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WOMAN AS THE *STOŽER* OF SERBIAN VOCAL TRADITION¹

“The house rests not upon the earth
but upon the woman”

(A Serbian proverb)

The word *stožer* (“pivot,” “axle,” or sometimes “point of support” – translator’s note) is very frequent in the Serbian language and it occurs every time something strong and solid is to be indicated, something which also represents a footing of a kind. Interestingly enough, the way it is mostly used among rural folk relates to things which are used in different ways but are essentially the same. Thus, for instance, the *stožer* denotes the center of a hay-stack (probably the original meaning), the pole around which the hay is piled representing the chief unifying factor which warrants the stability of the whole “structure.” On the other hand, the *stožer* is a pole stuck into the ground, like an axle; a horse is tied to it and revolves around it, treading on freshly harvested wheat, separating the grain from the chaff. Owing to this role, the *stožer* is highly respected in folk beliefs. It has in fact the role of a cult for it represents a domestic idol, or the deity of wheat and the protector of the household. When it wears out it is not thrown away, but is placed among beehives so as to prevent bees from flying off to another place. Also, it is not burned, lest crops should be parched by the Sun and at times of drought, the *stožer* is watered – this being a way of conjuring rain.²

The idea to call the woman the *stožer* of Serbian vocal tradition is only apparently new, in fact it is not so at all, considering the well known fact that the greater part of that tradition rests on women. Deciding on the subject for this paper, I soon realized that the problem in question is but a tiny portion of the problem concerning the role of the woman in the overall tradition and in society as well. Aware of that fact, between the wish to persevere in my intention and

¹ In view of the limited space allotted to articles in *Novi Zvuk*, this article, created following the initiative of the Institute for Folk Music in Vienna (where it was presented for the first time on May 11 1998) is considerably shortened with respect to the initial version. For that reason, we had to condense the part of the text dealing with the role of the woman in certain rituals, throughout the annual and life cycles and to omit completely the transcriptions of songs sung on such occasions.

² Customs associated with the *stožer* are many and they all unequivocally testify to its important role in the former patriarchal rural community. There is a very interesting, but now almost forgotten belief that the Earth itself holds on a *stožer* (Š. Kulišić, N. Pantelić, *Sprski mitološki rečnik* /Dictionary of Serbian Mythology/, Nolit, Beograd 1970, 276–277).

the fear that the problem I am trying to cope with is much larger and more complex than what can be observed from the ethnomusicological point of view, I have made up my mind to try. As a necessary consequence a need has occurred to narrow down the mentioned problem, which expanded at a certain moment to an incredible breadth. The narrowing of the problem, however, does not affect its depth, for the investigation of “a river of a narrow but deep flow,” an ideal of every science, is also the foremost “task” of ethnomusicology, a fundamental discipline in the study of music.

In a patriarchal society, like the one which existed in the Serbian village, the relationship between the sexes was clearly defined, although it bore some essential contradictions and ambiguities.³ Thus for example, the woman was generally subordinate to the man in everything, which was also manifested through a whole series of usually “negative (taboo) regulations,”⁴ while on the other hand everything vital for the community rested on her. Her link with the soil and nature which from primordial times had been strong and unbroken, made the woman the true “master,” but gradually she ceded her “command” to the man, who did not realize that it was only in form but not in essence. Withdrawing into the “shadow,” the woman proved to be wiser, for she evaded sharp confrontation with the man. This resulted in the opinion that the woman was an inferior being, which even though unpleasant and insulting owing to its manifestation in many domains of life, in fact suited her.⁵ The opinion of a Serbian folklorist Dr. Nenad Ljubinković that women are chief protagonists and men only “extras” gives a lucid picture of their role in society, the role which has been obscured by patriarchal relationships in the village. Many proverbs and sayings eloquently confirm this. In addition to sayings that in a way corroborate the general view of women,⁶ it is interesting that there are some in which a dilemma of a kind occurs⁷ and there are even sayings that clearly display the awareness of the woman’s dominating role in society.⁸ Elements of some “truths of life” expressed in these

³ For more information on this see: D. Bandić, „Ka opoziciji muški pol – ženski pol u religiji Srba“, *Carstvo zemaljsko i carstvo nebesko (ogledi o narodnoj religiji)* / “Toward the opposition male – female in the religion of Serbs,” *The Kingdom of Earth and the Kingdom of Heaven (essays on folk religion)*, XX vek, Beograd 1997, 155–171.

