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Serbia in a Broken Mirror

The Role Of "Kum" In Serbian Politics

by Milos Vasic

The institution of kum (translates as godparent and best man) in Serbia is a highly cherished one. By following developments which have affected the institution of kum among Serbian politicians we get an idea of Serbia's recent history. Godfathers have tripped and betrayed one another. However, it is in recent times that this phenomenon has become a more frequent occurrence.

The Church teaches us that the institution of godfather goes back to times when the Christians were persecuted: there were no baptismal books, so that it was necessary to have a sponsor at baptism before God and before men. Ethnologists and anthropologists say that the custom has survived as a functional institution of great importance for social dynamics.

"The institution of godfather is an important one in Serbia's history. It was an important and lasting channel of social links, sometimes stronger than family relations," said ethnologist Ivan Kovacevic. "The institution of godfather could not be imperilled with quarrels over inheritance, land and other transactions. It is an institutionalized form of friendship, help and security." Kovacevic illustrates his point with customs which ban godfathers from trading or entering into marriage (two relationships business and sex, which are often at the root of most disputes). Custom also demanded that the godfather is respected. According to tradition, when the godfather comes to visit, the host goes out to meet him one hundred feet in front of the house; the householders are bareheaded and kiss his hand even if the godfather is a younger man; the godfather sits first to table and no one leaves the table before him. The godmother is a sexual taboo; to lie with one's godmother is tantamount to incest. All this testifies that the institution of godfather means much more than prestige. The institution of godfather was an institutionalized form of regulating violence in the prestate community.

American ethnologist Eugene A. Hammel, is the author of one of the most exhaustive studies of the institution of godfather or godparenthood in these areas. In his book "Alternative Social Structures and Ritual Relations in the Balkans," 1968, he studies the stability of the institution of godparenthood in Serbia and Montenegro. Hammel has reached an interesting conclusion: the institution of godparenthood is stable in stagnant, remote and poor environments; it deteriorates in mercantile, economically active and politically active environments. These three key elements are present in Serbia from the early 19. century, and since then the institution of godfather has slowly and inevitably turned into a moral and religious norm which is less respected. It is a social and anthropological relic, but not imperative.

The turning point, and crucial incident with regard to the institution of godparenthood in the collective memory of Serbs, was the violent death of Vozd Karadjordje Petrovic (Vozd translates as leader; Karadjordje was the founder of the Yugoslav Royal family Karadjordjevic) who was axed to death while sleeping, by his godfather Vujica Vulicevic, in July 1817 in the village of Radovanje. The murder was committed at the order of another godfather Prince Milos Obrenovic. A political analysis of this murder reaches the following conclusion: Karadjordje had imperilled the delicate policy (and personal authority) of Prince Milos with his secret affairs abroad and return to Serbia in early July, and with his insurgent and extremist goals. It seems that murder was Milos's idea. Karadjordje's head was sent to the Sultan in Istanbul as a guarantee for what is today called a political solution of a crisis. The Obrenovic family have always justified the murder of the godfather with reasons of state and politics: Serbia was not in a position to start a new war with Turkey and face disaster; peace and a gradual attaining of independence were more important than the Vozd's head.

Godfathers have tripped and betrayed one another later in Serbian politics. However, it is in recent times that this phenomenon has become a more frequent occurrence.

The Communists, of course, did not hold much by the institution of godparenthood, at least not ideologically and as far as protocol was concerned. They didn't get married but 'registered' and so had a 'first and second witness at the Registry Office,' and they didn't baptize their children. (The SerboCroatian term kum translates into English both as godfather and best man. The institution of kum in both cases is a highly respected status among Serbs). Even so, at the registration ceremony of Josip Broz and Jovanka Budisavljevic, Police Minister at the time Aleksandar Rankovic was present in the capacity of 'witness' (i.e. kum). In July 1966, at Brioni, during the historical 4. plenum of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia, kum Rankovic was accused of a 'political conspiracy' and other things after which he retired and was politically neutralized. It must be said that Aleksandar Rankovic never tried to hit back, even after Broz's death either because of the institution of kum or because of Party discipline.

