

# Serbian Epos as the Reflection of National Self-consciousness

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## ABSTRACT

The present article is aimed at studying how Serbian national self-consciousness is reflected in epic songs. The key source for the analysis was the evidence and research by Russian, Serbian and foreign scientists, writers and cultural figures, including N.V. Gogol, I.I. Sreznevsky, P.I. Preys, A.N. Pypin, J. Cvijić, Alphonse de Lamartine, and A. Reiss. Serbian folk songs composed in the times of the Ottoman yoke are claimed to have promoted national self-consciousness and preserved historical memory. Serbian heroic epos was remarkably widespread in Montenegro and along the Military Border, the site of continuous wars against the Turks. The heroic element of the Serbian tradition is inseparable with the Christian philosophy, which is vividly depicted in the songs of the Kosovo cycle: they are imbued with the spirit of sacrifice and the love of freedom of the knights of the Battle of Kosovo. In the conclusion of the article, it is highlighted that the naturalness of images in Serbian folk songs and their ideological and artistic value have been of vast educational importance and have had a considerable moral influence on many generations of the Serbs.

**Keywords:** Serbian heroic epos, national self-consciousness, historical memory, Slavists, national tradition

## I. INTRODUCTION

The epic element has immense value to Serbian literature and culture. It is comparable to the artistic value of ancient mythology images and themes to Greek culture, and therefore, it is no coincidence that Serbian epos has been often put into comparison with Homer's epic poetry. [1] Representing the strongest traits of the national character, Serbian heroic epos ranks right up there with the most outstanding epics of Europe, which has been noted by European scholars (primarily German and Russian ones). Many distinguished personalities expressed burning interest in Serbian epic poetry (e.g. J.W. Von Goethe, J. Grimm, A.S. Pushkin, N.V. Gogol, A. Mickiewicz) [2]; some of them even started studying the Serbian language. In the early half of the 19th century, the Serbs became known to the cultural circles of Slavic countries and Western Europe primarily for their epic songs. Interestingly enough, the Serbian exhibit at the famous All-Russian Ethnographic Exhibition of 1867 was presented by a blind guslar performing on a multi-figure stage, singing folk songs to his audience dressed in national Serbian costumes, which attracted particular interest of the exhibition guests.

When evaluating the ideological and artistic value of folk songs, N.V. Gogol, a Slavic folklore devotee,

wrote, "It is a folk story, vivid, full of colour and truth, and revealing the entire life of people." [3] This accurately applies to Serbian epic songs, which, unlike the epic of any other European people, continued in existence until the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In this regard, the idea of A.N. Pypin is worth mentioning: unlike Russian bylinas (Russian traditional heroic epic), "Serbian heroic epic was sustained by real events until last." [4]

## II. SERBIAN EPIC SONGS AS THE REFLECTION OF NATIONAL SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE WORKS BY SCHOLARS IN RUSSIA, SERBIA AND ABROAD

Serbian heroic epos and the way it reflects the peculiarities of the national mentality was the focus of the works by Russian Slavists of the 19th century, including P.I. Preys [5], I.I. Sreznevsky [6], A.N. Pypin [7], V.I. Lamansky [8], P.A. Rovinsky [9], etc. The scholars emphasized the great value of Serbian epic as a means of preserving national self-consciousness and a source of lore and legend about Serbian history. Thus, following P.I. Preys, a significant feature of Serbian epic poetry is that not only does it describe the inner life, but it also shows the Serbian people in its historical development. "Over centuries, Serbian epic songs have

followed the fate of the people: they originate in times of glory, continue in calamity, and resound triumphantly the period of revival." [5]

The beauty and the cultural treasure of Serbian epic and its relation to national mentality were also placed emphasis on by European researchers and travellers of the 19th and early 20th centuries. One of them was the French poet Alphonse de Lamartine, who explored Serbia and the Balkan states in general, greatly appreciated the libertarian spirit and courage of the Serbs and was impressed by their epic songs. [10] An important record was also made by E. Troubridge, who wrote, "The love of freedom and for the fatherland is deeply engrained in the Serbs as well as in us." [11] From the perspective of the authors of the present article, of equal importance is the opinion of the Swiss professor Archibald Reiss (1875-1929). He made observations on how the Serbs associated their actual reality with the images and themes of the folk epic, their source of inspiration and knowledge of the world. In his famous work *Listen, Serbs!*, he addressed the people of Serbia saying, "You have an acute sense of patriotism. I am not familiar with any other people whose legendary national heroes are so alive in people's souls. You are given the remarkable gift and the memories about your heroes can inspire you so much that your own lives are relegated to the sidelines. In fact, the images of your legendary heroes are an integral part of your souls." [12]