⁴ *Ibid*, 157.

⁵ “Do not boast with your victory over women, they themselves wanted to be won” (Gerald, a 19th century French poet).

⁶ “Who obeys a woman is worse than a woman”; “Every woman is like her husband: whatever sort the man is, his wife is the same,” “Women are to chat, men are to act,” “His gun, his wife, and his horse a man can show, but not lend”. (*Vukove narodne poslovice s registrom ključnih reči* / Serbian Folk Proverbs Collected by Vuk Karadžić, with a key words register/, Nolit, Beograd 1996).

⁷ “You are both a man and a woman. In Risan (Boka Kotorska, author’s note) is said of a worthy woman.” (*ibid*).

⁸ Along with the one quoted in the subtitle, some other sayings speaking “in favor” of woman are: “Where there is no woman, there is no house”; “Where are you from? – Where your wife is from”; “Man is the head, woman is the shoulder on which the head rests and which turns the head” etc. (op. cit. 6).

ancient Serbian sayings are naturally found in other nations⁹, as well as in more recent times, which clearly demonstrates the great interest in the woman, which did not diminish with time, but on the contrary, intensified.¹⁰

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Since time immemorial up to the present day, Serbian vocal tradition has undergone great changes. Even though numerous and diverse, these changes can nevertheless be observed and studied if we have in mind in the first place the *function* of singing at a certain moment in the development of vocal tradition. Seen through such a prism, two types of our folk singing emerge: one conditioned by rituals and the other which is not. In a specific syncretic unity with dance, acting and other ritual elements, singing in the past used to have enormous, perhaps even existential significance. As it was gradually "liberated" from the ritual – desacralized, its function changed, becoming a goal unto itself, that is singing in the proper sense of the word.

In ancient times, due to his insufficiently defined relationship with nature, man performed rituals which were unified or at least related. From the initial "period of undifferentiated functionality,"¹¹ undoubtedly arose the gradual differentiation of individual rituals and in accordance with this – more forms of ritual singing. Nonetheless, no matter how these forms differed from each other, they were characterized by a degree of similarity which testified to their common origin.

Depending on the time and the occasion in which they were performed, our rituals belonged to what is known as the annual or vital cycle. People divided a year into two half-years: summer and winter, which was directly connected with two solstices – times a year when the sun traversing its ecliptic path is at its greatest distance from the celestial equator.¹² These two events were especially

⁹ "Three virtues of a woman: to obey her father, to obey her husband and to obey her son (Chinese); "Give your wife a good whipping every morning: if you don't know why, she will know it for certain" (Arabic); "The best woman is the one who knows how to rule by obeying" (Latin); "By being silent a woman knows even what she does not know" (Italian); "Trust a woman and a sly friend only in what you are sure yourself" (Portuguese) etc. (Tomislav Radić, *Vox populi (zlatna knjiga poslovice svijeta) / A Golden Book of Proverbs of the World*, Globus, Zagreb, 1989; J. Puljo, *Biseri mudrosti / Pearls of Wisdom*, Beograd 1979).

¹⁰ "God made women only to tame men" (Voltaire); "When the eyes of a woman are clouded with tears, it is the man that does not see clearly" (Tournier); "Women are smarter than men, for they know less and understand more" (Stephens); "The most stupid woman can rule a clever man, but it takes a very clever woman to rule a fool" (Kipling) and so on. (J. Puljo, *Biseri mudrosti*).

¹¹ I. Zemcovskij, „Žanr, funkcija, sistema“, *Sovjetskaja muzika*, 1971, 29.

