

## **Balkan Vampire Myth: Urban Legends or a Publicity tool?**

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*One of the first known 'real vampires' in the Balkan area, Jure Grando, has served as a tool for expressing fears about sexual freedom in an 18<sup>th</sup> century Balkan society constrained by its own depravity. Another, more famous figure, was Petar Blagojević, a Serbian peasant who was terrorizing the local villagers by strangling them, thus representing some of the concerns of rural communities of the time. Furthermore, Arnaut Pavle, a military hero obsessed with thoughts of suicide, the act that supposedly turned people into vampires, who after his own death becomes one of them, terrorized the village where he lived. Nevertheless, Sava Savanović is by far the most famous vampire figure in the Balkans, who is still being mentioned in literature and film alike. One of the common denominators that all these historical/mythical figures have is the overall terror and fear experienced by common people about the social, cultural, and health issues of the time, that needed a plausible explanation to make them feel secure in their own homes and with their own existence. Today, all these cases still exist, either as urban legends or simply as folk tales told to young generations, but even if their purpose might still be somewhat unclear, these tales have served as a great marketing tool for developing tourism in forgotten rural parts of Balkan countries.*

Keywords: *Balkans, vampire myth, dark tourism, literature, film, tradition*

### **1. Introduction**

Indeed, for as long as people have been able to travel, they have been drawn - purposefully or otherwise – towards sites, attractions or events that are linked in one way or another with death, suffering, violence or disaster. (Sharpley and Stone 2009, 4)

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The relationship between tourism and dark events exists for centuries, with one of the alleged first guided tours of this nature that took place in Britain in 1838; a trip by train to the hanging site to witness the death by hanging of two murderers. It is no surprise nor a mistake to claim that one of the main reasons for all this interest in the dark aspects of life is the fear of the unknown. The fear of the unknown implies the uncertainty and the overall fear from things that we do not understand or cannot perceive as existing in our real world. The darkness that surrounds our daily lives represents itself through various death related, sometimes unexplainable events, through literature, film, and other media. Therefore, for example, we witness the success of Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula* as being sublime, filled with religious connotations and the unknown supernatural forces that we as humans, do not have control over, which creates the fear of the unknown, and the desolate feeling of isolation and insecurity in the real world that surrounds us. One of these insecurities is the experience of death, or rather the fact that it is an uncharted area, where we do not know what to expect and what awaits us when our journey in this life ends.

'Dark tourism' as such might be considered as a historical phenomenon, which is of course open for debate, as to what extent this might be true, but the fact is that the human nature implies the existence of a somewhat morbid attraction to these kinds of desolate sites that exist all over the world. Since everything in the world is of dual existence, it is safe to say that human nature also has its dual identity, the feel of the unfamiliar that invades our lives, whether we want it or not. People have always had an interest in the unknown. They explore it and thus make it familiar, in that way getting rid of the primal fear that is embedded in all of us, and at the same time creating the desire to get acquainted with our Other selves. This relationship between 'dark tourism' and people willing to get involved in it can be a mutual appreciation of both: 'dark tourism,' as all forms of tourism, strives to move forward, and people have great willingness to make it happen, by visiting dark attractions, to satisfy their own curiosity, which in the end helps 'dark tourism' as an economic tool to flourish.

## **2. Categorisation of Dark Tourism**

When it comes to categorising 'dark tourism,' it is not as easy to do so as it seems at first. There is still not enough academic research on it, and most of the previous attempts to do so usually lacked certain theoretical foundation, so most of the categorisations that we have today are of descriptive nature. There is a useful

overview of the 'scope' of dark tourism by Dann (1998), which can be viewed as rather playful in post-modernist terms.

Dann divides 'the dark' in several categories, therefore we have places, which are described as dangerous destinations from the past and present, like towns of horror, imbued in tragic and violent events that raise interest in the media and general population alike. Houses of horror, which are buildings associated with death and horror, either actual or represented, like dungeons of death and heinous hotels offer tours of descriptive nature, often fun and with a comic relief to diminish the actual horror connected to these places. Fields of fatality are areas commemorating death, fear, fame, or infamy. Places like bloody battlegrounds, hell of Holocaust, and cemeteries for celebrities tell interesting stories about lives and deaths of famous people and horrific historical events, on which 'dark tourism' strives and builds itself in the eyes of the participants. Tours of torment, tours or visits to attractions associated with death, murder and mayhem are probably one of the tamest and most popular places in the categorisation of 'dark tourism,' because they offer historical background with interesting facts that are attractive to people interested in these areas. On the other hand, category of 'themed Thanatos,' which consists of collections or museums themed around death and suffering, like morbid museums and monuments to mortality, although built on historical events, tend to have a more serious connotation, rather than just serving as a form of fun, often invading the educational sphere with representations of history.

