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Charity, Good Deeds and the Poor in Serbian Epic Poetry¹

Charity, almsgiving, charitable bequests and various forms of poor relief are lasting and universal cultural and social themes. Charity is defined as “benevolent goodwill toward or love of humanity..., generosity and helpfulness esp. toward the needy or suffering” (Merriam Webster Dictionary). Motivated by charity, good deeds are often aimed at the poor. The category of poor people is at the same time concrete and abstract, depending on the focus and methodological approach. Social historians analyze the poor within the scope of subcultural marginal groups, both as a composite individual within a group, and as a heterogeneous group of individuals seen as a whole. Therefore manifold aspects of the life, social involvement and interactions of the poor are explored: social status, welfare, health care, hospitals, ecclesiastical and parish institutions, gender, social and ethnic minorities, and so on. More specifically, poor relief and charitable activities directed towards the poor are discussed as social models, but also as a complex way of social interaction between the elites and the poor. Charity is discussed as a strategy for the elites to regulate the labour market and stabilize social order, but also as a means of acquiring “social capital” in order to upgrade one’s status and career. As a common form of charity, poor relief was “a many-sided litmus test: vis-à-vis one’s peers, apropos subordinate members of society, and, in fact, toward God and one’s own conscience”.²

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² M. H. D. van Leeuwen, “Logic of Charity: Poor Relief in Preindustrial Europe”, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* XXIV/4 (Spring 1994), 598.

Social aspects of charity are strongly connected with its religious aspect which prevailed in the past, when spiritual connotations of charity were dominant not only in the sacral world but in the secular, too. In Serbia in the medieval period and under Turkish rule, until the beginning of the nineteenth century, the emphasis was laid on the religious and spiritual concept of charity, which had an effect on oral poetry and folklore in general. Charity, good deeds and the poor were transposed to oral poetry in a way that to a certain extent reflected their status in reality; at the same time, however, they were transformed in accordance with the conventions of the oral poetic system.

Care for the poor, almsgiving and charitable deeds were a religious obligation; but since they, like many other forms of charity, promoted common good in the broad sense of the word, in time they became a humanistic and philanthropic standard. Although they may be discussed as early forms of social and ethical awareness, as neighbourly charity that emerges from the feelings of human sympathy, compassion and solidarity, it is likely that they had initially been motivated by the fear of punishment for violating pagan religious and customary laws. Giving and gifts were obligatory within sacrificial and other rites, and in memorial feasts, as a tribute to the dead. Believing that the spirits of the dead (either familiar or unfamiliar) could harm or help the living, people tried to induce mercy in them. Therefore, giving to the dead is not only a sacrifice, but also an appreciative exchange. The popular motif of “the Grateful Dead” is based on such beliefs. A common practice in ancestor worship, gifts to the dead have been preserved up to the present. In Serbia and many Slavic countries, the widespread custom of almsgiving is directly associated with the cult of the dead. Almsgiving and charitable deeds at Christmas and *slava* (family feast, unique to the Serbs, in honour of the patron saint) are connected with the belief that the dead can, with our help, lead a comfortable afterlife, and the living are obliged to show respect for the ancestors in this way.³ In this process, the poor, like some other specific types with special attributes, symbolize a mediator between this and the other world, and therefore are granted privileges in communication with the representatives of both. Charitable giving to the poor, beggars, crippled, etc. is considered a “spiritual credit” which will be transferred to one’s actual ancestors and other needy dwellers of the otherworld. Eventually, the dead will remember such kind and generous gestures, good deeds, and take them into account when the time comes for the givers to join them in the otherworld.

³ For ancestor worship and cult, see V. Čajkanović, *Stara srpska religija i mitologija* [*Old Serbian Religion and Mythology*], vol. 5 of *The Collected Works* (Belgrade, 1994).

As a common and recurring element in ritual, religious and everyday practices, charitable giving became typified and universal. These characteristics contributed to the forming of cultural patterns which were integrated into the philosophical and ethical doctrines of different religious systems, and in that way they gained their ideological and humanistic strength. Charity, mercy, compassion, pity are built into the foundations of universal religious thought as regards the role of individual acts of charity and good works in human salvation. The most important distinction for understanding this problem concerns the way in which charity and almsgiving are regarded – as a personal virtue or as a religious duty. In Buddhism, for example, liberality or generosity (dana) is one of the prime virtues and means of gaining the merit (punna) needed to obtain a better rebirth in the future. Generosity is cultivated through hospitality and gift giving. In the Hindu scriptures, on the other hand, almsgiving is an imperative duty. In the teachings of Gautama, giving is “sanctioned as a personal virtue” and “associated with self-restraint as an evidence of rectitude”.⁴ In Judaism, charity is “a central and imperative duty for each believer”, since contributing to charity is one of the most important commandments. But “in making charity to all needy Jews an obligation (however gladly it was executed), Judaism identified charity and justice (zedakah)”.⁵ In Islam, charity is legally organized in the form of zakat, religious charity tax, considered to be one of the pillars of Islam, and in the form of waqf, “pious endowment”, i.e. a gift of “property or money placed in trust so that the income can be used for a charitable or educational purpose”.⁶ In Christianity, almsgiving is an expression and enlargement of faith, and charity, as “the highest form of love”, is the crucial concept in Christian ethical and philosophical thought.

