

The Singers and their Epic Songs¹

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One finds mention of the folk poetry of the South Slavs beginning with the seventh, then in the tenth century, and, in relation to the epic songs in particular, from the thirteenth century forward. Documents of any length bearing on the epic songs become more and more numerous among all South Slavic peoples from the fifteenth century, and they are printed for the first time in *Fishing (Ribanje)* by the Dalmatian author P[etar] Hektorović. From the first half of the eighteenth century, there already exist ample manuscript collections as well as numerous enough imitations of epic songs: among the latter the *Pleasant Conversation of the Slavic People (Razgovor ugodni naroda slovinskoga)* by the Franciscan Croatian monk Andrija Kačić-Miošić, originally of the Makarska region in Dalmatia, stands out; this poem dates from 1756 and eventually became the single most widespread Croatian book. Kačić-Miošić sang episodes from the history of all the South Slavic peoples, and especially of their battles against the Turks, in the spirit of the true folk epic poetry, and he included in his work a considerable number of actual folk songs. It was through the Latin translation of this work that for the first time the world heard the “Illyrian bards” speak. Nevertheless, the principal architect of their glory was an Italian naturalist, the abbot Alberto Fortis, who in his *Viaggio in Dalmazia* (1774) devoted an entire chapter to the music and poetry of the mountain folk of Dalmatia, the “Morlaks,” and published the original as well as an Italian translation of one of the finest folk epic songs, the *Sad Ballad of the Noble Spouse of Hasanaga*. Through the translation made by Goethe, which was printed for the first time in the *Volkslieder* of Herder (1778), where some translations of Kačić-Miošić are also to be found, this ballad became an integral part of world literature; it was also translated five times into French. Fortis had compared the Illyrian national epic songs to Ossian; the comparison to Homer was made in principle as early as the end of the eighteenth century by a physician from Split named

¹ Text enlarged and completed from the lectures given at the Sorbonne the 23rd, 24th, and 25th of May 1928, at the invitation of the Institute for Slavic Studies. The first part appeared in Murko 1928.

Bajamonti, and by a poet from Ragusa writing in Latin, Ferić (*Ad clarissimum virum Julium Bajamontium Georgii Ferich Ragusini epistola*, Ragusa, 1799).

It was from these sources, as well as through his personal relations with the Serbs and Croats, that a Viennese slavist, the Slovenian B. Kopitar, would learn of the great richness of their national songs. He sought to insure that these songs were collected. The unhappy outcome of the First Serbian Revolt in 1813 brought to Vienna Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, descendant of a Hercegovinian family, a talented and self-educated peasant whom Kopitar would make the reviser of the orthography and written language of the Serbs, an excellent grammarian, a remarkable lexicographer, and the celebrated collector of Serbian folk songs, proverbs, and tales. In the period of romantic enthusiasm for folk poetry and the national ethos, the first edition of Karadžić's Serbian national songs (1814-15) was to be received with correspondingly great enthusiasm, notably by Jakob Grimm: the second edition (Leipzig, 1823-24; Vienna 1833), in the wake of the excellent and musical translation by Miss Talvj (later to become Mrs. Robertson), provoked among the scientific critics² (once more above all Jakob Grimm), among Goethe and the poets, a veritable ecstasy that, thanks to other translations, won over all of Europe and even America.

This gave way in France to the famous hoax by Mérimée: *The Guslar, or a Selection of Illyrian Poems Collected in Dalmatia, Bosnia, Croatia, and Hercegovina* (Strasbourg, 1827). Goethe recognized that this collection was a fraud, and was greatly amused with it, but the Englishman Bowring, the German W. Gerhard, and even the great Russian poet Pushkin made translations of these supposed folk songs. Nevertheless, the French had also at hand a translation of the genuine national songs of Vuk Karadžić in the *Folk Songs of the Serbians Collected by Vuk Karadžić and Translated in the Manner of Talvj*, by Miss Elise Voiart (Paris, 1834, 2 vols.).

The third edition, much enlarged, of folk songs collected by Vuk, called the "Vienna edition" (1841-65), established their reputation and became the basis for scientific study as well as for new translations (of which the best was by S. Kapper, into German at first and then afterward into Czech). At the end of the last century there appeared in Belgrade a new standard edition, augmented by numerous epic songs found in Vuk's papers, songs which he had put aside for various reasons during his lifetime. Today the complete collection comprises nine substantial octavo volumes, of which only two, the first and the fifth, contain lyric songs, all of the others being completely composed of epic songs, a fact that

² That is, the practitioners of the "scientific" approach to literature and language—philology [Ed.].

characterizes well the richness of the Yugoslav folk epic poetry.³

Even during Vuk's lifetime, as well as after his death, the Serbs and Croats published a whole series of collections of folk songs, enough to fill a library. And one should mention the collections of songs from the seventeenth and first half of the eighteenth centuries from all along the southern Adriatic coast, those of Miklosich and B. Bogišić, member of the Institute, as well as the songs from the first half of the eighteenth century from the northwestern regions that were found in Erlangen in Bavaria and recently published by G. Gesemann; the collection of the Croatian Society (Matica Hrvatska) of Zagreb, whose rich resources furnished numerous variants—notably in volumes V and VI—and a selection of Moslem folk songs from the northwest of Bosnia—volumes II and IV (1898, 1899)—whose introduction, which we owe to Luka Marjanović, constitutes the finest study of the folk epic poetry that has been written since Vuk Karadžić. Ten years previously, Kosta Hörmann had published in Sarajevo a first anthology of Moslem folk songs from the entire Bosnia-Herzegovina area.

In the period of the Turkish invasions, the Slovenians also had an abundant epic literature, and many magnificent ballads were transcribed at the end of the eighteenth century and during the first half of the nineteenth. The first critical edition of these folk songs was that of K. Štrekelj. This collection was at the same time the finest made in any Slavic tongue.

The example of the Serbs and Croats was followed by the Bulgarians; for them folk epic poetry did not exist except in the western regions, and that poetry was comparable—in an earlier period—to that of the Serbs and Croats, but with less artistic finish in the form. Mostly after their liberation, the Bulgarians published numerous documents [recording this tradition], in large part in the *Sbornik za narodni umotvorenija* [*Anthology of Folklore*].

Among the South Slavs, the best known folk epic poetry is that of the Serbs; Vuk Karadžić was the first to study it in his great and classic collection, where from the start none but the finest songs played a part, edited in conformity with his linguistic and aesthetic principles: the official edition put together in Belgrade nearly doubled the size of the original. It is on Vuk's collection, which appeared precisely during the period of romantic enthusiasm for the folk song, that the greater part (and the best) of subsequent translations was based.⁴

Nevertheless, today one merges the epic poetry of the Serbs and that

³ But see now the songs published posthumously from Vuk's manuscripts: Mladenović and Nedić 1973-74 [Ed.].

