

## ‘Ahengu shkodran’ and its Balkan contexts

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### I. To the term *aheng*

The Ottoman period lasted in Albania from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Its traces can still be perceived today among other things in traditional music and the vocabulary used in it. *Aheng* is one of the most common terms in this context. It has several meanings in Albanian. The first ones are *music* and *pleasure and joy through music*. In these meanings it is used particularly when talking about the music at weddings and other pleasant occasions, during which people play, sing and dance with enthusiasm. It is therefore not surprising that one of the terms that signify folk musicians or more precisely “those who make music” is *ahengxhi*.

The term *aheng* is also used in Albanian to mean *maqam*. The term *maqam* itself has no longer been used since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. An announcement by a folk singer made in 1955 at the beginning of some recordings from the repertoire called *ahengu shkodran* - which will be discussed in the next section of the article - went as follows: “We begin the first *aheng* in *hysejni* or in *c sharp* with the song “The maiden was crying while washing at the brook” [*Po fillojmë 'hengun e parë n'hyseni ose do diezis me kangën ,Vasha kjante tuj la n'prru'.*]” (AIKP 3137 – 1.)

The term *aheng* is also used with the same meaning among the notes on the recordings of *ahengu shkodran* songs at the archive of *Instituti i Kulturës Popullore* (Institute for Folk Culture) in Tiranë. Examples of this are the song “*Diku naden sabahile* [Sometime in the daybreak]” with the number 3158 – 22 noted as “*fundi i hengtut të I-rë në Si n'agim* [the end of the first *aheng* in *b* in the daybreak]” or the one called “*Agimi tuj fillue* [The day is breaking]” with the number 3159 – 23 noted as „*hengut II në Si n'agim* [the second *aheng* in *b* in the daybreak]”.

The *aheng* in *b* is referred to by the name *zil* elsewhere. The song “*Bijshin dy kavajas n'Ulqin* [Two men from *Kavajë* (a town in central Albania) go to *Ulcinj* (a town in today's Montenegro)]” with the number 3250 – 3 is noted as “*Hengu Zil ose në si The aheng zil* or in *b*”.

The different ways the term *aheng* is used in Albanian in connection with the phenomenon *maqam* is highly interesting<sup>1</sup>. For this article it is nevertheless important to stress another of its usages, namely in the designation of the urban vocal repertoire from the city of *Shkodër* in northern Albania called *ahengu shkodran*. This is a further example that shows the significance of the term *aheng* for describing music and musical phenomena, very much connected with the influences of the oriental world into the musical life of Albanians.

### II. *Ahengu shkodran*

The term *ahengu shkodran* can be translated in a first meaning as “*music of Shkodër*”. But, in *Shkodër* several kinds of music and repertoires are known. *Ahengu shkodran* is only one of these repertoires. A well-known folk musicians from *Shkodër* -

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<sup>1</sup> More on this subject see Ahmedaja 2004.

Kolë Gurrashi - reports in an interview for the Albanian broadcasting service in August 1955 (he was 75 at that time), that “*ahengu shkodran* comprises about 300 selected songs” (AIKP 3137 – 1). In this interview he mentions composers, lyrics writers, and singers of these songs and relates that according to explanations from singers and musicians of his grandfather’s generation, the year 1870 represents a turning point for this repertoire. In that year a musical society was established in *Shkodër*.

Musicians’ memories, transmitted song lyrics, and sound recordings since the 1930s show that this repertoire is based on urban songs composed on different aspects of love and its sorrows (unattained love for example is often mentioned) and about passion. Singers were usually male, although female vocals are not uncommon. The instrumental accompaniment has varied from string instruments (especially those of the *saz* family) to a small ensemble of a violin, clarinet, drum, *saz* and accordion in the 1970s up to electronic instruments in the 1990s.

Songs of this repertory are still being sung today, but according to folk musicians’ opinion there are no more singers of this tradition now. The last one is considered to be Bik Ndoja (with the full name Ludovik Ndoj Gjergji), who was active until the late 1980s. Recordings of his interpretations are parts of the archives of Radio-Shkodra and of the Albanian Broadcast *Radio-Televizioni-Shqiptar*. A number of them have been published on the CD “*Bik Ndoja. Këngë qytetare shkodrane. Urban Songs from Shkodra*” (Scaldeferri 2002).

Of a great interest are the so-called “*jare shkodrane*”. The term “*jare*” (both the singular and the plural form are the same) also comes from the Ottoman period, where it was known as “*yar*” (lover).<sup>2</sup> The “*jare shkodrane*” are a number of *ahengu shkodran* songs, which might be called the “heart” of the repertoire. They epitomise in the most significant way general musical features of *ahengu shkodran* like the long melodic phrases, the extensive tonal range, the rich melodic ornamentations and the free rhythmic performance practice. Some of these characteristics might be recognized in the following transcription of the vocal part of a *jare* published by Ramadan Sokoli in 1960. This song is called among the folk musicians “*Jare, të due, mori të due*”, which could be translated into English as “My love, how much I love you”. The young man tells the girl of his heart to remember him with a word. He has chosen her among other flowers of the summer garden.

