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SONGS AND CHANTS FROM A SERBIAN VILLAGE¹

by

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The following notes, collected while making a community study in the region of Sumadija, central Serbia, in 1953-1954, present a glimpse of village chants and songs and describe the circumstances under which they are sung. The intent here is simply to illustrate their position in the total peasant culture and not to analyze their musical form and content. In the rolling hill country of Sumadija, as, indeed, in the whole of Yugoslavia, the various forms of verbal art are highly developed. Fables and other folktales, riddles, rhyming jokes and especially proverbs all are important. Proverbs recorded in the early nineteenth century by Vuk Stefan Karadzic, founder of the modern Serb literary language, are still very much a part of the local idiom. But among the different types of verbal folklore those associated with music appear to be the most significant. At the same time, they have undergone the greatest changes. This is shown by the present situation of the well-known heroic epics and of songs for various village occasions.

Although Serb ethnologists divide songs into epske (epic) and lirske (lyric) types, the peasants themselves group them together under the general term narodne pesme, or simply folk songs. They distinguish between the two by recognizing the former as the only kind chanted to the accompaniment of the gusle, as well as by the tradition they represent and by their special qualities of voice, rhythm and phrasing.

¹ Helpful comments in preparing these notes were received from Roxanne G. McAllister.

McAllister

P. 1 et linc
P. 4- linc
P. 5. Matic
P. 8. grazing
P. 11 prsluk
P. 13 renewed?
14. drape
2 reds
14. openly

The gusle, traditional instrument of Serbia, is single-stringed and played with a bow. The guslar always plays in a seated position, his instrument resting on his knee. He is almost invariably an older man, that is, over fifty years of age, and in very rare cases a woman. Above the plaintive and droning strains of his gusle, he chants the familiar ten or eleven meter lines in a loud, nasalized voice.

These epic poems, dealing mainly with real and legendary figures and events in Serbian history, from the Turkish conquest to the time of the First Revolt against the Turks, are considered one of the factors responsible for keeping alive the Serbs' fierce patriotism and pride during their more than four centuries under Ottoman rule. Passed down by word of mouth through the generations, the famous epics of the sorrowing mother of the Nine Jugovici, the Maiden of Kosovo and the amazing Kraljevic Marko are today known by almost all villagers. Vuk Karadzic was the first to write them down, and today they are easily accessible in printed form to both cityfolk and peasants. Many villagers learn them from books as well as from their elders.

With the mounting impact of urban influence and particularly with the increase in literacy, the old epics no longer hold the same meaning they once had. Fifty years ago almost every peasant home possessed a gusle, and at least one member of the household knew how to play and chant. Today perhaps one home in twenty has an instrument, and it hangs in a place of honor on the white-washed wall, already an object of curiosity. Although they can recite a number of the epics themselves, most young men show little interest in learning the mournful gusle accompaniment. When an elder plays they listen with interest and ad-

miration, enjoying the contact with their heritage. Nevertheless, they

have come to regard the monotonous recitations as a symbol of cultural backwardness. "Nije kulturni -- It isn't cultured," some of them insist, associating it with what they consider to be their primitive technology. This attitude is not as strong in more isolated parts of Yugoslavia, but if the trend persists it seems probable that the authentic guslar, as a carrier of tradition, will become a thing of the past, kept alive only by professional folklor artists.

Among the diminishing number of village men who do play the gusle, the traditional pattern appears to have altered. In Orasac village, from which all the following examples are taken, one of the epics more frequently chanted is about the Widow Jana. More a love ballad than a tale of heroic deeds, it is thought to have originated somewhere in Bosnia and was most probably transmitted to Samadija by appearing in printed form.¹ This manner of diffusion is far different than that of the original wandering guslari, often blind, who journeyed from village to village chanting the poetic epics.

An entirely different type of chanting, and one still practiced, is the tuzbalica or mourning chant. In the villages grief and sorrow are expressed by stylized laments, chanted only by the women. On the day of a burial the loud, sing-song wailings of female voices can be heard all over the village as the funeral procession winds over fields and wagon paths on its way to the graveyard. Once there, the lamenting increases in intensity and becomes almost mechanical. Voices hoarse from chanting and sobbing, some women actually compete with one another in displays of emotion as they bend over the grave and punctuate their

¹ According to Professor Milenko Filipovic, in a personal communication, the main character in this epic is Gojeni Alil, a very popular figure in Moslem songs in regions of Bosnia.

eries with heart-rending moans of "Jao, kuku mene! — Oh, woe is me!" Then, when the head of the bereaved family gives a signal, the piercing chants stop abruptly. Eyes are wiped, noses blown, and the funeral party gets down to the business of setting out food on the grave in memory of the departed soul.