As an aspect of charity, poor relief constitutes a special theme with a long history in Christian churches.⁷ It was fulfilled in several forms – ecclesiastical, institutional, public and private. In the course of time, the repetitive and habitual character of poor relief became an important issue in structuring cultural patterns. Ethical, educative and humanistic potential of charity, and its founding on cases confirmed or witnessed in real life, directly connect charity with the shaping of poetic narrative models. The poetic modelling of cultural patterns and their fusion with concrete life stories (oral

⁴ M. Curti, “Philanthropy”, in *The Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, Electronic Text Center at the University of Virginia Library © 2003 the Gale Group, vol. 3, 487.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *The Penguin Dictionary of Religions*, ed. J. R. Hinnels (Penguin Books, 1984), 260, 349.

⁷ “Care of the Poor by the Church”, in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. XII, Online Edition, Copyright © 2005 by K. Knight.

histories, case studies) about charitable giving and poor relief resulted in the creation of poetic narrative structures. Elements of charity and poor relief as cultural events and symbols entered oral tradition and became its poetic material, which was treated in different oral genres. The main carriers in the process in which cultural patterns develop into narrative structures are formulations and syntagmas which recur in many written documents in the same manner as oral formulas recur in oral formulaic texts. The nature and content of this poetic material inclined it mostly to the religious, legendary and miraculous domain and genres. However, once adapted to the system of traditional oral genres and folklorized, the themes of charity and poor relief were accepted and transformed according to the conventions specific to the poetic world of the oral genre in question.

In Serbian epic poetry, charity and poor relief are represented in a range of structural forms. It should be noted that the word for “the poor” (*sirotinja*) in the Serbian language signifies both the indigent and orphans. In the epic idiom, the syntagma “poor people” (*sirotinja raja*) is a general, formulaic term for the common poor people, non-Muslim subjects under Turkish rule. However, in oral tradition the poor represent a cultural, social and ethical category. On this occasion only the “indigent” component is taken into account, since orphans constitute a separate topic. Another terminological clarification involves the terms “folk epic songs” and “epic ballads”, which are to a certain extent synonymous, especially in English translations, where Serbian folk epic songs are often translated as “ballads”.⁸ In Serbian oral literature, however, the term “epic ballad” implies ballads and epic songs of various subtypes that have a balladic sensibility. The problem is partly theoretical, given that the generic boundaries between the epic (heroic) song and the ballad are quite flexible, and partly terminological and typological, because there are many inconsistencies in the description and classification of oral epic poetry.

In this paper attention is paid primarily to the question as to how the concepts and administration of almsgiving and charity affect the relations between epic rulers and heroes on one side and the poor and common people on the other. Those relations will be considered in the historical and socio-cultural as well as poetic contexts. Assuming that epic models can represent transformed and modified cultural patterns, and that epic characters can reflect certain philosophical and religious concepts, some parallels in formulas and motifs between epic ballads and medieval and post-me-

⁸ D. Subotić, *Yugoslav Popular Ballads. Their Origin and Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932); G. N. W. Locke, *The Serbian Epic Ballads: An Anthology* (Belgrade: Nolit, 1997; 2nd ed., foreword by Muriel Heppell, London-Belgrade: ASWA, 2002).

dieval documentary sources are discussed. Under the influence of practice, conventions and regulations, epic tradition adopted certain formulas, attributes, stock characters and patterns, and adapted them to its own poetic system. Hopefully, the examination of such parallels will add to our understanding of cultural and traditional processes in the past. Bearing in mind Vladimir Propp's morphological study of narrative structure, as well as studies of the "hero's journey" pattern and monomyth, we shall try to show that the epic poems build on ancient cultural patterns. Charity and almsgiving are a universal cultural pattern, as the poor are a universal socio-cultural constituent.

Serbian history provides numerous examples that can illustrate the popularity and continuity of charitable activities. Many cases of beneficent activities of the medieval Serbian rulers may have formed a cultural pattern of charity in a broader sense. We shall mention only a few records of the Serbian rulers' beneficent work to illustrate concrete acts of poor relief and social welfare.⁹ Biographers praised the Serbian Grand *Zupan* Stefan Nemanja (c. 1132–1200) and his son Archbishop Sava (c. 1175–1236) for protecting the poor, blind, disabled, dumb, orphans, and for paying redemption money for debtors and slaves. Queen Jelena I of Anjou (d. 1314) established an institution for poor and orphan girls and personally distributed food and clothes. The courts of kings Dragutin (d. 1316) and Milutin (c. 1253–1321) were the most popular shelters for the poor and disabled coming from distant lands, islands, and even from Jerusalem. King Milutin and, later, Despot Stefan Lazarević (c. 1377–1427), were said to visit, in disguise and at night, the quarters of the poor in order to donate food and clothes. All these and many other similar charitable deeds entered epic poetry to become typified, stereotypical functions of epic rulers. Different, and yet in many ways similar charitable activities had merged into stereotypical features to become epic structural functions in corresponding narrative compositions. The actual Serbian rulers from different historical periods merged into the epic stereotype of a generous and considerate ruler who cares for the poor and protects them.