Of today's politicians with a Communist background, the most interesting case of godparenthood is the relationship between former Serbian Communist Party chief Ivan Stambolic and Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic. Kum Milosevic listened unperturbed while kum Ivan spoke and then threw him to the lions the apparatchiks, at the historical 8. session of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Serbia in 1987. The two kums have not met since then, with the exception of a brief meeting at the funeral of Stambolic's daughter (when Mrs. Stambolic refused to shake hands with the Milosevics).

After the murder at Radovanje, all political clashes between kums (godfathers or best men) have inevitably given rise to comparison and associations. It is said that Prince Milos Obrenovic sacrificed Karadjordje for the good of the country; Tito sacrificed Rankovic because of power (a certainty) and the 'further

development of democracy" (not so certain); Milosevic sacrificed Stambolic because of personal power and so increased existing tensions and led the Serbs out of Yugoslavia and into a war whose end is still not in sight.

The Serbian nationalist opposition, since the founding of the first parties and movements in the late Eighties, has aimed at creating a populist (nationalist) image which was outdated after the First World War. This is an attempt at continuing a policy of flirting with the peasants. Just as they were Communists before, they have now become nationalists and have started wallowing in all that pertains to Serbia and its traditions: celebrating family feast days, getting married in Church, and baptizing their grown up children. The reasoning behind all this is: the peasants will vote for us when they see that we are patriarchal hosts. Some have the farmers in mind, other the bourgeoisie (while both target groups vote for Milosevic). Instead of security and welfare, they offer the voters blood and territory, and cherish the institution of kum.

Bozidar Vucurevic, the strongman of Eastern Herzegovina publicly offered a car and godparenthood to the first person to down a UN plane.

The rapid stratification of the Serbian opposition has broken up political marketing examples of godparenthood very easily. The biggest and most unfortunate victim of godparenthood in Serbia today, is certainly Serbian Renewal Movement (SPO) leader Vuk Draskovic. He was godfather to all and sundry. Four of his godfathers are now on the opposite side of the political barricade: Serbian Radical Party (SRS) leader Vojislav Seselj, Bora Komad, Jovan Koprivica and Dragan Milicic.

Seselj was the first to distance himself publicly from Vuk, because of some money collected among Serb emigres in America for the Serbian cause; after this the two men called each other names and accused one another of "treachery." Bora Komad, the columnist of the Belgradebased daily "Vecernje Novosti," is Vuk's opponent by the very nature of his position: "Vecernje Novosti" is a proregime paper. Lawyer Jovan Koprivica sold out on godfather Vuk and godmother Danica (Vuk's wife) while the two were lying in hospital after being beaten up by the police on June 1, 1993. Koprivica tried some fishy moves with forged letters planted by the secret police. Dragan Milicic, a top SPO official left the party, but returned recently with the promise that he would unmask godfather Vuk and godmother Danica.

The situation in the other opposition parties isn't much better. Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS) leader Vojislav Kostunica and Serbian Liberal Party (SLS) leader Kosta Cavoski are another pair of godfathers who have fallen out because of politics.

Ethnologists and anthropologists interpret this nonchalant entering into godparenthood and its equally easy breaking up, with insecurity in new circumstances, loneliness and a need for support.

If we agree with ethnologist Eugene Hammel that the first blow to the traditional institution of godparenthood among Serbs was inflicted by progress, trade, capital and an active political life, it seems very likely that one of the final blows will be made by this misinterpreted view of political life. Wellintentioned and decent people will continue to enter into godparenthood with each other and they will respect the institution of godfather, just as they respect friendship, contracts, promises and obligations of honor. They will teach their children that a ``godparent's curse is greater than a parent's" and they will caution them to take care who they enter into godparenthood with, and not to do as Vuk Draskovic had done. The institution of godparenthood, as an act of taking on responsibility for someone's spiritual life and a substitute for blood relationships, is older than Christianity and the Serbs, and as such will probably survive all our follies.