the Franciscans, gradually more and more persons became involved in the case: the Franciscan representative in Croatia, the lawyer Andrija Torkvat Brlić, bishop Strossmayer, the Austrian consul in Bosnia Atanasković, the Franciscan representative in Istanbul Fra Marko Bošnjak, the Bosnian bishop Barišić, and even the well-known Orientalist and diplomat Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall, who intervened at the Divan (Imperial council) in Istanbul. The continuous clarifications with which the friars tried to convince even Strossmayer, who was well-disposed towards them, show that their only concern was to free the interned friars from prison at any cost. It seems that they were not conscious of any blame on their own part. If anybody tried to bring into doubt their indeed very contradictory statements, they would attempt to discredit him in the coarsest way, as they tried, for example, to do in regard to the Austrian consul, Atanasković. Specifically, in a letter

<sup>18</sup> Drljić, based on material concerning the "Plehan incident" from the archives of Sutjeska Monastery, the Provincial Archives in Sarajevo, and the archives of Tolisa Monastery, claimed that dervish Hasan-Salih, "the brute from Sarajevo", also hindered Eastern Orthodox Christians from building their own church in Sarajevo in 1855. Zirdum, 27.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 151.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 152.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 152.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 153.

to Marko Bošnjak, who was serving in Istanbul, Fra Blaž Josić complained that Atanasković had sent a report to Vienna on the "Plehan incident", and Josić accused him, saying that, "as a *Rišćanin*", i.e., an Eastern Orthodox, he had malevolently formulated his report based on official Turkish reports of the killing. According to the assertions in this letter, Atanasković had reported to his government the following: (1) that Fra Luka first started to shoot at "the Turk"; (2) that "the Turk" was insane, and that it would have been easy to grab hold of him and peacefully prevent him from realising his intent; (3) that the friars live in debauchery and that their parishioners have complained that they behave like brigands and highwaymen (i.e., *haiduks*); (4) that the friars used sabres to force the Christians to burn "the Turk's" body; (5) that they finished off the wounded man, while he was still alive, with an axe and chopped him to pieces. At the end, Josić adds that all these details were made up by the Muslims from Derventa in order to slander the friars even more or extract money from them, or else in order to hamper the construction of the church in Plehan.<sup>23</sup> In a later letter to Andrija Brlić, Fra Josić went so far as to accuse the Austrian consul that he was the one who was completely managing the actions and decisions of Vizier Huršid Pasha.<sup>24</sup>

The attempts of the Franciscans to resolve the incident by paying a bribe to the Bosnian vizier (which was supposedly done), as well as an indemnity to the widow of the killed man (a sum of 500-600 ducats was mentioned), did not yield results.<sup>25</sup> "And whose heart would not break, dear Andrija, when thinking about this unhappy event at Plehan, besides the damage and sufferings of this monastery, after paying 500-600 ducats (...), and that one officiant lost his life in detention (Džoić), [that] another two sadly languish in the dungeon sobbing and sighing, and [that there is] help from nowhere..."<sup>26</sup> wrote Fra Blaž Josić to his friend in Vienna, asking with resignation, "is it just, that all the others die because of one fanatic, a *Balija*<sup>27</sup> who, due to his crimes, deserved the gallows anyway?"<sup>28</sup> Josić also accused Consul Atanasković of having manipulated the facts because he "had a strong influence on Huršid Pasha" and malevolently presented the events linked to this murder.<sup>29</sup>

Gradually, newspapers such as *Srbski dnevnik* of Novi Sad, *Agramer Zeitung* of Zagreb, and *Ostdeutsche Post* of Vienna also began to actively report on the development of this case. *Srbski dnevnik* presented some details that we do not find in the letters. It mentioned the names of people that incited the attacker and supplied him with gunpowder. Further on, the text says that he had intended to pour the gunpowder around the monastery building to blow it up, and that the friars had impeded him in this attempt. It also states that after the murder some thirty villagers gathered and deliberated on what should be done. There was one proposal to carry away the body and leave it farther away from the monastery, or else bury it, but as the author of the article says, the most foolish proposal was accepted, to burn the dead attacker. The same article states that the "Turks", when asked by the Franciscans why they had punished three friars and four villagers for the killing of one "Turk", responded that the reason was that they had burned the dead man.<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Zirdum, 109.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 124.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 116 and 120.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid 124.