⁴ In France: A. d'Avril, *La Bataille de Kossovo* (an attempt to gather together all of the poems on Kosovo into a single unique collection); Auguste Dozon, *L'Épopée serbe: Poésies populaires serbes*; F. Funck-Brentano, *Chants populaires des Serbes*.

of the Croats under the single heading of Serbo-Croatian epic poetry, just as one does with the language of these two branches of the same people; this poetry was and remains equally alive among both groups, it has traveled from east to west and from north to south and back, and it has been equally collected, imitated, and celebrated in both regions. Since a significant part of the poetic oeuvre stems from Moslems who were often neither Serbs nor Croats, it is better to apply the more general term "Yugoslav."

This Serbo-Croatian, or Yugoslav, folk poetry, in particular the epic poetry, became an important element of the national literature; for some time it was considered the only form of modern literature among the Serbs, the necessary basis for the written language reformed by Vuk Karadžić. That was why the national poetry was excessively praised not only by romantic authors and patriots, but also by rigorous philologists; on the other hand, in more recent times it has gone unacknowledged, and today the popular epic poetry is much less familiar to the Yugoslav intellectuals themselves.

Among the Slavic peoples, the Russians, far to the north, have an abundant folk epic poetry, very ancient and very interesting in its imaginative character. The name of these national songs, *byliny* or *stariny*, corresponds to that of the French *chansons de geste*. The Ukrainians have preserved only a small number of moving and more lyrico-epic *dumy*, related to battles undertaken against the Tatars and the Turks. The richest, the most perfect from an artistic point of view, the most realistic and the most humane of the Slavic folk epic poems is the Serbo-Croatian, which is further distinguished again by the fact that it has remained alive to our time and has preserved its creative power. This epic poetry, which even before being universally known was compared to that of Ossian and Homer, offers analogies with the ancient works and sheds light on Greek folk epic poetry and on that of the Romance and Germanic peoples. It presents in one respect an advantage over Old French and medieval Spanish epic: whereas the Romance traditions often allude to the battles against the Saracens and the Arabs, without our having any songs from the enemy featuring Christian heroes [in a different light], among the Yugoslavs there exist at the present time anti-Christian songs, often celebrating the same heroes as do the Christian poems, since the Turks, with whom the Yugoslavs were perpetually at battle, were for the greater part of the time Moslems in the same country (in Serbo-Croatian *musliman*).

These Moslems ordinarily showed more fanaticism than real Turks, although they might have spoken the Serbo-Croatian language. The Bosnian beys had a great influence in Turkey, and they long dominated not only Bosnia, Serbia, and Montenegro, but also the greatest part of Dalmatia and Croatia, all of Slovenia, and most of Hungary. It will suffice merely to

cast a glance over a religious map of Bosnia-Hercegovina⁵ to determine how complicated the region still is today, even after the emigration of a great number of Moslems. In the villages, Moslems are usually in the majority relative to Orthodox, Catholics, and Jews.

The Moslem epic songs attracted my attention because of their interest in innovation [*nouveauté*] against the background of their importance for the history of the civilization. I drew up a report on these songs at the international congress held in Berlin in 1908.⁶ In 1909, 1912, and 1913 I made trips of some duration through Bosnia and Hercegovina, as well as neighboring regions of Croatia and Dalmatia, with the intention of studying the folk epic poetry *in situ*. I quickly realized that I would not be able to, nor should I, limit myself to consideration of Moslem epic poetry, which was intimately connected in all respects to the epic poetry of the Catholic and Orthodox peoples. An example will make the point. In the course of my second field trip, I entered a café one day during Ramadan (in Serbo-Croatian *ramazan*), the month of fasting for Moslems, where every night a Catholic singer performed songs for Moslems. Surprised, I inquired how this situation was possible. They answered: "We live in harmony: *onda bilo, sad se spominjalo* (that which was, one evokes its memory now)."⁷ From this moment on, I was no longer amazed to see Christian singers performing for the beys and pashas of Bosnia for weeks and entire months. Among the people, Moslems listen to Christian singers just as Christians listen to Moslem singers. It can happen that the songs are selected or adapted, but on the whole there is no need for this, because each *junak* (hero) is universally honored, with whatever acknowledgment is fitting.

I have furnished preliminary, detailed reviews in the publications of the Viennese Academy of Sciences⁸ on the principal results of these field trips and on the phonographic transcription of songs from Bosnia and Hercegovina. I could not then write a work of more depth on the folk epic poetry, the [First World] War and the unstable situation of the Yugoslav territories having prevented me from resuming my fieldwork for some

⁵ See *Razdioba*.

⁶ See Murko 1909.

⁷ This decasyllabic phrase is a very common formula in Serbo-Croatian epic, especially Moslem epic; it occurs almost exclusively during the *pripjev* (or proem) to songs, as the singer is describing the process of traditional oral performance in preparation for the start of his narrative. [Ed.]

⁸ See Murko 1912, 1913, 1915a and b. I have furnished an abstract of my remarks, from the perspective of literary history, in my study Murko 1919.

time.⁹ It was not until 1924 that I could travel within the ancient *sandžak* of Novi Pazar, which up to 1913 had been under Turkish domination and was linked historically and administratively with Bosnia-Hercegovina until the occupation of these provinces by Austria-Hungary. I found in Novi Pazar a situation analogous to that which could have prevailed in Bosnia-Hercegovina before the occupation of 1878, and I made acquaintance with a patriarchal way of life that was truly epic, extremely idiosyncratic but very durable.¹⁰

In 1927 I wished to see the land of the famous ballad about Hasanaga's wife; to my delight I found the folk epic poetry still alive in that Croatian region near the small village of Imotski in Dalmatia (which continued under Turkish domination until 1717), but it was in vain that I sought stories about Hasanaga and Pintorović bey; nonetheless, I believe that one could, with the aid of documents drawn from Dalmatian and Bosnian archives, put together a survey of the properties owned by their descendants. On the other hand, the tragic conflict of this "sad ballad" now became clear to me for the first time. It is because she had been raised so strictly according to Moslem customs that Hasanaga's wife was not able, for modesty's sake, to go see her ill husband, even though he longed for her visit, having himself already acquired more humanistic, more Western attitudes in the course of frequent travels to the cities of great civilization along the nearby Adriatic coast. I also went to see the homeland of A[nđrija] Kačić[-Miošić], but there the folk epic poetry is already dead.

During my trips I did not seek new songs, and I did not transcribe any, except in fragments—such recording being a difficult task at best, and, at the time of harvest and the other labors associated with agriculture, almost impossible. But I gladly compared written and sung texts when the songs were printed; in addition, one day I studied two songs that the same singer had dictated twenty years previously in Zagreb and which had gone through important and instructive changes.