On certain religious holidays and on several ritually prescribed times during the year, the mourners return to the graveyard and repeat the chanting. Death is accepted realistically, especially in the case of older people, and the chants are usually no more than formalized expressions of grief. A common pattern is to send messages via the recently departed soul to other deceased relatives and friends. Many chants, such as the typical one below, express sorrow and loneliness and concern for the deceased, referring to the coffin as a house without windows or air.

Jao, woe is me, father!¹
 How shall I live without you!
 Jao, father, it's so hard without you!
 When I come through the front gate,
 There is no father waiting for me.
 Jao, father, you are sick and very ill,
 Jao, father, who will take care of you there?
 Jao, father, sick and very ill,
 And who will take care of you?
 The house there has no windows, father,
 And no air, father.
 When you arrive there, call our relatives —
 _____² is waiting there for you,
 To help you ease your pains.
 Jao, woe is me! woe is me!

Other chants are not as stylized, composed extemporaneously and specifically for the person mourned. This one was sung by two women over the grave of a young mother who had been their friend and neighbor.

¹ Or grandfather, brother, uncle, depending on the person chanting.

² Name of another deceased relative.

Jao, woe is me, that you have left your children!
 Who will they turn to if they have no mother?
 One year after another will go by,
 And another woman will bring your husband her love,
 But they will never again have their own mother.
 From a strange mother only sorrow comes.
 Jao, jao, woe is me!

When a young child is mourned, the grief expressed by all is deep and genuine. A mother chanted this poignant message to her small daughter Danica.

Jao, Dana, sweet little daughter,
 Greet Grandma there, my child,
 And kiss her hand,
 And obey Grandma, my child,
 For she is sick and very ill.
 My daughter, you will obey Grandma,
 And open the door for her,
 And Grandma will get you ready for school,
 And she will comb your hair,
 Dana, sweet daughter,
 Grandma will take a comb,
 The comb Mama has given you,
 So that Grandma can comb your hair, child.
 Dear Mother,¹ give a present to my daughter Dana,
 Here, Mother, is a present for Matrice,²
 For you to give to Dana, my dear daughter,
 To my little water-carrier,
 To my little obedient one,
 To Mama's little shepherd girl,
 And Mama cannot realize,
 That I no longer have you.
 Jao, woe is me, my darling!

In Serbian society age groups and stages of life are clearly defined, and there are lyric songs to reflect most of them -- lullabies, children's nonsense songs, game-songs, songs of courtship and marriage and work songs. Some, such as the spinning songs, are unwritten folk songs which have been in the region for a long time. Others are songs on folk themes, written by professional musicians in the city. Still another type are songs composed by the villagers themselves.

¹ Mourning mother now addressing her own deceased mother.

² A sort of Mother's Day, when mothers give their children small gifts.

Whatever a song's origin, it is sung in traditional style. In Sumadija group singing is prevalent, at village dances, weddings, feast day celebrations and other events. People rarely sing solo when in company, for the customary procedure is to select the best singer in the group as leader. This is a recognized position of esteem. The leader renders the first measure of the song in a resonant voice, and the others join in on the second measure, usually in loud, nasalized two-part harmony. The standard song pattern is short, repetitive couplets, and the rhythm of the melody follows very closely the syllabic structure of the lyrics. Frequently a song starts with a nonsense phrase employed for beat and rhyme only. For example, one begins:

Three sweet apples.
A maiden sat down and cried,
....

(Tri/ja/bu/ke/slat/ka/ce. Se/la/cu/ra/pa/pla/ce,....).

The following three selections are examples of songs which might be sung by one person alone, within the individual household courtyard and not in company. The first is a local lullaby and the second a children's song, known in other parts of Serbia as well. The third example is a fragment of a certain doting grandfather's favorite song. He often sang it as he bounced his grandchildren on his knee.

