

WEDDING MUSICIANS IN PRIZRENSKA GORA, JUGOSLAVIA

Birthe Trærup

For Felix Hoerbuerger, Regensburg, on his sixtieth birthday, 9 December, 1976

One of the most remarkable instrumental ensembles which is still to be encountered as a living tradition on the Balkan peninsula is the one consisting of drums and oboe-shawms. The number and the combination of instruments is different from district to district, just as the size of the instruments also varies, but the essential thing is the similarity of their construction as well as of the character of the music itself, which is unmistakably oriental.

In the present-day Yugoslavia drum-and-shawm ensembles are found in the southern districts of Serbia, in particular around Gnjilane, Peć, Djakovica and Prizren, as well as in many parts of Macedonia, but in former days they were much more widely distributed. It cannot be determined with certainty just when the instruments were brought into this area but iconographic evidence from the 14th century in Serbian and Macedonian churches would suggest that they came in the period before the Turkish occupation of the Balkan countries, apparently with the gypsies¹). Similar ensembles occur also in Albania, Greece, Bulgaria and Turkey. Outside Europe the area of their distribution stretches from West Africa to East Asia and throughout the whole of this area there are obvious common features in the music, its function and in the social position of the musicians.

The town of Prizren, with its surrounding districts, is an important centre of drum-and-shawm music, and its practitioners are much in demand for the many wedding feasts held throughout the summer especially in Prizrenska Gora²). It was in Gora that during a stay in the village of Vranište in August 1959 I first experienced this music in its proper setting, at a wedding of Slavic-Mohammedan Gorans³). It was also on this occasion that I made the acquaintance of the musicians who are still my informants, above all the brothers Feriz and Ramadan Osmani, hereafter simply referred to as Feriz and Ramadan. Since then I have come to know many other musicians and especially in the last two summers, 1975 and 1976, I have concentrated my attentions on drum-and-shawm music and its performers. The following presentation is based exclusively on conversations with the musicians and on my own observations.

The Instruments. The drum which is used in the Prizren area is a large cylin-

drical drum with two skins stretched towards each other with V-lacing, (see picture 5). It hangs from a strap over the left shoulder and is beaten with two drumsticks of different size, one a thick wooden stick which is curved at one end, the other a thin switch. The people of Gora call the drum *tupan*⁴⁾, whereas musicians from Albanian villages⁵⁾ amongst themselves use the Albanian designation *lodër*⁶⁾. Most drummers buy a cylinder from an instrument maker in Macedonia, e.g. in Debar, Tetovo or Kičevo, and finish making the drum themselves.

The shawm is large, ca. 53 cm. long – with head and mouthpiece up towards 60 cm. in all (see pictures 2 and 4). The instrument has seven finger-holes on the upper side and one under, the mouthpiece is fitted with a double reed and a lip-disc, the tone is penetrating but full. The local Goranish name is *svirla*⁷⁾, Albanian *cule* and *curle*⁸⁾. All the shawm players that I asked had purchased their instruments from Avdi Imeri, musician and instrument maker in Tetovo in Macedonia.

I will not go further into the subject of the instruments, nor of the music itself, on this occasion since each requires a study to itself. I will just venture a few remarks on the repertoire:

Repertoire. For the wedding processions the melodies played are partly those associated with particular parts of the ceremonies, partly those belonging to the ordinary repertoire of the district. The former are most often songs without words but in many cases with an underlying story and with a specific function. They are played in a free rhythm and the steps of the dance which the men perform to them during the leisurely progress of the procession are entirely improvised. The others are strophic songs or dance melodies, mainly from the Gorans', but also from the Albanians', Turks', Macedonians' and gypsies' repertoires. The rhythm is usually 2/4 or 7/8 (3+2+2) and (2+2+3), and the dance steps which lead the procession through the streets are always the same: two double steps to the right and one the left. These steps are characteristic of the so-called women's dances, (in which men can also participate) also when these are performed as ring-dances. The real men's dances are always performed as ring-dances, either on the meadow outside the village or on an open space between the houses. On these occasions the shawm players sit on the grass or against the wall of a house whilst the drummers go into the circle of dancers. The men's dances are more complicated than the women's and make use of such rhythms as 12/8 (2+2+3+2+3) and 13/8 (3+2+3+2+3).