Another cultural pattern regarding charity and concern for the poor, in fact a common theme in Serbian epics, is the building of churches and monasteries for the salvation of the soul. In reality, every ruler or feudal lord who founded or renovated a church or a monastery had an obligation toward the poor, which was regulated by charters and monastic foundation

⁹ Many records are mentioned by J. K. Jirecek, *Geschichte der Serben* (Gotha, 1918) = K. Jireček, *Istorija Srba*, 2. vols. (Belgrade, 1952; 3rd ed., 1988). Cf. also *Selected Charters of Serbian Rulers* (XII–XV century), vol. I, ed. and trans. T. Živković, S. Bojanin and V. Petrović (Athens: Centre for Studies of Byzantine Civilization, 2000).

documents. According to the *Typikon* of Saint Sava,¹⁰ nobody was to walk out the monastery gate empty-handed. The monks had to supply the poor with bread, wine, vegetables, worn clothes and footwear. In many Serbian monasteries the poor had shelter, hospital and refectory, and even their own graveyard. According to the *Code of Emperor Dušan* (1349), “in all churches the poor shall be fed, as is written by the church founders. Should any metropolitan, or bishop, or prior fail to feed them, he shall be deprived of his rank” (§ 28).¹¹ The rights of the poor were protected by law and they could be represented in court free of costs: “A poor person who is not able to litigate or defend himself, let him provide a representative to litigate for him” (§ 73); “Let the judges go through the land within their jurisdiction to supervise and do justice to the poor and the needy” (§ 179). The *Code* also regulated the status of poor women: “A poor spinner woman shall be free, like a priest” (§ 64). The latter article is associated with a fragment of an epic ballad published by Vuk Karadžić in 1823. Speaking about the unjustly heavy tax of ten ducats, the epic bard describes the sufferings of a poor widowed spinner with a spinning wheel as her only possession and even the hemp prepared for spinning belonging to somebody else.¹² Legal protection of poor widows and the poor in general continued steadily even in times of hardship for the Serbian medieval state. In Despot Stefan Lazarević’s *Novo Brdo Legal Codes* (1412) the sale of bread, salt and fruit is an occupation reserved for the poor so that they would be able to support themselves and their families.¹³

Charters and testaments of Serbian rulers and lords are a rich source for the analysis of our theme because they contain characteristic formulas which perfectly reflect the essential idea of charity. For medieval man, charity and almsgiving were a way to keep their inner peace and reach the

¹⁰ Sveti Sava, *Sabrani spisi* [Saint Sava, *Collected Writings*], ed. D. Bogdanović (Belgrade, 1986), § 38 (p. 81) – my translation from the *Typikon* for the monastery of Hilandar on Mount Athos (1200–1205). The same regulation in the *Typikon* for the monastery of Studenica in Serbia (1208). Cf. *Byzantine Monastic Foundation Documents. A Complete Translation of the Surviving Founder’s Typika and Testaments*, ed. J. Thomas and A. Constantinides Hero (Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2000), No. 44. “*Karyes: Typikon of Sabbas the Serbian for the Kellion of St. Sabbas at Karyes on Mount Athos*”.

¹¹ *Dushan’s Code. The Bistritza Transcript*, introd. and trans. Djurica Krstić (Belgrade, 1994).

¹² Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, *Narodne srpske pjesme*, vol. I (Leipzig, 1824; 2nd ed., Vienna, 1841), Introduction [*Serbian Folk Poems*, vol. I of *Collected works of V. S. Karadžić*, Belgrade 1975, 576].

¹³ V. Jovanović et al., *Novo Brdo*, Studies and Monographs 13 (Belgrade: The Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments of the Republic of Serbia, 2004).

ideal of Christ. Medieval documents frequently contain formulations such as: “to donate for the soul’s sake”, “to contribute to the church for the sake of the soul salvation”, “to bequeath one’s patrimony to the poor [i.e. children – because they are left without a parent], to the wife, servants and for soul salvation”. Those and similar formulations recurred often, and in time were adopted into already formed epic narrative structures, where they were used in different ways, depending on how deeply they were assimilated to the new folk pattern. Being transmitted orally, the medieval formulas and motifs were preserved in epic poetry recorded from the seventeenth to the beginning of the nineteenth century.

The recurrence of formulaic phrases and patterns was noted in Serbian medieval charters, testaments and legal documents, but also in medieval literary and liturgical texts of various genres. The Serbian Orthodox Church considered it one of its vital duties to constantly remind actual and optional sinners of their obligations toward the poor. This moral reminder was practised eagerly by the clergy in oral sermons, and in a range of literary forms, especially in apocrypha. Although the apocryphal writings were officially rejected from the Canon, they satisfied the people’s curiosity regarding the issues ignored in the Bible. The salvation of the soul being one of the most interesting topics since ancient times, many apocrypha tried to take the advantage of the fact by presenting the *exempla* of correct moral behaviour in order to prevent people from sinning. This undertaking was conducted in a rather threatening and moralizing way, by narrating about the Last Judgment, apocalyptic visions and impressions of the apostles and the Holy Mother from their journeys to hell and heaven. In Serbian copies of apocryphal texts, such as the *Apocalypse of the Theotokos* (similar to the *Apocalypse of Paul* and *Revelation of Paul*), the *Apocalypse of Anastasia*, and the *Acts of Thomas*, sins against the poor, widows and orphans are regarded as very serious ones. The sixth place in the list of sins is reserved for those who make no donations to the poor and beggars in the name of the Lord. Severe penalty awaits even the righteous whose next of kin do not act according to the Christian norms: as the wife and children fail to fulfil the deathbed wish of a man bequeathing his property for his soul’s sake, he is sentenced to the damnation of hell and the same destiny is to befall his wife and children. A sinner who committed unpardonable sins (earth and sea yield up his flesh, and God rejects his soul) repents and asks Anastasia to convey the message to his wife and children in order to admonish them to pray for him and donate charity for his soul and thus save themselves from eternal torments.¹⁴

¹⁴ Cf. *Apokrifi novozavetni* [*New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. and trans. into the contemporary Serbian language T. Jovanović], book 23, vol. II of *Stara srpska književnost* (Belgrade, 2005).

