Avdo Medjedović, who died in the 1950s, was a guslar from the area of Bijelo Polje in Yugoslavia whom Milman Parry and Albert Lord had the good fortune to record over a period of more than fifteen years, from 1935 to the early 1950s. The good fortune is entirely theirs and ours: neither Avdo nor his art needed Nikola Vujnović’s pencil and paper or Parry’s and Lord’s recording equipment. Before and after the recording team arrived in 1935, Avdo performed at home for his family and friends and in coffee houses for neighbors and visitors to the area. But he was generous enough to dictate to Nikola the 12,311-line Ženidba Smajlagina sina and to sing for recording discs the 13,331-line Osmanbeg Delibegović i Pavičević Luka, two great performances from which I shall excerpt and analyze two very short passages.

Lord tells us that Avdo did not think of himself as a great performer, at least in one sense. Avdo’s voice was hardly operatic; he was not very expert on the gusle; his singing at times outran his bowing. Yet Avdo, modest though he was about such things, was the master of an art that was developed by possibly two hundred generations of singers. Avdo preserved by performing this immensely long heritage that links him, by way of their common Indo-European source, to Homer, the singers of the Vedic Hymns, and the singer of Beowulf, to name some of the fragments of that heritage that have managed to survive—fossilized—to his time and ours.

*I delivered the substance of this article under the title “Possible Vestiges of Ancient Hymns in the Songs of Avdo Medjedović,” at the Slavic II section of the Midwest Modern Language Association meetings in Indianapolis, Indiana, on 8 November 1979.


The evidence for what might at first hearing seem like an extraordinary claim is by no means all in. Albert Lord is still at work on his study of traditional poetry in the Balkans from the beginnings to the present, a work that is likely to prove definitive. In the meantime the most important piece of evidence for Avdo’s inheritance of the Indo-European singing tradition is the language he composed in. Despite the many borrowings from the non-Indo-European language of the Turks, despite conversion to a religion devised by non-Indo-Europeans—Islam—no more problematic, I add, than a somewhat earlier conversion to Christianity—Avdo’s language is Indo-European. So too is the meter in which he forms his poetic lines.

Avdo did not know about such beautiful Indo-European fossils as Beowulf or the Odyssey. He could neither read nor write. Had he been literate, he might have done what we have done, or rather, what has been done to most of us in the holy name of literacy: he might have lost his ability to keep the traditional poetic language alive. But, fortunately, he remained illiterate all his life.—Fortunately, again, for us: Avdo was not always sure it was best to be illiterate. But because he was, he was able to sing the tradition: he did not have to read about it, or reconstruct it, or murder it to dissect it.

Here are a few lines from David Bynum’s transcription of a passage from Avdo’s phonographically recorded singing of Osmanbeg Delibegović i Pavilićević Luka. As you study the transcription your eyes will confirm what your ears might hear, if you are ever privileged, as I have been, to listen to Avdo’s voice. In this passage Avdo pilots himself—and us—steadily toward Boga in line 1310:

“’Oću, babo, ka kod baba svoga,
Ka kod baba svoga od Kajsara.
Al’ do toga, babo, biti neće.
U nad Boga i bože pomoci, ...”

[“I will, father, as (if you were) my father,
As (if you were) my father from Kajsar.
But to you, father, it will not be.
Under God, and with God’s help ...”]

Note how Avdo accomplishes his piloting. Perhaps a few simple statistics will point the way for us. In these four lines there are 17 As, 3 Es, 4 Is, 14 Os, and

5. I am grateful to John M. Foley for help in translating this puzzling idiomatic passage.