At some wedding celebrations there are held sports-games – the traditional horse races and wrestling matches and in more recent times also football matches. The drums and shawms are indispensable here as well and the progress of the competition is reflected in the music.

As a special homage to the families of the bridegroom and the bride respectively, the two shawms play the so-called *nibet*⁹⁾, which consists of a long series of songs. A *nibet* should actually comprise all the melodies of the wedding feast,

including the music connected with the sports-games. Such a complete *nibet* lasts in the neighbourhood of two hours, but most musicians cut it down, either because they don't know all the old melodies, or because the tips are not generous enough. When *nibet* is about to finish the drummers join in and bring the series of songs to a conclusion together with the shawms.

The musicians. What I want to devote my attention to on this occasion, however, is neither the instruments nor the music but rather the people who play. By means of conversations with many different musicians in their homes or while practicing their profession out and around in the villages, I have tried to gather knowledge of their way of life, their organization and their way of working. I was received everywhere with the greatest friendliness and a genuine spirit of cooperation without which it would have been impossible to carry out the investigation.

It is asserted in the literature on the subject, as well as in the oral communications of folk music research workers, that drum-and-shawm music in Jugoslavia is exclusively performed by gypsies. I think I can claim personally to have confirmed this belief, but it requires an explanation.

All the older musicians who now live in Prizren came originally from villages in Gora and Opojč, two neighbouring districts with respectively Slavic and Albanian populations. There seems to me no doubt that racially the musicians differ from the rest of the population. However, whenever I have asked if they might be gypsies I have always received the most decidedly negative reply — though only from the musicians, whereas the Gorans simply refer to them as "the gypsies". The conclusion I have drawn from my conversations with various musicians and their wives is that these people really are of gypsy descent but that they have lived as isolated musician-families and have thus to a certain extent assimilated themselves with the people of the village. They have forgotten the gypsy language and have adopted Goranish or Albanian as a mother-tongue instead. There was nothing to prevent them from allowing themselves to be called gypsies officially but the general contempt and mistrust to which gypsies are subject — and especially the nomadic gypsies with which the settled musicians would least like to be compared — can understandably encourage their wish to hasten the already begun process of assimilation with the more respected Goranish and Albanian population. By far the greatest number of the musicians are Albanian-speaking. In fact, the brothers Feriz and Ramadan Osmani and their children are the last Goranian-born musicians. Their mother-tongue is Goranish, but when Feriz left his native village Mlike in 1959 and moved to Prizren with his Albanian-speaking wife and their children Albanian became the family's language. The sons still claim nevertheless, even after so many years, that Goranish is the language that they master best. They regard themselves as Gorans but like their Albanian-speaking colleagues they have allowed themselves to be officially registered as

Albanians. Much more important, however, is the fact that they are Mohammedans and that they thereby belong to a community which cuts across national and linguistic differences.

In former times, according to Ramadan, there was a musician-family in every village. Feriz' and Ramadan's great-grandfather came from Topojan in Albania and settled in the village of Zjum in Opojë. His son Bislim moved later to the village of Mlike in Gora, which became the family home for the next couple of generations. The older musicians were to a large extent also smiths, a craft which was chiefly associated with gypsies. They made plows and axes, but when the wedding season came such work was laid aside while they concentrated on music. They did not go to school; musicians who are around 40 years of age today can neither read nor write. Their sons are the first generation to begin a normal school career lasting four to eight years. On the other hand, the younger generation has simply abandoned the handcraft of the smith and nearly all live exclusively from music. In the meantime all the musician-families have moved from the villages. They have sold house and land and sheep and have settled on the outskirts of Prizren. In these suburbs lives a mixed population of Albanians, Turks, Serbs and gypsies and everyone speaks at least one language besides his mother-tongue.