The essential purpose of my observations was to come to know the manner in which the folk epic poetry lives; who the singers are; for whom, when, and how they sing; whether folk songs are still being created; and why the folk poetry is disappearing and dying. Many of my observations confirm, complete, or clarify facts already known, but I have also gathered a fair amount of new material. My reports [note 8 above], which appeared during the Balkan Wars and World War I, were not circulated widely enough, but they did attract the attention of specialists on folk epic poetry.

⁹ But see his posthumous work, *Tragom srpsko-hrvatske narodne epike: Putovanja u godinama* 1930-32, 2 vols., Djela Jugoslavenske Akademije Znanosti i Umjetnosti, knjige 41-42 (Zagreb: Jugoslavenska Akademija Znanosti i Umjetnosti, 1951) [Ed.].

¹⁰ See *Prager Presse*, 11 January and 25 January, 1925.

Engelbert Drerup showed how one could use my remarks for comparative studies in his work entitled *Homerische Epik* (I, *Das Homerproblem in der Gegenwart*).

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Where does narrative epic poetry still live in the mouths of its people? In the Vojvodina, that is to say in the southern part of ancient Hungary, and in Syrmia (western Slovenia), where it admitted to a certain poverty from the time before Vuk Karadžić, the poetry has died out completely; the same is true for Serbia, with the exception of the mountainous area in the southwest (the Russian Hilferding had already found nothing there in 1868-69). In Slovenia, where toward the end of the eighteenth century epic songs were still often sung and imitated, there are none today. In southwest Croatia, from which region came a number of Vuk Karadžić's fine songs, they are in the process of disappearing. On the other hand, they are still sung frequently enough in the mountainous areas of Dalmatia, which were neglected by their Venetian and Austrian governments, and which preserved a character as patriarchal as certain other Balkan lands. Where the national epic poetry is very well conserved is in Bosnia, and better yet in Hercegovina and Montenegro, chiefly on the ancient border between these latter two provinces, where Christians and Moslems did not cease from continuous battles until the occupation of Bosnia-Hercegovina in 1878, and in the *sandžak* of Novi Pazar situated between Montenegro and Serbia before the Balkan Wars. These are in general lands of plateaus, inhabited by the people of the Dinaric Alps—strong, heroic, and at the same time possessed of a delicate sensibility and endowed with a natural rapport between imagination and intelligence, as well as with a sense for language and form.¹¹

Vuk Karadžić called these epic songs “heroic” (*junačke*), but he likewise represents among them mythological songs, legends, stories, and ballads. The people themselves employ the term “heroic” (*pjesme junačke, o junacima, o junaštvu*) or “ancient” (*starinske*, cp. Russian *stariny*) to designate those songs that celebrate heroes, or personages of more or less historical character. These songs constitute the greater part of the popular epic poetry; they are much enjoyed and renowned.

The song itself, which is usually a species of recitation mixed with music, is performed with accompaniment on a primitive instrument, the *gusle* (in Hercegovina and in Montenegro the ancient form *gusli* is customarily preserved), a sort of violin with horse-hair strings, more often one but two in the northwest regions. In northwest Bosnia, the Moslems exclusively employ—and the Christians also make some use of—the

¹¹ J. Cvijić, *Govori i članci*, II, pp. 80ff.; Branko Lazarević, *Tři jihoslovanské nejvyšší hodnoty*, p. 6.

tambura or *tamburica*, a type of small guitar or mandolin with two metal strings which is likewise known in the north of Dalmatia and in the district of the Lika in Croatia, and which was formerly used in Slovenia.

Scholars have long spoken, in the spirit of romanticism, of the people-as-singer [*peuple-chanteur*] or of the people-as-bard [*peuple aède*] (in German *das singende Volk*), and have truly believed that it was the people as a whole in a nation who sang. Today it is known that the representatives of the folk epic poetry are certain gifted individuals, spread in more or less great numbers through the lands and the villages of a patriarchal civilization. Among the people, these representatives are called simply the “singers” (*pjevač, piva*); their literary name of *guslar* (player of a *gusle*, in ordinary speech *guslač* among the people) is in less common use and is less exact, since a large percentage of singers do not accompany themselves on the *gusle*. There is no condition or profession one would find unrepresented among them. In the countryside the singers are for the most part farmers; in the towns they are artisans. In the mountainous regions they are mostly shepherds who delight in singing the epic songs, and these songs were naturally cultivated by the *hajduks* [“outlaws, brigands”], common during the revolts in Turkey and also in the Christian lands, against the public order, ordinarily for the sake of idealism. Among the singers were also found, and are still found today, the noblest Moslem lords, the beys, as well as priests of all faiths up to and including an Orthodox archbishop. The epic song was especially honored among the native monks of the Franciscan order, and the devotion which they showed it went so far that in 1909 in a seminary in the Mostar district I saw a *gusle* hanging on a hook above the bed of every novice.

Besides these amateurs, one also encounters professional singers, especially among the Moslems, in northwest Bosnia and further south. Even those who in most recent times ordinarily sang in Turkish coffeehouses, usually in winter and during the month of Ramadan, had and customarily still have some occupation, but formerly there existed among them true professionals who travelled in the orbit of Moslem nobility from one to the next, staying in one place for weeks and months to entertain the master and his guests. Many nobles supported their own particular singers, who were occasionally even Christian. This position was equivalent to that of servants of an elevated rank or of soldiers, more exactly non-commissioned officers such as commanders of squads and standard-bearers (*bajraktar[i]*); at the court of Dedaga Čengiđ, son of Smailaga Čengiđ, the tale of whose death was sung by the Croatian poet Ivan Mažuranić in a celebrated epic, there was, during the second half of the last century, a singer of this type who held the rank of commandant. These traces of Moslem traditions would allow us to formulate an idea of the way in which the oral epic poetry lived in centuries past, even if we were to

ignore the fact that it had been cultivated among the Serbian, Bosnian, and Croatian nobility. There is no doubt in my mind that the real folk epic poetry springs, in the same way as does folk art in general (the costumes, for example), from the most elevated Christian and Moslem social milieus, but, in the course of centuries, has evolved along its own lines.

I must also address myself to another assumption. The legendary Homer is represented as blind, and some indications given by Vuk Karadžić himself have encouraged the erroneous impression that many of the singers, and especially the best of them, are blind. In reality, in the lands where the national epic poetry is still flourishing, blind singers are extremely rare, and these unhappy individuals usually lost their sight at an advanced age, most of the time as the result of smallpox. It is only in the regions where the folk epic poetry is in the process of disappearing or is already dead that one sees blind and crippled beggars depending on singing for a way to exist.

I was surprised to observe that Moslem women know how to recite the epic songs, but not to sing them, and that among the Christian women singers are found, in the present day always as rare exceptions other than in the north of Dalmatia.

