

THE VITALITY OF SOME ANCIENT BALKAN MOTIFS AS FOUND IN SERBOCROATIAN EPIC POETRY

As the study of the Serbocroatian folk poetry goes further it becomes more obvious that this poetry is less simple than the first students of it thought in their enthusiasm for all the discoveries they made. Under "less simple" I mean that it is not an expression of "pure folk soul" as romaticists wanted it, in whatever social class we think it originated.

Particular works indicate more and more the complexity of folk epic poetry in all its aspects: in its form; in its formulas, which are an important part of the epic oral singing and which determine the structure of that kind of poetic diction; in actual details and language elements; and, finally, in subject matter, motifs, situations and characters. This complexity is a multiplex one. It includes the most different sources and influences: namely, the spontaneous, original creations, the native tradition, imported techniques and international borrowings.

However, it is very difficult in a particular case to decide which one of the mentioned phenomena is involved. To all appearances they are closely connected, as is usually the case in the other aspects of folk creations. However, a patient study and comparison could offer certain suggestions which are likely to be probable.

It has long been known that Serbocroatian oral poetry uses international motifs. The well-known translator of Homer's works into Serbocroatian, Tomo Maretić, wrote about some parallels between the Serbocroatian folk poetry and the Arabian tales of the 1001 nights, and between the former and certain German songs¹. Stjepan Banović pointed out the incredible similarity between Homer's *Odyssey* and the song from Makarsko primorje *Kako je Primorac Ilija postreljao ženine prosee* (How Primorac Ilija shot his wife's wooers)². The striking correspondence of details between Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, on one side, and the Serbocroatian folk epic, on the other side, were shown by another well-known Yugoslav translator of Homer, the

¹ Tomo Maretić, *Naša narodna epika*, Zagreb, 1909, pp. 200, 202, 204, 205, 207, 214 and 235.

² Cf. Stjepan Banović's paper *Motivi Odiseje u hrvatskoj narodnoj pjesmi iz Makarskog primorja* in *Zbornik za narodni život i običaje*, vol. 35, Zagreb, 1951, p. 139—244.

late professor Miloš N. Đurić³. Anica Savić-Rebac came across a very interesting philosophical-theological dimension in a folk legend from the song *Car Dukljijan i Krstitelj Jovan* (Tsar Dukljijan and John the Baptist)⁴. She connected this legend with the Neomanichean conceptions of the ancient Persian ethico-dynamic principle of a dualistic theology, which represented a conflict between light and darkness and included a belief in the inherent evil of matter, and which, through Bogumil mediators, became a part of the oral folk tradition up to the moment when it was expressed in the mentioned song.

This particular example is very instructive, especially from the methodological point of view. The students of Serbocroatian oral poetry very early became aware of the character of the song and, naturally, certain attempts were made to explain it in the simplest acceptable way, without pointing to the specific character of the legend. As A. Savić-Rebac says:

Quelques savants yougoslaves du siècle précédant, sans connaître le grand cycle dualiste, voulaient interpréter ses légendes par un ancien mythe sollaire — ce qui est devenu complètement suranné après les études de Vesselovski, qui les a rattachés au cycle dualiste. Leur trait spécial — la lutte pour la lumière céleste — peut avoir quelque fondement dans un mythe solaire qui aurait laissé des traces vagues dans la mémoire populaire; mais quand nous le trouvons dans une légende de type dualiste, il est clair qu'il y fût activisé par d'autres influences, beaucoup plus actuelles de leur temps.

(p. 272—273)

For me it is very important to mention the possibility of the crossing and merging of two, in some measure, akin motifs, which are due to quite different traditions: to a popular, almost mythological one, on the one hand, and to the learned, philosophical, religious one, on the other hand. This may be the case in the cited song. The folkloric literary motifs might have come to the Serbs and Croats similarly to the way in which the linguistic borrowings and influences came from different Balkan languages into Serbocroatian and vice versa, as it was shown by Sandfeld, Vasmer, Budimir, Skok and other scholars. Some of the motifs had long been a part of the oral tradition, as "vague traces in people's memory", before they were suddenly 'activated' by some actual occasion or by a similar motif from another source. It seems that some of these motifs with a vague existence show a remarkable vitality and, without regard to the circumstances and social, religious or political changes, are able to survive every crisis

³ Miloš N. Djurić, *Veze Homerove poezije s našom narodnom i umetničkom epikom* in Zbornik radova SAN, vol. X, Institut za proučavanje književnosti, vol. 1, Beograd, 1951, p. 165—216.

