Levels of Oral Traditional Structure in Serbo-Croatian Epic

Milman Parry and Albert Lord began collecting traditional oral epic in the Stolac district of central Hercegovina. Songs by twenty-eight Stočani were gathered during the 1933 and 1934-35 expeditions, and later trips in the 1950s and the 1960s by Lord and David Bynum have added substantially to the sample of epic singing from this area. As a first step toward understanding the nature of the Stolac tradition, I am in the process of examining the repertoires of individual singers from that region. One of them, Ibrahim Bašić, is the subject of this paper. Restricting the textual base to three versions of a single song from this single guslar, I will first examine the logical structure of the narrative as a whole. In the following section I will probe the inner dynamics of four relatively brief selections from that narrative in order to illustrate the various types or levels of organization which order thematic and sub-thematic units. A short biography of the singer and an account of the main action of his song precede formal analysis.

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2. I believe the best approach to the meaning of "theme" in the Serbo-Croatian tradition is to cite Lord's entire chapter 4, "The Theme," in The Singer of Tales (1960; rpt. New York: Atheneum, 1968). pp. 68-98, rather than to rely on a one- or two-sentence approximation.

3. The biography was assembled from Ibro's recollections in conversations 669a, 291b, and 291b (I follow the standard Parry Collection practice of representing texts recorded
The Singer

Though he spent the greater part of his life in the Stolac region, Ibro Bašić was born in Vranjević in the district of Mostar. At the age of fourteen he left his father’s household to become a sluga (‘servant’) to one Ahmet-efendija, a wealthy landowner from Opijač in Dubrava. Ibro remained with him for about ten years, until he entered the service of Salihagha Behmen on the occasion of his new master’s wedding. After three or four more years he himself married, living for a time with his bride, Dula Džanko, in her village of Ošanjica. Subsequently they left the village and Ibro found work as a porter in a hotel and as an attendant in a kafana. During this period Dula became quite ill and her brother took her to live with him in the hope of improving her health. Ibro soon followed her back to Ošanjica, but himself became bedridden as the result of a tumor in his leg. He remained in the village for at least eleven years after his recovery, living with a Ratkušić family. His first wife died during the war, and a childless re-marriage lasted only four years. Of his two sons who survived in 1934-35, one had moved to Belgrade and the other had remained with his father to work at their modest wood-cutting trade.

Ibro began to learn to sing at the age of eight or ten, first from his father, a skilled guslar who was a part of the local tradition in which a singer characteristically performed in a number of villages near his own. He also encountered five more singers of varying age and reputation in his early years. From Sule Tabaković he learned “Derdelez Alija and the Ban of Karlovo” (291, 291a, 6596) from Ibro Ćorić “Grgu Antunić Attacks Raduć” (6692), from Osman Marijić “Hrnjić Mujo and the Ban of Karlovo” (645) and “The Wedding of Smalagić Meho” (12491), and from Selim Bašić and Selim’s father on phonograph, wire, or tape with italic numerals and letters; those taken from dictation are given in Roman). While the absolute chronology is not reliable, the succession of events is quite believable.

4. Though he does not tell Nikola anything further about the coffeehouse experience, it seems safe to speculate that during this time Ibro had an opportunity to hear many singers perform. He may well have learned from them and perhaps even have performed there himself. A fragmentary description from 291b and an elaborate episode from 6598 indicate that he had at various times been paid for singing publicly.

5. This illness is a very “heroic” one, reminiscent in its hyperbole of Salih Ugljanin’s account of how to behead a man (SCHS, I, 63-64; II, 5).

6. On the special gift of youth in learning to sing, Ibro says: “A child of four years by nature remembers more than if he were twenty. The child is a great wonder; he can learn and retain it in his head. It’s in the nature of a child” (6598).

7. In 291b he credits Selim Bašić as the source of this song; this is the only contradiction about sources, however.

8. This text, recited with the gusle and imbedded in the very lengthy conversation 6598, demonstrates the important pacing function of the instrument. Hypersyllabic lines abound, most of them composed either of two final cola (12 syllables) or of an “extra” final colon (16 syllables). Cf. two recited texts by Salih Ugljanin in SCHS, II, 107-16 and 117-26.