

National Identity: The Inventiveness of Macedonia

Skopje, Kitsch and Mother Teresa

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

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National identities tend to be the strained contrivances of ministries of culture and propagandists. Their committee work formation, through eager pen, official pronouncement and neat selection of what are termed historical facts, reflects the odd flavour. A good deal of gibberish and mendacity is required, a stretch of the historical record. Any inconvenient facts or data will require either dismissal or inventive incorporation.

A series of these actions is evident on arriving at the city of Skopje, capital of the Republic of Macedonia. Even the country's name has been the source of dispute, with Greece desperate to halt any chance of territorial claims to its northern territories with the cumbersome appellation Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Most countries have, however, been won over by Skopje's inventive case, or at the very least unconvinced by Greece's *cri de coeur*.

Hopping off at the central bus station that has the characteristic Balkan grime and soot, pungent with suffocating fumes, there is one theme that stands out: the somewhat crazed and dedicated efforts to link Macedonian identity – that of the post-Yugoslavian state – with the toil, conquest and influence of the Argead dynasty. "Alexander the Great," asserted the republic's former foreign minister, Antonio Milososki, "had no passport or birth certificate."

Officials in Athens engage in regular tirades against the Macedonian effort to appropriate Alexander III ('the Great'), his father, Philip II of Macedon, and an entire dynasty, as heroic manifestations of the credo of a state. They should know – the Greek obsession with Hellenic revivalism has form, typified by fits of urban destruction in the nineteenth century when ancient Greece became the motif par excellence. Unfortunately for them, there are rivals. Everyone wishes for that chance to bite the rich pie of Alexander's legacy. The cost, however, has come to over 200 million euros, and set to balloon.

Even cultural kitsch, when mixed with political seriousness, can produce its small cultural bombs. Strikingly, one of these incendiary devices, at least in the symbolic sense, is Alexander the Great's statue, rising at 22 metres in the central square. It is an alarming grotesque of sorts, with Becapalus heaving like a genetically modified beast with enormous hind muscles, a hormone monstrosity saddled by an equally monstrous master.

This is Skopje's vulgar rebuke to Athens, "our way of saying [up yours] to them," in the words of Milososki in October 2010. Dispute our claims to be a Republic of Macedonia, but not our statues of appropriation. Or the airport, or roads, which bear the family names of antiquity.

The archaeological museum, one in a series of modern wonderland structures situated on

the Vardar river front, houses what is meant to be a temple of culture. It is only something you might look forward to if you wished for a meal heavy in the propaganda of the great Macedonian peoples. The visitor may wonder whether this languishing white elephant houses but a few artefacts, with a “made in China” label carefully concealed. Such feelings are admittedly harsh, and ignore local resourcefulness, mixed in with a good deal of guile.

The guide who greets you on this occasion hopes to banish such snobbish contempt. This is the committee of culture representative in full swing. He is an astonishingly enthusiastic man, engaged with his audience, and determined to seek what he calls “parallels” with other nations. (If you say that you are from Denmark, incidentally, you will be told that your ancestors subjugated the ancient capital of Macedonia – at some point.) The tour is extensive, fastidious, and even exhausting.

Dozens of tribal names and peoples are tossed into the mix, ranging from the Neolithic period characterised by the worship of vast, large-hipped sculptures of fertility to the Pannonian princesses and high priestesses who communicated their fortunes to rival kings and chieftains via an opium induced state. There are burial reconstructions. There are hoards of coins.

While there is no reason to be surprised that solid, durable Ottoman currency, the historically enchanting currency of Alexander’s empire or that of Rome, the haunting money of the Serbian rulers of the 14th century, or the subsequent influence of the grosso coins of Venetian treasure, could be found in this land, the sceptic has to ask a vital question: How has one of Europe’s poorest states assembled such a collection? Moreover, it is one typified by neatly assigned spots and displays in the manner of an eccentric numismatist. The lot of such countries is rich in terms unrestored ruins from Greco-Roman times, but the treasures tend to be poor.

An answer is that the government of Macedonia has been busy in recent years, getting the bricks and mortar ready and attempting to transform the capital. This is yet another historical re-enactment, a theme that is suggested on the famous stone bridge – the Kameni most – that was given its current form by the Ottoman conqueror, Sultan Mehmed II, between 1451 and 1469. Those with Serbian sympathies prefer the designation of the Dušan bridge, after the Serbian ruler Stephen Uroš IV Dušan.

The city had to undergo another dramatic transformation with the sundering earthquake of 1963, one that levelled the city with uncompromising fury. Hotel Macedonia ceased to exist, as did all its residents bar one enterprising individual who got into the fridge as all was caving in around. Another got buried in his bathtub when taking a bath, though his only question on being recovered was who had won the battle. A curious bit of city trivia is that one building which survived the appalling assaults of the earthquake seemed to be dedicated to Mother Teresa.

What the earthquake did not do, bad taste has in the form of the project “Skopje 2014”. Pompous buildings disgrace the new bridges crossing the river Vardar – they seem like vain efforts to create a Las Vegas front of cultural entertainment, ostensibly to add a spring into the city’s aesthetic.

In that sense, these efforts at cultural mimicry have succeeded – one cannot help but be grimly entertained by the sculptured figures on the new bridges, meant to represent every

notable that has had some connexion, however tenuous, to Macedonian lands.