¹² "In our parts, the winter solstice occurs approximately on December 21st, it is the time of the longest night and the shortest day. The summer solstice is approximately on June 21st and it is the longest day and the shortest night. Equinox occurs in our parts approximately on March 21st and September 23rd. The Sun is in the zenith above the equator and

celebrated among our people, so that St. John's Day (June 24th or July 7th, according to either the Julian or Gregorian calendars) "falls" on the summer solstice and Christmas Eve and Christmas (December 24th–25th or January 6th–7th) on the winter solstice.

According to the folk calendar, winter began with a holiday called *Mitrovdan* (St. Dimitrios' Day, October 26th or November 8th) and summer with *Đurđevdan* (St. George's, April 23rd or May 6th). Such a division into two half-years was to a large degree emblematic of ancient Serbian religion.¹³ The period from St. Dimitrios' to St. George's day is sowing-time, "laying seed into Mother Earth and expecting general growth and exuberance."¹⁴ This expectation was accompanied by various rites addressed to dead ancestors, who owing to the fact that they had returned through their burial to Mother Earth were believed to be in power to help their descendants by "watching over the seed." The rites began with a ritual procession on Christmas Eve and ended with the festivity of Lazarus' Day (eight days before Easter) and the moment when what had been sowed was expected to crop up.¹⁵ A custom called *kraljice* (queens) observed on Pentecost fifty days after Easter, was a kind of parting with the dead until the next agrarian year, even though it did not mean a total break of communication with them.¹⁶

As we have already mentioned, being strongly tied to nature the woman was the carrier of the majority of rituals and accordingly of ritual singing. Besides the *koledo* ritual (similar to Halloween, but performed just before Christmas) where chief protagonists were men, all other rituals "belonged" to women (actually, women did have a role in the celebration of Christmas, but we will not dwell on the subject, for want of sufficient data).¹⁷

In the past, the richest part of the year from the ritual point of view was spring. As far as we know today, the first rites in the calendar year in which the main participants were women were connected with Shrove Tuesday, the day before the beginning of Lent. Considering that they heralded a season of fasting, Shrove Tuesday was celebrated very merrily, with feasting and music but also with appropriate ritual actions.

night and day are of equal length." (N. Ljubinković, „Agrarna godina i narodni kalendar“, *DANICA, srpski narodni ilustrovani kalendar za godinu 1997 / "Agrarian Year and Folk Calendar" /*, Vukova zadužbina, Beograd 1997, 250).

¹³ It is not by chance that people in Serbia call these days "the heads of the year" and are very careful not to be absent from their homes on their eves.

¹⁴ Op. cit. 12, 251.

¹⁵ Op. cit. 12, 252.

¹⁶ Op. cit. 12, 252.

¹⁷ An interesting even if isolated piece of information refers to *koledarke*, women *koledari*, in fact a group of girls which in Resava (northeastern Serbia) paid caroling visits for Christmas, singing and dancing. An expert – ethnologist opinion is interesting, however expected: the customs is older than male *koledars*, as they were assumed to personify female ancestors (op. cit. 2, 170).

As particularly interesting from the point of view of both ritual and music is the custom *rana* the name of which stems from the name of the fire lighted by the inhabitants of the whole village. After the fire had been lighted, merrymaking began with singing and dancing till dawn. On *Lazarus' Saturday* (the day before Palm Sunday, eight days before Easter), celebrated in commemoration of the righteous Lazarus, Jesus' friend and follower who was resuscitated by him before the latter's triumphal entry into Jerusalem, various rituals were performed in many parts of Serbia. As it is often the case in our country, this is one of a series of pagan festivities which the Church accepted without introducing any essential changes. Hence the ritual processions of girls who made their rounds of the village and its surroundings with suitable songs and dance. The girls were rewarded for their performance – most often with eggs as a specific symbol of life.¹⁸ The principal characteristic of the whole ritual was the symbolism of a circle, which is again universal and signifies integrality, wholeness, eternity and infinity.¹⁹ This was manifested in the circular path of *Lazarice* as well as in their songs and dance in which the said "circular principle" was expressed in several ways, primarily through antiphonal singing and the appearance of the "frame – verse" (the first line of the poem was equal to the last one; the most common mode of appearance was: "Oj ubava mala moma" / "Oh, pretty little lassie"/). These songs also contained a refrain, as a special "confirmation" of what was expressed by the main text. The refrain was usually short and it went like: "lazare," "doz," or more rarely: "lado."

