

Commentary piece: Sociocultural characteristics of Montenegrins – the negative message in positive jokes

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Abstract

Ethnic jokes are a form of comical narration extremely widespread throughout the social life of various nations. They generally centre on neighbouring nations and reveal a positive assessment of one's own ethnic group, usually negatively evaluating other nations. The subject of the analysis is jokes about Montenegrins, who are known in the Balkans for their laziness and slow lifestyle. However, they are able to transform this unfair stereotype into an advantage, a cultural identifier, which is reflected in popular culture, numerous jokes and tourist promotion of the country.

Keywords: ethnic groups, nations, ethnic jokes, stereotypes, Montenegrins, laziness.

1. Introduction

The issue of the role of humour in social life and communication within any given national group can be examined on the basis of the numerous, constantly created ethnic jokes about one's own nationality (usually assessed positively), or other nations, mostly neighbours, where a negative assessment prevails.

A joke should be understood as “a short text structure, precisely specified and of fixed composition, finishing with a punch-line” (Buttler 1968: 31). It is also defined as “a short, humorous piece of oral literature in which comicality is accumulated in the last sentence” (Hetzron 1991, after: Brzozowska 2000: 14). In the Polish tradition this specific kind of utterance is commonly called a *kawał*¹, in the countries of the former Yugoslavia, also Montenegro, there exists the term *vic* (from German). We should emphasise the duality of the function of jokes in cultural life: in oral communication as joke telling and its coexistence within the literary form such as the recording of jokes (formerly in the form of printed collections or publication in the press), currently also on the Internet on joke websites of various thematic categories.

One of such categories is the ethnic joke, concerning a nation, an ethnic group, or several nations whose representatives are juxtaposed on a confrontational basis. “Ethnic humour is

[...a] special category of humour, it is based on a number of specific scripts and oppositions which have to be internalised by the speakers and hearers of ethnic jokes.” (Raskin 1985: 180). Raskin’s concept of script is fundamental for understanding the essence of a joke: “The script is a large chunk of semantic information surrounding the word or evoked by it” (Raskin 1985: 81). Researchers of ethnic humour have identified two most popular scripts presented in ethnic jokes: the script of stupidity (Poles in US, Irish in Britain, The Newfoundlanders in Canada) and the script of stinginess (Scots, Jews) (Davies 2002; also Raskin 1985: 180). Other popular scripts in ethnic jokes include craftiness, cunningness (Jews, Gypsies), laziness, slow life style (Montenegrins, inhabitants of southern countries: Greeks, Spanish, Italians, in America—Mexicans); the stereotyped sex-related script; the Jewish mother script of “Yiddische Momma”—bossy, over-possessive, unenthusiastic about sex; the script of an Australian man who embraces the cult of mateship and drinks too much in the men-only bars (Davies 2002: 106).

It is usual for neighbouring nations to tell jokes about each other. In the Polish tradition there exists a highly developed (especially in the Polish People's Republic, 1948-1989) series of jokes depicting a Pole, a Russian and a German; similar anecdotes are made up by other neighbouring nations: the French, the English, the Portuguese, the Spaniards, the Swedes, the Norwegians. The countries of the former Yugoslavia also possess a broad set of national anecdotes, criticising the stereotypical features strongly associated with a given nationality. For example, in the case of the inhabitants of Montenegro it is their “innate laziness”, in Bosnians—their stupidity; Serbs and Croats point out each other's nationalism, warlike past (Chetniks, Ustasas), political sympathies: pro-Russian (Serbia), pro-German (Croatia, Slovenia). In the case of Slovenia, fun is also poked at the small area of their country.

But some nations laugh at themselves: we can distinguish the self-mocking category of jokes and Montenegro humour can be included here, side by side with more widely known Scottish jokes about greed and about unattractive weather, area of the country² (Francesconi 2011). The case of Montenegrins, who have recently turned the ascribed vice of laziness into a sort of cultural distinction and not a cause for shame, is worth noting. This phenomenon can be observed in numerous ethnic jokes, but also in popular culture and tourist promotion of the country as a place for a dream holiday with the natural conditions conducive to this: sea coast, mountainous landscapes, ecology (almost the entire country being the area under ecological protection) and Mediterranean climate—260 sunny days a year. This promotion is disseminated through souvenirs and gewgaws of a humorous nature, referring to stereotypical Montenegrin laziness: ‘The Decalogue of a Montenegrin’, ‘The Montenegrin working day’, presented in the form of fridge magnets, cards, calendars, mugs, T-shirts with the inscriptions of ‘golden thoughts’, such as: ‘What you have to do today, do the day after tomorrow’, ‘Work can be the cause of many serious diseases’. Before discussing the phenomenon of the transformation of anti-values into values, as well as the basis for shaping such a stereotype, it is worth looking closer at the very subject of our research, namely Montenegro and its inhabitant, the hero of the jokes—the Montenegrin.

