

## The Montenegrin Oral Epic in a New Perspective

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In 1982 a study by the Russian scholar Boris Nikolaevič Putilov entitled *Geroičeskij èpos Černogorcev* [*Montenegrin Oral Epic*] was published in Leningrad by "Nauka." After a series of earlier studies on the problem of the oral epic of different peoples, Putilov investigates here the relationship between history and poetry in Montenegrin oral epics dealing with the struggle for liberation of the Montenegrin people from about 1700 to 1850. He has made a careful study of the collections of folk songs of Vuk Karadžić, Sima Milutinović-Sarajlija, Petar II Petrović Njegoš, and others during the classical period of the Serbo-Croatian oral epic tradition, as well as of the manuscripts containing the oral heroic songs preserved in the libraries, museums, and archives of Montenegro.

Vuk Karadžić was the first to point out that in Montenegrin oral epics history rather than poetry is in the foreground. This idea put forward by Vuk has gained wide acceptance among scholars, but Putilov takes a different view.

In his study Putilov advances the opinion that the question of the relationship between history and poetry in Montenegrin oral epic poetry can be resolved by the historical-typological method, which reveals that oral heroic poetry, one of the universal forms of folk art, did not, in its earliest stages, rely on the representation of real historical personages. Its point of departure was, instead, "the oldest strata of ethnic history, *understood and fixed in the language of myth*" (227; emphasis mine). By this method it can be demonstrated that archaic epics are the repository from which basic epic subjects and fundamental motifs are drawn. This is the level at which the basic structure of the epic and the types of heroes and their opponents are established, spatial and temporal relationships are delineated, and epic style is formed. Later, Putilov argues, the oral epic tradition underwent a succession of transformations, evolving under the impact of historical events and reflecting radical changes in the national consciousness. Each stage in the development of oral epic is influenced by the preceding one, thus ensuring a specific kind of continuity between typologically different stages. The process, according to Putilov, is also characterized by a permanent shift from the fantastic to the concrete historical world and to the strengthening of the principle of truthfulness. Thus it becomes apparent that the distinctive characteristics of the national

epic regarded as *primary* by the historical school of thought were in fact *acquired at a later stage of development* as the result of a prolonged evolution of epic poetry from its archaic to its historical forms. Putilov argues that the above process is virtually irreversible.

An erudite scholar of broad theoretical knowledge, Putilov criticizes in detail adherents of Vuk's view that Montenegrin oral epics are closer to history than to poetry. Putilov's familiarity with the secondary literature on the question is impressive. He includes in his study the briefest articles published in the daily papers as well as rare books preserved in libraries. On several occasions he examined at length the materials available in the libraries and archives of Montenegro. Traveling about Montenegro, he has studied the current state of affairs regarding oral epics sung to the accompaniment of the *gusle* and has visited the places where the events described in the classical oral epics occurred.

Although Putilov's conscientious work deserves the greatest respect, it must be pointed out that he was not in a position to fully apply the "historical-typological method and theory" to Montenegrin oral epics since that method is based on oral literature that in principle *precedes* written literature and higher forms of culture. The author neglects the fact that Montenegrin oral epic, like all other epics created in the Serbo-Croatian language, was, in the process of developing and maturing, in constant interaction with written literature and Christian civilization. It was immersed in a Christian culture that had developed over a period of a thousand years. During the Turkish occupation, the written tradition, in its specific aspects, maintained close links with oral epic poetry that reflected various forms of resistance to the enemy by the enslaved people. In other words, *the memory of historical events* of the Montenegrin people is preserved in their oral epic tradition and this aspect of content distinguishes it typologically from oral epic that precedes the written tradition. The fact that oral literature was influenced by historical thought and Christian civilization by no means precludes the influence of the fundamental principles governing the development of oral epic. Among the "universal forms of folk art," the presence of historical thought and memory and the ideological and psychological need of the enslaved people to maintain connections with their historic past—from which they were severed by the Turkish invasion—were prominent categories. It is these categories that militate against the conclusion that Montenegrin oral epic "did not from the start present and describe real historical personages," but instead took its point of departure, in Putilov's words, "from the oldest strata of ethnic history, understood and fixed in the language of myth."

The language of the poems about the Montenegrins' incessant warring against the Turks is as far removed as possible from the "language of myth." In the tribal organization of Montenegro, supreme power was in

the hands of the Orthodox Church. It should be noted that the bishops from the Petrović family, Danilo, Sava, Vasilije, and Petar I and Petar II Njegoš, were versed in both ecclesiastical and literary matters. They were also in control of the struggle against the Turks. This situation caused their religious, ideological, and political views to be directly incorporated in oral epics concerned with the struggle. As a result, the system of ideological and political thought current at the time was placed in the foreground, while the mythological and fantastic elements concerning historical and anthropological issues were dealt with only marginally.