⁴ Anica Savić-Rebac, *O narodnoj pesmi Car Dukljijan i Krstitelj Jovan* in Zbornik radova SAN, vol. X, Institut za proučavanje književnosti, vol. 1, Beograd, 1951, p. 253—273.

as important elements in the culture of the people, which bind the previous inhabitants of the Balkan soil with the later ones. It is interesting to mention here that the aforementioned scholars who discussed the common Balkan elements which appear in Serbocroatian folk poetry were students of the Homeric works.

M. N. Djurić, for instance, indicated the features which were common to both Homeric and Serbocroatian heroes. When Homer's gods and heroes see or hear something unpleasant they beat on their thighs with their hands, while the Serbian heroes beat on their knees:

Δή ῥα τότ' ὤμωξέν τε καὶ ὦ πεπλήγετο μηρῶ
 Ἄσιος Ὑρτακίδης, καὶ ἀλαστήσας ἔπος ἤυδα·

(Il. 12, 162—63)

Kad to začu srpski car Stjepane,
 udari se rukom po kolenu.

(Vuk, II, 27, 87—88)

(When the Serbian tsar Stjepan heard it,
 he beat on his knee with his hand.)

Both Greek and Serbian heroes behave like that very often (cf. Il. 15, 113—14, Il. 16, 124—25 and Vuk, II, 46, 141—42, Vuk, IV, 40, 40—42).

In the Balkan mountains it was sometimes necessary for a hero to have a strong voice, and not only 'a fast hand' and excellent arms. Homer compares the voice of Stentor to a voice of fifty other men together (Il. 5, 785—86). For Ares' voice he says:

Ὅ δ' ἔβραχε, χάλκεος Ἄρης,
 ὅσσον τ' ἐννιάχιλοι ἐπίαχον ἢ δεκάχιλοι
 ἄνδρες ἐν πολέμῳ ἔριδα ξυνάγοντες Ἄρης.

(Il. 5, 859—61)

Running away from Grčić Manojlo, Starina Novak seems even to be competing with Ares:

podvikuje iz grla bijela,
 bre koliko Novak podvikuje,
 sve sa gore lišće otpadaše,
 i sa zemlje trava polijeće.

(Vuk, III, 6, 296—99)

(He shouts from his white throat,
 with such a strong voice,
 that the leaves fall down from the trees
 and the grass gets blown up from the ground).

These are a few examples from the many similar reactions of the Homeric and Serbian heroes, which M. N. Djurić enumerates as follows: the heroes shout, grind their teeth and glare with their eyes, and converse with their horses; further, they are very proud but care a lot about public opinion. The motif of *obiectus pectorum* is common in both epic poetries and it is used, as the last means of convincing, when all other means are exhausted.⁵

However, even some prehomeric elements were still alive at the time when certain Serbocroatian songs originated, and which are, hence, of particular interest. One of the motifs which survived from Mycenaean mythology through Hellenic religion and continuously lived in the Balkan region even at the time the Slavs came, was later expressed in the well-known Bürger's ballad *Lenore*. This motif somehow remained preserved as a trace of their pagan past among newly converted Christians, and even by those who later accepted Islam⁶. In the song *Braća i sestra* (Brothers and the sister, Vuk, I, 5) the motif of returning from the grave is woven into a story in which the youngest of the nine brothers who died in the plague, comes out from his grave in order to visit his married sister. In one of the variants of the ancient Greek myth, Kastor and Polydeukes undertook an expedition to Attica, where they set free their sister Helena, who was married to Theseus. In other variants of the myth of Dioscuri (Λευκὸ πῶλω) the chief god permitted the brothers to meet each other after Kastor's death. Polydeukes, as he was immortal, was allowed to visit Kastor every second day, because they loved each other so much that they could not stand to be separated even after death came to the mortal brother. In the Serbocroatian song the Christian god also had pity on the desperate, lonely sister. So he permits a brother, against all Christian traditions, to cross the unbridgeable border between life and death and to go to console his sister. Just the existence of great sorrow and disconsolateness on the part of the two loving persons, who are forced to be separated forever, would not be sufficient to speak of the long tradition of a motif. The motif of Orpheus and Euridike would be more characteristic for such a circumstance. Besides, such a motif would not be complete in the Serbocroatian song because the sister Jelica does not even know that her brother is dead. However, what was characteristic in the cult of Zeus' twin sons, is preserved even as to its details in the cited Serbocroatian song. That is the reason that makes us connect the Serbocroatian song with the ancient Mycenaean myth.