2. The most important facts from the history of Montenegro

Montenegro is one of the smallest states created after the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia. The area of the country is 13,812 km² (the size comparable with that of Northern Ireland or the American state of Maryland), with a population of 672,000. It became independent on 21 May 2006 as a result of the independence referendum; previously between 2003 and 2006 Montenegro was in federation with Serbia as “Serbia and Montenegro,” formerly one of the republics of Yugoslavia. The basic economic problems of this young

country are: a lack of well-developed industry with a profitable impact on the economy (industrial production, high technology are absent as Montenegro is an agricultural country), corruption, a high level of crime, high unemployment, poor road and rail infrastructure—Montenegro is a mountainous country, with only 270 km of railway (one major line between Podgorica and Bar). There are also nationalistic problems, as this is a multinational and multicultural country. Montenegrins are not the majority group in their own country, representing 45%, of the population, Serbs—29%, other minorities are: Bosnians, Albanians, Croats and the Romani people. There are several faiths, the Eastern Orthodox religion dominates with 74%, Catholicism which, chronologically, since the 10th century, has been the first religion on the land, and also Islam. It is impossible to ignore language problems (Koncewicz-Dziduch 1999). Montenegrin has been recognised as the official language since 2007, but the declared usage is only at 37% of the population, while the majority say they speak Serbian: 43% (both Serbs and Montenegrins). Additionally, other terms are used to describe language, e.g. Serbo-Croatian, a term that fell out of use in 1991 after the breakup of Yugoslavia. The Montenegrin language is in effect the result of the struggle for its legal recognition organised by a group of intellectuals from the academic centres in Podgorica and Cetinje, it is still in the phase of codification and has many archaic and dialectic forms.

This state has a long historical tradition, though there exists an unjust tendency to identify the culture and language of Montenegro with Serbia, which is effectively fought against by the Montenegrins. The recognition of the distinctiveness of the country and its language, as well as history, tradition and culture is their great success. The Montenegrins have reasons to be proud, as the traditions of the state date back to the 13th century, when the name Montenegro officially appeared; Slavonic tribes, however, had inhabited the area since the 7th century, establishing here the first historical Zeta Principality (from the Zeta tribe). Despite its political dependence on Serbia in the Middle Ages, from the 12th to 14th century, the state boasts the fact that it managed to defend itself against the aggression of the Ottoman Empire, through the use of the natural conditions of mountainous topography. This has become a reason for national pride, as larger states, such as Serbia or Bosnia, surrendered to the Turks; their inhabitants would often Islamise in order to improve their living conditions. The Montenegrins despised such an attitude, which is reflected in their national epic from the period of Romanticism, *Gorski vijenac* [Mountain Wreath] (1846) by P. P. Njegosz. This work refers to the actual event of the killing of “the Turkicised” (*poturica*), (that is the Serbs who had accepted Islam), by Montenegrin warriors on Christmas Eve. The myth of the fight with the Turks is often referred to, as is the romantic pan-Slavic idea of the Slavic community, uniting smaller states under the sceptre of the strongest Slavic state—Russia. This idea is echoed today in the Balkans in the pro-Russian sympathies of Serbia, and also partly of Montenegro. Relations with Russia are quite visible in the Montenegrin economy: Russian capital (ownership of 40% of real estate; hotels, shops and even entire villages), investment in tourism, air transport, tourists coming from Russia. Despite its economic problems, the country has had many political successes, it was officially invited into the membership of NATO in late 2015, it also expresses the will to join the European Union (it uses the Euro) and is on the right track for this, since it was not actively involved in the war in the Balkans in 1991, like Serbia or Bosnia.