Nevertheless, the whole issue has not been completely overlooked, as Seaton, Lennon, Rojek state:

A number of 'drivers' of dark tourism have been suggested in the literature, varying from a simple morbid curiosity, through *Schadenfreude*, to a collective sense of identity of survival in the face of violent disruptions of collective life routines. (Sharpley and Stone 2009, 11)

New and fresh approaches to dark tourism emerge from academic and tourism circles alike, trying to add to the existing and often outdated theories and to build on the development of dark tourism in contemporary times, when its popularity is reaching its peak.

Furthermore, some academics link the attraction to dark sites with nostalgia, whether reflexive or restorative, with motives for the consumption of 'dark tourism,' such as fear of phantoms, which deals with the theme of overcoming childhood fears, the search for novelty, as something that strives to achieve the higher level as the times change. Desire to celebrate crime or deviance and basic bloodlust have been present in our lives through film and literature, that often

portray the interest for the macabre in a superb visual way that diminishes the seriousness of the violent events happening all around the world, but at the same time are making a statement that these desires and dark things that invite us to explore them through 'dark tourism' are a vital part of our culture and society. The so called 'dicing with death' describes visits to specific destinations where tourists' lives are in peril, usually acted, which has become very popular in recent years, especially in America, and as of recently, in the UK. Derelict abandoned places of urban decay are being transformed into haunted houses of horror and terror, that offer a fully immersive experience of a journey through the depths of the dark side of human mind, using urban legends and myths as themes through which the participants of the immersive experience give consent to endure imaginary horror transferred in their own reality. In that way, people can indulge themselves in experiencing different eras, being the participants in the crimes of Jack the Ripper, for example, and the Whitechapel murders, as the potential victims, which is a part of an immersive experience offered by some companies in the UK and are becoming very popular as a form of entertainment.

### 3. Black Spots

It is also worth mentioning the concept of 'Black Spots', which is fundamentally constructed around the representation of grave sites and sites in which a large number of people, famous or otherwise, lost their lives, meeting their sudden death often in a violent way, as tourist, more commercialised attractions, the concept introduced by Rojek himself (Rojek 1993). According to him, there are three different famous examples of 'Black Spots' in history, on which one can build further theoretical and practical aspects of dark tourism:

- Annual pilgrimage to the place where James Dean died in a car crash in 1955,
- Annual candlelight vigil in memory of Elvis Presley at Graceland,
- Anniversary of JFK's assassination in Dallas.

Rojek refers to these as "postmodern spectacles, repeated reconstructions" (Sharpley and Stone 2009, 13) of dark events popularized through media, which creates an interest in them and a certain appeal of visiting these 'black spots' to feel closer to important events that changed the course of history and perhaps to become participants of the same in a metaphorical way. The focus here is on dark sites and attractions as OBJECTS of dark tourism consumption and works well with the overall definition of 'dark tourism.' Therefore, the division to sensation sites, the 'Black Spots' as a form of commercialisation and consumption and nostalgic sites that involve

cemeteries and other places of disaster which became attractions by accident is quite appropriate here.

A different theory, by Seaton, focuses more on 'Thanatourism', the behavioural aspect of dark tourism that became a behavioural phenomenon, satisfying tourists' demand for this kind of leisure activities in which their behaviour is influenced by the representation of death and violence throughout history. However, despite these constructed theories that tried to explain the popularity of dark tourism phenomenon, there is still the need to scratch beneath the surface to expand on the existing knowledge of the topic.

As previously mentioned, the whole classification of 'dark tourism' is based on satisfying people's fascination with it, fascination with death and violence that surrounds them every day, and the need to explain mortality. Building on that fact, we can distinguish and identify the so called 'four shades' (Sharpley and Stone 2009, 20) of dark tourism, which clearly explain why dark tourism is so important to research and address:

1. Pale Tourism – tourists with a minimal/limited interest in death visiting sites, unintended to become tourist attractions (accidental sites),
2. Grey Tourism Demand – tourists with a fascination with death visiting unintended dark tourism sites,
3. Grey Tourism Supply – sites intentionally established to exploit death, but attracting visitors with some, but NOT a dominant, interest in death,
4. Black Tourism – pure dark tourism, fascination with death is satisfied by the purposeful supply of experiences intended to satisfy this fascination.