<sup>27</sup> *Balija* is a pejorative term for a Muslim.

<sup>28</sup> Zirdum, 124.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 124.

<sup>30</sup> *Srbski dnevnik*, no. 10, 2nd February 1856.

It seems that the authors of the letters and newspaper articles especially wanted to emphasize the torture to which the suspects in Sarajevo prison were subjected. After all, stories about the arbitrariness and cruelty of the Turkish authorities were commonplace in European liberal narratives. Even almost a hundred years later, the Franciscan friar Dr. Rastislav Drljić, in his book on Martin Nedić (1940), concluded that Jako Džoić died in the Sarajevo prison as a result of severe torture.<sup>31</sup> In many letters it was claimed that the prisoners were "shackled in chains". Yet in answer to a direct inquiry by Andrija Brlić, Nikola Šokčević in a letter sent from Sarajevo prison on 29 October 1856 refuted the writings of some newspapers that Džoić had died in chains. He wrote that, being ill, Džoić had been transferred to a Christian house, where he died after five days. "For never was he, nor either of the two of us, even to this day, ever in chains."<sup>32</sup>

### 5. Final Considerations: How do Institutions Tell Stories

Based on the Franciscan letters, it is not possible to reliably determine who was most guilty in the "Plehan incident"; nevertheless, they clearly indicate that the Franciscans did indeed alter and adapt their versions of the event in accordance with the development of the case during the inquest and trial. In an attempt to rid themselves of responsibility, they shifted the blame to others, even to their own parishioners. The need to protect their own small community outweighed their duty both to stand up for their endangered congregation and to uphold the elementary principles of Christian morality. Indeed, the letters reveal no signs of remorse or regret for the act of killing and desecrating the corpse. We have seen how various interpretations of the event were constructed by numerous actors involved directly or indirectly in the case (Bosnian Muslims, Bosnian Franciscans, Ottoman authorities, the Austrian consul, Bishop Strossmayer, and others.). All parties involved in resolving the "Plehan incident" *understood in their own way what was correct and moral, and what was not*. Such a situation is typical of divided societies, whose ethnic and/or religious communities are closed in their own thought styles.

The *thick description* of the murder at Plehan Monastery provides us with material to analyse the *thought style* of the Franciscan community, which should provide an answer to the question, *How do institutions tell stories?* The thought style which, as we have shown, directed the most important cognitive functions of the members of the Franciscan community was based on the store of knowledge in the thought community. Thus, in this storage, forms and thought elements were kept which enabled a story to be begun and told, to be altered according to a thought pattern, and to be enhanced if this was in the interest of the social group's survival. Within such stores of knowledge, *classification programmes* (or codes for arranging the social world) constitute an important element: who "we" are and who "they" are, how one behaves towards "one's own" and towards "others", what can be expected in a given situation from "us", and what from "them". A comparison of Franciscan chronicles<sup>33</sup> and letters reveals that the preconceptions about and axiological attributions regarding Bosnian Muslims which we find in the letters correspond to preconceptions and attributions found in the older body of

<sup>31</sup> Drljić, *Prvi Ilir Bosne fra Martin Nedić*, 27.

<sup>32</sup> Zirdum, 120.

<sup>33</sup> For an analysis of the thought style of the Franciscan community in Bosnia and Herzegovina see: Iva Beljan, *Pripovijedanje povijesti: ljetopisi bosanskih franjevaca iz 18. stoljeća* (Zagreb –Sarajevo: Synopsis), 2011.

Franciscan texts, but also in Croatian literary works from the early modern period, which certainly must have made up a part of their store of knowledge.<sup>34</sup>