Organization. How many musicians are now resident in Prizren it is difficult to say. I have so far recorded 75 names¹⁰⁾ of people I have met and spoken with but this is probably far under the true figure. The musicians organize themselves in bands; one such is called *tajfa*¹¹⁾ (see picture 1) and normally consists of six members who are either master (Gor. *majstor*, Alb. *usta*¹²⁾ or apprentice (*čirak*¹³⁾) depending on their leading or accompanying function. The band is named after the leading master and only with his forename. The Gorans say, for example, "It is Feriz that is coming to the wedding on Friday". The musical profession is entirely dominated by family tradition and the musicianfamilies marry with each other. Thus the bands consist of father, brothers, sons, nephews, sons-in-law and other male relatives — never women. Eventually, as the family becomes larger, the band is divided into two and a brother or a son assumes leadership of the new group. In 1975 Feriz' band was as follows:

- Feriz Osmani, shawm, master
b. 1928
- Rafet Osmani, shawm, master
b. 1952, Feriz' son
- Sadik Jashari, shawm, apprentice
b. 1959, a distant relative from Tetovo
- Bislim Osmani, drum, master
b. 1954, Feriz' son
- Refik Osmani, drum, apprentice
b. 1959, Feriz' son

Hasan Xhogaj, drum, apprentice
 b. 1955, Feriz' son-in-law

Although a band normally has a fixed membership, there is for various reasons a constant changing of members: an old musician dies or has not the strength to continue playing, a young musician is called into military service or an apprentice becomes a master and wants to form his own band. I have observed some of these bands over a period of years and have seen how they change, how they borrow musicians from outside, as a rule from amongst the closest family but sometimes all the way from Tetovo in Macedonia, and how at large and demanding weddings they even combine with another band in order to attain a sufficiently large number of musicians.

The function of the individual. As stated, a normal Prizren-*tajfa* consists of six musicians: three shawm players (Gor. *svirladžija*, Alb. *culexhi*) and three drummers (Gor. *tupandžija*, Alb. *lodraxhi*)¹⁴). At least one of each group of instrumentalists must be a master. Whenever I have wanted to write down the members of a band their names have, almost without exception, been dictated to me in a very definite order: first the shawm players in the succession master — apprentice, then the drummers in the same way. The musicians themselves regard the shawms as the leading instruments and the leader is always a shawm player. Not all the musicians play at one time, however. The most usual combination, which serves for the performance of music for processions and dancing, is two shawms and two drums. One of the shawms functions as leader: it is this one that changes melody and it is this one that plays the upper voice when they play in octaves and it is this one that performs the improvisational passages in free rhythm over the sustained drone of the accompanying shawm. The leading and accompanying parts are performed by master and apprentice respectively or, in certain situations, by two masters or two apprentices. The same relationship applies to the drummers. It is the leading drummer that sometimes undertakes rhythmic improvisations while the other maintains the basic rhythm and during the men's dance, when both drummers go into the circle of dancers while the shawm players remain on the outside, it is he who plays for the leading dancer. He himself dances since he follows the leading dancer and excites him with his drumming.

While these four musicians are playing the two others hold themselves in readiness, prepared to substitute at a given signal. During the processions they remain close to the ones playing, the drummer ready to take over his colleague's drum, the shawm player with his instrument under his arm (see picture 3). Especially the shawm players replace each other often — the blowing is very strenuous. The musician makes his substitute aware of his wish to rest with a glance or a movement of the head and the other fits a mouthpiece to his instrument and moves up beside him. For a few seconds they play together, after which the place is relinquished in favour of the replacement. This all takes place quite un-

obtrusively without the least interruption or disturbance of the music, which in this way can continue for hours.

Some wedding feasts are on such a large scale that a single band cannot cope with the work. In the village of Brod especially great demands are made on the musicians who must be constantly on hand for three days with only a few hours' rest at night. For such a wedding it is necessary to engage more musicians, perhaps two complete bands, twelve in all. With six shawms and six drums it is possible to work in three teams so there is time to rest. Nevertheless there are some musicians who do not like to play in Brod because they find the ceremonies too extensive and the whole character of the feast rather too wild and exhausting. But how exciting those moments are when all twelve shawms and drums play together and emphasize with their ear-splitting noise the high points of the celebrations!