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<sup>2</sup> A special thank for this information goes to Hande Saglam, a Turkish colleague.



Example 1  
"Jare, të due, mori të due"  
("My love, how much I love you")  
Sokoli 1960/3: 219, Nr. 116

A new interpretation of this song can be heard in the track 18 of Scaldaferrì 2002. The recording has been made in 1986 using a new instrumental arrangement. The flute in particular does not sound very familiar, compared to other performances from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. On the other hand, changes in the instrumental ensemble have taken place continuously in the performance practice of this repertoire, as we can perceive them from the recordings of the past 80 years. The last change in this context was the introduction of electronic instruments. They have influenced the establishment of the major-minor system of the accompaniment, thus dictating different main tones to the melody than the previous ones, related to the *maqamat*. Changes of this kind especially began to take place since the accordion was introduced into the instrumental accompaniment.

### III. *Ahengu shkodran* and its oriental connections

The connection of *ahengu shkodran* with musical traditions from the oriental world, especially with those from Istanbul can be noticed not only in musical features, but also in "theoretical" issues, namely in the question of *maqamat*. Songs that belong musically

to the *maqamat* tradition are known as far as central Albania, but the discussion about *maqams* or *aheng* is known only in *Shkodër*.

The following example from central Albania is a love song, again full of sorrow. A young boy says to the girl of his heart “*I have loved you since I was very young / Are you not sorry to abandon me and to marry another one?*” Interpretations of Afsa Zyberi, a famous female singer of urban songs from central Albania in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, are very well known. One of them is the track 5 of an audio cassette published by Albanian Broadcast (RTSH). A musical transcription of the vocal part was published for the first time in 1960.

Example 2  
„Unë ty moj të kam dashe ije“  
(I have loved you, *ije* [a term used for saying “my love”])  
Sokoli 1960/3: 222, Nr. 141

This is a very familiar song still today. According to Ramadan Sokoli it is based on the *maqam divan* (Sokoli 1960/3:162). When Memo Schahiner, a musician and researcher from Turkey living in Vienna, heard this recording he discerned the *maqam shahnaz* and was very astonished that the singer was so “tempered” in terms of the *maqam*. Another musician might discern another *maqam* in this song, Schahiner also said. And disagreements in determining the *maqam* on which a melody is based are not a new issue, as is well known. Interesting in this case is that although this and several other songs in the repertoire of this singer are viewed as part of *maqamat* music, she and the musicians she used to perform with never talked about *maqams*. Even in *Shkodër*, where musicians and singers used to talk about this subject until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was no agreement. The song melody was and still is important for the

Albanians and not the *maqam* upon which it might lie, unlike in Turkey where musicians and even part of the audience may discern by hearing the *maqam*<sup>3</sup>. What is more, in Turkey this music is part of the classical tradition, in Albania it has been always part of traditional music. In addition, after the independence of Albania in 1912, in both countries - in Turkey and in Albania - different political and social developments have taken place influencing at the same time the musical life. Last but not least, in Albania there have been efforts since then over and over again to purge oriental influences as much as possible, and therefore also those in “*maqam* music” and “*ahengu shkodran*” and vocabulary derived from them as prime examples of this influence.

#### IV. *Ahengu shkodran* and *sevdalinke*

The influence of oriental music in the Balkans can be perceived still today not only in Albania but also in other Balkan countries; mostly in Greece, Bulgaria and the former Yugoslavian states. When talking about possible connections between *ahengu shkodran* and other particular repertoires, that of *sevdalinke* in Bosnia and Herzegovina has to be pointed out. Its roots also reach back to the age of rule of the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans. The former term for the songs of this repertoire was “*turčije ‘Turkish-like songs’, but since the late 1800s they have been known as sevdalinke ‘love songs’ (Turkish sevda ‘passion’)*” (Petrovič 2000: 964). The musical features are very similar to the songs of *ahengu shkodran* “*wide melodic range*”, “*based on hidžaz makam*”, “*accompanied by the saz*”. “*The player elaborates main melodic tones with melismas, ...*” (Petrovič 2000: 964) As far as the instruments used for the accompaniment are concerned, the accordion has been very prominent in recent decades. The lyrics are devoted to love and lovesickness. In the following example the boy gives the girl a rose. If she likes the smell she should take it, if not, she should burn it... One of the recordings of this song is the track 15 of the CD “*Asovi Sevdaha*” which could be translated into English as “*The best of sevdalinke*”. The singer - Zaim Imamović - is a very well known interpreter of this repertoire.