The constant reminder of the Last Judgment influenced folk ballads not only through literary forms, but also by means of medieval paintings. The Last Judgment was depicted on the walls of many Serbian churches and monasteries, which may have inspired epic bards directly or indirectly.¹⁵ Regardless of specific conditions (time, place, school of painting, etc.), the main theme was depicted in episodes – a series of iconographical scenes illustrating well-known motifs such as the weighing of souls, symbols of the seven deadly sins, various torments of the damned, punishments in hell, an angel taking the sinners into the river of fire, etc. The motifs common to medieval painting and literature complemented one another and in the fantasy of an ordinary man created an integral cultural symbol, a sort of an artistic and mental pattern of this theme.

The recurrence of similar formulations, motifs and themes, and the presence of common and corresponding symbols in different historical, legal and literary documents, and art forms of the Middle Ages, permit us to consider them all as variants of a single cultural text, in the sense defined by Y. M. Lotman. In this way the symbol, as a specific idea of cultural value and content, acts as the guardian of cultural memory. It is “a profound coding mechanism, a special kind of textual gene” that derives from “archaic signs which represented condensed mnemonic programme of texts and patterns preserved in oral collective memory”.¹⁶

Within the scope of their “semiosphere”, Serbian epic ballads transformed and reconstructed their structural principles according to the principles of “other” oral genres or cultural spheres. The “other” genre or sphere preserved a recollection of its previous coding mechanism, and that resulted in the creation of new structures – epic models based on the process of recognition and translation. There follow some illustrations of semantic and structural interweavements of epic ballads with other cultural texts.

Our first example comes from the ballad *The Miracle of Lazar's Head* published by Vuk Karadžić in 1823.¹⁷ When the head of Prince Lazar (c.

¹⁵ On some motifs common to Serbian folk songs and paintings, see S. Radojčić, *Tekstovi i freske [Texts and frescoes]*, (Novi Sad, 1965), 108. In Radojčić's opinion, some motifs in the frescoes of the Last Judgment may have influenced epic ballads in the way that certain songs were composed by members of the Serbian clergy.

¹⁶ J. M. Lotman, *Semiosfera* (Novi Sad, 2004), 158-159 (cf. the Russian original: *O semiosfere. Trudy po znakovym sistemam* (1984), 17, 5-23; and the English translation: *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1990).

¹⁷ Karadžić, *Narodne srpske pjesme*, vol. II (Leipzig, 1823), no. 17 = *Srpske narodne pjesme*, vol. II (Vienna, 1846), no. 46 [*Serbian Folk Poems*, vol. II of the *Collected works of V. S. Karadžić*, Belgrade, 1988, no. 46], noted down from a blind lady bard from the village of Grgurevci in Srem. – The song has been interpreted differently. Some researchers consider it part of the medieval and later folk tradition about the historical fact of

1329-1389), found on a Kosovo field, is miraculously reunited with the body, he tells the assembled clergy that he should not be translated to any of the eight great monasteries they suggest for burial, but that he prefers his own foundation to them all:

He preferred his splendid Ravanitza
At the foot of the high mountain Kuchaj;
For Lazar built there a temple to God
While he lived and ruled amongst his people,
Built a church for his own soul's salvation,
Built it on his own bread and with his own treasure,
*Not with tears of widows and of orphans.*¹⁸

The blind lady bard emphasizes that Prince Lazar did not build his memorial foundation at the expense of the poor, but with his own financial means, so in that way he spared the poor from taxes, or, in epic terms, from tears and misery. This type of generous ruler became a distinctive stock character in epic ballads, in which the clichéd static epic ruler was amalgamated with the mental framework of sacred kingship.¹⁹ Nonetheless, Prince Lazar's charitable deeds are authentic, so the motif in the ballad is based on historical fact. In the *Foundation Charter of the Monastery of Ravanica* (1381), Prince Lazar indicates that the land that he is giving to the monastery is his own property either purchased from the nobles who owned it or exchanged

translating Prince Lazar's relics from the battlefield of Kosovo to his memorial church, Ravanica, in 1390. The monastery of Ravanica was a cultural centre where both oral and written literature was fostered. At the same time, with Prince Lazar's relics resting in the monastery, Ravanica "became a centre of pilgrimage and the focal point around which developed the cult of the martyr prince and the heroes of Kosovo who had fought with him", cf. M. Ljubinković, *Ravanica* (Belgrade, 1966), ii. Some other researchers believe the song grew from the Christian legend of St. John the Baptist and other saints "cephalophores", head-carriers, such as St. Dionysius or St. Denis of Paris who carried his severed head to the place of his burial.

¹⁸ *Kosovo. Heroic songs of the Serbs*, trans. Helen Rootham, introd. Maurice Baring, hist. preface Janko Lavrin (Oxford, 1920).

¹⁹ In medieval Byzantine and Serbian political philosophy, the emperor is the *optimus princeps* and he is chosen by God, so his moral duty is to imitate God. In this process of *imitatio Christi*, the emperor becomes God's emanation and, consequently, the embodiment of all virtues – he is an exemplary, orthodox Christian, extraordinarily brave (*semper victor*) and pious. In the words of Hans-Georg Beck (*Das Byzantinische Jahrtausend*, Munich: C. H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1978): "Sublimity and excellence of his character manifest in self-restraint, justness and wisdom, and first of all in charitable deeds intended for all mankind. This emperor embodies the law because it is integrated in him" (my translation from the Serbian translation: H. G. Bek, *Vizantijski milenijum*, Belgrade, 1998, 98).

it for some parts of his estate.²⁰ In this song, the motif serves as poetic praise of the holy Prince and tends to create a special psychological bond and a sort of intimacy between the bard and the audience on one side, and the martyr saint and ruler on the other. The ballad is meant to possess the same completeness of experience that medieval man used to have in an encounter with Lazar's miracle and cult, for every divine miracle has a symbolic form of revelation and new alliance with God that repeats its mission of salvation in concrete, historical time.