Training. There does not seem to be any sort of systematic teaching of the young people¹⁵). The musicians sometimes take their small sons along to a wedding so that they can become familiar with both the music and ceremonial customs. I have observed such a little fellow at almost every wedding I have attended, first in Vranište in 1959 where Feriz brought his seven-year-old son Rafet. I shall never forget the sight of the boy as he sat with his father during the performance of *nibet* with the wail of the shawm in his ears. Sixteen years later, in the summer of 1975, I saw him again in Prizren, now already a highly-regarded young master shawm player.

Ordinarily the musician-to-be begins with the drum. This is considered to be easier than the shawm and is regarded also as a prerequisite for mastery of shawm playing. It is the drum which invariably maintains the rhythmical foundation of the music and only after he has really got this rhythm into his blood with a couple of years' work as a drummer can the young musician switch over to the shawm, the music of which sometimes seems to move hovering freely about the rhythmic framework. He can begin to play the shawm at the age of 16 – not before, since a child's lungs cannot stand the great strain it requires. To begin with he is allowed to play the simpler things as a substitute, but eventually as he becomes more confident he can also assume the leading part. When he has served an apprenticeship of two or three years he becomes a master and can perhaps form his own band.

At the wedding feasts the apprentice's job is first and foremost that of attendant to the master, though once in a while he may also substitute for him. But the important and difficult things are done by the master. He appears at the climax of the ceremonies, he leads the music for the men's dances and it is his prerogative to play the leading part in the demanding *nibet*.

It seems to be the normal course of things to begin as a drummer and then after a few years to go over to playing the shawm. However many continue as

drummers for a longer period of time, fifteen or twenty years, before changing instruments and some continue throughout their lives. Only a few musicians begin directly with the shawm without the introductory stage as drummer. The playing-technique is acquired simply by observation and with the master's informal guidance, just as the repertoire is learned by listening and playing along with others. The young players practice but the more experienced keep their skill up to the mark with the work itself.

Ćazim Huseini, an old Goranish shepherd from the village of Kukuljane and one of the best known flute players in the district, told me that he had taught Feriz while they kept watch on the sheep in the fields between Kukuljane and Mlike. Feriz had been about sixteen years old, his father was dead and he had no one else to practice with at that time. Ćazim played Goranish songs for him on the short shepherd's flute *šupeljka*¹⁶) and taught him to blow and breathe through the nose. When Feriz soon after began to play shawm with the master Sait from Opojč he was already familiar with the breathing technique and a part of the repertoire.

The Working Season. The musicians of Prizren play for all sorts of people – as Ramadan expresses it: for Serbs, Catholics, Albanians, gypsies, Gorans and Macedonians. Each village has its melodies and the musicians know them all. Gora is their most important area of activity, however, because it is here that the big weddings (*svadba*) are held, much more so than in the neighbouring Albanian district of Opojč. The wedding season in Gora extends over the summer months of July and August, but in Opojč and Prizren it continues into September. The circumcision feasts (*sunet*¹⁷)), which also use drum-and-shawm music, are held in the same season. During this time feast follows feast, the musicians' appointment books are over-filled, they try as much as possible to slip home between engagements to rest up for a day, but often they are obliged to go directly from one feast to the next. Wedding-hosts who want to be sure of getting a particular date are wise to contract for it nine months in advance.

A wedding normally lasts four days, which means that the musicians leave home on Friday morning with the bus from Prizren to the village of Dragaš in Gora and from there out to the villages on foot or by taxi, which because of the poor roads is usually a jeep. The ceremonies – that is, those of the ceremonies that require musical accompaniment – begin at noon with the reception of the musicians and finish Monday morning with their departure. Already on Tuesday the next wedding begins. However, some wedding-hosts shorten the ceremonies for reasons of economy.