From the *thick description* of the murder at Plehan Monastery and its discussion within the context of all the letters of the Bosnian Franciscans which we had at our disposal, and in the context of the political and social situation of Ottoman Bosnia, it could be said that the Franciscans would enter into the grouping of small "border-obsessed" (Douglas) communities. And they protect this border by developing a unique *thought style*. Understanding this thought style is tied to the "pains of translation" from one system of thought (theirs), to our modern system of thinking. Faced with our own contemporary Others, and even more with Others that preceded us, we are all "lost in translation" (Geertz). Understanding the way in which a community perceives and thinks about its situation, according to Geertz, is a key problem in a world inhabited by different, often clashing groups. It becomes clear that the "problem of how a Copernican understands a Ptolemaian, a fifth republic Frenchman an *ancien régime* one, or a poet a painter is seen to be on all fours with the problem of how a Christian understands a Muslim, a European an Asian, an anthropologist an aborigine or vice versa. We are all natives now, and everybody else not immediately one of us is an exotic."<sup>35</sup> However, the task of interpreting culture is an attempt to make such a translation and to gain an understanding of the symbolic world of Others, i.e., all those who are distanced from us in space and time. During the Tanzimat reforms, the situation hurriedly changed and somehow "raced pass" the opportunity of adequately defining the realities of the actors immersed in it. From the letters one gets the impression that the Franciscans, on the one hand, perceived the situation more realistically than the Muslims. They felt that with the reforms of the Ottoman Empire their position had changed for the better, and they also knew that they could count on the support of powerful external protectors. On the other hand, during the "Plehan Incident" they did not do well in appraising their position in relation to the judicial and executive authorities at the time in Bosnia, and thus they were surprised by the severity of the procedures towards those accused of murder. Muslims, and especially the unfortunate dervish, defined the situation within a classification scheme which no longer corresponded to the situation. In a certain sense, they defended the old order, resisting changes in the status of non-Muslims. For this reason, an attack was made – forbidden even by the Qur'an – on the area of a protected religious group. Endangering borders, first of all symbolic ones, often provokes inappropriate reactions as well, because the preservation of borders is a precondition for the preservation of a group.

---

<sup>34</sup> For images (preconceptions) of the Turks in Croatian literature in the early modern period, see Davor Dukić, *Sultanova djeca: Predodžbe Turaka u hrvatskoj književnosti ranog novovjekovlja* (Zadar: Thema), 2004.

<sup>35</sup> Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 254.

### Bibliography

- Beljan, Iva. *Pripovijedanje povijesti: ljetopisi bosanskih franjevaca iz 18. stoljeća* [Narrating the History: Chronicles of Bosnian Franciscans of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century]. Zagreb – Sarajevo: Synopsis, 2011.
- Cepelić, Mirko. *Josip Juraj Strossmayer – Biskup Bosansko-đakovački i Srijemski* [Josip Juraj Strossmayer – Bishop of Bosnia-Đakovo and Sirmia]. Zagreb: Dionička tiskara, 1904.
- Douglas, Mary. *How Institutions Think*. Syracuse: University Press, 1986.
- Drljić, Rastislav. *Prvi Ilir Bosne fra Martin Nedić 1810-1895* [The First Illyrian of Bosnia, Fra Martin Nedić, 1810-1895]. Sarajevo: Trgovačka štamparija M. Ramljak, 1940.
- Dukić, Davor. *Sultanova djeca: Predodžbe Turaka u hrvatskoj književnosti ranog novovjekovlja* [The Sultan's Children: Images of Turks in Croatian Literature in the Early Modern Period]. Zadar: Thema, 2004.
- Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books, 1973.
- Geertz, Clifford. *Local Knowledge*. New York: Basic Books, 1983.
- Mazower, Mark. *The Balkans: A Short History*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2000.
- Srbski dnevnik* (Србски дневник), no. 10, Novi Sad, 2 February 1856.
- Šljivo, Galib. *Omer-paša Latas u Bosni i Hercegovini 1850-1852* [Omer Pasha Latas in Bosnia and Herzegovina 1850-1852]. Sarajevo: Svjetlost, 1977.
- Zirdum, Andrija. *Pisma bosanskih franjevaca 1850-1870* [Letters of Bosnian Franciscans 1850-1870]. Plehan: Slovoznak, 1996.
- Zirdum, Andrija, Marko Karamatić & Vjeko-Božo Jarak. *Plehan*. Plehan: Slovoznak, 1987.
- Zoran Grijak & Zrinka Blažević, “Korespondencija fra Martin Nedić-Ljudevit Gaj 1839-1841. Prilog proučavanju odjeka ilirskog pokreta u Bosni i Hercegovini” [Correspondence between Fr. Martin Nedić and Ljudevit Gaj 1839-1841. A Contribution to the Study of the Reflection of the Illyrian Movement in Bosnia and Herzegovina ], *Prilozi 41* (2012): 21-58.