The singers begin to learn to play the *gusle* and to pick up the epic tradition from early childhood—on the knees of a father or grandfather, or of other relatives or friends, then in public—the greater part of the time between ten and twelve years of age, but always in general while young, “while they still have nothing else on their minds,” up until the age of perhaps twenty-five. It is ordinarily sufficient for them to hear a song sung a single time, though more than once when they grow older; yet in Gacko, the aged Janko Ceramić, 68 years old, assured me that he could repeat the next day an entire song heard the preceding evening. Nevertheless, the songs that make up this poetry called “oral” or “traditional” are not always transmitted from one mouth to the next; they are very often, and more and more, taken from books and pamphlets, and this practice goes on even in Hercegovina, the classical territory of the epic song. One can by no means dismiss the possibility that even the blind singers themselves might not have learned their songs from the mouths of other singers, since someone may have read the songs to them, [or] they could learn from another singer whom a priest, schoolmaster, or some other person has instructed. It is among the Moslems that the oral tradition is best preserved, because they are more traditional in spirit and think better of illiterates. The singer who learns a song that is read to him must have it repeated more times in order to know it.

The Moslem singers know how to evaluate those from whom they have learned their songs, and who are customarily are found among their kin. The Christian singers acquire material everywhere that people sing,

but often also at home or among their relatives. When they hear of a fine singer, they may travel many hours seeking him. A certain number of songs are spread about by travellers or by wagon-drivers and laborers who move around from place to place.

People sing during the long winter nights around the hearth and during gatherings (*sijelo*, *silo* [lit., “village”]) in the houses of well-to-do peasants, throughout the evenings, at the time of ritual and familial celebrations, and in general on all joyous occasions, especially weddings, which until recently lasted an entire week when they took place in the parents’ household, and longer still when the bride was brought from a distance. Thus it was that the singer Janko Ceramić of Gacko accompanied the guests of the Ljubušak beys for 34 days, when all three of them were married at a single time. In certain regions the groom’s family and that of the bride each has its own singer, and these two compete to see who will perform better and longer: it is a disgrace if another singer leaves the bride’s house victorious in such a competition. One also sings publicly in the coffeehouses, principally among the Moslems, at the time of *zbori* (masters’ assemblies or celebrations), [or] near the monasteries and churches, as at the markets. People would also often sing while traveling on horseback, mostly at night, but in this case without the *gusle*. Among Moslems in the north and northwest of Bosnia, there are singers who during the winter spend entire months journeying from territory to territory; in the season of Ramadan certain villages and their coffeehouses engage these singers for all or a part of the thirty-day duration. The pashas and feudal lords summoned such singers for Ramadan and for other occasions in order to entertain themselves and their guests. The women too were allowed to listen to the singers—but from behind a curtain, unless the singer were a parent to one of them, a person before whom they had no need to veil themselves. The nobles especially desired singers who would come for a stay of some length in their domain to settle down, to work there or collect taxes. Naturally, in the Christian villages they most often summoned singers who were also Christian. In a word, the national epic poetry was and is—for the nobility, the middle class, and peasantry—what concerts, theaters, and other amusements are for us. In Dalmatia a peasant told me this: “You people in the city, you have your music, and we have our songs.”

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It is therefore not surprising that these songs may be extremely long and may last many hours, an entire night and even, among the Moslems, two and three nights. Among the songs collected by Vuk Karadžić, there is one whose length some found astonishing: *The Wedding of Maksim Crnojević* (*Ženidba Maksima Crnojevića*), which comprised 1225 verses of ten syllables and filled 42 pages of printed text in a grand-octavo volume,

that is, a length greater than that of any book of the *Iliad* or *Odyssey*. In 1891 *The Wedding of Senjanin Tadija* was published, a song by an Orthodox singer of Travnik in Bosnia which runs 3412 decasyllabic verses. The Moslem songs are particularly long; the Croatian Society (Matica Hrvatska) in Zagreb has in its archives eleven songs from two to three thousand lines and four between three and four thousand lines; such length caused them to be set aside by the editor, and the longest published song [from this collection] has no more than 1862 lines.

First of all I make the observation that the singer can shorten or lengthen his songs at will according to his artistic personality; for example, there are singers who are famous for knowing better than anyone else how to portray a young girl or woman, a hero (*junak*), his horse or armament, while others do not occupy themselves at all with such things. A singer can also modify songs as he goes, according to the time available, his own mood, the audience before whom he is performing, and the payment he has reason to expect. Moreover, the audience can directly influence him, and, when a song lasts too long, someone may cry out to him: *Goni, goni!* ("faster, faster!" [lit. "get going, get going!"]). I cite the example of a certain prisoner from Lepoglava in Croatia, from whose dictation songs of 2500 and 4400 verses were transcribed, even though the same songs had no more than 1200 and 1500 verses when sung by the man in Bosnia who had taught him. One comes to realize that these songs are not sung continuously, but with pauses. Each session usually lasts a half-hour to an hour. In 1911, at a wedding in Hercegovina, a singer fifty years old sang for an hour and a half consecutively in a competition, from which he emerged victorious.

The singers are not prepared to specify exactly the number of songs that they know. They commonly say that they know 30 or 40, or a hundred, or better yet that they can sing a new one every night for three months, or even for a year. They do not usually exaggerate, and I would estimate that their repertoires might be even more considerable than they themselves indicate. To give an idea of the richness, I recall that between January 2 and February 17, 1887, in Zagreb the Moslem Salko Vojniković from Bosnia sang, or, to be more precise, dictated 90 songs comprising a total of 80,000 verses, about double the combined length of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, given that the decasyllabic verses are shorter than hexameters and the number of verses three times greater. And there have been philologists who doubted that a single singer could know all of Homer by heart! Such a memory is all the more astonishing in that the singer had no prompter.

People have long believed, and believe still, that the singers do not change their songs. Even John Meier, who remarked that the [Homeric] rhapsodes were improvisers, remained convinced by the accounts he had received of Russian and Yugoslav epic poetry that the singer would adhere

closely to the text and would not change one iota. I have already said that, on the contrary, he can shorten or lengthen his songs at will, and that the same poem can be very different in content in the versions of different singers. It is absolutely certain that under such conditions a text cannot remain unchanged. I have demonstrated this experimentally. On two occasions I brought with me a phonographic apparatus perfected by the Viennese Academy. I could not record the long epic songs on this machine, but it did suffice for fragments of less than 30 verses to verify something unexpected. Since it was necessary to write down each text before phonographic recording, I asked the singer first of all to practice outside the tent while a stenographer transcribed the text. I thus had three texts at the same time from a single session, and even four in one case.¹² The comparison showed that not only isolated words or word-order but entire verses appeared in a wholly new form or simply disappeared, so that of 15 dictated lines [in one version], for example, there might remain [in the next version] no more than 8 sung lines. A fine singer from northwest Bosnia himself modified the opening line on each occasion.