Montenegro's priority is the liberalisation of its economy, the fight against corruption, as well as the opening of the country to tourism, not only from the Balkan countries, Serbia and Kosovo, which do not have access to the sea, but also from Western and Central European countries. It is already happening through the promotion of such cities and centres of culture and leisure as Budva, where many cultural events and concerts take place in the summer. A place for an exclusive holiday is Sveti Stefan Island or the towns in the Bay of Kotor. On the tourist and cultural map, Montenegro creates its image similar to Croatia (“A small country for a great vacation”), as a place of rest, sweet laziness, which can be found in ethnic jokes.

3. Image of a Montenegrin in ethnic jokes

A series of Balkan ethnic jokes had already been coined in the former Yugoslavia, where countries of different cultures, mentality, tradition and religion found themselves together under one state. The clearly established stereotype was that of the lazy Montenegrin and the stupid Bosnian (a Muslim, typical names in jokes for a man being Mujo and Haso and for a woman, Fata). This stereotype is not disappearing at the present and is even increasing despite the political and mental changes, as is evidenced by this contemporary joke:

An immigrant from the Balkans is looking for a job with a German employer, who asks him:
Where are you from?
Bosnia – answers the questioned.
I'll not accept you, because you are lazy people – the German retorts.
It's not true, it's the Montenegrins who are lazy, we are stupid – answers the Bosnian

Jokes about Montenegrins were collected from websites devoted to the Balkan and Montenegrin humour³ and translated into English. Several types of script can be noticed in the jokes, the most popular of which represents the Montenegrin as a idler, lazybones, while others are associated with narcissism, self-admiration and stupidity as well as its opposite: cunningness, smartness.

The Montenegrin as an idler—this is the largest group of jokes about this nationality—about 80% on websites devoted to Montenegrin humour. Canonical in character are the so-called “Deset crnogorskih zapovjedi” [“The Ten Commandments of the Montenegrin”]—this is a humorous set of rules to follow in the life of a Montenegrin man, and only men, as this is a male and patriarchal culture, as is emphasised by the portrait attached to the Decalogue: old man in a traditional costume, with a cigarette. This code is popularised in the form of various gadgets: cards, mugs, badges, fridge magnets with inscriptions in various languages (Serbian, English, German, and Russian), all emphasising the role of rest in the life of a Montenegrin.

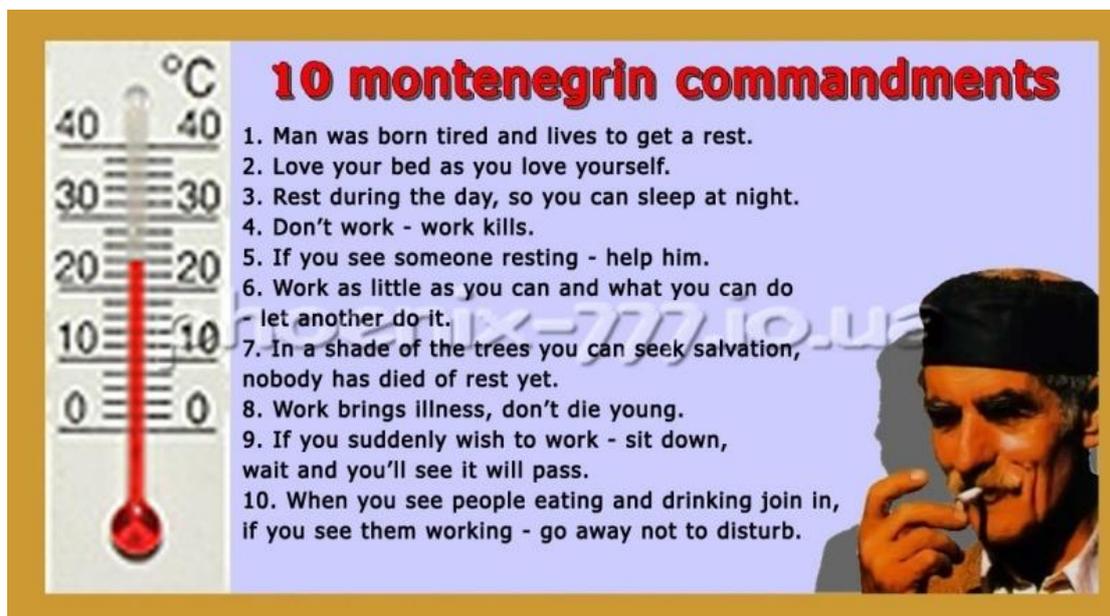


Figure 1. 10 Montenegrin commandments. Source:

