

The strains of a Balkan ballad

By Nicholas Wood

SKOPJE, Macedonia

And you thought the Balkan wars were just about politics. One evening five years ago a group of friends — a Serb, a Turk, a Greek and two Bulgarians — were at a restaurant in Istanbul. As they ate, a band struck up a familiar tune. A dispute broke out, each of the diners claiming that the tune was a famous national song that belonged to his or her country.

The idea that the same song could be shared by nations that had been at each others' throats for hundreds of years enraged and infuriated some of them. It was also grounds for one of those diners to spend the next four years making a film about it.

The result, a 70-minute documentary entitled "Whose Is This Song?" by the Bulgarian filmmaker, Adela Peeva, has recently gone on general release in Bulgaria after winning prizes at several specialized film and television festivals, notably in Paris and in Nashville.

The film has touched a raw nerve among audiences in the Balkans, questioning what many see as an integral part of their national identities and ultimately, Peeva believes, showing just how much they have in common.

The documentary follows Peeva through Macedonia, Turkey, Greece, Albania, Bosnia, Serbia and Bulgaria.

In most countries, the tune is a love song with varying lyrics, but in others, such as Turkey and Bosnia, it has also been used as a war song. In each country the reactions are the same as people display shock, anger, or disbelief when Peeva suggests the same tune is also claimed by their neighbors.

"The Turks took it from us," says an Albanian in Tirana, explaining that the song was originally theirs. "We are one of the most ancient peoples."

In Vranje, a town in southern Serbia, Peeva's hosts storm out of the restaurant they are entertaining her in when she plays a Bosnian version of the tune that has been used as a call to arms.

"This is theft!" shouts one man before leaving.

"Music and song are one of the strongest parts of our identities," Peeva explained. "But when someone comes along and say it is not, they are very sensitive."

The film does not attempt to define where the song originally came from, although Peeva said she was given numerous differing explanations, including the possibility that it had been introduced by soldiers from Scotland who were based in Turkey during the Crimean War.

In Greece it is known as "Apo Xeno Eopo," or "From a foreign land," and in Turkey it is called "Uskudar," after the region of Istanbul.

The Turkish version was the subject



Andrew Testa for the International Herald Tribune

Adela Peeva's documentary film "Whose song is this?" questions Balkan identities.

of a film, "Katip" (The Clerk), directed by Ulku Erakalin in the 1960s, and the singer and actress Eartha Kitt recorded a version of the song, also called "Uskudar," in the 1970s.

However many different versions there are, Peeva says they all point to the fact that most Balkan nations share a tradition passed down to them by what was once the Ottoman Empire, and the Byzantine Empire before that. This goes against what most people in the region have been brought up to believe, viewing the Turks as oppressors who sought to crush their true national identities.

The idea that the same song could be shared by several nations has enraged some people.

"We tend not to accept we have a common identity," said Peeva.

The rise of nationalism in the 19th century saw everyday traditions shared throughout the region redefined in national terms, according to Alex Drace-Francis, a research fellow at the University of London who also writes about the culture of identities in southeastern Europe.

"Basically there was a common culture, in terms of cuisine, domestic life, music and clothing," he said. "There were regional differences but they were not defined in terms of nationhood."

Those differences were re-emphasized and exacerbated towards the end of the 20th century, with the exchange

and expulsion of populations in Greece, Turkey and Bulgaria, as well as the interethnic conflicts of the 1990s in the former Yugoslavia.

Peeva claims that, just as the film has shown how sensitive people in the region are about identity, it has enabled audiences to see the absurdity of the different claims. "It makes us laugh at ourselves," she said.

Reactions to the film have been positive throughout the region, she said. "People laugh and sing in the same places. The Bulgarians even sang the Bosnian version of the song and clapped during the screening."

Greece is the only country in the region that has not shown the film. "I think they have a problem with it," said Peeva.

Mark Mazower, a professor of history at Columbia University and author of "The Balkans," a book that explores identities and nationalism in the region, says that the film is the latest in a series that challenges long-held images of national identity.

He cited two recent Greek films, "A Touch of Spice" by Tasos Boulmetis, released last year, and "Ulysses's Gaze" by Theo Angelopoulos, starring Harvey Keitel and made in 1995, as recent examples that explore the blurred and mixed national identities in the region.

"There is clearly a mood to question the national myths about the Balkans," Mazower said in a telephone interview.

Peeva would now like the film to be used in schools throughout the Balkans. She acknowledges, however, that not everybody who sees the documentary accepts its lesson.

"The reaction of some of the people are the same as in the film, even when it has ended," she said. "It needs time."

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