The motif of the care for the poor on their deathbed, presented in two *bugarštica*²¹ songs, shows great resemblance to authentic testaments of the nobles in structural pattern and formulas. The *bugarštica* songs speak about the death of Serbian Despot Vuk Grgurević.²² Their pattern corresponds to the standard scheme of a medieval testament: as Despot Vuk "breathes his last", his wife Barbara asks him, in bitter tears, to whom he intends to leave his lands and towns and his rich treasury. In the older version (recorded c. 1650), Despot Vuk, abiding by the feudal rules of inheritance and allegiance, replies that he reverts his lands and towns to his patron, King Matijaš. As for his treasure, Vuk requests from his sworn brother Mitar Jakšić to divide it in three:

You'll make part one Mount Athos' share,
Part one you'll give Mount Athos' monks,
My Mitar Jaksic,
And let them pray for the despot's soul;
Part two you'll make the orphans' share,
Wretched maidens,
That they too may remember him;
Part three you'll make my Barbara's share,
My brother in God!²³

²⁰ Prince Lazar's foundation charter for the monastery Ravanica (1381) was edited by J. Subotić (*Srbsky létopis* IV, 1847, 46), F. Miklosich (*Monumenta serbica*, Vienna, 1858, 196), S. Novaković (*Zakonski spomenici srpskih država srednjega veka*, Belgrade, 1912, 769-770) and A. Mladenović (*Povelje kneza Lazara*, Belgrade, 2003); cf. Đ. Trifunović, "Autobiographical details about king Lazar", in *Kosovo 1389-1989, Serbian Literary Quarterly* 1-3 (1989), 200-202.

²¹ *Bugarštica* (pron. bougarshitsa) is a distinct type of epic ballad in lines of fifteen to sixteen syllables, unlike more common decasyllabic epic ballads, cf. John S. Miletich, *The Bugarštica. A Bilingual Anthology of the Earliest Extant South Slavic Folk Narrative Song*, ed., trans., introd. and bibl. John S. Miletich, foreword Albert B. Lord, afterword Samuel G. Armistead, Illinois Medieval monographs III (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990).

²² Vuk Grgurević (c. 1439-1485), Serbian Despot in Hungary 1465-1485, remembered by his epic name Zmaj Ognjeni Vuk (literally Wolf the Fiery Dragon).

²³ Miletich, *Bugarštica*, 161.

The version of this *bugarštica* recorded in the first half of the eighteenth century is slightly different, but care for the poor remains a stable motif:

My treasure you'll divide in three:
The first part for my sinful soul,
Distribute it to priests and monks,
Thereof small portion to the poor,
They'll pray to God for my sinful soul;
The second part for my aged mother;
The third part for my own true wife.²⁴

In the authentic testament of Voyvoda Miloš Belmužević (1500), the formulation is almost the same, except for its prose form. In confessing his sins a Serbian nobleman divided his lands among his family and nobles, and donated some of his treasure to the church for charity and salvation of the soul.²⁵ Many legal documents from the medieval period confirm that contributions of money, wine and food to the poor and the Church, for the sake of the soul's salvation, were usual both among aristocrats and in middle and lower social ranks.²⁶

The motifs related to the poor and charity in epic ballads presented so far have been linked to the corresponding legal documents and actual acts of charity in late medieval Serbia. It seems that customs, feudal etiquette and the reality of daily life found a way to influence epic ballads in wording and composition. The ballads mentioned give an impression of being more genuine in the sense that they have preserved the actual facts, names, places and spirit of the epoch to which they relate.

However, there are other songs that assimilated motifs of the poor and charity into already formed, time-tested thematic and structural models, which can vary in subgenre and theme. Motifs of the poor and charity²⁷ are not necessarily involved in the central conflict but may still be very functional in developing the plot, in describing relations between characters or as a poetic ornament. Often stylized as contrast, antithesis or parallelism, these motifs conform to the epic convention of black-and-white portrayal,

²⁴ Miletich, *Bugarštica*, 171.

²⁵ A. Ivić, "Nekoliko ćirilskih spomenika iz XVI i XVII veka", *Vjesnik Kr. Hrvatsko-slavensko-dalmatinskog zemaljskog arhiva XV* (1913), 93-94 ["Several Cyrillic documents of the 16th and 17th centuries", *Bulletin of Royal Croatian-Slavonic-Dalmatian general archive XV*].

²⁶ *Odabrani spomenici srpskog prava (od kraja XII do kraja XV veka)*, prikupio i uredio A. V. Solovjev (Belgrade, 1926), [*Selected monuments of Serbian law, from the end of the 12th until the end of the 15th century*, coll. and ed. A. V. Solovjev].

²⁷ Some notes about the concept of charity from the ethical aspect are presented by J. Brkić, *Moral Concepts in Traditional Serbian Epic Poetry*, Slavistic printings and reprintings 24 (Gravenhage: Mouton 1961), 164-165.

especially when ethical issues are involved. This is why the poor are represented as a counterbalance to the rich, powerful and arrogant, and thus may stand for conscience, justice and moral rightness, as shown by the following examples.