St. George's Day (April 23rd or May 6th), as we have already indicated, was celebrated as the reatest shepherds' festivity. In this holiday connected with St. George²⁰, as in many others, we can observe the process of Christianization, also without changes in their pagan essence. It is in fact a holiday of the revival of nature; countless apparently ordinary actions are intended to transfer its power, in the first place the power of new vegetation, onto people, cattle, poultry and bees, on crops and grapes.²¹

Jeremiah's Day (May 1st or 14th) was named after the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah and it was devoted to ritual protection from snakes.²² In some parts on

¹⁸ "An egg with an embryo out of which the world will develop is a universal and self-explanatory symbol. The opinion that the world has grown out of an egg is common to the Celts, Greeks, Egyptians, Phoenicians, Canadians, Tibetans, Vietnamese, Chinese, Japanese, inhabitants of Siberia and Indonesia and many other peoples" (*Rečnik simbola /Dictionary of Symbols/*, Narodno delo, Beograd 1994, 196).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 260.

²⁰ St. George, in the tradition of our people and also of other Slavic peoples, was considered to be a protector of smaller livestock, like sheep. Also, St. George appears in legends as a protector of wolves – on his day he assembles wolves and administers food to them (op. cit. 1, 260).

²¹ Op. cit. 2, 119.

²² "The Jeremiah cult came through the influence of Christianity, as this saint is said to have tamed snakes and crocodiles. The prophet Jeremiah (born around 600 BC.) is still invoked in Christian prayers, while in ancient Egypt, where he was buried, people used to take dust from his grave as a medicine against the bite of a snake" (M. Nedeljković, *Godišnji običaji u Srba /Annual Customs of Serbs/*, Vuk Karadžić, Beograd 1990, 112).

Jeremiah's Day ritual processions used to go through the village, but gradually the custom was reduced to several actions performed by each household individually. Thus, for example, some of the residents of a house, generally the housewife, went around the house banging on a metal object (frying pan, poker, and so on) singing or rather uttering a song for the occasion, beginning with the line: "Jeremiah into the field, vipers into the sea". The whole performance of the miniature ritual was very loud, as it was believed that thenceforward snakes would not come nearer the house than the "acoustic boundaries" thus established.

Among our people the bee was considered a holy and blessed "animal," hence the belief that it was a sin to kill a bee. Various jobs connected with bees were not strictly tied to a certain day but in the traditional rural practice they were performed at the very beginning of summer (according to the folk calendar). The most important one was the "capturing" of a swarm of bees into a new bee-hive, which was for that occasion specially scented with plants like basil, etc. The woman who did that "communicated" with the bees, either by speech, inviting them into the bee-hive and dissuading them from going to another place (mountain, forest, or the like) where "something bad can happen to them," or by song. The song performed on that occasion contained a great deal of improvisation, testifying to its ancient origin. It was characterized by fragmentary structure with frequent addressing to the queen (*mato*), which can be understood as a specific refrain.