H em am  
E - VO O - VU RU - MEN RU - ŽU IZ MOG SKROM- NOG  
em am H em  
PE - RI - VO - JA NA DAR TE - RI DU - ŠO  
am am H E  
SA - LJEM I - ME JOI - JE LJU - BAV MO - JA

Example 3. Žero 1995: 78

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<sup>3</sup> A special thank for this information goes to Mansur Bildik, an excellent *saz*-player from Turkey.

This repertoire, though considered to be the national music of Bosnians, is also very popular in Serbia, Montenegro and Macedonia. Moreover, it has been one of the sources for the so-called “*novokomponovana narodna muzika*” (“newly-composed folk music”), a main stream of popular music in the former Yugoslavia since the 1970s.

Until now there has been no research of possible connections between *sevdalinke* and *ahengu shkodran*. Investigating both repertoires influenced by the same musical sphere could be a good way of finding out more about similarities and differences in establishing processes of urban traditions and repertoires as well as getting answers on the question of how different communities perceive the same tradition.

Another point of interest in this framework is the religious belonging of the folk musicians and singers as well as of the communities in which these repertoires are established. In the case of *ahengu shkodran*, singers and musicians have been both Moslem and Catholics (the mentioned Bik Ndoja is Catholic, for example). This is not surprising, when considering that in *Shkodër* half of the population is Moslem and half Catholic. On the other hand, the *sevdalinke* are known not only among Bosnian Moslems, but also among communities in the former Yugoslavia who are mostly Christians (Serbians, Montenegrins, Macedonians). In addition: “*Into the twentieth century, professional musicians who performed in the aristocratic courts of Bosnian Muslims and in the ubiquitous urban kafana-s (cafés) were primarily Christians, or alternatively, Muslims of low social caste, or Gypsies.*” (Petrovič in Levin / Petrovič 1993)

## **V. Music of Sephardic Jews in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Islamic religious chant in Albania**

A further consideration, which has to be put forward for discussion when talking about *ahengu shkodran* and its Balkan contexts, is the possible link between the *sephardic* songs in the former Ottoman lands and urban repertoires in the Balkans. A strong reason for that is the close relationship between *sephardic* or *Judeo-Spanish* songs in these areas and the *maqam* system (Cohen 2003).

As far as the music among the Sephardic Jews of Sarajevo is concerned, the relationship with the oriental world used to be present in several repertoires. “*In the 1980s, Sephardic musical forms were no longer found in living tradition and could be reconstructed only from the memories of the oldest members of the community. Men performed religious songs in a style of singing called bosanski mekam ‘Bosnian maqam’ and alaturka ‘in Turkish style’-like Muslim religious music, a synthesis of local Bosnian singing with Turkish musical practice.*” (Petrovič 2000:968) The wedding songs “*performed mainly by women*” used to retain “*some aspect of Spanish legacy, such as specific versification and the metrics of the poetic content in Ladino*” adopting “*stylistic features resembling those of local Bosnian Muslim practices, primarily sevdalinke.*” (Petrovič 2000:968)

Also the Islamic religious chant, in particular the *ilahijas* of the Sufi brotherhoods in Bosnia and Herzegovina have “*left significant traces in both religious and popular musical practices, both among Muslims and among other groups, for example Sephardic Jews.*” (Petrovič in Levin / Petrovič 1993)

At this point, it should be stressed that in Albania the relationship between popular musical practice and the Islamic religious chant - just as the Christian orthodox chant and the music of the Catholic Church - have not been subject of investigations. The

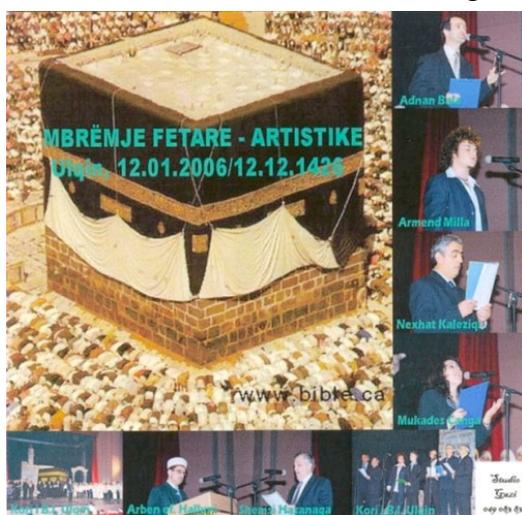
music research in Albania began after the World War II, during the communist time. As in all former communist countries, the religion was considered a threat by the rulers. The Albanian government went even a step further forbidding the practice of the religion by law in 1967. This law changed only in 1990. Under these circumstances, no research on religious music could be undertaken.