In the ballad *Dušan Wants to Marry His Sister* a typical charitable gesture, although part of the poetic décor, is used structurally as the culmination of a series of impossible tasks.²⁸ Stefan's sister resists his wish to marry her by requesting the impossible:

I will not be your wife
 Until you find three hundred builders,
 And send them to Mountain Šara
 To find three hundred springs,
 And until they join all springs in one pipeline,
 And conduct it to the land of Misir;
*And until you make three cups of gold
 For the poor to drink water from them.*²⁹

The building of a memorial drinking fountain for the poor is a universally spread custom, often practised in Serbia. Apart from the charitable context, the meaning of such an act is very archaic and symbolic. According to the widespread belief of Semitic and Indo-European peoples, there is constant thirst in the otherworld. One of the most important duties of the living is to provide water for the dead. Thus building a drinking fountain "for the soul" is directly related to the cult of the dead and the cult of ancestors. There are many records showing inscriptions and dedications on the fountains.³⁰

In the same song, however, the poor have one more role to perform – the stereotypical character of the poor self-taught child (*đaće samouče*) symbolizing a morally superior person who speaks the truth without fearing the authority. After her brother manages to accomplish his other difficult tasks, his desperate sister turns to priests. The corrupted priests consent to the sinful marriage. The outcome is dramatic and frightening: the sister puts a heavy curse on the priests, but only a lower-ranking one, who represents the poor self-taught child type, dares to speak out against the emperor and, for his honesty, gets condemned to the stake. Soon after the fire is set, Roxanda's curse is activated, bringing awful punishment on the corrupted

²⁸ The plot in the poem shares some common features with folktale types AaTh 313E* and 510B, see: S. Thompson, *The Types of the Folktale. A Classification and Bibliography. Antti Aarne's Verzeichnis der Märchentypen (FFC No. 3) translated and enlarged*, 2nd rev., Folklore Fellows' Communications, vol. LXXV (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1961).

²⁹ Karadžić, *Srpske narodne pjesme* II, no. 27 (my translation).

³⁰ Čajkanović, *Stara srpska religija*, 82.

priests and consecration on the righteous one. Witness to the intervention of Divine Justice, her brother emperor is compelled to retreat, and the social and ethical order is restored.

The poor play multiple roles in the ballad *Emperor Constantine and the Poor Self-taught Child*.³¹ During the celebration of his patron saint's feast-day (*slava*), the emperor puts to the test the whole clergy, from highest to lowest ranks, by asking to be assigned a penance and offered absolution from the sin of beating up his parents. The higher clergy absolve the emperor in exchange for material possessions (silver and gold crowns for the patriarchs), and financial support for building new monasteries and cells (for bishops and holy fathers). However, the poor self-taught child, as a representative of the novice and lowest sacerdotal rank, refuses to fawn upon the emperor. On the contrary, he suggests that the emperor's repentance be tested by fire: the emperor should build a cell of pine wood, grease it with tallow and tar, enter the cell and set it on fire, letting it burn from evening till dawn; if he survives till morning, it will mean God's pardon and prove his being purged from his sins. The emperor agrees to the test, but instead of doing it personally, he puts the poor novice in the wooden cell. The following morning he finds the novice alive, sitting in the pile of ashes and praying to God with the Psalter in his hands. This scene encourages the emperor to try the same, but as he is sinful, his flesh burns completely, except for his right hand that is saved because of his charitable acts:

The Emperor's right hand was consecrated
Because of many good deeds that he had done:
He fed a lot of hungry people,
He supplied water to many thirsty people,
He provided clothing for many naked and barefoot people,
He supported the poor and the miserable people –
And for those deeds his hand became holy.

In the ballads about the emperors Stefan and Constantine, the poor are an important constituent of the theme of charitable deeds, but they are also represented as the symbolic figure of the poor self-taught child. The structure of the songs is simple and based on the opposition between reward and punishment. As a result of successful adaptation to Serbian tradition, a high level of concretization can be observed in both songs: distinguishing between heroes by names and titles, spatial localization, use of national traditional customs and beliefs as elements of epic ambiance and characterization, presence of details reflecting the actual church hierarchy of medieval and postmedieval Serbia, recognizable allusions to historical figures such

³¹ Karadžić, *Srpske narodne pjesme* II, no. 19 (my translation).

as the Serbian emperor Stefan Dušan³² (1331–1355) and the Byzantine emperor Constantine V Copronymus³³ (741–775). In spite of a predominantly negative characterization of these epic rulers, the emphasis is on their conversion according to Christian virtues. From this aspect, the motif of concern for the poor and the poor self-taught child type – a novice in the monastery who is not afraid to speak the truth no matter how dangerous it may be – constitute necessary elements for developing the story plot and building the characters. In both cases the poor symbolize the moral ideals cherished and elevated to universal values in different epochs and cultural regions. That gives them both the narrative and symbolic capacity to represent the ideals worth to be promoted in epic poetry and oral tradition. From the aspect of artistic structure, the poor novice, concern for the poor and charitable deeds may be said to act as dominant and creative narrative forces that form a plot, to finally overcome regressive structural elements of the poetic world depicted. Furthermore, it may be noted that the emperors Dušan and Constantine exemplify quite an opposite epic stereotype to Prince Lazar. They symbolize sinful, tainted rulers who need to repent in order to be saved. The most significant role in their moral conversion is given to the poor, who clearly represent ethical purity and demonstrative instrument in the hands of Divine Justice.