One of the most reputable researchers studying the typical features of the mentality, soul and mind of the South Slavs was Archibald Reiss' contemporary, the prominent Serbian geographer and ethnographer Jovan Cvijić (1865-1927). In his famous work entitled *The Balkan Peninsula and the South Slavic lands*, he stressed the significance of thorough investigation of the epic heritage, since it "perfectly reflects the psychology, thinking paradigm and national self-consciousness of the South Slavic ethnic groups." For instance, he highlighted that the South Slavs from the western Balkans (the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes) were characterized by a strong moral feeling and sympathy at the root of the national soul. [13] Describing the most typical anthropological and psychological features of the Dinaric South Slavs (three-quarters of which being Serbs) [13], Jovan Cvijić noted, "All their actions are inspired by spiritual and moral impulse, while material interests have a secondary role only. To generate their maximum forces, one should involve their feelings, personal and national pride, and the ideal of honour, truth and freedom." [13] Among their main strengths, Jovan Cvijić mentioned the fact that the Dinaric Serbs were well aware of the main events of the Serbian history, the greatest contribution to which was folk songs passed from one generation to the next. [13]

### III. SERBIAN PERCEPTION OF THE CONCEPT OF 'FREEDOM' AS REFLECTED IN FOLK SONGS

The images and expressions of folk poetry are often to be found in Serbian literature, no exception of contemporary literature; they communicate ideas in a more precise way and allow conveying a certain mood. Such examples are present in numerous literary genres ranging from fiction and scientific works to journalism and church sermons. From this point of view, the inspired speech by Luka Pištelić (1873-1958), the famous public and political figure of his time, given before the officers' meeting in St. Petersburg on the occasion of Austrian annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (1908), is illustrative. The speech described the difficult circumstances the Serbian people found themselves in, their inborn love of freedom and a sense of national dignity, due to which they were unwilling to accept injustice. According to Luka Pištelić, these feelings was what helped the Serbs to win against the odds. Supporting his arguments, he quotes a folk song: "*Кад устане кука и мотица, / биче Турком по Медини мука*" (When scythes and pitchforks are raised and people rebel - woe to the oppressors and their homes). [14] Meanwhile, this is the evidence that the most remarkable events in people's life were reflected in the epic.

The love of freedom, so characteristic of the Serbs is clearly visible in the folk songs of the Kosovo cycle, and the topic of Kosovo itself has always been the dominant issue in the history of culture, both spiritually and hierarchically. Thus, in his fundamental work *"The Book of Kosovo"*, professor D. Bogdanović reminds the reader of the words of Vuk Karadžić, the Serbian folklorist and ethnographer, who collected and published numerous folklore works. He once noticed that, even though the epic songs of the Kosovo cycle were not the most ancient ones, they were critical to Serbian epic, "due to the deep moral value and historical significance of Kosovo for the Serbian tradition." [15] From the ideological point of view, the motto of the Kosovo knights - "For the Life-Giving Cross and Golden Freedom!" - is especially illustrative; in times of challenge and faith, it encouraged the Serbs to fight for their relics and national sacraments. For the Serbs, the word "freedom" is directly associated with defending the principles of national dignity, and the issue of honour and nobility. Semantically, its closest analogue is the ancient Greek word 'ἐλευθερία' – 'freedom, independence' and its derivative 'ἐλεύθερο' – 'free, independent and noble'. [16] Meanwhile, in the national Serbian consciousness, the concept of freedom is imbued with the deep Christian philosophy. This idea was featured by the prominent Serbian theological writer of the 20th century, Nikolaj Velimirović, in the work entitled *"The Serbian People as a Servant of God"*. Analysing the spiritual history of his people over the past eight centuries, he defined it as "the unprecedented

epic of accumulating the personal and national character; the epic of labour, struggle, suffering and glory - all under the sign of the Cross and freedom. [...] Under the sign of the Cross implies reliance on God, while under the sign of freedom means independence from people. Moreover, under the sign of the Cross suggests following Christ and fighting for Christ, whereas under the sign of freedom means being freed of passions and moral corruption<sup>1</sup>. It is not just the Cross and freedom, but the life-giving cross and the Golden freedom." [17]

