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## **WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN PROFESSIONAL ENSEMBLES OF FOLK DANCES AND SONGS IN SERBIA**

**Abstract:** In this paper women's leadership will be reviewed through the professional biographies of two women who, in the role of director, managed the stage presentation of folk dance and music in Serbia. One of them is Olga Skovran, who laid the foundation of folklore professionalism in Serbia and the region and established the Ensemble "Kolo". She was the Ensemble's general manager from 1948 to 1965. The other woman is Snežana Jovanović, who has been the head of the Folk Dance and Song Ensemble of Kosovo and Metohija "Venac" from Gračanica since 2013. This paper will reflect on the professional positions of these two female figures who worked in historically different times. In addition, special attention will be given to defining leadership within two temporal and spatial dimensions, as well as the competences required for leading a professional ensemble in specific political, economic, artistic, and other conditions.

**Keywords:** women's leadership, Olga Skovran, Snežana Jovanović, Ensemble "Kolo", Ensemble "Venac"

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The consideration of women's activities in the creation of global music history is represented in various disciplines, especially after the expansion of feminist music research during the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup> Within the framework of ethnomusicology, there have been numerous studies about women as performers and creators, with special reference to the problem they encounter in their desire to express their musical talent.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the least attention has been paid to female cultural leadership as a sphere of expression of the specific role of women in the creation of cultural policy at the local and state level.<sup>3</sup> Bearing in mind the assumptions about women's competences and stereotypes about gender roles, it is important to focus on the broader context of their actions.<sup>4</sup> In this sense, the leadership position of women in managing professional folklore ensembles in Serbia is intriguing. This time, their actions are observed through the significant and successful activity of Olga Skovran – the founder and the first director of the Ensemble of Folk Dance and Song "Kolo" in Belgrade, and Snežana Jovanović – director of the Ensemble of Folk Dance and Song of Kosovo and Metohija "Venac" ("Wreath") from Gračanica. The leadership positions of these women are reflected through different historical periods (in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century and in the initial decades of the 21<sup>th</sup> century) and through cultural and political circum-

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<sup>1</sup> Iva Nenić, "Uneven Terrains of Struggle: Towards the Transformative Notion of Female Music Leadership", in: Iva Nenić and Linda Cimardi (Eds), *Women's Leadership in Music: Modes, Legacies, Alliances*, Bielefeld, transcript Verlag, 2023, 15–33.

<sup>2</sup> See more: Ellen Koskoff, *Women and Music in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, New York, Greenwood Press, 1987; Pirkko Moisala, Beverly Diamond, *Music and Gender*, Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 2000; Tullia Magrini, *Music and Gender. New Perspectives from the Mediterranean*, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 2003; Iva Nenić, *Guslarke i sviračice na tradicionalnim instrumentima u Srbiji: identifikacija zvukom* [Women gusle players and musicians on traditional instruments in Serbia: sound identification], Beograd, Clio, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> The research for this paper was supported by the project FLIM ("Female Leadership in Music: a Cross-Genre Research of Women's Roles, Agency and Collaborative Music-Making Practices in Serbia") within the PROMIS program of the Science Fund of the Republic of Serbia (2020–2023). The project was carried out by the Department of Ethnomusicology, Faculty of Music in Belgrade, in collaboration with the Faculty of Dramatic Arts in Belgrade.

<sup>4</sup> See: Karin Klenke, *Women in Leadership: Contextual Dynamics and Boundaries*, United Kingdom, Emerald Publishing, 2018, 10, 20; Louise Wrazen, "Daughters of tradition, mothers of invention: music, teaching, and gender in evolving contexts", *Yearbook for Traditional Music*, 42, 2010, 44.

stances. With their leadership abilities and artistic activity, they contributed to establishing, cultivating and developing professional folk dance ensembles in Serbia.

### **Olga Skovran's activity in folklore professionalism**

In shedding light on the personality of Olga Skovran as a choreographer and long-term director of the "Kolo" Ensemble requires an insight into the cultural and historical context of the time in which she lived and created. Namely, the establishment of the FPRY – the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia after World War II, as well as a communist system meant an ideology of equality of all the nations, expressed in the term "fraternity-unity". The Communist Party of Yugoslavia (CPY) created the entire societal life of the population and followed the Soviet model entirely where it concerned the state, society and culture.<sup>5</sup> The ruling political circles, as well as the country's President Josip Broz Tito, quickly realized that the opportunity which existed in folklore art, having an ideological impact on the youth and using the potential of traditional music and dance for the purpose of a cultural revolution and the promotion of the State itself.<sup>6</sup>

That is how many amateur cultural-artistic societies appeared in the post-war period, where multiculturalism was encouraged through music and dance, with the tendency of mitigating the differences between the nations and religious denominations.<sup>7</sup> In that regard, the newly formed state recognized the need to act in the field of cultural diplomacy and to create professional folk dance ensembles that would represent it worldwide. That is why at the proposal of the Ministry of Education of the Government of the People's

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<sup>5</sup> Zoran Janjetović, *Od internacionale do komercijale (popularna kultura u Jugoslaviji 1945–1991)* [From international to commercial (popular culture in Yugoslavia 1945–1991)], Beograd, Institut za novu istoriju Srbije, Biblioteka "Studije i monografije", 2011, 31.