The poor may be actively engaged in narrative pattern, and influence even more directly the decisions of epic characters and future events in gen-

³² In Serbian epic tradition, the royal name *Stefan* (as part of the hereditary royal title, from the Greek *stephanos* – crown, wreath) is used as a stereotyped name for all rulers of the Nemanjić dynasty. The epic character of emperor Stefan personifies typified traits of medieval rulers and therefore is easily identified with the authentic Serbian king and emperor Stefan Uroš IV – Dušan *Silni* (the Mighty). Introducing the name “emperor Stefan” instead of “emperor Dušan” into the titles of several epic songs he collected and published, Vuk Karadžić clearly suggested that those names should be understood as equivalents. It has been pointed out that the historical facts of Dušan’s proclamation as “tsar and autocrat” in 1345, and the elevation of the Serbian Orthodox Church from archbishopric to patriarchate, led to grave conflicts over the ecclesiastical authority and political domination in the Balkans, which provoked the anathema of the Patriarchate of Constantinople and the Byzantine (Greek) Orthodox Church. These incidents must have affected the traditional concept of epic ruler and especially the image of the emperor Dušan.

³³ Byzantine emperor Constantine V Copronymus was remembered primarily as a fervent iconoclast. The historian G. Ostrogorski wrote that Constantine’s extreme cruelty in persecuting the iconophiles was not due to his primitive roughness, but to a state of psychotic overstrain. He entered the tradition as the typical “greater sinner”. Church legends consider his death a divine punishment – he died at sea, yelling in fever: “I’ll burn alive!” In time, he came to be known as “Copronymus”, meaning “The Dung-named”. Later on, in the 9th century, he was disinterred and his remains thrown into the sea.

eral. The true epic hero acts upon the code of ethics and always considers the needs of the poor. This is the case of Banović Strahinja, perhaps one of the most popular nobles in Serbian epic poetry. From the many versions of his wife's betrayal, we cite from the *bugarštica* recorded in the first half of the eighteenth century. After his court was looted and his wife captured by the Turkish outlaw Denalija, Strahinja sits ill-tempered at dinner with his kin. His brother-in-law Stjepan Ugović asks him:

– What ails my sister's husband so –
 Do you bewail your looted court,
 Do you bewail your captive wife?
 If you bewail your looted court,
 We'll levy tax among the Vlachs,
 So we may build your court anew.
 If you bewail your captive wife,
 Abducted by Denalija,
 We'll have for you another wife.
 But Strahinj' made to him reply:
 – Oh leave me be, for the good Lord's sake!
 Why speak to me of my white court,
 Of levying tax among the Vlachs,
 Of building my white court anew –
*Of others' tears I have no need,
 Nor curses of the sad, poor Vlachs.* –
 Why speak to me of Jelica,
 Of having me another wife –
 Ne'er Jelica I'll have again!³⁴

The response of Banović Strahinja is formulaic and can be found in other poems, such as the one about the abduction of Marko Kraljević's wife. At the moment of his wife's abduction, Marko is winning a war for the Turkish sultan. Since his participation in the battle has been vital for the Turkish victory, the sultan offers him a larger palace, more treasure, a higher position and a new wife; but Marko refuses because of heroic honour:

Thank you, my Sultan, my dear lord!
 When you start to build my court,
The poor will curse me with words:
 – Look at bastard Marko Kraljević!
 His old court was burned in flame,
 And may this new court never prosper!
 If you make me a chief tax collector,
 I could not collect tax from the people
 Until I arrest the needy and the poor;
So the poor will curse me with words:

³⁴ Miletich, *Bugarštica*, 3.

– Look at bastard Marko Kraljević!
 His old treasure was robbed,
 May this new one be unfortunate!
 And as for your promise to find me a bride,
 I don't wish another wife while mine is still alive!³⁵

In both poems, the opinion of the poor is highly appreciated and affects the action of the heroes. The poor personify the social and ethical norms that epic heroes must respect in order to maintain their position in the epic world. On poetic level, the motif of the poor prepares and motivates a turn in the narrative sequencing of events. The poor function as a warning to the hero to amend or consolidate his actions and principles according to the traditional heroic code.

Being superior to the common people, the epic hero is obliged to protect the poor and needy, and to safeguard social order and moral values. As the epic hero's protective function, or the protector's role (in Propp's terms), often overlaps with the epic liberator's role, the notion of protected subjects widens in order to encompass all categories of the poor, needy and unprotected people of a nation. This idea is well represented in the cultural patterns of the dragon-slayer, such as the song *Marko Kraljević Repealing Marriage Tax*.³⁶ By killing an Arab who oppressed³⁷ the people of Kosovo, levied a marriage tax on brides and grooms, and even demanded to have a new girl brought to him every night, Marko liberates all the Christians of Kosovo and earns their blessings and gratitude.

The feelings of compassion and mercy, as well as charitable activities of epic heroes, put the audience into epic exploits of greater national or social significance. Heroes are expected to show concern not only for the poor, but for the people unable to fight for themselves in general. Respect for the common people is part of the universal heroic code, not only the code of Serbian epic heroes. As their epic adversaries, the Turks, if honourable and righteous, sometimes treat the poor respectfully and may be merciful to the Christian poor, even though oppression against the non-Muslim population was not considered a sin against God.³⁸ In the song *The Start of the Revolt against the Dahiya*s there is a sharp contrast between the old Turkish

³⁵ "Marko Kraljević i Mina od Kostura" ["Marko Kraljević and Mina of Kastoria"], in Karadžić, *Srpske narodne pjesme* II, no. 62 (my translation).

³⁶ "Marko Kraljević ukida svadbarinu" ["Marko Kraljević Repealing Marriage Tax"], in Karadžić, *Srpske narodne pjesme* II, no. 68; noted down from a blind lady bard from Grgurevci.

³⁷ In Serbian: *zulum*, from Turkish *zulüm* and Arabic *zulm*, meaning injustice, tyranny, cruelty.