Ljulja, ljulja, ljulja,
Give him to Uncle.
Nini nini nini,
Give him to Auntie.
Ljulju, ljulju, ljuke,
Pears on the Morava.
Auntie is sitting down there,
Shaping little cakes,
And she would give me some,
But Uncle doesn't let her.
May God eat him

The turtle-dove is cooing,
 Peter turns his horse.
 Give me a stick, Peter,
 So I can kill the turtle-dove.
 The turtle-dove gives me salt,
 And I give the salt to the ram.
 The ram gives me tallow,
 And I give the tallow to the cat.
 The cat gives me a mouse,
 And I give the mouse to the eagle,
 The eagle gives me a feather,
 And I give the feather to the priest.
 The priest gives me a book,
 And I give the book to God.
 God gives me happiness,
 And I put the happiness in a sack,
 And carry it over the doorstep and home.

Oj, maple tree, maple tree,
 You are the best tree.
 Beneath you I drank wine
 And kissed the girls.

The next song is an original one, composed by two fourteen-year old girls while they were out taking the sheep to pasture. They sang it to a common folk melody and, again, the unrelated first line is for rhyme and rhythm.

A white flower perfumes the reeds.
 I have my Mile who writes me letters.
 Everything is fine,--only one thing spoils it -
 Mile wants to be the boss.
 My dear Mile, I don't have a boss,
 Until my hands are tied before the altar.
 While I am still a child and a young girl,
 No young men are going to boss me around!

Songs are often made up when young people attend a dance or gathering in a neighboring village. They compose teasing couplets about the other village, such as this one sung by some Orasac youths while visiting in nearby Stojnik.

Stojnik is a very famous village -
 Its young men grovel and its girls graze!
 (Stojnik selo na velikom glasu -
Momci riju a devojke pasu!) .

Of the wealth of courtship songs, many can be divided by subject matter into two main categories: those idealizing the courtship opportunities offered by sheep watching and those associated with spinning bees. Villagers interpret the love songs as either "bachelors' songs" or "maidens' songs." The following bachelors' song, for example, would never be sung by a group of girls or women. At the time of our field work there, this was perhaps the most popular of all Orasac songs.

I'm watching the sheep down in the glen.
Try, darling, to come to me there.
Be careful lest your mother see you,
So get up early with the sheep.
If you don't know where I'm watching the sheep,
You will hear the sheeps' bells ringings.
Across the road a brass bell is ringing,
And there my sweetheart is moving with his flock.
He is watching the sheep and playing his flute,
And my heart will not stand still.

Another favorite bachelors' song tells of a shepherd who entreats the mountain to protect his sheep while he goes down the slope to visit the maidens tending their flower gardens below (Caj Goro, Lane Moje). Still another, well-known in all parts of Sumadija is about a young young man who calls to his sweetheart by playing on his flute, begging her to come watch the sheep with him. Some years ago this song (Jova Ruzu Kroz Svirala Zove) was re-adapted in the city, given a professional arrangement complete with response singing of male and female voices interspersed with flute solos, and released over the radio. The peasants are familiar with this new version and like it immensely but continue to sing the song in traditional style.

One of the reasons for the popularity of the sheep watching songs may be that today this romantic and socially sanctioned form of courtship is generally no longer possible. Until about the turn of the century Sumadija has an important grazing economy, whereas today

livestock grazing is definitely subsidiary to agriculture. Then too, with the gradual dissolution of the zadruga, the classic Balkan joint-family, household groups have become smaller. This has resulted in a decreased number of livestock owned by any one household and has effected the family's division of labor as well. Formerly young men were chosen as shepherds, but nowadays they are busy with cultivating chores; the less important job of caring for the stock falls instead to younger children in their early and mid teens. For the most part, then, courting while watching the sheep belongs to the past.

But the prelo, or spinning bee, provides a courtship pattern which still persists. Maidens and matrons gather in the evening to spin and gossip. In the winter they meet at someone's home and in the summer out in a grassy clearing near the road. For the maidens it provides a means of meeting boys, singing, joking and flirting, all under the watchful eyes of their mothers, aunts, cousins and even potential female in-laws. Fingers fly as each spinner deftly pulls out tufts of the fluffy wool strapped to her distaff and twists it into yarn, winding ~~the~~ nimbly onto the spindle rotated in her right hand. After a while they hear the low murmur of laughter and male voices off in the darkness, and they know the bachelors have arrived. The maidens tuck their distaffs under their low stools, and the real fun of the evening begins. They sing out to the boys:

Come, darling, to the spinning bee,
The maidens are waiting for you at the spinning bee.
At the spinning bee are two beautiful girls,
Knitting stockings for bachelors.
They are knitting in many colors,
Come on, kade, the prettiest are yours.