There will always be a demand for exploring the dark side, and where there is demand, there is supply, a firm relationship that exists in our consumerist society. Having said that, this relationship is visible in other parts of the world, especially in Balkan countries, whose economy is craving to develop, with existing and already established ways of consuming popular culture, often recycling them to boost interest of the rest of the world for Balkan regions.

#### **4. Balkan Vampire Myths**

The belief in vampires is one of the most interesting sensations in Balkan history.

...Under the name of vampire (lampir, lampijer, kudlak, tenjac, grobnik, gromlik, ljugat, ljug) the Balkan peoples conceive a dead person into whom

enters an evil spirit during the course of forty days after death, so that he, or she, deserts the grave at night, strangles people and cattle and sucks their blood; and, in fact, turns into a vampire. (Perkowski 1976, 206)

These myths fall into the category of 'themed Thanatos,' a 'Black Spot,' a place of sensation rather than nostalgia, and the shade of grey tourism supply, as further example from historical archives will show:

The following incident concerning vampires among the Serbs in the eighteenth-century dates from the year 1731, the time of Austro – Turkish wars, and occurred in the village of Medvedja, near Svetozarevo (former Jagodina) in Serbia.

...The High Command from Belgrade immediately sent a commission of German officers and others to the spot. They excavated the whole cemetery and found that there were really vampires there, and all those dead found to be vampires were decapitated..., their bodies cremated, and the ashes thrown into the river Morava. (Perkowski 1976, 205-206)

This historical testimony was one of the first written accounts of vampire myth in the Balkans. However, regarding the more recent and more contemporary popularity of vampires in the Balkans, the myth mainly revolves around the names of Sava Savanović and Petar Blagojević, two of the first vampires on Serbian territory. These names have been used across media in numerous ways to popularize the vampire myth. First Serbian horror film, *She Butterfly* (*Leptirica*, dir. Kadijević 1973) was based on the legend of Sava Savanović, a local vampire who tortured people, sucked their blood, and was hiding in one of the mills in the village, waiting for his next victim. The film is valuable in a way that it gives its audience the most accurate visual representation of the vampire myth in the Balkans. The vampire in the film, Sava Savanović, is crude, cruel, always in the shadows. His skin is black, and he lives inside the mill. According to the Balkan vampire myth:

...It is believed that the body which is to become a vampire turns black before burial....

At Podunavlje in Serbia, the Gypsies from the small town of Grocka hold the curious belief that vampires live in mills and go out at night... According to one Gypsy story... in this small town, a vampire kept appearing in a mill, who had beard like a priest. (Perkowski 1976, 211)

There are also some traces of the symbol of the butterfly that has a special meaning in Balkan vampire myth, and because of which the above-mentioned horror film is titled the *She Butterfly*; although, when it comes to myths on these territories, vampires were usually men, and rarely women: "If a butterfly comes from a grave they (people) think that it is a vampire whose body remained within while its spirit walked abroad." (Perkowski 1976, 212)

In 2012, the rest of the world suddenly started to show more interest in the Balkans, mainly because of the sport success of some of the countries in football, which made an impact throughout the media, and the ongoing post war political issues connected to the outcome of the civil wars in the 1990s, as well as Balkan wars in general. The countries Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia, Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro can thus be considered and analysed as 'dark tourism' sites:

The 'touristification' of sites related to war is generally problematized through the notion of 'dark tourism' (Stone 2006; Lennon and Foley 2000), or 'thanatourism', as is that of sites linked to natural disasters or terrorism attacks. (Naef 2014, 322)

To exploit the newly gained fame and interest on the topic, locals have started to spread the story about the long-forgotten vampire legend coming back to life. The situation escalated with reports appearing in the foreign press, like *The Guardian*, and *The Independent*, with titles such as "Vampire on the loose, Serbs are warned," and in Croatia, "Croatian Dracula revived to lure tourists."

According to media reports, the watermill that Sava was inhabiting collapsed, and the locals were afraid that he will try to find himself a new home. There were even talks of municipal council of Zarožje to issue an official warning advising people to put garlic and hawthorn branches above their doors.<sup>2</sup> The story got through to the major international media, but the legend itself was known throughout the territories of Former Republic of Yugoslavia, mostly because of the classic novel by Milovan Glišić. His efforts to popularize the vampire legend were compiled into a novel titled *After Ninety Years*, and published in 1880, 17 years before Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. The novel, as well as the already mentioned horror film *She Butterfly*, directed by Kadijević in 1973, tells a story about unrequited love that resulted in Sava Savanović's death, and a young love that endured after his death, but was greatly influenced by it:

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<sup>2</sup> According to Jan L. Perkowski's book *Vampires of the Slavs*, about the history of the vampire myth in the Balkans, stakes for killing vampires were made from hawthorn branches, as the most effective weapon against them.