<https://www.google.pl/search?q=deset+crnogorskih+zapovjedi&hl=pl&biw=1280&bih>

(Accessed on: 20 June 2016)

The form of 10 Commandments is very popular in jokes and has an international character. Also well-known are 10 commandments for bosses or secretaries. It is worth mentioning that there are similar Decalogues, differing only in linguistic form: “Decalogue of the Dalmatian” for example, but it has not gained equal popularity to the Montenegrin. The inhabitants of these both sea regions of a warm climate are attributed the tendency to enjoy a lazy lifestyle, similarly as the inhabitants of the south of Italy—the attitude of *dolce far niente*, and the form of the Decalogue testifies to the divine command for such behaviour.

There are various forms of Montenegrin laziness which are the subject of jokes, one of them being not overworking in the workplace, which is confirmed by:

“Montenegrin working time” (*Crnogorsko radno vrijeme*):

- 7.00 – work starts
- 7.30 – coming to work
- 7.45 – morning coffee
- 8.15 – reading the newspaper
- 9.00 – breakfast break
- 11.00 – back to work
- 11.15 – coffee break
- 11.30 – conversation with a colleague about politics
- 13.00 – a glass with a friend
- 14.00 – nervousness because of work overload
- 14.15 – leaving work
- 15.00 – end of work

Apart from there being too little an amount of time devoted to professional duties, another southern feature is also ridiculed here, namely the so-called flexible approach to deadlines, as well as the lack of observance of the set working hours and the holding of meetings. All this is annoying for the people from the west and north.

The drawing up of a weekly work schedule by Montenegrins has also gained international fame:

The most important Montenegrins meet to set a weekly work schedule and after long discussions the chairman reads out the proposals:

- Monday – resting after the weekend
- Tuesday – preparing for work
- Wednesday – working day
- Thursday – resting after work
- Friday – preparing for the weekend
- Saturday, Sunday – weekend

Then one of the participants asks the question – Is every Wednesday going to be a ‘working’ day?

Typical for the male Montenegrin is a reluctance to physical work also at home, which results from patriarchal traditions: it is the woman who performs most of the domestic duties, while the man likes to spend his time in the shade, drinking a coffee or cold drink or sitting in the cafe with his friends, which is typical for the culture of the south. The jokes emphasise this reluctance to any activity or physical work:

Stretched out on a chair, a Montenegrin turns to his busy wife saying
–I’m really sorry to see you working all the time and getting so tired, so please shut the kitchen door.

A Montenegrin who did nothing during his whole life, died suddenly. His wife cremated his body and placed the ashes in an hourglass. While using it, she spoke to her husband's remains with satisfaction:

– At least you are doing something after death.

A very popular form is short jokes of the question-answer type:

Which road sign does not exist in Montenegro?

– Road works.

Why did the Montenegrin opposition lose in the elections?

– Because they had promised work for everybody

What were the last words Jesus addressed to Montenegrins?

– Don't do anything until I come again.

Where does a Montenegrin's wife hide money?

– Under the shovel.

Why does a Montenegrin keep two stones near his bed?

– One to turn off the light once he gets into bed, the other to check if he has closed the window.

What does a Montenegrin virus do in the computer?

– Nothing.

What do we call a film in which a Montenegrin is working and studying?

– Science fiction

Which animal do Montenegrins envy most? -

– A viper because it moves while lying down.

Laziness also concerns the issue of married life: in jokes the Montenegrins are often attributed with having little sexual activity, the opposite to the Bosnians:

A Montenegrin man and Bosnian woman married. Unfortunately the man delays performing matrimonial duties and after half a year, the Bosnian wife applies for a divorce, justifying her application by their lack of a sex life. The court asks the Montenegrin what the reason was and he replies – 'I didn't know it was so urgent.

When would Montenegrins cease to exist?

If they recognised sex as physical work.

Help, help, I've been raped by a Montenegrin! – a woman screams.

How do you know he was a Montenegrin?

Because I had to do everything myself.

Although the main motif of Montenegrin jokes is laziness and its various manifestations, it is worth pointing out, however, that also other vices of Montenegrins are ridiculed, such as their having a **too high self-esteem or self-admiration**, plus other vices concerning men in the community:

How does a Montenegrin grade adjectives?

Nice, nicer, me.

How does a Montenegrin cat introduce himself during a telephone call?

Hello, lion speaking.