M. P. Nilsson finds the origin of the Spartan myth of Dioscuri in the prehellenic myth of chthonian deities, whose symbols most often were snakes or birds. Zeus begot them in the guise of a bird. Their sister Helena was a Mycenaean tree-goddess. The snake was their

⁵ Etc., cf. M. N. Djurić, *op. cit.* passim.

⁶ Cf. H. Trnavci, *Motiv o sestri i mrtvom bratu u usmenoј književnosti balkanskih naroda*, Beograd, 1969, p. 11—12 (Diss.).

secret animal and representative.⁷ Later in the Greek myth they are generally represented by their horses, Xanthos and Kyllaros. The oldest reliefs, like those in the archeological museum in Sparta, represent them with all three attributes together: the horses, the birds and the snakes.

In the Serbocroatian variants containing this motif the Christian god gave orders either to two angels or to two saints to supply the youngest brother with a horse.

Od groba mu konja načinite
(From his grave make him a horse)

(Vuk, II, 8, 40)

Od zemlje mu konja učiniše
(They made him a horse from the earth)

(MH, I, 29, 75)

The same verse, with a slight modification, is repeated in a variant of the same song (MH, I, p. 515). In the song *Mrtvi pohodjani* (The dead visitors) even nine horses are made.

Devet dobrih otvorite groba,
od mrtvih ih učinite žive,
od pokrova skrojite haljine.
Od zemljice skuvajte pogaču,
a od mraka podajte njim konja.

(MH, I, 30, 67—71)

(Open the nine good graves,
turn the dead into the alive,
cut clothes for them from the cover.
From earth cook them unleavened cakes,
and supply them with horses of darkness).

The horses have a special function here: they serve for flying; across the sea in Vuk's variant and to the 'ravna Indija' (plain India) in the others.

Podiglo se devet braće mile,
devet braće devet sokolova,
na 'po devet konja paunova.

(The nine dear brothers,
the nine brothers, the nine falcons,
flew on the nine horses, on the nine peacocks.)

⁷ M. P. Nilsson, *A History of Greek Religion*, 2 ed., New York, 1964, pp. 34 and 124.

The same motif is preserved in Albanian, Modern Greek and other Balkan oral poetry,⁸ what is another sign of its common Balkan origin.

Another variant of the same motif, the so-called 'Lenore' motif, is widespread all over Europe. As one can see in Aarne-Thompson's index, this motif is to be found in many languages.⁹

The 'Lenore' motif seems to be a somewhat narrowed and more precise modification of a more general motif of returning from the grave:

The dead bridegroom carries off his bride.
He carries her behind on his horse. He says:
"The moon shines bright, the dead ride fast."
(Thompson, loc. cit.)

We can find a similar verse in almost all Serbocroatian variants:

Nu poslušaj moj rođeni brate!
Što to veli ptica golubica:
"Mrtav braco živu seku vodi!"
(MH, I, 29, 119—121)

(Listen, my dear brother,
to what the hen-pigeon is saying:
"The dead brother carries his living sister!")

Vazdan piva ptica lastavica:
"Bože mili velika ti hvala
gdi živ isan s mrtvim hodijaše."
(MH, I, 30, 110—111)

(The swallow sings all the time:
"Dear God, your name be praised,
there is an alive being walking with a dead one.")

For the same motif cf. and MH, I, p. 516.