Local lore holds that Sava never married, and that in his later years when he had become rather ugly, he fell in love with a much younger girl who spurned his advances. One day while she was tending sheep, he once again proposed to her, but she again declined, and turned her back on him. Angered at this, he pulled out his pistol and shot her in the back, killing her. Unbeknownst to Sava, his brother Stanko had suspected he was up to no good and had followed him. When Sava shot the girl, Stanko jumped out of the bushes and tried to apprehend him. The noise of the gunshot attracted shepherds, who saw the two men fighting and assumed it was a traveller being attacked by a bandit. When Stanko saw the shepherds, he feared trouble, so he ran off towards the forest, leaving Sava. The shepherds thought Stanko was the guilty party and shot at him with their rifles, killing him. When the local villagers realized what had happened, they beat Sava to death with hoes and mattocks and buried him near the scene of the murder, as they did not wish to have a murderer buried in the local cemetery. Shortly thereafter, rumours began to circulate that Sava was seen wandering about in the village in the evenings and had become a vampire. The vampire killed people in Zarožje for years and years and no one knew who the vampire was, so they couldn't find his grave and kill him. There was a young man from the village of Ovčinje named Strahinja, and there was a wealthy farmer in Zarožje with a very beautiful daughter named Radojka. Strahinja fell in love with Radojka, but he was very poor, and her father was strong and powerful and wouldn't let his daughter marry Strahinja, even though Radojka loved him. So Strahinja thought about what he could do, and one day he came to Zarožje and asked the people to let him be the miller for one night in the watermill. They didn't want to let him, because anyone who spent the night in the watermill was killed. At the urging of Radojka's father – who thought it would be a good way to get rid of this unwanted suitor – the villagers permitted Strahinja to spend the night at the watermill.

Strahinja came to the mill before dark, took a tree stump and some bags and wrapped them in a blanket and put them next to the fire so that it would look as though he were asleep. Strahinja then hid up in the rafters of the mill and watched. The mill was grinding away, when suddenly, in the middle of the night, the door of the mill opened all by itself and a large, horrible man appeared in front of the doorway and entered the mill. As he entered, he spoke out loud to himself saying 'a good dinner for me.' Watching this, Strahinja was overcome with fear. The vampire bent over to suck the blood of the sleeping man and discovered it was a tree stump, not a person. Then he exclaimed loudly "Since I became Sava Savanović, I have never gone without dinner, but tonight I've gone without dinner."



From his perch in the rafters, Strahinja shot at the vampire with his rifle, and Sava disappeared. In the morning, the entire village came down to the watermill, expecting to find Strahinja dead. Instead, they found Strahinja sitting on the doorstep of the mill, smiling. Radojka's father asked him how he survived and asked if he had learned the vampire's name. Strahinja told him that the vampire's name was Sava Savanović. Since Strahinja had saved the village from the vampire, Radojka's father gave him permission to marry his daughter.<sup>3</sup>

The story is told in detail by James Lyon in an interview for the Vampirologist blog.<sup>4</sup> Lyon is the author of the novel *Kiss of the Butterfly* (2012), based on true historical events, meticulously researched, and set against the background of collapsing Yugoslavia, where vampires are portrayed in their original folkloric form, which is a completely different portrayal from the ones we have in our popular culture today. There is also a helpful review of the novel on Magia Posthuma blog by Niels Petersen:

*Kiss of the Butterfly* is certainly an exciting read. The backdrop of Serbia on the brink of war, the minutiae of history, geography, and customs, combined with a well-crafted mix of fact in fiction in the findings of Steven's vampire research makes it a fascinating read as well. (Petersen 2012)

Mayor of the village which, according to the legend, was and still is the dwelling place of the oldest and most famous vampire, stated that the whole raising the undead story was just a gimmick to attract people to the otherwise poor, neglected, and isolated rural part of Serbia, to revive the rural tourism in the region. The trick worked at the time, but it was a short success. Nevertheless, Sava Savanović, although the most famous vampire in the Balkans, is not considered to be the first one. Petar Blagojević, a peasant from a small village Kisiljevo in Serbia, lived in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when Serbia was a part of Austrian empire. After his death, the villagers started reporting cases of seeing Petar lingering next to their beds and strangling them, and his wife fled from the village after he appeared to her one night asking for his shoes. Two months after his death, the municipal authorities opened his grave and found his body fresh and filled with blood. They drew a stake through his body and burned it on the spot, resolving the issue of the first known

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<sup>3</sup> Vampirologist Blog. The. <http://thevampirologist.blogspot.co.uk/2012/12/vampires-in-serbia-unraveling-fact-from.html>.

