

Islamic Echoes in Bosnia and Hercegovina: Tradition and Modernity

by **Ankica Petrović*** (Los Angeles, USA)

The subject of discussion in this paper is the status of Muslim music in Bosnia and Hercegovina in the 20th century, with emphasis on the changing styles, functions, aesthetics, meanings and legacy. For a better understanding of the forms and role of Bosnian Muslim music under the communist rule and in the most recent period of socio-political disintegration, I am providing a survey of the historical, religious, and ethnic circumstances in the country. The paper also points out strategies of the Bosnian Muslim music, in relation to the local music scene in the most recent period and to the global music trends. These strategies show how this music plays in and between the needs of the Bosnian Muslims for exposure to current multiple identities – Eastern and Western, religious and ethnic, with traditional and modern expressiveness.

Since the recent war in Bosnia and Hercegovina, which lasted from April 1992 until December 1995, it was not well known to the world that in this southeastern part of Europe live people of Muslim faith, nowadays officially named as the Bošnjaks (Bošnjaci, plural). The other majority people on the same territory are of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christian Churches, recognized as the Croats, and the Serbs. These three Bosnian ethnicities have the same South-Slavic background and speak the same Slavic tongue, in present day officially distinguished as Croatian, Serbian and Bosnian languages. Bošnjaks use some Turkish, Arabic and Persian words in their vocabulary, showing traditional affinity towards languages and cultures of the Islamic world.

Conversion of the Slavs to Islam occurred after the Ottoman Turkish conquest of Bosnia (in 1463) and Hercegovina (in 1482). Process of Islamization was slow and beneficial for the early Bosnian converts. By accepting the new religion Bosnian and Hercegovinian Muslims succeeded to preserve and gain properties, rights, titles and power. In return, they declared loyalty towards the Ottoman rulers and adopted more readily the elements of Ottoman culture: architecture, way of life, cuisine, musical instruments and other elements and concepts of Turkish music.

Bosnia was the most Western administrative unit within the Ottoman Empire, staying for four centuries on the border with the Ottoman's chief enemy, the Hapsburg Monarchy. Religion served as “the primary organizing and identifying principle in Bosnia and Turkish Empire” (Eller 1998: 256). It served as an initial factor of ethnic distinction in the 19th century, that is, in a period of enlightenment and national awaking in this peripheral Islamized corner of Europe, and remained here until the present day. The religious affiliations to the Roman Catholic, Orthodox Christian and Muslim faiths became the main determinants for declaring the Croats', Serbs' and Bošnjaks' ethnic identities. Religious differences deepened cultural distinctions and became the chief cause for mutual misunderstandings, prejudices and, as it was seen recently, for the bloody war.

* Adjunct Professor at the Department for Ethnomusicology and the Department for World Arts and Cultures, UCLA.

Even in the present situation, with an existence of official peace among these variance ethnicities, some religious and cultural aspects serve as the means to aggressive rivalry, provocations and irritation. For example, during the Ramadan period in Fall 2006 the minaret of the mosque in the small city of Stolac in Hercegovina was blown up by a local Christian man because the sound of *ezan* (*adhan*) irritated him.

The most direct musical influence from the Islamic world spread into Bosnia and Hercegovina through the patterns of Muslim prayers. During the early period of Ottomans' role among Islamized population, the practice of the new religion included forms of the Kur'anic chants, prayers, religious hymns and performances of the call to prayer, *ezan*, which could be heard five times each day from every mosque. The other sources of musical influences were the tunes of Turkish military orchestras, *mehterhanas*.

The administrative power and religious establishment of the Turkish rulers were concentrated more in the cities, such as Sarajevo, Travnik, Banjaluka, Mostar, Foča, etc., rather than in smaller Muslim rural communities. As a result of such varying degrees of Turkish influence, different interpretations of the call to prayer and of hymns and prayers could be heard. By "interpretation" I do not mean only various ways of performing the prayers, but also distinctive treatment of them by people of different social backgrounds and levels of religious education.



Example 1.
Bosnian Ezan performed by Kasim Mašić, from Travnik

Local Muslim devotees and religious authorities hold the common Islamic view that Muslim prayers and *Kur'anic* chant, are not music, but recitation. Actually they named it as *učenje*, "learning it." In spite of a denial attitude about the presence of a musical/aesthetic component in the chants, they appreciate the well-trained voices of the *muezzins* (*muezzins*) and *Kur'anic* chanters. Only the members of the Sufi brotherhoods in Bosnia, as in all other places of Sufis' religious activities in the Islamic world, had high appreciation for music and its power in expression of religious thoughts and feelings.

