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**THREE-FINGER EMBLEM. HOW DID THE SERBS GESTURE  
CONSTRUCT THE VISUAL IMAGE OF THEIR NATIONAL  
IDENTITY IN 20th CENTURY 90s<sup>1</sup>**

*Abstract:* The gestural performance of the physical body vehicle shape which consequently became known as the Three-Finger Emblem presents a kind of the cultural invention in the Serbian culture in the last decade of the 20th Century. This paper deals with this phenomenon from the socio cultural anthropological viewpoint founded on the methodology of gesture studies: the issue of interest includes matters of ethnicity and identity, as well those of gesture morphology, semantics and motivation.

*Key words:* gesture: anthropological approach, emblems, semantics and morphology; Serbia: contemporary culture, cultural cognition; ethnicity; identification and auto identification.

I don't find necessary to bother anyone of what happened in former Yugoslavia during the last decade of 20th Century. The aim of this paper is to present the gestural fact which - just maybe - has appeared as the visual coocurance of many diverse situations portrayed the Serbian side in the everyday-life frame much broader than wars themselves. The main feature of this presentation is an emblem which became known as the "Three-Finger (Symbol)". It could have been observed in political gatherings and sport events before the bloody cataclysm of former Yugoslavia, at the pictures from the war-zone broadcasts, whenever and wherever anti-Milošević protests took place in 90's, at public and even private celebrations, and in many more, almost countless situations. I refer to it as "an emblem" because it is used as the completely nonverbal expressive tool<sup>2</sup> (Zikić, 2002: 28), where the meaning is gained after the visual consideration of the communicative aspect of the movement and the physical shape formed that way, while the term "symbol" denotes not just the common designation of this emblem, but also its semantic value<sup>3</sup> (Lich, 1983: 21-25).

This emblem's body vehicle consists from the fingers of the one hand, no matter the hand's lateral determination. The emblem is shaped by the thumb, the forefinger and the index spread, while the other two fingers are curled toward the palm.

<sup>1</sup> This paper is delivered after the work within the Department's project authorized and financed by Serbian Ministry of Science and Technology *Cultural Identity of the Contemporary Population of Serbia*.

<sup>2</sup> I very much refer to maybe old-fashioned notion of emblem similar to as proposed in Efron 1972 or in Ekman and Friesen 1981 when stating that emblems are the gestures performed mostly in nonverbal communication mode with relatively fixed meaning within some cultural context whenever they occur; see Жикић 2002: 28.

<sup>3</sup> I refer to the terminology employed by Leach and consequently to the distinction between the sign and the symbol described in Lič 1983: 21-25.

The body motion is of upward and slightly forward multiple movements of from the elbow raised forearm. It is mostly performed in the nonverbal communicative mode; where it cooccurs with the verbal expressions, such expressions could be classified as speech only formally<sup>4</sup>. The Three-Finger Emblem's communicative meaning is known in all of the former Yugoslav republics since ca. 1991, where it is widely considered as the "Serbian Symbol". The informants' verification<sup>5</sup> (Calbris, 1990: 1-25; Zikić, 2002: 5-13, 28-29, 30-63) of this emblem suggests that the Three-Finger Emblem represents "Serbia" or "srpstvo"<sup>6</sup>.

It is obvious that there is neither visual/morphological nor essential relation of the handshape described to the concepts of "Serbia"/"srpstvo", but nevertheless the verification of this emblem is successful by total percentage. The ethno-explications like for an example "I raise three-fingers because I perform sign of the cross by (those) three fingers and that means I am an Orthodox and a Serb", or "Lord helps three times and we the Serbs believe in God" do not help the consideration of choosing this emblem for particular concept presentation, being in fact silent of the concept itself. On the other hand, these ethno-explications prove evidences about the existence of certain concept personal impression, but also about the acceptance of its conventionalised gestural presentation.

This example is chosen because it is relatively easy to trace its genesis and the motivation beyond the "metaphoric" gesture performance, particularly considering that long-time conventionalisation tends to blur such motivation.

The Three-Finger Emblem had become widely known in public in the beginning of 1990's by its frequent and meaningfully intended performance by Vuk Drašković, who at the time was leader of the most significant opposition party in Serbia<sup>7</sup> (SPO). Mr Drašković promoted the meaning of this gesture as the "Serbian sign". Media controlled by Milošević has been particularly alarmed by the public appearances of Mr Drašković and has been instructed to obstruct them whenever the news reports could not have been avoided. The Three-Finger Emblem also felt filed under this obstruction: it has been presented even like Nazi symbol by broadcasting the documentaries showing the SS-troopers being blessed by some cleric performing gesturally something like the Three-Finger Emblem.