He said the first time:

Beg Osman beg rano podranio (etymological figure)
“Osmanbeg arose early”;

then while practicing:

Beg Osman beg na bedem izidje
“Osmanbeg mounted the ramparts”;

and afterward he sang:

Beg Osman beg niz Posavlje gleda.
“Osmanbeg gazed out over the Sava plain.”

Professor Vladimir Ćorović of Belgrade, originally a native of Hercegovina who therefore well understands the national epic poetry, has declared in a critical evaluation that the singer, embarrassed, made an

¹² Although the language is inexplicit, Murko is describing a process whereby he obtained at least three different texts of the same material, one or two of them recorded and one or two taken (sometimes without the singer’s knowledge) from dictation. Milman Parry and Albert Lord followed a similar procedure in their fieldwork, asking a *guslar* to repeat the opening of a song (called the “Proba” technique in Nikola Vujnović’s notes) or to perform the same song again a day or more later. Both the Murko and Parry-Lord experiments amounted to strategies through which they could obtain variant texts of the same material for comparative evaluation. See Murko’s deductions immediately below [Ed.].

error. There can be no question of such a thing with a professional singer. Accordingly, I paid particular attention to this issue the following year. In the Orthodox monastery of Duži near Trebinje in Hercegovina, we listened to the songs of a peasant associated with the monastery (*kmet* [a landless peasant]) and much beloved by the monks and the abbot. Earlier one of these monks and a schoolmaster had written down the beginning of one of his songs from dictation. I now requested that they transcribe the variants throughout the present song, but they were forced to give up at the second verse. I repeated the experience with a teacher and a student near Bijelo Polje in the *sandžak* with similar success. It is thus very clear to me that the songs we possess today in printed form were not all sung only a single time or, more exactly, dictated only a single time before being committed to writing. This is also why all of the attempts to reconstruct a song in its “original” form are futile. The comparison of different variants cannot enable us to determine the primitive content of a song or even parts or single verses. Having had the kind of experience described above, I was able to show¹³ that Vuk Karadžić had not written down the song *Jakšići kušaju ljube* (*The Jakšići Test their Wives*), which appears in his *Srpske narodne pjesme* of 1845 (the Belgrade edition, vol. 2, pp. 624-27), from dictation by a young man of eighteen years from Užica in Serbia, as he himself affirms—although the event is inherently possible—but that he simply borrowed it from the Croatian poet A. Reljković, who had published it in his *Satir* in 1779 to instruct the men of Slovenia not to place trust in their women. Vuk Karadžić reprinted it verse for verse, even though identity between texts from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries would be impossible, and according to his usual custom made changes in the song-text which were solely of a phonetic, morphological, and lexicographical order.

Most Moslem singers sang in expectation of reward. The beys gave them grain, horses, oxen, even pairs of oxen as in the case of the Hindu singer of the Rigveda, cows, sheep, clothing, and ducats, and even, as late as the last century in Hercegovina, land. In the course of recent years, people from these regions have passed from a natural economy to a cash economy, but, as for the singers, collections made with saucers in the coffeehouses yield less and less money, and the singers are “honored” today more often with coffee, tea, lemonade, cigarettes, and tobacco. In the case of the Christian singers, when they are not expressly hired, there is no question of payment; the custom is to give them only something to drink and to smoke. The singers all like to drink, chiefly the *aqua vitae* (*rakija* [highly distilled plum brandy]), since beer and wine do not have a salutary effect on the voice. Nevertheless, the Christian singers do not disdain these latter beverages. Such drinks do not adversely affect a singer, says one

¹³ *Sbornik prof. Jana Máchala*, pp. 329-35.

man, because for him “it passes while he is shouting.”¹⁴

The singers retain their songs as long as they do thanks to the well-known epic repetitions, utilized for example for messages, and to the various clichés reserved to celebrate aspects of feminine beauty, heroes, costumes, horses, arms, duels, and so on. I knew a Moslem singer, already affected by modern civilization, who sang these commonplaces, but who narrated the real action. Many singers recite one part while singing, another part while narrating. There are those who narrate better than they sing, but also those who do not know how to narrate at all. The Montenegrin Marko Miljanec, from the Vojvodina and self-taught, related to us the entire history of his clan (the *Kučići*) by alternating between recitation, for the old traditions, and verse. Poetry and prose can thus co-exist perfectly side by side, a fact which is not without importance for the study of analogous conditions in the ancient oral literature of other peoples.

The singer, seated, begins with an instrumental prelude on the *gusle* or on the *tamburica* (when he accompanies himself on the *tamburica*, he can also remain standing); then comes a short prologue during which he speaks about his art and assures [those present] that he is about to sing a “true” song about “the old times” or “the old heroes.”¹⁵ Often he also gives voice to his patriotic sentiments and offers greetings to the audience, in particular to those of an elevated social rank.

Of the musical aspect of the song, I can say nothing, not being a specialist. I merely make the observation that the song is on the whole a monotone recitation that produces a non-musical impression, and which is likewise incomprehensible to the cultivated people of the region, especially when they have lost contact with the common people.¹⁶ In any case, for the admirers of beautiful poems related to ancient Serbian history, it is better not to hear them sung. The Russian Rovinskij, author of a classic

¹⁴ This explanation may seem problematical to those who have never heard or seen a *guslar* perform. As indicated by the singers' own use of the verb *turiti* (“to drive out, impel”) to denote the actual singing of a song, oral performance is a very strenuous exercise that requires a good deal of physical exertion. Songs are not sung *sotto voce*, but in full voice in a manner approximating “shouting” (*criant*) [Ed.].

¹⁵ I reproduced for my lecture [see note 1 above] a phonograph disk which had recorded on it the beginning of the song *The Wedding of Banović Mihajlo*, which tells of the vicissitudes attending a marriage between a Christian and a Turk.

¹⁶ The first collector of Yugoslav tunes, Kuhač, has declared, with respect to the best Moslem singer, Mehmed Kolaković, who was in Zagreb, that his recitations did not at all deserve the term “song.” He did not as yet have a sense of historical evolution. When, at the start of the year 1928, a very fine Montenegrin singer, T. Vučić, was brought to Berlin so that he could establish phonograph recordings of some of his songs, many experts in the history of music declared that people probably sang in more or less the same manner in Germany in about the tenth to twelfth centuries.

book on Montenegro, tells us that a Frenchman, an admirer of Serbian folk poetry, having gone to Cetinje expressly to hear the songs, could not listen to them for very long and quickly departed. This is also why Serbian emigrants, throughout the Great War, were wrong to make an exhibition of the singing of epic poems with *gusle* accompaniment. In America, Serbian and Croatian laborers would sing behind closed doors, for fear of mockery. Before a public who do not understand the language, people would not sing the poems, even short ones, or excerpts longer than what is sufficient to give an idea of the character of the national epic poetry after a brief introduction; there is also an opportunity to give such an idea before beginning the text.