From all these examples one may conclude that, even if the 'Lenore' motif was introduced to the Balkan peninsula from somewhere else, it must have found an ancient and vivid tradition with all its archaic elements.

One of the cases where the international motifs are interwoven with the real historical events and persons is undoubtedly the motif of the husband who went to the war long ago and arrives home just

8. Cf. H. Trnavci, *op. cit.*

⁹ *The Types of Folktale. A Classification and Bibliography.* Antti Aarne. Translated and Enlarged by Stith Thompson, Second Revision, Helsinki, 1961 (FF Communications N:o 184), 365.

as his wife is going to marry another. This is the No. 974 motif in Aarne-Thompson's index. But it should be mentioned that this index does not list the Serbocroatian rendering of the motif, although it occurs pretty often in this poetry.

In the Serbocroatian poetry the cited motif is most often connected with very eminent persons like Marko Kraljević and Stojan Janković. Besides that there are some interesting variants about Zemljanić Stipan. Father Mijo Pavlinović, who wrote down this song, remarked that he had heard many songs about Zemljanić Stipan, but that they were all incomplete and in the ikavian dialect. He added that it seemed to him that "this song was a very old one and came from prehistoric, nonchristian times".¹⁰

The origin of the song *Ropstvo Janković Stojana* (The Captivity of Janković Stojan) is rather strange. This captivity is historically connected with the „Candian war“ (Cretan war). Both the Candian war and Janković Stojan are real historical facts, but the way they are represented in the mentioned song shows many elements of fixed epic display of the motif: a longabsent warrior arrives home when his wife is to remarry. Surely, at the first moment one could think that it is not the very nature of the folk poetry to give a truthful and exact description of the events. Besides, it is difficult to determine how far, in time and space, the singer was from the event that he sang about.

But the folk song very often is not even a free interpretation of what really happened. If it were so, we would not have a repetition of the content structure again and again. Interpretations of different events in the folk song very often do not bifurcate in different directions, which is likely to be expected to being more close to the historical truth, but rather they unite in the fixed, simplified, mainly inherited structure of the events. What varies is details, names, places where something happened, and other similar external features. The structure of the content alone almost always shows, though, such striking similarities that one is to conclude that not only the form of folk epic song and the technique of singing were fixed, but that to some degree there were stereotyped ideas — content clichés.

In the song *Ropstvo Janković Stojana* Smiljanić Ilija is mentioned as being together with Janković Stojan in Turkish captivity. They both were real historical persons and took part in the Candian war, between Turkey and Venice (1645—1669). The battles were fought not only on the island of Crete but also on the Balkan peninsula. In one of the battles (the battle of Sinj, 1660) Janković Stojan was captured and taken as a war prisoner to Constantinople. Fourteen months later he escaped, leaving in Constantinople two newborn sons and a Turkish wife, whom he had married although he had already had a wife at home.¹¹

¹⁰ V. MH, V, p. 55.

¹¹ Cf. *Historija naroda Jugoslavije*, vol. II, Zagreb, 1959, pp. 557 and 563.

A real image of what happened is given in the beginning verses of the song, except that the folk singer does not want to mention Stojan's Constantinople marriage:

Kad no Turci Kotar porobiše,
poaraše dvore Jankovića,
zarobiše Smiljanić Iliju,
zarobiše Janković Stojana.
U Ilije mlada osta ljuba,
mlada ljuba od petnaest dana;
u Stojana mladja osta ljuba,
mladja ljuba od nedelje dana.
U Stambol i odvedoše Turci,
pokloniše caru čestitome.
Tamo bili za devet godina
i desete za sedam meseci,
tamo i je care poturčio,
kod sebe im dvore sagradio.

(Vuk, III, 51, 114—127)

(When the Turks captured Kotar,
they devastated the house of Janković,
they captured Smiljanić Ilija,
they captured Janković Stojan.
Ilija left his young wife,
the young wife married fifteen days ago;
Stojan left his even more recently married wife,
his wife married a week ago.
The Turks took them to Constantinople,
and presented them to the sultan.
They remained there for nine years
and seven months of the tenth year,
the sultan converted them into Islam,
and built them houses there.)