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<sup>4</sup> Those expressions are slogans from the crowd, like for an example political yells or sport-fans cries.

<sup>5</sup> My fieldwork and analytical methodology considering emblems is of the kind presented in Calbris 1990: 1-25, and it is described in Жикић 2002: 5-13, 28-29. About 67 emblems have been obtained and 40 of them are analyzed in Жикић 2002: 30-63.

<sup>6</sup> It is a bit hard to translate this last word in the most proper way; it is kind of a concept of "Serbianity" - to be Serbian, to lead and promote Serbian way of life and something akin to Weltanschauung (whatever that really means), the overlapping unity of various concepts with "Serbian" as the forthcoming attribute: culture, history, politics, interests, nation etc.

<sup>7</sup> This of course does not mean that Mr. Drašković has "invented" this symbol; Mr. Drašković's party is Srpski pokret obnove (Serbian Renewal Movement), known as SPO.

Message intended to be conveyed this way had suggested that particular gestural performance by the opposition leader infact symbolizes trippled adversary: Nazism as the arch-enemy of every other type of regime - especially socialist or democratic - then “German imperialism” as the nazi-ideology bearer featuring enemy of 20th Century Serbian state, and finally every possible threat to Serbian nation. Considering this statement, one should note conducted media representation of Milošević’s regime and his political figure as social democratic, reestablisher of the Serbain state dismembered by Tito’s political will and interests, and the defender of Serbian national interests imperilled by resurrected nationalisms of non-Serbian peoples in former Yugoslavia. Consequently, such gestural performance should have been understood by the “loyal citizens” as the element of disveiling Milošević’s political opponents inside Serbia as serving enemies’ agenda, which means - traitors.

Nevertheless, or just because the treatment like this by regime media, this gesture succeeded in featuring the message “coded” by the most popular Milošević opponent of the early 90’s and established itself as an emblem symbolizing the concepts of “Serbia”/”srpstvo”. The supporters of Drašković’s party were the first recipients of this kind of symbolic gestural message; they have been followed by politically non-organized opposition supporting citizens and the largest, the most well-organized and potentially the most violent football-fans group “Delije” - the Red Star Belgrade supporters. Then both the performance and the meaning of this gesture have been accepted by the Serbs living in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, who infact mostly supported Milošević’s politics of the time, and the relation physical movement/symbol/concept(s) has been established to temporaly coincide the first clashes of Yugoslav civil war.

Featuring the same time and the same context, Serbian “enemies“ used a similar gesture, with a morphological difference in the two handshapes of just the thumb being curled about the palm and crossing the fourth finger - the notorious “V-sign“. This gesture became widely known as the symbol in political context of former Yugoslavia in 1981 after its usage by the Albanians in the first Kosovo-Metohija street protests. The same “V-sign“, although marked and repected as the familiar Churchill’s gestural performance representing the victory over the Axis, for Serbs appeared to be the visual identification of their enemies, especially after being commonly used by Croatian and Bosnian Muslim soldiers when wars of 90’s started.

It is still not clear why mr Drašković associate this gesture with something denoted as the “Serbian sign”, but motivation for its widespread reception could be overviewed considering several contexts of significance for message decoded. Those contexts are of gesture (first) recipients/(and later) performers and the idea is to demonstrate how the finally denoted concepts gained their meaning through introjecting the particular meanings of such contexts. The gesture did not have the same meaning for perhaps anti-communist orientated population inside Serbia and the Serbs in western formerYugoslav republics: while at the time the first were about to accept almost anything coming from the side opposite to regime and to ascribe it anti-communist

evaluation and meaning, at the same time the second were interested into finding the symbols available to be ascribed the ethnic/national values.

Although there had been some crucial differences between the political contexts of the regime non-supportive citizens within Serbian society and their fellow ethnics outside Serbia, their common goal was designed by the same name of “national interests“ (and consequently “Serbia“/“srpstvo“), even its denotation differed. The “insiders“ context has been marked by the sentiments toward democratic traditions of Serbian society prior to WWII and the Western culture; the “outsiders“ context has been specified and determined by historical remembrance and the notions of national history: by the facts that their Croatian and Bosnian Muslim neighbours mostly joined the military formations of Croatian nazi-marionette state for persecuting and killing them, but also by the mythologema of Serbian medieval state.