The essence is the content or subject matter, with its poetic form. The language, rich in tropes and figures and infinitely plastic, resounds magnificently on the lips of fine singers. In the end the melody also pleases those who understand the spoken words, when they have listened long, and especially when they see the singer—caught up with enthusiasm for his heroes and their exploits—adapt himself to the flow of the action, express his feelings through his mimicry, and wax truly dramatic. He starts slowly, but he accelerates the rhythm and can achieve a remarkable speed [of delivery]; he ceases to play his instrument at these times. During such moments even a parliamentary stenographer would be helpless to follow him.

There are different kinds of songs; in many places, people distinguish songs reserved for peasants from those reserved for the cultivated classes. In a general way, a song is darker and more indistinct in the northwest region of Bosnia, and much livelier and clearer in Hercegovina and in Montenegro. It is not that the playing of the *gusle* may not be able to engage interest; one cannot believe that such beautiful sounds could emanate from such a primitive instrument. That will always be for me a memory as imperishable as the music to which the Archimandrite Nicephor Šimonović of the Montenegrin monastery of Kosijerevo had me listen.

One may also be amazed at the physical exertion of the singers, who sing, according to my observations, from 13 to 28, or on the average 16 to 20, decasyllabic verses per minute for whole hours and even all night, often in cramped quarters and before a large audience, so that they become bathed in perspiration.

What struck me the most is the magnificent delivery of the singers. Can one picture for himself what it is to sing long poems, without error in subject matter, in irreproachable poetic verses, with the greatest of speed? This is not possible except among singers who do not learn the poems by heart, or word for word, but who re-create them anew each time in brilliant improvisation, thanks to their “science” of language and of poetry.

A fine singer can make a mediocre poem remarkable, and a poor singer can spoil the best poem. It was not in error that Vuk Karadžić often sought a singer of quality to dictate a certain song that had not pleased him. The listeners also appreciate this art of the singer. A bey one day expressed to me his admiration in these terms: “Myself, I would not attempt a composition of even three words.” In Hercegovina people told me of peasants who would give the best ox from their stable to know how to sing one certain song.

The singers are artists, a fact shown by their extreme jealousy of one another. One day in Sarajevo, after having collected recordings of three singers, I gave the same payment to all three. One among them refused to accept it. I sensed immediately that I had bruised his ego in some way. The people present in effect warned me that he considered himself a much better singer than the other two, an observation which he confirmed himself the next day. In Hercegovina a young man nineteen years old said to me: “As many as we are here, we are all enemies to one another. It is painful for me when I meet another who knows more about [singing] than I do.” And he went on to explain, with reference to me: “You also, Mr. Professor, you travel more widely than do other professors in order to gain an understanding of things, and so you would consider yourself much better than your fellows.” In fact he had a point: this took place in a village where there was not even an inn, so that I was obliged to resort to the hospitality of the local constabulary.

The audience listens to the singer with maximum attention, interest, and sympathy for the heroes, and is sometimes extremely moved by the whole of a poem or by certain episodes. During the pauses for rest, the members of the audience make various remarks, question the singer, and critique him, to which criticism he does not fail to respond. One time I reproached a singer for having given a favorite Moslem hero, Hrnjica Mujo, four brothers instead of the two he is credited with elsewhere; he retorted in a bitter tone: “That’s how another told it to me; I wasn’t there when they were born.” There is one process of criticism which does not lack originality: when the singer is absent during a pause for rest, someone greases the strings and the bow of his instrument with tallow, which makes it impossible for him to continue.

* * *

We know, by virtue of the existing collections of folk songs, that only a very small number of them celebrate events that took place before the Turkish occupation. The overwhelming majority of Serbo-Croatian epic songs treat the battles against the Turks, which begin in Macedonia, reach their climax with the great disaster at Kosovo, are transported across the Danube and then into Croatia, Dalmatia, and Montenegro, lead into the

liberation of Serbia, and which, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, crop up unceasingly on the borders of Montenegro, and reach their end at the time of the Balkan Wars and the Great War. Nonetheless, the greatest battles and their consequences form the subject of but few of the poems; far the majority are devoted to the deeds and actions of favorite heroes—such as Prince Marko from the Christian side, and from the Moslem sector of Bosnia, Djerdjelez Alija and Mustajbeg of the Lika—and in the same way to small struggles fought along the Turkish-Christian border, chiefly in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Christians who had escaped from Turkey (*uskoci*) could gain distinction for themselves there, in the service of the Viennese emperor in the vicinity of Senj (Zengg) on the Croatian seaboard, or in service to the Venetian doge in the Kotar plains around Zara; but it was very common to see them attacking the Turks on their own initiative, in the same way as did other leaders of such bands and various *hajduks* (in the poems these bands ordinarily numbered 30 men). The Moslems were likewise little concerned with the official peace, as witnessed by their songs about Hungary and the Lika district in Croatia. It was chiefly this kind of guerilla operation which offered occasions for personal heroism, duels, adventures, acquisition of rich booty and beautiful women and girls, who often willingly fled the Christians for the Turks and vice versa, romantic marriages, attacks at weddings, freeing of women and imprisoned heroes, distant trips on horseback (*obdulja*), various knightly sports, feasts during which the Turks drank a great deal of wine, and so forth. In the Christian quarter various heroes are distinguished: Ivo and Tadija Senjanin, Ilija Smiljanić, Stojan Janković; on the Turkish side Mustajbeg of the Lika, Hrnjica Mujo, and Halil, whose renown spread from northwest Bosnia to the north of Albania.

People say that the Moslems, a traditional group, live more in the past, and that they especially evoke the era of their domination in Hungary and the Lika in Croatia. Yet they also possess poems on their battles with Austria in the eighteenth century, on their occupation of Bosnia-Hercegovina, and on the continual skirmishes along the Montenegrin border; but these poems are little known. Those of the most recent epoch, in particular, have not even been collected, much less published. Likewise, the Bosnian and Hercegovinian Catholics are to an extent traditionalists, and the poems they sing the most are those of Kačić[-Miošić] and the recent collections (above all that of Jukić). Philologists were formerly astonished to encounter this or that song by Kačić[-Miošić] among the people, but in Hercegovina I made the acquaintance of Catholic singers who knew by heart all of Kačić[-Miošić]. The songs of this Franciscan had also spread among the Orthodox people, especially in Montenegro, and were even encountered in Macedonia (Galičnik). I was surprised that the Bosnian and Hercegovinian Orthodox did not know the magnificent songs relating to the

ancient history of Serbia as well as I expected, any more than did the Orthodox people of Montenegro. When I collected recordings in Sarajevo, the intellectual Serbs present asked a singer from the region if he knew the poems about Prince Lazar, Miloš Obilić, and Vuk Branković. He answered: “No, I’m illiterate.”¹⁷

Nowhere except in Hercegovina did the sense of these words become entirely clear to me: people sang for me chiefly poems on the recent and modern battles fought by Hercegovina and Montenegro against the Turks, and I learned that these poems came mostly from published collections. One of them, the *Kosovska Osveta* (*The Revenge for Kosovo*) is particularly widespread. It is by Maksim Šobajić, and it reports the battles of the Hercegovinians, Montenegrins, Serbs, and Russians in the period 1875-78. But there are in addition the Greco-Turkish, Russo-Japanese, Italo-Turkish, Balkan, and World Wars, which are also celebrated in the poems of known and unknown singers. In a poem dating from 1912, the sultan already makes use of the telephone:

*Telefonu care doletio,
na telefon zove Enverbega.*¹⁸

“The tsar hastened to pick up the telephone,
on the telephone he called Enverbey.”