The Islamic chant that is heard in Albania in the last one and a half decades comes from different countries of the Islamic world like Egypt, Syria, and Turkey representing diverse traditions. What was the Islamic chant in Albania before the second half of the twentieth century can possibly be reconstructed, among others, through the contacts with older generations, as well as through comparative research in neighbouring countries. As far as *Shkodër* is concerned, its musical connection with the town Ulcinj (in Albanian *Ulqin*) in South Montenegro is of a particular interest in this framework. The majority of population in Ulcinj are Albanian Moslems, very much connected with *Shkodër* as a former trade and cultural centre in this part of the Balkans (Ulcinj served, among others, as a port in the 19<sup>th</sup> century). In addition, not only families who have members at the other side of the political border (Moslems and Catholics), but also many inhabitants and folk musicians in Ulcinj say they have culturally a lot in common with *Shkodër*. And this can be seen and heard in different celebrations - like in weddings, for example - where urban songs from *Shkodër*, in the first place those of *ahengu shkodran*, have a particular significance.

Ulcinj inhabitants have had hard times to practice their religions (in the town live Moslem and Catholics - mostly Albanians - and Orthodox Montenegrins and Serbs) like everyone else in the former Yugoslavia. Nevertheless, a radical interruption like in Albania has not taken place. In addition, the connections of the Moslems in Ulcinj with Bosnians and especially Sarajevo - as a place where Albanian Muslim clergies still go to study - have been very close.

When discussing about the influence of the Islamic chant on musical practice, the other side of the medal - the influence of the folk music practice to the practice of the Islamic chant - can not be left out. First, I would like to mention an example of how *ilahi* are being presented today in Ulcinj in public concerts from adults and children. On the pictures of the CD cover (picture 1), where the date of the “*Mbrëmje fetare – artistike*” [“Religious – cultural evening”] is written after the Gregorian and Islamic calendar, some of the soloists and groups at one of them can be seen. During several

rehearsals for other concerts of this kind I attended in April-May 2006 and August 2007, it was not difficult to discern song melodies well known in *Ulqin*. Fiqri Hasanaga, who conducted the rehearsals, told he becomes the music and the lyrics from the responsible clergies in the town, but that music is not at all unknown for him. “It is enough to change the lyrics and you can have, instead, folk songs,” he said.



Picture 1. The cover of the CD  
“*Mbrëmje fetare – artistike*”  
 (“Religious – cultural evening”)

A second example of folk music included in religious festivities I want to talk about is that of Diren Emiri. She was over 70 years old when I talked to her in Tirana in 2002. Diren Emiri comes from a Bektashi family in a village of Korçë region (Southeast Albania) and was married when very young in Tirana (Capital, Central Albania). She remembered family gatherings with religious character (after 1967 in secret), which in Albanian is called *mevlud* (*Mawlid* in Arabic). This term has come from Turkish “*Mevlid Serif - The Blessed Birth*” [of the Islamic Prophet Muhammad] to the Albanians, and it is also used as a generic term for various celebrations with religious character in the family or among friends. The melodies Diren Emiri remembered from Korçë-*mevluds* were similar to the folk songs of Korçë area, those from Tirana-*mevluds*, similar to the melodies known in Central Albania. This was surprising, because of the big differences between the music in these two areas (one evident difference is the pentatonic used in the South and the diatonic in Central and North Albania).

The close connection between the Islamic religious chant and folk music practices is not a new issue. But in the case of Albania, it becomes particularly important, because in the same areas, the music of the Orthodox and Catholic chant should also be correlated (and it does again since the 1990ies) with the same folk music practice that the Islamic chant did and does. There are hardly “pure” areas of Muslims, Catholics and Orthodox in Albania. This is true particularly for urban areas, in one of which the “*ahengu shkodran*” is established.

## VI. Conclusions

*Ahengu shkodran*, which may be called a production of the Ottoman time in Albania, shows parallels not only with the musical practice in Turkey, but also with urban repertoires in other Balkan countries. The *sevdalinke* of Bosnia and Herzegovina are an important point of reference in this framework. The similarities in musical features, lyrics’ subjects, the time and circumstances of the establishment of these two urban repertoires are evident, although no detailed research is done until now on this subject.

Also, the music of Sephardic Jews in Bosnia and Herzegovina has to be taken in consideration when focusing on *ahengu shkodran* and its Balkan context. The close relationship between Sephardic songs in the former Ottoman lands and the maqam system, and the relationship between several repertoires of Sephardic Jews of Sarajevo and music from the oriental world are clear indicators for that. Comparative investigations between these urban repertoires, known and practiced by Catholic and Christian Orthodox populations in the Balkans as well, would initially allow to know more about the coming-into-being and identification processes of urban repertoires. This would be of further interest to become a better view of the music crossing the ever-changing Balkan borders and of a way cultural connections among various communities, religions and nations in this area are materialized.

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