Here, for example, are Feriz' appointments for the month of July. The list is kept by his eldest son Rafet.

- 1/7 Circumcision in Rapča (Thursday to Friday evening)
- 3/7 Wedding in Vranište (Saturday to Monday)

- 7/7 Wedding in Kukuljane (Wednesday to Friday morning)
- 10/7 Wedding in Rapča (Saturday to Monday)
- 15/7 Circumcision in Vranište (Thursday to Friday afternoon)
- 17/7 Wedding in Kukuljane (Saturday to Monday)
- 20/7 Wedding in Brod (Tuesday to Friday)
- 24/7 Wedding in Vranište (Saturday to Monday)
- 27/7 Wedding in Dikance (Tuesday to Friday)

Thus the summer is a very strenuous time for the musicians, but the rest of the year, on the other hand, is more relaxed. The biggest festival is St. George's Day (*Gor. Djurdjien, Djurijen*) at the beginning of May, at which the entire population of the villages gathers, and also the first of May celebration, which is arranged by the municipality. On these occasions – as sometimes also at weddings – sports-games with horse-racing, wrestling and football matches are held, all of which require drum-and-shawm music. Music is also a part of the Mohammedan festival *bajram*¹⁸), which falls at varying times of year.

During winter nothing special takes place. "Then we rest", Feriz says, "we repair our mouthpieces and gather strength for the summer's exertions."

Economy, Living Conditions, Dress. One may wonder whether it is possible to manage economically on a summer's work, but it is a fact that very few Prizren musicians have another job on the side. One or two make gramophone recordings, but that is not a very profitable business. The fixed price for a wedding is 4000 dinars, on top of which one can count on tips (*bakšiš*)¹⁹) amounting perhaps to 1000 dinars²⁰), hence 5000 dinars in all to be divided among the musicians. A certain amount, for example 300 dinars, is paid in advance when the appointment is made as a sort of guarantee. The balance is paid to the leader of the band by the host when the wedding is over, immediately before the musicians depart.

I have not tried to estimate what their over-all income amounts to but I have observed that they live comfortably and that the members of the family are well-dressed and do not otherwise seem to want for anything. Feriz has a fine, large house with many large rooms which are all beautifully painted and attractively furnished. Here he lives with his wife, his three sons, two of whom are married and have children, and two daughters who are not yet married and therefore still live at home. One daughter, whose husband is a member of Feriz' band, stays with her parents the whole of the season. On the ground floor of the house is the parlour where one receives guests and where, in accordance with Mohammedan custom, one sits on carpets or on cushions around the walls. On the floor above there is a similar parlour and another room furnished with two divans, a sofa-table, upholstered easy-chairs, two large cupboards, carpet. Everything gleams and shines. In another building across the courtyard there are several large bedrooms for the family with beds and white embroidered sheets and pillowcases. In the courtyard is an attractive and substantial outdoor kitchen with

glass walls and with an electric stove. The house is also provided with a radio, a tape-recorder and television.

The women are clothed in colourful loose-fitting trousers and gold-embroidered vests, as is customary with Mohammedan families in Prizren (see picture 7). The men wear ordinary trousers and shirts, though only while they are at home. When they go out to play they dress in Goranish costume – dark brown or white woolen trousers, shirts (usually ordinary ready-made manufacture) and a woolen jacket with elbow-length arms. About the waist they have a colourful woven belt and the shawm players wear in addition a heavy wide leather belt (*silah*)²¹ to give support to the abdomen since the blowing can result in a rupture. On their feet they wear home-knitted patterned stockings and on their heads round flat-topped felt hats around which are wound scarves in which the wedding-guests can stick bank-notes. And finally the shawm players wear a string around their necks with ready-to-use mouthpieces (*pištanika*)²². They wear this costume partly because it is necessary to be warmly dressed since even in summer it can be very cold in the mountains. The shawm is kept in a patterned, knitted case (*kaluf*)²³ which their wives knit for them and from the shepherds they buy a sack made of sheep or calf skin (*tardžuk, jandžik*)²⁴, in which they place the shawm, a sweater and other necessary items.