In a word, the singers wish to and indeed must show themselves modern in all respects; the public requires songs relating to actual events, although such poems do not generally attain the beauty of the ancient songs and although they often are no more than mere accounts, just as the Russian P. Rovinskij called the Montenegrin poems modern, or indeed like newspaper articles, as some would say of certain Montenegrin poems in Vuk Karadžić’s collection. What is most surprising is that the epic poem of Hercegovina and Montenegro, provinces where it is flourishing the most, is the greater part of the time of literary origin. In the second half of the last century, Orthodox and Catholic priests, schoolmasters, and other literate persons recited and sang to singers and to other people poems drawn from books, and today the singers very often know how to read the texts themselves; there are even some among them who learned to read only for the sake of learning the epic poems, which are spread abroad in innumerable printed reproductions, books or pamphlets, in Cyrillic or

¹⁷ In early 1928 the singer T. Vučić, having been invited by me to sing the poem *Majka Jugovića* for the Seminar for Slavic Philology in Prague, asked for the text collected by Vuk Karadžić, which he studied assiduously before appearing in public.

¹⁸ Transcribed in Hercegovina in 1913.

Latin characters.

I devoted a good part of my effort to determining whether more folk songs were coming into existence, and if so in what manner. I collected thirteen expressions that designate the creation of a poem, but the one most current in Hercegovina, the term *isknaditi*, *knaditi*, is almost unknown in literature and is treated as “obscure” in the great historical dictionary of the Yugoslav Academy. I also often heard it said that the singers knew how to “put back to back” (*nasloniti*) one poem with another, that they knew how to condense many poems into one and how to modify, correct, and complete poems. One singer declared that a poem could not be good “if the singer knows nothing to add from his own ornamentation [*ajouter son crû*].” In a general way one can say (see above what was said on the delivery of the songs) that at least in our own day all singers of any quality are improvisers. Also it is superfluous to debate, as have the classical philologists, the question of whether the pre-Homeric bards were followed by rhapsodes or by mere reciters, since there are bards, that is singers who themselves compose the poems [they perform], still today among the rhapsodes. I have myself seen many of these singer-poets, and I have reliable accounts testifying to others.

Among the singers are people of every social rank, all of them capable of immediately composing a poem on some martial deed or on any other interesting event. Many unremarkable singers told me that they could even narrate my meeting with them in a poem, and I received a poem of this type from a blind female singer from Dalmatia. A 75-year-old bey from Bosnia also claimed the same ability. The exploits of leaders in small battles were frequently celebrated by the men in their bands. In the same way, among the poems relating to the death of Smailaga Čengić there is one which was sung by his *bajraktar* (standard-bearer), on horseback, even as he returned from the field of battle. Rare are the leaders who sang of themselves. The most curious of these in recent years is Jusuf Mehonjić of the *sandžak* of Novi Pazar, who fought against Serbia after the Balkan Wars, against Montenegro and the Austrians, and even against the new kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, and who recorded his campaigns in decasyllabic verse in a log of his travels which is to be found at the Ministry of the Interior in Belgrade, its author having lost it during his flight. Other people also, for example shepherds and shepherdesses, who did not observe an action except from far away or even had no connection other than hearing it being described, occasionally composed a poem on the subject. Songs of this type were composed collaboratively by many different authors, whose verses were adopted, corrected, or rejected. This was the way it was done in the Montenegrin army, where, after the battles, reports were carefully edited in this manner, distributed in manuscript copies among the military singers, and finally published. To be

cited and placed in the action of a poem was, in Montenegro, the greatest mark of distinction, the equivalent of medals and decorations in other armies.

I was very surprised to hear it often said that battles of some importance could not be celebrated except by those “who had studied,” who “had been at school,” pursued their studies “for twenty years,” or even who are “like you,” said one person, indicating me. Effectively, an ordinary folk singer would not be capable of describing in its entirety a battle in which many Montenegrin troops had participated. This is also the reason why one does not find in the Yugoslav epic poetry full accounts of great battles, but only episodes and events that bear some relation to those battles, and only rarely an action like the siege of a town. One sees that the people themselves conceive of the poets, authors of epic poems, as individuals who are very gifted and at the same time very cultivated. It is nonetheless the epic poetry of Hercegovina that for the most part inspired Jakob Grimm and the Slavists to believe in a kind of origin, a mystical genesis of folk epic songs, works which were created, so they said, by an entire people—[a theory] in which, for example, the great Slavic philologist Miklosich believed until his death (1891).

Nevertheless, the narrative epic song can also be subjective, even while being composed by many authors. In addition, certain poems and collections can offend or displease. People have criticized a poem as widely known as Maksim Šobajić’s *Kosovska osveta* (*The Revenge for Kosovo*) for being partial to the Montenegrins, and for assessing too lightly the services performed by the Hercegovinians. National tribunals looked into the matter, and the poem was even burned! Analogous disputes have arisen in Montenegro, where each clan has its own epic poetry.

I have already said that the epic poems can border on newspaper articles. I had confirmation of this from the singers themselves. When I asked a revolutionary who had fought against Turkey and Austria, and who was in some vague way a *hajduk* in the Balkans, why he did not sing about his own exploits, he responded to me: “It’s not worth the trouble; that’s a job for journalists, men of learning.” And, just as one can pay to insert personal news in the press, so one can, through financial means, secure an appearance in a folk song. In Nevesinje the singer Alexis Ivanović recounted to me that after the Battle of Vučji Do (1876) his uncle saw two such “men of learning” approaching him. They asked two *pleta* (about two francs) to describe him as a *junak* (hero) who mowed down the Turks; but the penniless man could not afford such glory.