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vampire in the Balkans. It is also interesting to mention the name of Arnaut Pavle, a military hero who was obsessed with the thoughts of suicide, the act that supposedly turned people into vampires, and becoming one of them after his own death, he terrorized the village where he lived. But Sava stole the spotlight from both and thus became known as the first vampire in the Balkans.

In Croatia, there was not much difference in the portrayal of vampires, which were mainly used as a promotional tool: "No one is claiming that vampires or evil forces exist. All we want is to promote a documented legend to boost what we can offer to tourists."<sup>5</sup>

According to the said legend, for 16 years after his burial, a Croatian Jure Grando terrorized his former fellow villagers in Kringa village, Istria, his most common victim being his widow. All night he wandered around, knocking on doors, after which the people who lived there died a horrible death. He paid regular visits to his widow forcing her to continue fulfilling her marital duties (according to the Balkan vampire myth, if the widow gets pregnant during this unholy reunion, she will bear an extraordinary child, the one and only weapon used for vampire destruction – a Dhampir).

In 1672, a group of local men decided to put an end to Grando's terror. First attempt in killing the vampire didn't go that well because the hawthorn stake bounced off him, but eventually, in all the panic and fear, one of the men managed to decapitate him, which put an end to the era of vampirical terror in Istria. Grando stands for a cynic, someone who challenges authorities and is sexually active. All these things were a taboo in the 1600s, and quite unimaginable to tackle. It is also believed that Grando served as a model for Stoker's *Dracula*, and possibly other future literary counterparts. The legend was forgotten for a while, until 1999, when Croatia got its first edition of *Dracula*. Today, Kringa village has its own unique Vampire Bar, which is a part of a bigger project launched by local tourist authorities, plainly named Jure Grando, Vampire from Kringa.<sup>6</sup>

Information about the vampire myth in Croatia is somewhat scarce, as seen independently from the rest of the Balkan countries, but an effort is being made to change that.

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<sup>5</sup> "Vampire Bar in Kringa Tinjan", "Istra - Istria Blogspot", accessed March 30, 2017, <http://istra-istria.blogspot.co.uk/2008/07/vampire-bar-in-kringa-tinjan.html>.

<sup>6</sup> "Americki novinar, prvi vampir je Petar Blagojevic", "Telegraf", accessed March 29, 2017, <http://www.telegraf.rs/vesti/876594-americki-novinar-prvi-vampir-je-petar-bлагоjevic-rumuni-srbima-ukrali-slavu-foto-video>.

## 5. Conclusion

According to Lennon and Foley, the 'dark tourism' definition applies to sites associated with death, disaster, and atrocity, such as battlefields, graves, accident sites, murder sites, places of assassination and death camps. It is also linked to tourists' desire to satisfy a morbid curiosity. So far, research on this subject has mainly focused on hospitality management and marketing: "...An approach with qualitative and interdisciplinary methods" is much needed, "to develop an analysis that goes far beyond the tourism industry." (Naef 2014, 322)

Even though war sites are the most popular sites of 'dark tourism,' it is important to note that urban legends and myths of a country, that are a crucial part of a country's culture, should have a bigger role in the development of 'dark tourism,' especially in the lesser known and much neglected areas of the world. The fear of the unknown, in this case the fear of a distant part of the world that has been stereotyped as barbaric and deviant within the media, like the Balkans, should be dispersed with new approaches to the developing theme of 'dark tourism,' showing the potential these 'unknown' countries have, not just in their historical events, but also in the constant and rich heritage of legends and myths.

Dark tourism is very much alive in the Balkans, as well as all the urban myths revolving around vampires, death, and suffering. The region has the potential to develop all aspects of 'thanatourism' just by referring to historical and traditional events alike, and as we have already seen, reviving the long forgotten and buried myths, like the Balkan vampire myth, to enhance the economy of those countries for a longer period, especially in rural regions. There are new efforts in academia on the progress of 'dark tourism,' focusing on the things beyond hospitality and management, and the change is for the better, with a possibility to update current research. The potential is there; the only thing these countries need to make that potential a reality is proper political guidance, a more analytical approach to dark tourism phenomenon, and a skilful utilisation of available marketing tools to boost the economy of 'dark' Balkan countries.

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