

# The Influence of the Middle East on Balkan Culture

By Lisa Adeli (adeli@email.arizona.edu)

1. Intro.: Play the Macedonian song “Jovano, Jovanke” [available on Bilja Krstić’s *Zapisi* CD – can be purchased on Yu4You website or email me] and pass around picture books of the Balkans. **(Slide 2)**

A. Explain that the song is a love story of a guy who is in love with a girl (and she likes him too), but her mother won’t let them be together.

B. Language: What do you notice about the language? Is it a Middle Eastern language? Greek? No, actually, it is a Slavic language. (You can tell it’s not at all like Greek because of all the sibilant sounds – sh, ch, zh, dj – that Greek doesn’t have very much.) Point out that although Greek was the main language and culture in Macedonia at the time of Alexander the Great, in later centuries Slavs inhabited the area. Therefore, Macedonian is a Slavic language, not Greek. (The Greeks, however, still hope to reclaim the area, so the question of the ethnicity of Macedonians is still very controversial today. In fact, most international organizations use the unwieldy name “Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” because the Greeks won’t let them call it “Macedonia” because they don’t want a Slavic-speaking state to use that name - even though that is the only name that the area has ever had. Also, to make the section of Macedonia that belongs to Greece more “Greek,” the government has settled many Greek-speaking refugees from Cyprus to try to change the ethnic balance. Notice that ethnic politics in the Balkans is highly emotional.)

C. Music: What do you notice about the music – instruments and rhythms? Note: The strong Middle Eastern influences in the beginning and the chorus, but the more traditional Macedonian rhythm in the verses (unusual, 11-count measure).

D. Why do you think Macedonian music would have Middle Eastern overtones? What kind of connection is there between that part of Europe and the Middle East?

E. What do you notice from the picture books? What geographical features characterize the Balkans (mountainous, some open plains, Adriatic, Black, and Aegean Seas)? Note that the mountainous landscape served to isolate groups of people, but there were plenty of passes, so the mountains did not keep out invaders.

2. History & maps of the spread and retreat of the Ottoman Empire in Europe

A. As you will see, Macedonia (referring back to the song) was under Ottoman rule for nearly 600 years – from the mid-1300s until 1913! How might that account for the Middle Eastern influences on the music?

B. What other areas did the Ottoman Empire rule?

1. Look at the map of the Ottoman Empire’s territory at its height (**Slide 3**). Note that it included North Africa, much of the Arabic-speaking countries of western Asia, Turkey, and southeastern Europe from Greece up through Hungary and across to Ukraine.

2. The second map (**Slide 4**) shows the territory expanding in the Balkans. What peoples/places are under Ottoman rule? (Greeks, Bulgarians, Macedonians, Albanians, Serbs, Bosnians, Romanians)

3. **Slide 5** shows the empire at its height in Europe. Now what parts are under Ottoman rule? (Croatia, Hungary)

4. **Slides 6 & 7** show the gradual decline of the empire. Which European peoples were under Ottoman rule for only a short time? (Hungarians, Slovenes, Croats, etc.) Which were under the longest? (Serbs, Greeks, Romanians, and especially Macedonians, Bulgarians, Albanians, Bosnians. Macedonia and Albania were under Ottoman rule until 1913!)

### 3. Direct impact on Balkan society

A. Centuries of warfare led to a mixing of populations. For example, large numbers of Serbs fled north, and Albanians replaced them in Kosovo. But paradoxically, the Ottoman system allowed each group to maintain its separate identity, determined by language and religion. Therefore, in the Balkans, different groups live interspersed, but each group keeps its own language, religion, and culture. For example, in Bosnia, one village might be inhabited by Croats; the village next to it by Serbs, and the one next to that by Bosnian Muslims. (This is the root of the ethnic strife today – when modern nationalism affected a multi-national region.) **SLIDE 8:** CIA’s map of religions/ethnic groups. Note that some are language groups (Albanians, Romanians), while others speak a common language but their “ethnicity” is determined by religion (ex: in Bosnia, Orthodox Christians =Serbs; Catholics=Croats; Muslims=Muslim “nationality”).