How do Montenegrin sparrows greet each other?
How are you, falcon!

How does a Montenegrin start chatting up a girl?
You fancy me, of course, but the question is, do I fancy you ?

Another feature of Montenegrins that appears marginally in jokes is their **limited knowledge of the world, parochialism and stupidity**. This was due to Montenegro's position in the former Yugoslavia: as a typical agricultural region, with a low level of industrial development, education, a high degree of illiteracy (up to 60% in the interwar period). Today this is changing, but the stereotype remains, also in jokes:

A Montenegrin arrived in Belgrade and got on a double decker bus. As there were no empty seats in the bottom deck, the conductor advised him to check if there were any free seats on the top. After a moment the Montenegrin returns. The conductor asks him:
Are there no free seats?
Yes, but there's no driver.

A Montenegrin and a Japanese man talk about the priorities of life. The Japanese man says:
For me, Japan is in the first place, then work, and finally my family.
The Montenegrin replies:
And I'm the other way round: first is my family, then work and finally Japan.

In confrontation with other countries of the former Yugoslavia, a Montenegrin occupies varied positions, depending on who the author of the joke is. Usually, the Montenegrin's faults are laughed at by their closest neighbours: Serbs, Croats. If the origin of the joke is indigenous, a Montenegrin is usually depicted positively; a similar position is held by Poles in jokes with Germans and Russians; he shows common sense and in effect triumphs:

A Montenegrin, a Slovenian and a Macedonian are flying an airplane which breaks down suddenly. They have to jump from the plane but discover they only have two parachutes. The Slovenian says to the Montenegrin:
Give me the parachute, we Slovenians are wise and there are too few of us, so I have to survive.
So the Montenegrin gives him a rucksack. When he has jumped out of the plane, the Macedonian says to Montenegrin:
How are we going to survive now we only have one parachute?
Take it easy – says the Montenegrin – we have got two parachutes. I gave him an empty rucksack – if he's so wise, let him invent something on the way down!

4. Conclusion

In the light of jokes, the image of the Montenegrin is quite diverse, though in popular consciousness it has merged with an unfair stereotype of laziness. Nevertheless, the Montenegrins themselves laugh at this vice, do not deny it, nor do they feel offended by it. They approach this cultural phenomenon with a distance and look at the attributed laziness from another side, as an encouragement to slow down the pace of life, enjoy the pleasure of rest, of 'doing nothing'. This is in line with the image of Montenegro as a country whose economy is based on tourism, associated with leisure, holidays, a nice way of spending one's free time; the country's climate and geography being most conducive to it. This kind of image also perfectly fits the trend promoted in western culture since the 1990s, namely *slow life*. This

is a certain way of life, a state of mind referring to the Mediterranean attitude of *dolce far niente* which consists in enjoying one's life, celebrating the moment, taking a rest in nature, calming down. *Slow life* philosophy has emerged as an opposition to the western lifestyle based on constant haste, stress, the “rat race”, consumerism.

Modern citizens of Montenegro, especially the younger generation, are in fact a contradiction to the stereotype of a lazy Montenegrin. During the tourist season, which lasts from May to October, they work with great engagement, especially in the travel industry, often earning money for the rest of the year, as high unemployment and low wages are the problem of this state. Emigration for the purpose of work is also popular here. Despite this contrary reality, jokes about the lazy Montenegrin are still fondly coined and passed on, nowadays also through the electronic media, and the citizens themselves laugh at them and do not mind that the “Decalogue of a Montenegrin”, sold as souvenirs in various languages, has become their cultural identifier.

Notes

¹ It is worth referring to the definition of a joke by A. Wierzbicka, who stresses such features of this form of utterance as: the vernacular, oral, and rough character of the language (Wierzbicka 1991, after: Brzozowska 2000:14).

² Francesconi draws attention to the role of humour in the promotion of the country's tourism by analyzing humorous postcards that ridicule national stereotypes and characteristics related to Scotland (a canny, prudent Scot, bad weather, monotonous landscape). The author agrees with Davies theory that ‘humorous self-mockery is the best way of self promotion’ (Davies 2002: 28).

³ Examples of jokes come from the following websites: :Crnogorski vicevi, http://www.cgautentik.com/zabava_vicevi.php, Najbolji vicevi, <http://www.najboljivicevi.com/kategorija/crnogorci-12-0.php>, (27.06.2017.)

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