However, secular songs cherished among Bosnian Muslims, especially the songs of the lyrical character were not well regarded by the Muslim religious dignitaries. Sarajevo's chronicler from the second half of the 18th century Mula Mustafa Bašeskija, who was a dervish, has been very critical in his writing about young Sarajevo's men of his time who were singing love songs in the sinful ambience of the local inns. He was naming these songs as *turčije* that is, the lengthy songs in Turkish musical style. Along such critical observation about secular song genre, Bašeskija also mentioned playing of the *saz*, the long-necked lute of the Turkish and middle Eastern origin, which was used in Bosnia to accompany urban men's love songs. Following other traces of information on the Bosnian lyric songs towards the end of the 19th century, we can find that the name *turčija* became replaced with the term *sevdalinka*, which is today recognized as the very sensual local Muslim poetic and musical genre. The root term *sevdah* is of Arabic origin. In *Redhous Dictionary* we can find several meanings of that word: love, passion, intense longing, strong wish or desire, melancholy, and so on.

Besides *turčija/sevdalinka* the Bosnian Muslims nourished long songs – male epics, named *junačke pjesme* - heroic songs and female ballad-type songs, known as *dugačke*, long songs. With time many ballads became transformed from a narrative interpretative style into elaborated forms of *sevdalinka* genre. On the other hand, the Muslim epics,

accompanied by *gusle* (one-stringed lute with bow), or small *tambura* (long necked lute), which were sung in favor of the Turkish course of history, and local Muslim heroes, had to disappear at the beginnings of the 20th century. This was because the Serbian epics, and their interpretation of history and glorification of their heroes became dominant and official in the newly established South Slavs' state of Yugoslavia. However, the most epic songs, recorded in Yugoslavia in the 1930s and 1940s by Milman Parry were of Muslim origin, and sung by the Muslim singers.

We can also find reflections of memories on specific individuals and events in *sevdalinkas*. The same story has historical strength when it is interpreted as an epic men's song, and, in another situation and version, when it is sung as a *sevdalinka*, mainly by middle and upper class Muslim women. The song becomes very sensual, both from the poetical and musical point of view. *Sevdalinkas* allow exposure of expression of suppressed emotions, intimate wishes and complaints, but usually in a symbolic way, or as a metaphor. The poetical language of *sevdalinkas* contains a lot of verbal gradations, the expressive contrasts, and comparisons with the world of nature, cosmos, supernatural beings, birds and plants. Besides expressions of subtle feelings, love stories, and sophisticated social comments, some *sevdalinkas* also expose moral criticism, attitudes and values of traditional Muslim society of Bosnia and Hercegovina. However, such *sevdalinkas* cannot be regarded as the protest songs with political connotations. It always remains in the genre of lyrical poetry, as it exposes subtle emotional feelings.

Musical components of *sevdalinkas* are also very elaborated, following in expression the poetic sophistication of the poetic text. In fact, *sevdalinkas* were never just recited, but always sung by a skillful solo singer. In musical style they were regarded as the songs of the urban Muslim providence.

Sevdalinkas have broad and refined melodic structures with elaborated melismatic embellishments, relatively free rhythm and expressive melodic formulas, especially at the initial and final parts of the strophes. *Sevdalinka*'s typical interval of augmented second surrounded by two semitones provides a connection to the Turkish *hidjaz makam*. However, *makam* as a tonal and formulaic system did not find strong ground in Bosnia and it has become forgotten as tonal concept since the late 19th century.

Nowadays the term "Bosnian *makam*" may be mentioned by the knowledgeable Bošnjaks only in context of general discussion on unique Bosnian melodic expression of the genres of religious chants, as being distinctive from the chants of Turkish or Arabic origin.

Sevdalinka was alien to the Bosnian Muslim rural dwellers, who were isolated from the Ottoman cultural influences and established urban Muslim culture of Bosnia and Hercegovina. In music they shared much more in common with the rural music of the Christians, rather than with the music of urban Bosnian Muslims. I found such situations in the field in the 1970s and 1980s.

Local Christians were resistant to accept *sevdalinkas* until the end of the 19th century, because it sounded to them as too Muslim in style and character. On the contrary, the Sephardic Jews, who previously had connections with Muslim music practices, Arabic and Turkish, adapted easily the elements of Bosnian Muslim music in their *romancero*, as well as in their religious chants. Local Gypsies, both of the Muslim and of the Orthodox Christian faith, who served most readily as professional musicians became the active public promoters of *sevdalinka*.



Example 2.

“Jo hanino, tu hanina” Sephardic song performed by Berta Baruh Kamhi from Sarajevo (Recorded by Ankica Petrović, 1984)

Sofka Nikolić, a Christian Gypsy woman from Bosnia was in the 1920s the first presenter of *sevdalinka* on the programs of Radio-Belgrade, which was the capital radio-station of the newly established kingdom of Yugoslavia. She was followed in the direct radio interpretations of *sevdalinkas* in the 1930s by several other professional singers, who were mainly of the Christian background. In that period the *sevdalinka* became recognized as a soulful song of oriental character and accepted with nostalgic feelings about past times by ethnically and religiously mixed audiences.