The ritual of *kraljice* (queens) is performed in Serbia mostly on Pentecost (49th day after Easter) and Holy Thursday (40th day after Easter), more rarely on other occasions. The participants of the ritual were girls – *kraljice* ("queens"), were generally the same persons who performed the *lazarice* ritual, the two customs developed many common traits, observable also on the musical plane. Thus, the music was performed mostly antiphonally, there was the "framing verse" as well as the refrain, mostly "lado" or less commonly "ljeljo," which according to some folklorists represented remainders from ancient Slavic mythology (because of references to pagan deities).²³

Dodole (rain conjuring) was not strictly tied to a certain day in the year, or a particular occasion, nevertheless it also belonged to the cycle of annual events, as it was most commonly practiced in summer, sometimes in spring, when rain was needed (chiefly between St. George's Day and Holy Thursday). In the past, the *dodole* ritual was performed by a group of female children (5 – 10 years), one of them being the "chief protagonist" and she was called *dodola*. She had to be an orphan (without a father and a mother) or a posthumous child.²⁴ Dressed in shabby clothes and barefoot, yet adorned with grass, vine-leaves and fruit twigs, children circled the village district organized into specific processions, singing occasional songs accompanied by the customary refrain "oj dodole." Water was often poured over *dodole* which was meant to be a "hint" to the super-

²³ Op. cit. 2, 173.

²⁴ Op. cit. 2, 108.

natural forces to do the same. Also, they were given various gifts, usually food, but not eggs, lest hail should destroy the crops.

Within the annual cycle, *harvest* should also be mentioned. It is characterized more by its working process (nothing strange, considering that it was the most important annual task on which the whole community depended) than by what could be properly considered as a ritual. For that reason, harvest songs are deprived of ritual traits and belong to “work-songs.” In view of our subject – the role of the woman in vocal tradition, we can again conclude that harvest songs belong entirely to women.

In many of our parts, the feast of *Transfiguration* (August 6th or 19th) marked the transfiguration of nature, when days and water became colder, and leaves on trees began to turn yellow. From that day village gatherings would begin, lasting until spring. They took place indoors, usually at night and they consisted of carrying out a task, accompanied as a rule by song, playing a traditional instrument and dance. Songs performed at these gatherings were not ritual, they belonged to the so-called lyric singing. Their topic was most frequently love, which was treated either seriously, or the songs appeared in the form of *pripojke* or *pripevuške* where relationships between young men and women were presented with humor. These songs, performed solely by women singers, were interesting from the point of view of their structure: their text was always the same, only the names of the boy and girl changed, according to the current interest of the singers.

The life cycle contains customs, including songs that are not associated with a specific part of the year, or specific holidays but with important events in man's life. Thus one may speak of customs accompanying birth or early childhood, wedding, death. Needless to say, the woman – the one on whom the rural household rests – was the main if not the only protagonist in these customs as well.

The birth of a child among our people was accompanied by some pronouncedly ritual actions, but not with occasional songs. Songs were undoubtedly sung to the baby, however, from the very first day, most often with the function of lulling it to sleep – cradlesong, of which several types have survived in folk tradition. These songs were commonly performed by the child's mother, but it could have been a grandmother too, since soon after the birth the mother had to return quickly to her daily chores which were always plenty in a village household. The basic traits of cradlesongs were a fragmentary structure appearing as a sequence of small melo-poetic units, small melodic compass and syllabic singing, all this with the intention of creating a specific monotonous quality with a hypnotizing effect.

Along with cradlesongs there were other songs sung to children in everyday contact: for instance when dandling the child on the knee, so-called *cucalice*, the purpose of which was to calm down or amuse the child.

It is interesting that cradlesongs and “dandling songs” were not considered to be songs at all, so that their performance was not called singing but “counting.”

Among the rare ritual songs devoted to children there are *kravajske* and *strižarske* songs. Both types were inseparably connected with certain occasions, as with the first visit to a woman after she gave birth, when she was given honey cakes called *kravajčići*, and *strižba*, the child's first ritual haircut. *Strižba* was normally performed by the godfather but it could have also been another person with whom the family wanted to establish such relationships. Occasional songs were sung; their texts even if not strictly ritual, manifested some ritual traits.

As the "central event" in a man's life, the *wedding* is of exceptional importance. The most important reason for this lies in the fact that marriage enables posterity and the continuation of the species. Even though in the past wedding songs used to be ritual, they have ceased to be that, so their chief function is to follow the "dramatic structure of the wedding." Thus we can speak about songs performed in the bride's and the bridegroom's house, songs sung on the way to the bride's house or on the way back with the bride, when the bride is taken out of her parent's house, etc. Wedding songs are most frequently performed by women, moreover not just any women but ones specially chosen as good singers.