Disadvantages with the Work. The occupation of musician involves various risks. Shawm-playing is regarded as being harmful to the health, in particular it causes headache and pains in the chest. When I came to Prizren in June, 1975 Feriz was in the hospital with a lung illness caused by the blowing. He was sent home with instructions to rest for a month and as a result, incidentally, I had a chance to have a number of conversations with him which would otherwise have been impossible in the musicians' busy season. Feriz told me that the cheeks become stretched and enlarged with blowing, they become softer and thinner and it hurts when one begins to play again after a period of inactivity. Then it helps to rinse the mouth with brandy. (This explained why Feriz sometimes took a mouthful of brandy and spit it out again.) As mentioned earlier, the strenuous blowing can also induce a rupture, which is why it is necessary to wear the heavy leather belt (*silah*). But there are also other draw-backs associated with shawm-playing. For instance, it is dangerous for the musicians' teeth if one of the dancers should bump his instrument with an arm or a bottle while he is playing. I myself have seen a musician get a splinter of glass from a brandy bottle in the eye, which thereafter became very swollen. But it is not only the shawm players who are exposed to danger. Ramadan told me that his grandfather, who was a drummer in Mlike and had a very large drum, had died of exhaustion while he played.

Nevertheless, many musicians continue to play well up in years. Rasim Berisha, 68, and Jakup Manxhuki, 74, are still going strong and have no intention of

stopping for the time being. The famous Xhemo from Globočica was still playing when he was 100 years old.

The Story of Jakup's Shawm. The well-known shawm player Jakup Manxhuki has six sons, all of whom are musicians. Three of them are with him, a fourth is a member of another band and two are together in the band of the eldest son Rexhep (see picture 6). In the course of a visit with these two, Rexhep and Kamber, they told me the following story, which reveals something of the importance of his instrument to a musician.

"Our father Jakup is the most famous shawm player in Gora, the most skillful. He had a shawm which he had been given by his mother's brother. But one time when he was playing in Albania he fell in love with a shawm belonging to Musa from Novoselë and he asked Musa if he would trade shawms with him. Musa would willingly trade, but demanded in addition a watch-chain with watch, a silver ring, a *silah* and a gold piece, and my father, who desperately wanted this shawm which came from Istanbul, did not hesitate to give Musa from Novoselë everything he asked for. He gave him the lot and returned home with the shawm, crossing the Albanian border at Globočica. And when he had come home to Jugoslavia with it he worked on it and made it even better than it had been before and its reputation spread far and wide.

When Musa from Novoselë heard how splendid the shawm had become he became envious and dispatched four men to waylay and attack Jakup and if necessary kill him to get the shawm back from him. At that time our father played with his brother Hamit. When they realized what was about to happen they worked out a ruse. Jakup and Hamit exchanged shawms and in this way duped Musa's emissaries so that they took the wrong shawm away with them. Jakup escaped from this adventure with his life intact and played on his famous shawm for nearly fifty years. He has it with him to this day as a keepsake and he wouldn't sell it even if he got fifty million²⁵) for it because he wants to keep it as a permanent reminder of his early youth when he began to play on this shawm."

*A Little About the Famous Master Xhemo*²⁶). Everywhere one goes one hears about Xhemo (Jakup's mother's brother) from the village of Globočica in Gora. He is spoken of as the greatest master of the shawm, not only in Gora but also in the old Albania and in Macedonia. He even travelled to Turkey and stayed there a month or two at a time playing at weddings and annual markets, and everywhere he enjoyed the greatest admiration. He lived to be very old, reputedly 110, and Rasim Berisha, who was his pupil, says that he was still playing when he was a hundred years old. He could play all the tunes, both old and new, Goranish as well as Albanian, Macedonian and Turkish. It is also said to be he who created the Goranish *nibet* and made up many of its songs, some of which are to this day obligatory for the performance of this two-hour-long sequence of melodies for two shawms. Especially famous are two songs which tell about the