With professionalization and popularization of the genre, certain changes in interpretations occurred, following Western music trends of the time. *Sevdalinkas* became accompanied by ensembles of Western instruments, which greatly modified the style of the song. Previously *sevdalinka* was performed by solo voice only, or it was accompanied by the *saz*.



Example 3.

“Prošetao Mujo Mlad” *sevdalinka*, sung and played on *saz* by Kadir Kurtagić

New instrumental ensembles were tuned in a Western tonal system. They also introduced Western harmonies, fixed rhythmic formulas, exposed new instrumental timbres and somehow limited opportunities for vocal improvisation, variation and melismatic embellishments, typical for old *sevdalinkas*. The expressive freedom in vocal interpretation of this genre became greatly subordinated to the collective interpretation of the professional song delivery. Now the aesthetics of the song balanced between oriental-traditional and Western-modern. This was the prize that had to be paid for survival of the *sevdalinka*, as a genre of Muslim origin and oriental expressiveness, under an unfavorable socio-political situation of the new state of Yugoslavia. It was a period when all remnants and reminiscences on the former Turkish role (which lasted in Bosnia until 1878, and in southeastern part of Yugoslavia until 1912) had very negative political connotations, and when the Bosnian Muslim ethnic identity was suppressed.

Sevdalinka also remained as a popular genre during the communist period in Yugoslavia that lasted from 1945 to 1991. It had a prominent place on Yugoslav radio and television programs, concerts, festivals and in the music industry. At that period the majority of professional *sevdalinka* singers were of Muslim, that is, of Bošnjak's origin, although there were also several successful non-Muslim interpreters. Active involvement of Muslim women as professional singers was a reflection of their social emancipation that was reinforced in Yugoslavia during the communist period. Previously the Bosnian Muslim women performed their lyric songs only in intimate home environments.

In the second half of the 20th century, hundreds of *sevdalinkas* were brought to the public scene. Many of them have been revived after several decades of oblivion. Sarajevo as the capital of the Republic of Bosnia and Hercegovina was the center for *sevdalinkas'* promotion. Radio-Television Sarajevo, the state governed institution, served as the main filter for judgment of the songs' values, as well as of the singers'

skills. For that purpose the political and program authorities developed a rigid system of censorship. That was because *sevdalinka* was still regarded in its inner nature as the relic of retrograde and enemy's culture. The textual contents were especially the subjects of censorial intervention. The song could be banned, changed and shortened if poetic content had any connotation with the religion, or with the Muslim historic figures and titles of the Turkish period. Public interpretations of *sevdalinkas* on the state RTV program meant usually the opening of the door to other media instances, both for the song and for the singer.

In the early 1960s the new phenomenon of creation of *novo-komponovane narodne pjesme* (newly-composed folk songs), whose poets and composers have been publicly announced, was commenced in Bosnia and Serbia. Some early "newly-composed folk songs" were created in *sevdalinka* style and were adopted like "real folk songs." From the early 1970s this new popular genre put an emphasis on the profit, rather than on the aesthetic component of music and poetry. Initial close bonds of this popular genre with traditional folk songs and their "proofed values" were disappearing. The new genre absorbed some appealing elements of the contemporary Balkan Gypsy music scene and of Near Eastern folk and pop cultures. Being officially recognized as the "kitsch," the most of "newly composed folk songs" did not find a place at the state run RTV programs. They flourished at the "estrada" – staged performances, and in the discography industry. These two new establishments, which were promoting the sounds of subculture primarily for commercial reasons, were competing with state institutions. It seems that they perfectly understood the social and economic changes within Yugoslav society and abroad, the peoples need for a new kind of music and also recognized the errors of the official communist system in further controlling of culture.

In relation to the rapidly spreading "newly-composed folk songs" genre through the central and eastern part of Yugoslavia in the 1980s, the *sevdalinka* remained as the elite remnant of the past, close to the hearts of the older urban Muslim dwellers, and also to some non-Muslim *sevdalinkas'* admirers. They regarded the *sevdalinka's values* as an ideal model of the high standard folk music aesthetics.

The religious music was a subject of the most restrictive state control within the Yugoslav communist system. Under such political conditions there was no chance to present in media any form of religious practice, including Muslim chants, even though there was an official state declaration about freedom of practicing religions. For example, the *ezan* - call for the prayer, could be heard publicly from the minarets of the mosques, but not from radio waves. Severe political sanctions have been applied for any attempt of presenting religious music out of its close religious context and ambience.