B. Religions of the Balkans. Notice how the religious mix in the Balkans was affected by Ottoman rule and the Muslim practice of allowing other monotheistic religions to exist. (For example, the Ottomans did not persecute Jews and Muslims the way Spain did, and they did not forcibly convert conquered people to their religion.)

1. Most people in the Balkans were – and still are -Christians (mostly Orthodox or Catholic). The Ottomans had a policy of religious toleration, so people kept their own religion and culture. (Examples of Christian religions in Ottoman time: **SLIDE 9** - Greek Meteora Monastery – ‘meteora’ means ‘suspended in the air’ – has an out-of-the way location, which protected it from Ottoman interference; **Slide 10** - Gračanica monastery built by Serbs in Kosovo during the 14<sup>th</sup> century; **Slide 11** - fresco of a ‘saint,’ King Milutin’s wife Simonide - the eyes in the painting were gouged out because some Muslims were outraged at the use of ‘idols’ in Christian churches.) Christians faced some problems, however: They had a lower status, had to pay a special tax, and were sometimes subjected to the forcible recruitment of some of their boys for government service. Also, some Christians converted voluntarily to Islam (ex. the Bosnian Muslims), and the Ottomans also frustrated Christians by lumping them all together instead of realizing that they spoke separate languages. Thus, Greeks dominated the Orthodox church institutions. (It wasn’t until later that Serbs, Macedonians, etc. demanded their own Orthodox church leaders.) **SLIDE 12:** Also, the Ottomans sometimes turned churches into mosques, as seen by the picture of the Bihać church.

2. Jews: The Ottoman tolerance of people belonging to monotheistic religions led many Jews who were fleeing the Inquisition in Spain in the 1400s or persecution in other parts of Christian Europe to settle in the

Ottoman Empire. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, for example, during the reign of the Ottoman ruler Suleiman the Magnificent, the Sephardic Jewish community on the island of Rhodes grew rapidly since he gave them autonomy, religious freedom, a 100-year tax exemption, free housing, and a guaranteed supply of kosher meat at reasonable prices. (**Slide 13 & 14:** Jewish quarter and synagogue.) Rhodes soon became a major Sephardic center. Bosnia and other parts of the Balkans also hosted important Jewish communities from about the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Compared to the rest of Europe, there was relatively little anti-Semitism in much of the Balkans (with the possible exception of Romania), partly due to the tradition of religious tolerance promoted by the Ottomans. This remained true throughout modern times.

3. Muslims: Although Christians and Jews had certain rights, the Muslims were the privileged elite with a greater share of the political power, so large numbers of people converted to Islam in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Albania, and Crete as well as smaller numbers of converts in other places. (In most parts of Ottoman Europe, the Christian nobility was removed and replaced by a foreign nobility. Therefore, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Serbia, Greece, etc. became independent and threw out the Ottoman rulers, they were nations without a traditional aristocracy. In Bosnia, on the other hand, the native nobility retained its position because they converted to Islam.)

#### C. Ottoman Architecture

1. mosques – Muslim places of worship. (**Slide 15** - Gazi Husrev Beg Mosque in Sarajevo and **Slide 16** - mosque in Kosovo in the town of Prizren.)

2. cemeteries: Note that just as Christian graves are often marked with a cross, Muslim graves in Bosnia (and Turkey) are often marked with a turban (**Slide 17.**)

2. secular structures - bridges: **Slide 18** – Ottoman-built bridge in the city of Skopje, Macedonia; **Slide 19** – Mostar, Bosnia (the name ‘mostar’ means place of the bridge). During the Bosnian civil war in the 1990s, the Croats blew up this bridge, symbolically and physically breaking the connection between the Croatian part of the city and the Muslim half. The bridge has now been rebuilt but is nowhere near as wonderful as the original, Turkish-built bridge; **Slide 20** – the famous “bridge on the Drina” in Višegrad, Bosnia. The bridge is at the center (and in the title) of the most famous novel by Nobel Prize-winning Bosnian author Ivo Andrić.

