

Petar II Petrović Njegoš and Gjergj Fishta:
Composers of National Epics
Matthew C. Curtis

While most modern theorists of nationalism emphasize the role of intellectuals “creating nations out of nationalism” (Gellner, 1983) or imagining the community of nations (Anderson, 1991), I argue that another role of intellectuals may also be equally as valid: the role of the poet as adapting existing communities, and the trappings of those communities, into the shape and appearance of a modern nation. Using the examples of the Montenegrin poet Petar II Petrović Njegoš and the Albanian poet Gjergj Fishta and their epics *The Mountain Wreath* (1847) and *The Highland Lute* (1939), I argue the continuation of their literary epics to the oral epic traditions which formed an important basis for Montenegrin and Northern Albanian communities.

In their literary epics Njegoš and Fishta imitate the language and themes of their communities’ oral traditions, yet improve upon this tradition in their conception of the modern nation. They elevate the peasant language to the level of poetry and take stock of their communities’ historical, cultural, and religious heritage, employing myths, symbols, customs, and values from the oral narrative tradition. However, the writers did not blindly follow the tradition from oral narratives; in many instances, they question the value of this society and suggest changes in the traditional society to develop a national culture.

Far from being “unskilled or unethical psychologists” planting false memories in their communities (White, 2000), Njegoš and Fishta are competent composers who combine their communities’ oral epic tradition, European literary movements, and their own individual poetic skills to forge a new conception of their community as a modern nation. Indeed in these national epics, Njegoš and Fishta present a higher aesthetic and ethical standard for their communities than the preceding oral epic and heroic traditions. While White (2000) accuses Romantic nationalists of invention and deception, their national epics capture an essence of authenticity for the nation that not only makes them influential in their own national literatures and cultures, but also gives them a place in great world literature, representing the highest poetic accomplishments of their respective nations.