With the fall of the communist system in Yugoslavia in 1991, which ended with exaggerated ethnic tensions, division of the country and the war in Croatia and in Bosnia and Hercegovina, the radical disintegration of the culture and music, in particular, had occurred. Ethnic conflicts provoked transformation in the meaning of some music forms, which were used as a powerful tool for political manipulation. Previously recognized common social and cultural values in multicultural Yugoslavia, turned to be narrowly oriented nationalistic ideals.

Thus, among the nationalistic militant forces of former Yugoslavia, especially among Serbian ultranationalists some musical genres and forms were projected as national symbols with aggressive intent at the outbreak of the war in 1991 in Croatia, and in 1992 in Bosnia and Hercegovina. Here, I think primarily about Serbian *guslarske*

pjesme, the epics performed with *gusle* accompaniment, which, in spite of their traditional values, became in period of this recent ethnic conflict the potent weapon for indoctrination among the Serbs. The same songs and sounds of *gusle* were also performed for the purpose of irritating and frightening the people of other ethnic backgrounds – the Croats and Muslims.

As a response to Serbian militant exposure of the epics, the Croats from Hercegovina selected the *ganga*, polyphonic song of rural dwellers of all ethnicities in the region, as exclusively their kind of song. In this case the newest projection of *ganga* as a primarily Croatian cultural symbol, is not founded in its music form and sound, but in a new construction of its meaning under special political circumstances.

Backing away from the treasure of previously shared traditional music forms, the Bosnian Muslims, became again exclusive carriers of the *sevdalinka* genre in the 1990s. There is nothing new in these songs of Muslim origin, which became popular in the 20th century as the folk song genre of all Bosnian ethnicities, and even wider in entire Yugoslavia. *Sevdalinka* remained very sensual and melancholic in musical and poetic character. However, as it is the case with the *ganga* form, *sevdalinka* changed its political and social contexts which created new song meanings and roles. In this newest conflicting period it was not the Bošnjaks' decision alone to select *sevdalinka* as their sound symbol. Actually, the other ethnic sides, Serbian and Croatian, expelled *sevdalinka* from their ethnic cultural milieus, regarding it again as hostile sound, that is related to the Turkish era, to the Bosnian Muslims and finally to Islam. Thus, this genre remained exclusively at the Muslim, that is Bošnjak's side of the political play in Bosnia and Hercegovina. In the last few years several performers try to internationalize *sevdalinka*. They are showing that *sevdalinka*'s soulful character easily may be mixed with blues and some other jazzy and popular styles. Thanks to such interpretative approach by "Mostar Sevdah Reunion" group, the *sevdalinka* was brought to the world music scene and internalized.

The new sonic winds may be heard in religious Muslim incantations, too. Thus, for example, the Turkish and local Bosnian way of interpretation of *ezan*, and prayers are now becoming replaced with sounds typical for Arabic style of chanting, as the Bosnian Muslims are gravitating in the religious realm more and more towards Arabic Islamic centers. Also the mosques and Islamic cultural centers, built just recently with the money of dignitaries from Arabic countries, provide space and opportunity for bringing closer the Bosnian peripheral idiom of approach of Islam to the central, Arabic model.

At the same time we are witnessing some Western music trends on the religious scene of Bosnian Muslims. Some forms of the local Islamic chants, like *ilahiya* and *kasida* (ilahyas and qasidas) got political connotations, since they were presented publicly out of the religious context for the first time in history of Bosnia and Hercegovina, just prior to the war in 1990. The concert and other media presentations of these Muslim religious hymns and odes, re-tabooed in some way the religion and its expressions. Ethnic rivals interpreted this Muslim phenomenon as evocation of strong national feelings among ethnic Muslims (Laušević 1996:124) and the Bošnjaks accepted that construction of the religious songs' meanings. They found *ilahyas* and *qasidas* as well as the hymns of *mevlud* (*mawlid*) content as very suitable forms for expressing their identity, as these songs are connecting them to the Islam, the crucial mark of their belonging. Musical language of these paraliturgical songs was familiar to the ears of Bošnjaks and became more suitable for mass interpretation than *sevdalinka*, because they could be

easily adjusted to various styles of music expressions – from choral chant to sophisticated models of Western classical arrangements even with symphonic orchestra accompaniments, and to the genres of popular music which are incorporating the musical trends both of the Eastern and Western popular music scene. Through these genres of religious music the Islam of Bosnia and Hercegovina and the popular culture became united. Such union is projected by Bosnian Muslim leaders as a path which guides the Bošnjaks and their idiom of Islamic culture towards Europe. Exposure to mixtures of musical styles, where Eastern and Western music elements, with tradition and modernity are blended together, reflects the Bošnjak's search for a multisided identity.

After all, we can conclude that the contemporary trends of Bosnian Muslim music, in aim to be distinct in relation to other Bosnian ethnic musics, serve in the function of exposing, re-constructing and strengthening ethnic identity of the Bošnjaks, which under a threat of extermination leads towards effective ideology – nationalism.

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