According to the regular use of certain numbers in folk poetry (like 3, 7, 9 and others), especially if they perfectly fit into the pattern of the dekasyllabic line, Stojan and Ilija naturally had to remain captured for nine years and seven months, because otherwise it would be impossible for the folk singer to introduce the dramatic and painful point that Stojan's own mother confesses that she has already forgotten her son. The nine-year captivity is a fixed term, although it sometimes lasts twice as long. Stojan comes back from his captivity on the very day that his wife is to remarry, and that recalls very much Odysseus' homecoming. Stojan does not go straight to his house, but first he goes to the vineyard where he meets his mother, similar to Odysseus, who first visited his father in the servants' house before he let his wife know that he was back...

The singer of the song *Ropstvo Janković Stojana* had a rather confused and clichéd knowledge of the Candian war. In some other Serbocroatian folk songs some other aspects of the same war are expressed. I mean the songs *Sultanije robinje* (Sultan's wives as slaves, Vuk, III, 16) and *Sultanije u Kandiji* (Sultan's wives in Candia, MH, III, 2). The first song is a Christian version, but only "a piece of the song", ('komat od pjesme', Vuk) is preserved. The second song is a Muslim variant and, according to the singer from whom the collector heard the song, "our oldest Turkish song". Both songs are about a long war which took place on the islands of Crete or Malta because of the captivity of the sultan's wives. It is possible that in these songs we have another cliché of the theme which is generally regarded as having given rise to the Trojan war. At any rate, it is very interesting that the folk singer expresses his ideas about a long war between the Christians and the Turks in the 17th century, using the main elements which are known to us from Homeric épopées. What is more important, these similarities of motifs are found in the poetry of both participants in this war, the Christians and the Turks. In both of the variants the story is pretty far from the real historical base. In light of the foregoing, it is possible that the long-disputed question of the so-called *Ilias quaedam Phrygia* may be seen and interpreted as the 'Iliad of the other non-Achaic side of the Trojan war'.

Thus, we seem to come back again to what I called the clichés of content which would deny to some extent the old thesis of the same social conditions resulting in the same motifs. It is not known that the Candian war was fought because of a woman or women. Neither is it known if the wife of Stojan Janković really was to remarry during Stojan's absence. But it is known that he was married while being in Turkish captivity. Taking all these in consideration it is difficult to see which were the "same conditions" that could produce such striking similarities between Homeric and Serbocroatian epic poetry. The similar historical conditions and the whole spiritual climate might have influenced the *originating* of the epic poetry, but it does in no way mean that the *story* alone, with all its mythological burden, told in that poetry should be the result of what really happened and that all the small details must actually be repeated in the life of the later generations. The hypothesis that the long duration of the Candian war activated the motifs, which were in a kind of latent existence in the imagination of the people, thus seems to be more and more likely.

On the other hand, we can hardly say something like that for the strange song about Zemljanić Stipan. Even the name of the hero is very strange. One of the variants of his name reads Zemljeni Stjepan (Stjepan Made of Earth). He really appears as being made of earth in the beginning verses of the song, which sound really mythical:

Zaplinule noge do kolina,
 prionule ruke za kamenje.
 (MH, V, 4, 5—6)

(He was immersed into the earth up to his knees
 and he was affixed to the rocks by his hands).

Because all of the variants of this song are incomplete, it is not clear why and how Stipan found himself in that desperate situation, nor is it known how long he remained, as Prometheus once did, bound to the rock. This unreal situation is resolved with the help of *vis maior*. That makes the end of the song sound even more strange:

Tad on idje dvoru bijelome.
 Kad u dvoru kićeni svatovi,
 redom svati jedan do drugoga,
 među njima Zemljanova ljuba,
 ona nosi sablju Stipanovu:
 „Tko mi hoće sablju otklopiti,
 onog ću se ja nazvati ljuba.“
 Al je nitko otklopit ne može.
 Išće sablju crni Bugarine,
 oni njemu sablju dodadoše.
 Sablja mu se otklopila sama.
 Tu govori previjerna ljuba:
 „O, junaci, kićeni svatovi;
 eto meni Zemljanić Stipana!“ —
 Stipe siće kićene svatove,
 siće Stipe na obadve ruke.
 Nitko Stipi tute ne ostade,
 sama osta ostarila majka,
 i njegova previjerna ljuba.
 (42—60)