There are forgotten rulers who look bemused on the Bridge of Civilisations, and there are the more recent composers, singers, and writers who tend to be world famous in Macedonia, on the Art Bridge. When one is encountering the figures of antiquity, the jaw is bound to fall. The connection between the eccentric entity that is Macedonia and Philip II of Macedon is as firm as that between the Skopje citizen and Erich von Däniken's all-inventive ancient aliens.

The bridge figures themselves, all acting as crowding irritations, have no simulated inner life, resembling the poorest copies of the worst workshop. The Greek tradition that this Skopje exercise would supposedly channel the sensuous life through marble, giving it breath. Instead, it looks like the low grade social realists from the long vanquished regime of Romania's Nicolae Ceaușescu have been rehired – or at the very least their children. One would get as much historical thrill from the gyrations of Disney characters.

Some of the locals have been testy about the cost of the project; others prefer to take issue with the history. But it is not the Disneyland variant of Alexander the Great that is troubling. Rather, it is the Serbian presence, personified by a sculpture of King Dušan. In December 2013, an unruly attempt was made by Albanians to topple the figure. The Albanian NGO, Wake Up, argued that, "Erecting a monument to a Serbian occupier speaks of an identity crisis, or of the Serbophilia of those who put it there" (Balkan Insight, Dec 9, 2013). The paradox of Balkan richness is that certain identities assert purity in the face of a hybrid existence.

The identity crisis certainly persists in other architectural forms, though this speaks more about the attractions of entertainment and cash than any vestigial cultural message. The constructions of bulbous stationary ship restaurants on the Vardar grant this some swelling emphasis. We are bearing witness to a confused casino, where the cards of culture are being distributed by suspect croupiers.

The one area where the must of history lingers with any sense of plausibility is that of Bit Pazar, the old Turkish quarter. The narrow streets typical of the Turkish design have survived. There is the formidable stone fort of Kale, a brooding overseer of a city teeming with chaotic themes.

The Ottoman buildings seem overgrown yet charming – they bulge and wish to move onto the streets, outgrowing their joints, exceeding their limbs. There are jewellers. There is the presence of an astonishing degree of bling – garish dresses with glitz and eye-watering designs. There are sellers of the famous miniature shoes hung like peppers. There are well patterned coffee grinders to be bought. There is the holler of Turkish music and Albanian markets.

No figure represents Skopje's classic of re-creation and dissimulation than Mother Teresa herself, whose legend of moral invention stalks the city. Anjezë Gonxhe Bojaxhiu, as she was born, was scented by keen hagiographers, notably a seduced Malcolm Muggeridge in his *Something Beautiful for God* (1970), and placed on the fast tract to sainthood with the beatification points accumulated as a masterful broker in the world of charity and religious pandering. Her presence is ubiquitous in the city. Her banal pleas feature on buildings. She is found on fridge magnets.

While the late Christopher Hitchens did regard the antics of the departed Mother Teresa as those of a manipulative troll of souls and decaying bodies, best described in *The Missionary Position*, the ultimate excuse of channelling bad consciousness to heal poverty and sickness, Teresa herself showed, more than any other moronic self-help book, the power of re-invention. Just as St. Francis of Assisi, to embrace the poor, embraced the leper (in her words in a 1981 interview, “The encounter with the leper made St. Francis.”), the poor of Calcutta made Mother Teresa. She even regarded the cruelly impoverished much as the statues of Skopje 2014 might be seen as – astounding aesthetic efforts. “There is something beautiful in seeing the poor accept their lot, to suffer it like Christ’s passion.” Truth be told, this is grotesquery at work.

In 2013, three Canadian academics, Serge Larivée, Carole Sénéchal and Geneviève Chénard, examined Mother Teresa’s record, and found that the barbs fired by Hitch and other critics should be taken seriously. The blessed figure had proven as cagey, and as enigmatic, as any Skopje government official – only rough estimates are available regarding the costs of Skopje 2014. Mother Teresa, to such ends, showed a “suspicious management of funds that she received” (*Studies in Religion*, Jan 15, 2013). “Given the parsimonious management of Mother Teresa’s works, one may ask where the millions of dollars for the poorest of the poor have gone?” posed Larivée on the University of Montreal website (Mar 1, 2013).

Her religious views, and attitudes about caring for the poor, were also deemed dogmatic. The respected British medical journal, *The Lancet*, ran a piece in September 1994 by R. Fox arguing that Mother Teresa’s Order had poorly trained staff and did not provide adequate medical assessments. Such was the lot of a hospice. As for an even harsher Hitchens, the hospice had facilities that were “rudimentary, unscientific, miles behind any modern conception of what medical science is supposed to do” (*Free Inquiry*, Sep 30, 1996).

Seductive deceptions have the longest legs, and will go far in the forums they will rest in. Mother Teresa was, in that sense, the most modern of salespersons, stroking egos and breaking others. Her spirit animates the costly revitalisation project of Skopje 2014. In the words of another ego keen on marketing moral matters, Bob Geldof, “The way she spoke to journalists showed her to be as deft a manipulator as any high-powered American public relations expert.” Little surprising, then, that she had the ear of every world leader, and conscious stricken philanthropist, there was. If that is the ultimate recipe of success, than the defiantly resilient Skopje citizen knows where to aim.

Dr. Binoy Kampmark was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He lectures at RMIT University, Melbourne. Email: bkampmark@gmail.com

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