#### 4. Long-term influence of the Middle East on Balkan cultures

##### A. Linguistic influences

1. The Serbian language has some many Turkish borrow words, so there is a special letter of the alphabet for a sound only found in such words (џ = the “j” sound we have in English, “John.” (Serbs use two of this letter in writing “George” - as in “George Bush.”) It is used in words like “mosque”, pronounced “jamia” in Serbian.) **Slide 21.**

2. In areas where there are a lot of Muslims, such as Bosnia, many Turkish, Persian, and Arabic words have come into the language and coexist with Slavic words. For example, “most” is the common (Slavic) word for bridge, but they also use ćuprija (*chupriya*). Or čašica (pronounced *chashitsa*) is the Slavic word for the little cup used for Turkish coffee, but it is also called fendžan (*fenjan*), a Middle Eastern word. There is even a whole dictionary of “Turkisms” in the Serbo-Croatian language.

3. Even today, new words of Middle Eastern origin are coming into the language. Bosnians use the term “šahid” (*shahid*) to describe someone who died fighting on the Bosnian Muslim side during the 1990’s civil war.

**Slide 22.** It is from an Arabic/Persian word for someone who is a martyr in a religious war....

#### B. Popular culture, shared by all people of the region

1. Turkish coffee is the most common drink of the southern Balkans, among Christians as well as Muslims. (**Show the coffee cup and coffee maker – džezve – from Bosnia**). The coffee is so thick that a tiny cup like this has a whole spoon of finely ground coffee, a heaping spoon of sugar, and a little water. It is the consistency of mud – very strong and very sweet.

2. There is a slower pace of life (coffee houses, breaks in the middle of the day, less of a customer-oriented society) in former-Ottoman parts than in former-Austrian parts just north of them. And if you complain about that, a Serb would shrug and say, “five hundred years under the Turks” by way of excuse (though Ottoman rule ended well over 100 years ago!).

3. Crafts – **Slide 23:** Traditional crafts (intricately designed metalwork, etc.) are still for sold in the traditional Baščaršija (pronounced bashcharshiya) market in the Muslim quarter of Sarajevo, Bosnia. **Slide 24:** Copperwork in the Kazandžiluk (coppersmith) street in Sarajevo’s market. Note that even the words *baščaršija* and *kazandžiluk* are words borrowed from the Turkish language. (Serbo-Croatian speakers north of there – such as Croatians – would not understand the terms.)

#### C. The specific culture of Muslim groups

##### 1. Everyday life

a. Muslim names are often of Turkish and Arabic origin – although the pronunciation has been changed to suit the native languages of the area. In fact, in Bosnia during the 1990s civil war, first and last names were often the only way people were identified as Muslims (and subsequently persecuted). Paramilitary soldiers would frequently check someone’s i.d. card or driver’s license just to see if that person had a Muslim name. (For example, Muslim men might have first names like Murat or Esad, while women might have distinctively Muslim names like Samira, Fatima, or Esma. And if the first name isn’t a giveaway, last names such as Halilbegović or Alihodžić are instant markers of Muslim ethnicity.)

b. Muslims have a distinctive housing style in Bosnia (**Slide 25** – note the low couches, decorative carpets). The construction of the house is often distinctive too. Muslim houses often have an open courtyard in the middle so that women can be outside without being viewed by male passers-by.

c. Some Muslim women today wear headscarves (**Slides 26 and 27**). This practice is much more common today – as a way to express one’s religious views or political identity – than it was 20 years ago.

2. Religious practice – During communist times, all religion was forbidden in the Soviet bloc countries and discouraged in the former-Yugoslavia. Today, with the end of Communism, religious belief is becoming a more important part of society. Muslim identity is also a political statement in a place like Bosnia or Kosovo, where feelings of nationalism are associated with religious heritage (**Slides 28 & 29**).

5. Conclusion; The Muslim world has had an important cultural, linguistic, and artistic impact on the Balkans stemming from Ottoman times. Today that heritage is emphasized even more than previously as a way for people to assert their identity and cultural distinctiveness from neighboring peoples. (**Slide 30**)