Besides the events of war, people also celebrated other bloody encounters through the songs, as well as all interesting goings-on: weddings, elections; in Bosnia and Dalmatia, proclamations are distributed in decasyllabic verses; in this way one celebrates popular political leaders,

for example Etienne Radić; last year in Dalmatia, I myself saw the program of the popular Catholic party explained via the same medium, in a pamphlet of respectable dimensions. The ancient provincial government of Bosnia-Hercegovina received [legal] complaints and appeals in decasyllabic verses. In a word, the epic verse continues to live among the people, in the manner of all of the apparatus of epic poetry. Thus it is that a singer from the vicinity of Gacko began a poem on our meeting in the following manner:

Poletiše dva sokola siva

“Two [grey] falcons rushed together,”

meaning the two constables whom the sub-prefect of the district had sent to find him so that he and I could be introduced. Attention has recently been drawn to these introductions and other heroic-epic processes by G. Gesemann (*Studien zur südslavischen Volksepik*, pp. 65-96). This kind of imitation can also be transformed into parody: in Bosnia, an attendant in a coffeehouse told me that along with his friends he had composed, in the style of the epic poems, a song celebrating the wedding of a proud bey, one who was in reality a poor peasant.

According to the claims of singers and the belief of the people, the epic songs had to be true. The same is not the case with the most recent songs, which do not allow anything but an understanding of the idea that the people formulated from various repeated events; all the more reason to doubt the truth of the older songs.

There was a lively dispute among Serbian historians—between the romantics and the critics—over the relative historical truth of the national songs. It has been proven, for example, that the last tsar of Serbia, Uroš, survived his assassin by many months; that Miloš Obilić was not the son-in-law of Prince Lazar, and that there could therefore not have been any dispute between the sisters-in-law; and that the real son-in-law of Lazar, Vuk Branković, was not the traitor—the Ganelon—indispensable to this passage in the national poem. In general, the entire cycle of the Battle of Kosovo in 1389 is a myth, but a magnificent myth. Every poet, the folk epic poet like all others, has the right to handle his subject as he sees fit, and to modify the facts and the characters according to his needs. Nevertheless, the essence of numerous poems, even the older ones, is historical. What is above all remarkable is the veracity of the songs from the point of view of the history of the civilization, and, from this perspective, many folk epic songs deserve rehabilitation. In them one sees perfectly reflected the feudal life of the Yugoslav noblemen of the Middle Ages, which the Moslems of Bosnia and Hercegovina have preserved into

the second half of the nineteenth century. One understands what opposition, going as far as insurrection, the feudal lords of Bosnia showed against the reforms of the Turkish sultans themselves, until their dominion had been shattered (1850-54) by Omer pasha, former sergeant-major of cadets in Austria, and originally a Serb. Until that date these lords warred among themselves, and they maintained in their troops singers whose duty it was to celebrate their glory, to entertain and incite their soldiers. This is one altogether faithful way in which the epic songs describe life as it was on the Turko-Austrian and Venetian borders up to the peace of Karlovci (1699), and then later on the same borders and on the Montenegrin frontiers as well as in the interior of ancient Turkey.

The national epic poetry is dying in all regions because it has ceased to be reflective of reality. The feudal aristocracy is no longer interested in the poetry, since its military glory was annihilated by Omer pasha and by the occupation of Bosnia-Herzegovina. The songs on the battles along the frontiers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries today constitute a perfect anachronism. A modern state would not know how to lend an interested ear even to the heroism of *hajduks*. Small skirmishes are no longer the order of the day, the *handžar* or *yataghan* (cutlass) has given way to the magazine-rifle, to the machine gun, less epic weapons; in contemporary war it is not possible to challenge an adversary to single combat; what prevails today is not heroism but, as my singers said to me, “discipline”; one of them added: “and politics.” A person would not any longer know how to teach the strategy and tactics employed in the folk songs. The circumstances of the professional singers are more and more difficult, and the people themselves sing less and less, in accordance with the complete transformation of the economic situation. One *aga* (great landholder) from northern Bosnia explained it to me in the following terms: “People sang when they had nothing to do (*od besposlice* [as a result of unemployment]), but at present the “Swabian” (= the German, in the pejorative sense of “Welsh” for the French in Germany, but in fact any man who crossed the Sava river and was wearing a hat or a military cap) requires that they work.” Having asked a Hercegovinian Catholic on another occasion whether it was also the “Swabian” who had compelled him not to sing any more, he responded: “No, it is my wife and children.” The Christian intellectuals reacted against long wedding ceremonies and other inauspicious amusements, which were one of the prime occasions for singing. The people themselves do not find as much pleasure in the epic songs because they have lost faith in their truth and utility, and the youth prefer the lyric songs, and other games and diversions. The choral song and the musical societies with folk instruments (*tamburaši*) contribute equally to the disappearance of the epic songs. In Plevlje, in the *sandžak* of Novi Pazar, I was struck in 1924 to see that a choral group of Serbian

singers had wished to surprise me with their choirs directed by the pope (Orthodox priest) of the area, and that the public paid very little attention to the *guslar* who was summoned on my behalf; the singer was whisked away to the Moslem lecture hall, where a large audience listened to him with attention and lively interest. But the greatest enemy of the singer is modern instruction. The collections have caused people to lose interest in the folk songs (I could not gain the confidence of numerous singers without assuring them that I would not make a transcription of their poems): today any child can amuse the nobility, the citizens, and the rural population by giving them a reading of the folk songs, a practice already carried on in the coffeehouses. The poems are in themselves still interesting, and children carry to school large collections published by the Croatian Society (Matica Hrvatska) and others, in order to read them in secret.

Finally, the folk epic poetry has lost its principal support, the five-century resistance against the Turks. Turkey is today far away, and as for the Moslems within the country, they have reconciled themselves to modern civilization. They have so well adapted themselves to the situation that the Yugoslav Moslem organization is today¹⁹ a governmental party in Belgrade, and a Moslem is Minister of Commerce and Industry and actually a substitute for the Minister of Finance. Let us mention in passing that this amounts to proof that Yugoslavia, or the realm of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, is not practicing Balkanization but rather organization—social, national, and political progress. Soon one will be able to shout: “Yugoslav epic poetry, folk and oral, has died, long live Yugoslav epic poetry!” It will continue to live through its magnificent poems as an important element of the literature and of national civilization, it will provide yet more inspiration—and with greater success than before—to epic and dramatic poets and other artists, as it has to the great sculptor Meštrović, and it will nourish the national opera, all of which influences were foreseen a century ago by B. Kopitar, master and friend of Vuk Karadžić. Nevertheless, the national Yugoslav epic poetry will always remain a fertile field for study by native and foreign scholars. We hope that French scholarship as well will devote to this poetry the same attention it has given its own national *oeuvre*, bringing to such study the experience gained from brilliant work with their *chansons de geste* and epic poetry of the Middle Ages.

Translated by John Miles Foley

¹⁹ That is, in May 1928.

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