(Then he went to his white house.
 But in the house there was a wedding-party,
 there were many wedding-guests all around,
 among them was the Zemljanić's wife,
 and she carried the sabre of Stipan:
 "I will be the wife of that one
 who can draw out the sabre from the sheat."
 But nobody could draw out the sabre.
 The black Bulgarian asked for the sabre,
 and they gave it to him.
 (In his hands) the sabre was drawn out by itself.
 Then his very true wife spoke:
 "Oh, heroes, wedding-guests!
 Here is my Zemljanić Stipan!"

Stipe began to kill the wedding-guests,
 Stipe killed them with both his hands.
 He did not leave anyone alive there,
 but his old mother,
 and his very true wife.)

And spontaneously one gets the impression that the whole song, containing only sixty verses, was composed in order to show the situation described in the last third of the song. There we find the following elements:

1. The husband comes home disguised (as a "black Bulgarian"), so that no one — neither his mother, his wife, nor all the wooers — could recognize him;
2. The wife tests the wooers by giving them her husband's arms;
3. None of the wooers can use the arms;
4. Only the disguised husband can use the arms;
5. The recognition on the basis of the ability to use the arms;
6. The husband revenges himself by killing all the wooers;
7. The wife is shown to be true.

There is no need to emphasize the close correspondences between all these elements in *The Odyssey* and in *Zemljanić Stipan*. Some details vary — the kind of arms, for instance. But it is the common feature of the art of the folk singer that he deals with the arms he knows.

To these examples could be added two songs that Stjepan Banović examined in the cited article: *Bojčić Delalija i bane od Janoka* (Bojičić Delalija and the ban of Jančak) and *Kako je Primorac Ilija postrijeljao ženine prosce* (How Primorac Ilija shot is wife's wooers). The correspondences in the particular details between these songs and Homer's *Odyssey* are so obvious that it makes it difficult to believe what the author says about the origin of the song *Kako je Primorac Ilija postrijeljao ženine prosce* in the region of Makarsko primorje. He claims that this poem is an expression of the 'Odyssey motif' which independently lived in this area, conquering all the obstacles of isolation between Homer and modern times and thus being the only exception among all folk literatures in the world (p. 228). S. Banović, in fact, mentions a very strong literary tradition in translating and investigating Homer in Dalmatian monasteries, but he does not think that this tradition influenced the origin of this particular song. Unfortunately, this song was quite unknown until he published it in 1951. Some linguistic and stylistic features would indicate the relatively recent origin of the song. The most obvious are often, almost regular rhymes and expressions like "curicu rumenu ružicu", "i staricu majku milosnicu", "i sve moje stanje i imanje", etc. It seems to be advisable to connect this poem with the literary tradition, but the thing still remains to be studied further.

The aim of this paper was to remind of some details, which are not very often mentioned, in the study of Serbocroatian folk poetry, as well as to try to indicate some small additions to this study. A new interpretation of some symbols from the inventory of Serbocroatian folk songs has been proposed.

A strange inter-play of flying horses (as contaminatoin of horses and birds, which are also mentioned) and chthonian powers has been separated from the main stream of Lenore-motif and paralleled to the requisits used in one of the oldest Balkan cults — the cult of Dioscuri. They represented a sort of synthesis of chthonian and celestal powers, which was indicated not only by attributing them proprieties of snakes, birds and horses, but also in the story of the ancient myth which showed one of the twin brothers mortal, and the other immortal.

When I speak of Balkan origin of the motifs, I mean that they originated not only on the Balkan mainland, but also on the islands (Crete, for instance), as well. So the origin of Dioscuri-cult may be considered Balkan.

Another representation of common Balkan elements was sought in a detailed analysis of some Serbocroatian songs which share many content features with the *Odyssey*. It was pointed out that the presentation of the Candian war in the folk poetry, both of the Christian and Muslim inhabitants of the Balkans, was very instructive in order to see how the clichés of the content originate.

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