³⁸ Cf. Brkić, *Moral Concepts*, 72.

times (represented by a stable regime and regard for the common people) and modern times (represented by *dahiyas*, mutinous Turkish commanders). The modern Ottoman regime is depicted in the words of the old Fočo, a venerable Turkish noble, who advised the Turks to beware of the poor Serbian people (*sirotinja raja*):

We laid upon the folk a crushing tax,
 We rode rough-shod upon their dignity,
 We drove them into penury most dire,
 We pressed upon them fines and penalties,
 Despoiled their churches, trampled on their pride.
 Now, once again, the portents have appeared:
 Those signs that tell an empire is to end.
 It is not any king that you need fear.
 Against an emperor no king prevails –
 No kingdom can an empire overthrow,
 For God has made the world in such way.
 But now beware the starving Serbian folk!
 For when the hoes and mattocks rise and fall,
 Then Turks as far as Medina shall quake,
 And Turkish women weep in Syria –
 The common folk shall bring them great distress.³⁹

In these verses the common people are transformed from a passive into an active collective character, who was to play a historical role in the First Serbian Uprising in 1804. In another ballad by the bard Filip Višnjić, the poor sound a note of warning to the Serbian commanders as well. In *The Battle of Salaš* the Serbian rebels rest in their camp, while the local people suffer Turkish retaliation. A messenger – a poor, barefooted boy – runs into the Serbian camp and cries out:

Woe to you, three Serbian voyvodas!
 Woe to your food and your wine!
 You sit, drink wine and sing,
 And the poor people whine in misery!⁴⁰

After this rebuke, the ashamed commanders start preparations for battle. It is clear here that the poor act as social and moral critics of the leaders, and as initiators of epic action.

As the last examples demonstrate, Serbian epic heroes and rulers are under constant social and moral evaluation by the common people. The

³⁹ “Početak bune protiv dahija” [“The Start of the Revolt against the Dahiyas”], in Karadžić, *Srpske narodne pjesme* IV, no. 24; recorded from the blind bard Filip Višnjić (trans. G. N. W. Locke, 197-198).

⁴⁰ “Boj na Salašu” [“The Battle of Salaš”], in Karadžić, *Srpske narodne pjesme* IV, no. 28 (my translation).

poor criticize the actions of epic heroes that do not measure up to the traditional values. The voice of the poor (*vox populi*), with their judgments about social and moral issues, urges other characters to change their conduct and harmonize with the “horizon of expectations” (H. R. Jauss) of the audience. Following that general idea, the role of the poor in Serbian epic poetry is comparable to the role of the chorus in Greek tragedy. The chorus is represented by a group of actors symbolizing the people. It can take part in the action or comment on the events and destinies of characters, but its major function is to set the framework of ethical problems related to the character. In Serbian epic poems the poor likewise take part in the action and affect other characters; because of that contact, the status of the character can change.

The role of the poor is not necessarily explicit, or embodied in an epic character. Sometimes the narrator gives himself the privilege of evaluating and commenting the actions of his protagonists, and even of labelling them as poor, more precisely: as paupers. There is one particularly poeticized example in the *bugarštica Marko the Prince and His Dear Brother Andrijaš*, noted down in 1555 from two fishermen from the Adriatic island of Hvar. This ballad tells how Marko murdered his brother Andrijaš over a looted horse, and how his dying brother forgave him. In a highly refined trope, a figure of speech known as Slavic antithesis, the narrator compares the wretched brothers with poor men, paupers:

Two paupers had for long been friends,
Close friends were they and dearly loved,
Divided booty cheerfully,
And did take leave as cheerfully,
And after having taken leave,
Did meet each other once again.
They took three fine, heroic steeds,
Two paupers did,
Most cheerfully divided two,
But on the third could not agree,
And in great rage each other cursed.
They weren't two paupers, no, my friends,
But rather Marko, knight and prince,
Marko the knight and prince it was
And Andrijaš his brother dear,
Knights so young.⁴¹

The tragic destiny of the brothers who once were friends and companions in arms is interpreted by the narrator as spiritual misery and poverty. He takes pity on their ill-fortune, but does not judge them (at least not openly,

⁴¹ Miletich, *Bugarštica*, 39.

or perhaps just as a feeble hint). The motive for the murder is simple, and the feelings of the killer and his victim are held back. The reduction of background details does not reduce the impression of a collapsing heroic world, the world crushed not only from the outside, by the Turks, but also from the inside, in the family circle. The dying brother is triumphant in his sympathetic forgiveness, remaining superior in heroic, moral, and human sense. Nevertheless, he is named “pauper”, and so is his brother. For the epic bard and his sixteenth-century audience, the destinies of the brothers are poor, unfortunate, and yet pitiable, their occurrence being common and ordinary in everyday life.

Although the limited space makes it impossible to exhaust the role of the poor in Serbian epic poetry, some general remarks can be made. The poor should be considered as a socio-historical and cultural category that has its own development in the history of the Serbian people. It seems likely that this category, originally connected with the prerogatives of rulers and feudal lords, integrated into the Serbian epic through the concept of charity. The frequency and certain uniformity of almsgiving and charitable deeds in practice, and the repetitiveness of formulaic patterns and expressions employed in literary, legal, monastic and other documents, led to the creation of corresponding epic models and formulas. Once they entered the oral epic, the motifs of the poor and charity were structuralized within the traditional epic system, and after that various processes of adaptation and merging with the “pool of tradition” (Honko) began. The poor grew to be functional characters, both individual and collective, and to a great extent stereotypical, representative of certain social and ethical values.