Even though it constitutes the natural end to living, *death* among the Serbs is accepted affectively. However, regardless of the fact, rituals related to it are to a large degree precisely determined, which concerns "lamenting" or "wailing" for the deceased – a verbal expression of grief (displayed mostly by their closest relatives). Resembling singing though not considered as such, wailing is connected with a particular occasion more strongly than other vocal forms. While, for instance, a vocal melody may occur simultaneously in songs belonging to completely different genres (e. g. ritual and lyric), which means that it has become universal, wailing is characterized by a melody of its own, peculiar in many ways as are also some of its other traits. It is as though the wailing had "captured" or "petrified" the effect which is manifested through the fragmentariness of form based not on the poetic line as might have been expected, but on only one of its segments, with frequent use of specific refrains: "jao," "i, jao" and a characteristic "falling" melody (each melo-poetic unit starts with a higher note and subsequently drops down).

Only women take part in wailing, several of them at a time, which may turn this normally monophonic form into multi-voiced. The multi-voiced texture is accidental in this case and it does not obey the "laws" otherwise characteristic of the usual vocal practice. Particular grief is expressed in the textual content when a young person has died. In north-eastern Serbia such a burial was accompanied by a special ritual. At the beginning, a whole plum tree was pulled out together with the roots. Then it was decorated in different ways, according to whether it was a boy (flowers, wool of different colors and variegated papers) or a girl (all that plus the dowry she had been preparing for her prospective wedding). The decorated plum tree was carried in the funeral procession and upon the completion of the burial planted above the head of the buried person. All this was accompanied by songs mentioning the name of the deceased.

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After all that has been said about the participation of the woman in customs and traditional folk singing we should have no doubts as to the importance of her role. Someone may ask: "And what about the man, where is he in all that?" We do not wish to underestimate his significance in vocal music tradition, but it should be pointed out that man has always been associated with instruments more than with singing. No wonder, considering that the majority of songs had been ritually conditioned and the ritual practice was something which rested on women. Men presumably started singing only when singing was "liberated" from ritual. Hence men's songs belong mostly to the class of lyric and also epic (narrative) songs, generally accompanied by *gusle* – a traditional cordophone with one string, among our people often perceived almost as a sacred instrument.

Taking part in folk singing men very often assumed different attitudes toward it. The attitude was expressed through specific simplifications (one-part instead of traditional two-part singing – southeastern Serbia) as well as by adopting some new features (homophonic two part singing *na bas*, which was introduced into our parts probably more than a hundred years ago from the "West" – from Croatia, as opposed to the traditional two-part performance *na glas*). While dealing with the subject, a question arose somewhat unexpectedly yet understandably, or rather matter for contemplation about the possible "gender-determined singing or playing," in other words an inclination of men and women to one or the other type of music-making. I have no intention of drawing conclusions that would exceed the competence of an ethnomusicologist, however with an awakened curiosity for this question, having reached the end of the paper I cannot help mentioning a fact springing from the 20 years of my field investigations: the best male singers I have met tended to be somewhat effeminate. Along with a perfect knowledge of singing, they were also acquainted with ritual and even with some jobs traditionally associated exclusively with women, such as spinning wool, knitting and so forth. On the other hand, there have been women whose interests are or who are occupied with "purely men's" jobs or play a musical instrument. Considering the patriarchal organization of our society, this phenomenon is not so frequent and when it does occur it is necessarily facilitated by specific circumstances. Thus, for instance, a woman "deserves" the privilege of doing a man's job by the force of her personality which has enabled her to rear her children in spite of her early widowhood. As the "head of the family" such a woman is entitled to make decisions that are of the utmost importance for the family. Her behavior is often in accordance with this: she may perform actions typical of men (drink, smoke and so on), even sing accompanying herself with the *gusle*, which would in our society under normal circumstances be considered a sacrilege.