#### **IV. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND THAT CONTRIBUTED TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE EPIC CONSCIOUSNESS**

In the times of the Ottoman yoke and the periods to come, it was primarily folklore that promoted national self-consciousness and preserved historical memory. Meanwhile, new songs about the heroic deeds of Serbian young men and other remarkable events were composed and sung. They were mainly spread across those Serbian territories, which were the sites of continuous wars against the Turks - in Montenegro and along the Military Border, which was inhabited by Austrian Serbs and provided a shield to Austria-Hungary and the Habsburg Empire against the Ottoman Empire. However, in the Serbian or Slavic Sparta, as Montenegro was frequently called in the 19th century, many phenomena of Serbian and Slavic life, in general, were more pronounced (tribal setting, South Slavic *zadruga*, etc.). In Montenegro, people commemorated the Battle of Kosovo, and its heroes were particularly honoured. This, in particular, was evidenced by many Russian scientists and travellers having visited the Balkans. Thus, the Russian Slavist I.I. Sreznevsky collected Serbian epic songs, which he mentioned in his joint report with P.I. Preys to the Minister of National Education, Count S.S. Uvarov, "People sing, especially Montenegrins. They still keep many old songs alive, including the ones dating back to the Battle of Kosovo, etc." [18] In turn, the modern Serbian researcher M. Šurbatović, the author of a monograph on the history of the wars of Montenegro, emphasized, "The Montenegrin women were Serbian Spartans, inspired by the idea of the Kosovo maiden and the mother of the Jugović brothers." [19] Seeing their loved ones off to the war, they often said, "*Врати се али светла образа*" (Come back with your honour unstained). [19]

Thus, historical environment and background contributed to the development of heroic epic, which brightly illustrated certain phenomena of Serbian life. As mentioned above, the Serbian national self-consciousness is associated with the Christian

philosophy, which is reflected in their actual reality. An interesting observation was made by the writer and historian V.B. Bronevskiy (1784-1835) in his book "The Notes of a naval officer, in the continuation of the company in the Mediterranean under the command of Vice-Admiral Dmitry Senyavin from 1805 to 1810". Reporting on the arrival of the Russian Navy in the town of Kotor, V.B. Bronevsky mentioned that local residents displayed strong loyalty towards the Russians, which encouraged them to free the Serbs of Dalmatia from the French troops oppressing them. The Serbs, in their turn, under the leadership of their metropolitan and ruler, provided the widest cooperation possible to the Russian Navy. Thus, according to the report by Bronevsky, "instead of the requested 1,000 soldiers, the Metropolitan promised 6,000 and volunteered to lead the forces into the battle himself." [20] As far as the rest of the clergy is concerned, inspired by the example of their metropolitan, they themselves were a model of heroism and courage for their congregations. Bronevsky testified, "Entering a church, a priest lays down his arms, but is ready to take them with the cry of 'Who is the knight?'. They are particularly courageous, and therefore, at the decision of their parishioners, they command the troops." [20] Such examples clarify the lines from a Serbian folk song: "It is not the arms that fight in battle, but the heart of a young man." In other words, within the national Serbian consciousness, the concepts of heroism and commitment are complementary.

#### **V. CONCLUSION**

To conclude, it should be noted that being the representation of the Serbian *formae mentis*<sup>2</sup>, Serbian epic songs served to preserve historical memory and national self-consciousness, and had a powerful moral and educational impact on many generations of the Serbs. However, for the Serbian culture, epic songs were an imperative rather than just a historical monument. The Serbs still glorify the valour of their national heroes and express grief for dramatic events in national history. For this reason, Serbian folk songs are characterized by genre and topic diversity. They were most popular in the early 19th century, owing to the collecting, publishing and research activity performed by Vuk Karadžić, the Serbian folklorist. It did not take long before Serbian epic songs became known in Russia, especially among Russian Slavists and writers (e.g. I.I. Sreznevsky, P.I. Preys, N.I. Nadezhdin, A.N. Pypin, etc.), who recorded valuable evidence and carried out research into the peculiarities of Serbian epic metric versification, its existence and reflection of Serbian national self-consciousness.

<sup>1</sup> The original expression in the Serbian language is "moral kvarezh".

<sup>2</sup> *Formae mentis* (Latin) – thinking paradigm, state of mind

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