Two viewpoints coincide in both contexts: that Serbian nationality was oppressed by the Communists - where Communists usually have been avoided to be recognized as the Serbs, manifestly because of Tito’s Croatian nationality, and that Constitutional restructuring of the state is needed. That is how the perception ignoring the objective difference between the notions of “ethnic“ and of “national“ emerged and the way of public opinion formatting in that concept of “Serbia“/“srpstvo“ includes and unifies every political and/or cultural concept disagreeable to political and/or cultural norms and values implemented by the regime since 1945. What was important for the Three-Finger Emblem considering the semantics of its conceptual links and references appeared to be the transmitter suitable to respond the demands of such conceptualization.

Red Star F. C. supporters appeared to be maybe the most important transmitter of the Three-Finger Emblem and this was perhaps even the main cause of the popularity this gesture has gained in for not so very long time. 1991 was the year in which Red Star Football Club had won in UEFA’s Champions’ Cup and that fact turned to be recognized as something of the greatest national and cultural importance in Serbian public; more to that considering matter of issue, this club and its supporters have been considered as some kind of opposition to Communist regime and associated to the notion of “srpstvo“ in former Yugoslavia for some decades prior to dismemberment of the country<sup>8</sup>. Being designed that way, they have been serving as the concept capable of comprising every notion of significance opposite to regime: political, cultural, and national.

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<sup>8</sup> Although none of the statements in this sentence cannot be completely rejected, especially considering mythology and folklore of urban society, as well the common people attitudes, the facts are that the club was founded in 1945 under the supervision of Yugoslav police establishment, that the club until the late 80’s has been sympathized and partially financed by Serbian Communist Party establishment, and that players have been brought from all over the country, no matter their ethnicity - for an example, a Croat, a Bosnian Muslim, two Macedonians, two Montenegrins and a Romanian participated in the eleven of the 1991 champion team.

That was probably the first conceptualisation in contemporary Serbian culture which appearance has somehow suggested the overlapping unity first of the notions of ethnic and national, and then of such melted notion and some others. The visual aspect of the newly established symbol like this gesture was, has been particularly convenient to represent something structurally ethereal but consistent not only in beliefs then in attitudes and behavior followed them. The gesture did not become the emblem before some cultural meaning has not been assigned to it; the convention was achieved about the relation of the body part physical movement and shape formed that way to the concept represented. The gesture became sign of the times just because of the dominant and determinative context of that times: ethnic turmoils in the country (the former Yugoslavia), where all of the sides used to equal “ethnic“ and “national“.

This equation affected the final perception which rised among Serbs in the mid-nineties that the Three-Finger Emblem could represent only something Serbian attributed, so this gesture has been established as the symbolic device mainly invented for the purpose of ethnic/national bordering, which means the visual marking of ethnic description in Barthenian sense<sup>9</sup> (Barth 1969). The gesture entered the inventory of national identity construction symbols accepted that way in the context of ethnic conflicts in former Yugoslavia: although Serbian “invention“ it turned to be intelligible to all ethnic sides involved, a tool of both ethnic autoidentification and ethnic differentiation. Any person performing this gesture used it to represent his/her acceptance and promoting of, and also belonging to the concept(s) referred.

The only somehow objectively measurable element of the symbolic construction of Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian national identity is religion; Serbs are Orthodox Christians, Croats are Roman Catholic and Bosnians are Muslims<sup>10</sup>. Religious affiliation is reliable factor of both ethnic autoidentification and differentiation in context like that: one who for an example wants to describe himself/herself as a Serb, or to be recognized so, cannot make any mistake by employing the symbols of his/her religion in such purposes. More to this, it is common to refer to someone as to Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian because of someone’s religious affiliation and vice versa. Thus the ethnic, national and religious identification are perceived as being inseparable.

The basic element of religious autoidentification and/or differentiation in these circumstances is the presence of the cross: the cross is the overall Christian symbol, whereas Muslims lack it; but considering previously presented, the cross could be also used as the ethnic/national identity construction device. It is in the manner of how the sign of the cross is performed, or better - which is the way the shape of the

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<sup>9</sup> The theoretical reference is concept first featured in Barth 1969.