The bachelors retort with one of their songs, and a courtship songfest is under way. The girls know which bachelors are present by recognizing their singing voices, and someone may call out a traditional teasing song, linking a maiden's name with that of one of the young men.

Come here, Zlata, come here pretty Zlata,
So we can give you, Zlata, to give you, pretty Zlata,
Handsome Rajko, pretty Zlata,
Handsome Rajko, pretty Zlata.

The girls' eyes sparkle and they wait to hear what the boys will chorus back. From the circle of matrons comes the singing exclamation,

Oj, maidens, make up your eyebrows black,
For the devils have become Don Juans tonight!

In this patrilocal society many of the spinning songs reflect the village stereotype of the mother-in-law -- someone respected and obeyed but not always loved. At one Orasac prelo a maiden amused the other spinners but provoked the mother of her fiance with a song that began,

I don't care for my mother-in-law,
Thank God I don't see her often!

The following is one of the older spinning songs.

Spin, spinners, don't look at me.
I went to the spinning bee in the village,
And spun three lengths of cotton.
It will be a shirt for my mother-in-law,
Only I'm afraid it will be too long.
If I knew how, I would shorten it.

Despite over four hundred years under the Turks, there are only a few songs in Orasac which still exhibit an Eastern melody and accompanying freer vocal style. Even so, the peasants of Sumadija sing them in less of an Eastern style than do people further South, who were under Turkish rule for a longer period of time. One of them, a maidens' song, tells of a young man named Karanfil, or Carnation.

O Carnation, my vari-colored flower,
 Aman, aman, flower from my garden.
 Carnation is preparing for a trip and singing,
 Amen, aman, preparing for a trip and singing.
 And his lover saddles his horse and weeps,
 Aman, aman, saddles his horse and weeps.
 "Are you going away and leaving me alone?
 Aman, aman, leaving me alone?"
 "I am leaving you with two mothers,
 Aman, aman, with two mothers."
 "I don't need my mother nor yours,
 Aman, aman, my mother nor yours,
 When I don't have my darling with me,
 Aman, aman, my darling with me."

There are many local songs showing Turkish influence and employing Turkish words, such as dul for rose, and parsluk for the embroidered velvet bodice of the female costume, which in itself is Turkish in origin, but they are all sung to even, triadic and more Westernized melodies.

Among the many songs written by contemporary composers and accepted in the village as "true" folk songs, one (Sumadija, Rodni Kraju) has come to be regarded as a sort of unofficial anthem.

O Sumadija, my birthplace,
 You are like paradise,
 Wonderful woods and mountains,
 And everywhere meadows and valleys.
 Handsome youths, from Sumadija,
 Handsome youths and pretty maidens,
 Men and women of Sumadija,
 Black-eyed and tall.
 Through the meadows and on high,
 Shepherds' song echo back.
 My heart is happiest
 when the song is of Sumadija.

A song written around the common folk metaphor of likening people to flowers appeared in Belgrade and the provincial towns in 1952 (Ja Posadih Jedru Kuzu Bebu). In it a wilting white rose represents a lonely maiden pining for her lover. The song immediately became popular in the villages where, again, the peasants adapted it as their own. The

first two line were written, "I planted a white rose/ In the fields of my native village." Following the meter and word rhythm, it was very easy for them to convert the second line to "In Orasac, in my native village (U Orascu, u mom rodnom selu)."

This particular song was more popular than many of the traditional songs during the authors' residence in Orasac.

As part of the general educational program stressing the new unity of Yugoslavia, the village school children are taught songs from other parts of the country. In this way tunes ranging in locale from an island off the Dalmatian Coast to a region near the Danube and Tisa Rivers in the Vojvodina have suddenly become part of their repertoire. Interestingly enough, the older villagers want no part of these "foreign" songs. They scoff, "Do you call that music? Qars are the only real songs!"

x + x

Joyous singing and merry-making accompany every village wedding. In carriages trimmed with colored streamers and garlands of flowers, the groom's party races over country lanes to fetch the bride. Whooping and yipping as they go, brandy flasks held aloft and arms akimbo, they perform with gusto all their familiar and beloved songs. One member of the party is dressed up with a long braid of flux pinned to his cap and a necklace of garlic and peppers around his neck, in mock imitation of a bride, to detract any evil spirits which might otherwise harm the bride. A sort of jester, he enlivens the gay caravan with his clowning antics and ribald songs.

Once they arrive at the entrance to the bride's household their mirth is subdued. The married women of the bride's family line up to greet them with song.