The universal character of oral epic poetry found its supreme expression in those songs that were beyond the control of the audience and not in those about the actual reality of Montenegrin clans and their struggle against the Turks. Both the poet-singer and his audience “activated” their positivistic parameters whenever a song centered on the events involving tribal pride and competitive spirit typical of the patriarchal man, in which he and his kin strive to surpass others in all areas (this spirit has a great deal in common with the *agon* of Homer’s heroes, who strive to excel in noble and manly competitions). In such songs the truth-loving Montenegrins prevented oral epic from developing into poetry in the way that the songs dealing with pre-Turkish times developed in the same regions and during the same period. Free from the concern that he might hurt the feelings of tribal pride of Montenegrin warriors, the bard could give full rein to his imagination in the latter songs. On the other hand, the poet-singer composing to the accompaniment of the *gusle* a text in which he described an event of interest to an audience consisting of members of particular clans could not gratify his fancy in the same way as when he performed—before the same audience—a song about Marko Kraljević or about the personages and events from the period preceding the battle of Kosovo of 1389.

Thus, even though one may accept the hypothesis that history was not a *primary* category in the oldest Serbo-Croatian oral epics, one cannot find solid proof that Montenegrin oral epics dealing with the struggle for liberation in the 1700-1850 period did not from the very beginning depict *real historical personages and events*. The bard composing heroic epics had at his disposal stylistic and poetic devices used in older songs not concerned with the current reality of war. He drew upon them when he was not restricted by his theme, that is, when realistic facts and events were to be described. Šarac, Marko Kraljević’s horse, can run so fast that he can even catch a fairy (*vila*) beneath the clouds! That horse can also understand human speech! The Montenegrin bard sang about Šarac in this way, but he could not ascribe such preternatural qualities to the horse of a living Montenegrin hero. From the old, rich poetic storehouse he took only such elements as he could adapt to the realistic theme of his song.

A local episode in *Gorski vijenac* [*The Mountain Wreath*] by Njegoš, the Montenegrin Prince-Bishop who lived during the period when the oral epic investigated by Putilov was fully developed, is instructive for the discussion at hand. Njegoš had an intimate knowledge of the Montenegrin oral epic tradition dealing with the struggle against the oppressors. At the beginning of his literary career, he himself composed oral epics that cannot be distinguished thematically and structurally from the oral traditional songs produced by unlettered bards. In this episode of *Gorski vijenac*, we are told how the news of the death of Batrić Perović, a young hero treacherously killed by the Turks, is received by Montenegrin warriors. They are severely distressed by the news as well as by the lament sung by the young hero's sister mourning for her brother, which depicts his manly and heroic moral and physical qualities. Moved by sorrow and enraged by the Turkish deceit, the warriors loudly extol Batrić Perović as a hero. Knez Rogan claims that in his eighty years of living he had seen many a famous hero—Montenegrin, Turkish, and Latin—yet had never met such a fierce youth; Batrić was a “winged hero” second to none in valor and prowess. Vuk Mićunović says that never before had a Montenegrin woman given birth to such a hero. In their praise of the young hero, the warriors cannot agree which of his qualities was most outstanding: his handsomeness, his wisdom, or his valor and prowess. One of them says that he had “iron eyes,” another that he was not afraid of death, and still another that Batrić was intrepid. All of them agree that his death is mourned by all of Montenegro in recognition of the courage and other virtues of the young hero, not yet twenty years of age. The peculiar thing about all this is that these feelings are shared by the members of different clans.

Njegoš' verses show clearly that men inflamed with warlike passion, filled with patriarchal moral and tribal pride, men who love and hate with elemental force, did not in their eulogies speak of their slain fellow-warrior as of a *real warrior*; instead, they depicted him in the *language of myth*. In the eyes of the peasant-warriors venerating the cult of glory, apart from being the son of the goddess Thetis, Homer's Achilles was not superior to Batrić Perović. However, in the Montenegrin oral epic tradition there is not a single song referring to any of the exaggerated qualities of Batrić Perović mentioned by the warriors in *Gorski vijenac*. Other variants deal with this incident that have come down to us, one of which is to be found in Njegoš' *Ogledalo srpsko* [*The Serbian Mirror*] and the other in the fourth volume of *Srpske narodne pjesme* [*Serbian Folk Songs*] collected by Vuk Karadžić, are typical oral epic chronicle songs, attempting to give by poetic means as faithful an account of that historical event as possible. They mention not a single quality ascribed to Batrić Perović that, in its epic stylization, could not be applied to a real-life hero.

In both variants there is considerable poetic elevation here and there, but it is still far from that of the best songs dealing with older themes. Accordingly, in his *Gorski vijenac*, Njegoš showed that “universal forms of folk art” existed in the collective mind of patriarchal Montenegrin warriors, and that in the beginning such fundamental principles determined the mental attitudes of individual men and of the entire community in depicting particular historical events. This is the epic-mythic attitude toward history singled out by Putilov as revealed by the “historical-typological method and theory.” However, *strict truthfulness*, closely adhered to by the ambitious warriors who were members of particular clans, clipped the wings of the imagination of the Montenegrin bards. Those who composed and transmitted oral epics compensated for such loss in songs about early heroes who did not belong to any particular clan. Strict insistence on truthfulness by the audience was markedly reduced in songs dealing with themes that aroused an identical ideological and psychological response in them.

In conclusion, Putilov’s *Geroičeskij èpos Černogorcev*, however lucid, complete, and instructive, nevertheless fails to corroborate its central proposition: that Montenegrin oral epic poetry created from 1700 to 1850 during the struggle for liberation did not in its incipient stages represent and describe real historical personages and events, but that its point of departure is intimately linked with a mythic system of thought.

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