<sup>10</sup> The population censuses in Kingdom of Yugoslavia did not feature the nationality but only the religious affiliation; the first censuses in Tito’s Yugoslavia introduced the category of national affiliation, but Bosnian Muslims have been considered either Serbs or Croats. The 1961 census able the category of Muslims among the other national affiliations so Muslim population of Bosnia-Herzegovina was conducted to claim themselves as “Muslims“, while the term “Bosnian“ referred to the inhabitant of Bosnia no matter his/her national/religious affiliation, although it commonly referred just to the Muslims.

cross is visually designed by the joined physical movement of arm, hand and fingers. Unlikely for the example the one of the Roman Catholic Church, religious practice of the Serbian Orthodox Church demands the move of the thumb, the forefinger and the index beginning at the forehead downward the belly, then to the shoulders, respectively the right one and the left one. Those three fingers are circularly joined at their fingertips while the other fingers are curled to the palm.

It is notable that the same three fingers are involved in the performance of both gestures: when extended and spread they form the Three Finger Emblem, while joined at their fingertips they feature the starting locus of the movements performing sign of the cross. It is likely that the motivation affected the conventionalisation: the need for the ethnic/national distinction of every kind from the others of the context - which includes the gestural distinction as well - and also the inventorial presence of the formally similar gesture representing one crucial identificational concept caused the symbolic relating of the Three Finger Emblem physical shape to the concepts of "Serbia" and "srpstvo".

I have already mentioned that concepts of "Serbia" and "srpstvo" are cognitively interlaced in contemporary Serbian culture; people consider them to be synonyms. Treated that way, the concept of "srpstvo" is basic determinative, the one from which the concept of identification arises; and this concept of identification is by cultural cognition further indivisible to the concepts of ethnic, national, or religious identification, comprising them all.

Relating the way of the sign of the cross gestural performance not just to the religious affiliation, but to the religious in the sense of the national identification makes the next derived concept in this scheme. The "translation" of the way people experience this emblem to the language of gestural semantics suggests the consideration of this gesture's "iconicity": it symbolizes the overlapped meaning of both religious and national autoidentification and that is why this gesture could be verbal translated by the terms like "Serbia" and/or "srpstvo". The acceptance of this kind of explanation would be the illusion suggested by the comprehension of cultural gesture inventory of dictionary type, where each gesture is tended to be interconnected to the related word or phrase without considering that gestures always represent the concepts.

The emblem discussed here is not iconic, ofcourse, neither it symbolizes the way of performing sign of the cross; the ethno-explication became some kind of cultural autosuggestion. The concept of religious identification is just the part of the concept of identification and the concept of identification is derived after the concept of "srpstvo" and it is not the distinctive opposition pole of the meaningful relation within that concept as the general plane of the gestural designed within the gestural symbol.

Concept of the religious identification - in the sense of being identified to the concept of national identification - appears as the motivating factor of determination considering "the most suitable" visual characteristic: it orientates to what seems to be logical for recipients to comprehend as the concept represented.

The gestural reference of the The Three-Finger Emblem is concept of “srpstvo”; the inner plane of such reference is composed of the gestural performer’s expressing himself/herself as the “embodiment“ of that concept, as well of the cognitive notions of the concepts of “Serbia“/“srpstvo“. Because there could not be neither formal nor essential relation between the emblem and the concept(s) represented, the characteristic designed as the most suitable for the visual presentation is derived after the one of the subsequent phases of the conceptual derivation employed in the cultural cognitive process of (auto)identification.

Gestures are cultural symbols and consequently the bearers of cultural symbolics; considered like that, their properties are the ways of establishing the meaningful relations that symbolics are constituted by. There are at least two levels of establishing such meaningful relations: because the gestural reference is always the concept and not some real or some particular entity or object, there should be relation between the movement performing the gesture and its reference - that is between gestural designating and gestural designed. The other relation is within the plane of gestural designed: it is one between the expression and the cognitive notion. The nature of such relations - i.e. whether gesture should be classified as “isonic“ or as “metaphoric“ - is dependable on what has been chosen for the gestural designated, which consequently means on physical configuration of the movement as well on what is represented by gesture.

The Three Finger Emblem is an example for the conceptual derivation process of cultural cognition. The motivation for employing such gesture is found in determinative context of socio cultural time - those of politics through prism of ethnic and national identification and differentiation. Due to the metaphysical nature of the concepts represented by this gesture, the ultimate meaningful relation - the one between gesture designating and gesture designed - is nonessential and it could be notified as “metaphoric“; however, cultural conventionalization of this gesture’s meaning is strengthen by visual and formal similarity of its body vehicle parts to those of gesture representing another identification concept - that of religious affiliation. The notion of national identity is inseparable one; every kind of affiliation which may seem to be relevant to it - and especially such crucial one, as religious affiliation is usually considered - is meltingly comprised by it and that is why people claim to feel that the association between the gesture and its reference is obvious.

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