<sup>6</sup> See: Богданка Ђурић, Олга Сковран: Коко с љубављу [Olga Skovran: Kolo with love], Београд, Ансамбл народних игара и песама Србије "Коко", 2021, 53; Сања Ранковић, *Певачка тракса ансамбла народних игара и песама Србије КОЛО* [Singing practice of the National Ensemble of Folk Dances and Songs of Serbia KOLO], Београд, Ансамбл народних игара и песама Србије КОЛО, 2022, 24.

<sup>7</sup> Anthony Shay, *Choreographic Politics. State Folk Dance Companies, Representation and Power*, Middletown, Connecticut, Wesleyan University Press, 2002, 114; Дуња Јаради, *Књига о танцу: традиције, теорије, методи* [The book of dance: traditions, theories, methods], Београд, Ансамбл народних игара и песама Србије "Коко", 2018, 65–66.

Republic of Serbia, on 12 May 1953, the first folk dance ensemble in the territory of the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia, named the "Ensemble of the Folk Dances of the People's Republic of Serbia" was established.<sup>8</sup> In 1953, this house of arts was given the name it bears today – the "Kolo" Ensemble of Folk Dances and Songs of Serbia.<sup>9</sup>

The first director of the Ensemble "Kolo" was Olga Skovran who served in that position during her most fruitful years of work, from its establishment in 1948 until 1965. During this period, she laid the foundations of folklore professionalism in Serbia and Yugoslavia, demonstrating her abilities as a director, teacher and choreographer.<sup>10</sup> Olga Skovran was born in Pančevo, where she graduated from primary school and the gymnasium. In the course of her education, she had joined the Sokol association in Belgrade,<sup>11</sup> and later enrolled at the Faculty of Philosophy where she was unable to graduate because her family had financial issues. The knowledge she had obtained as a member of the Sokol movement as a leader of children and youth groups, in the Cultural-Artistic Society "Ivo Lola Ribar", as a professor of gym at the Second Girl's Gymnasium, as well as at courses in folk dance organized by the

<sup>8</sup> The founding act of "Kolo" is framed in the office of the Managing Director of this institution and it reads the following: "The Government of the People's Republic of Serbia, upon proposal by the Ministry of Education, made the decision on establishing the Ensemble of Folk Dances and Songs of the People's Republic of Serbia. This is the first ensemble in our country. The Ensemble will start working immediately so that its first performance before the audience would take place in May 1948. The permanent Ensemble of folk dances of Serbia will cherish dances of all nations. The Folk Dance School will operate within the Ensemble, which will be attended by the members of the Ensemble. Apart from folk dances, the attendees will study acting, ballet, history of music etc. They will obtain capabilities for teachers in folklore departments which will be established in all music schools in the country. Belgrade, 1948". See more: Љиљана Кузмановић Тубић, *Коло национални ансамбл [Kolo national ensemble]*, Београд, Ансамбл "Коло", 2008, 6.

<sup>9</sup> Олга Сковран, "Сценска примена народних игара у ансамблу Коло" ["Stage application of folk dances in the Kolo ensemble"], *Годишњак праца Београда*, XI–XII, 1964/65, 434.

<sup>10</sup> Б. Ђурић, op. cit., 37.

<sup>11</sup> It is an organization initiated in 1882 by Miroslav Tyrš in Prague, with no limitations regarding racial, religious or gender affiliation. The goal of the association was that "the youth, by physical exercises and gymnastics become physically healthy persons, morally strong people with national awareness, with developed patriotic feelings, and among whom the idea of Slavic cooperation and unity would be propagated." This association was founded in 1882 in Belgrade. See more: Богданка Ђурић, op. cit.

ethno-choreologists Ljubica and Danica Janković, helped her to lay the foundations of folklore professionalism in Yugoslavia and the region after the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War. This task was quite demanding because there were no appropriate institutions for the education of professional dancers. That is why the first generations of employees were predominantly amateurs from workers' families and young people who were lacking in general and dancing education.<sup>12</sup> In order to compensate for their ignorance about the art of folklore, Olga Skovran created an educational program and gathered a team of experts to implement it. So, the practical work of dancers took place during the morning hours, and in the afternoon, after working hours, their education in the history of music, the history of dance, ethnology, choir singing, and solfeggio was organized.<sup>13</sup> Since most of the members of the Ensemble came from poor families, before important trips and meetings with world statesmen, Olga Skovran organized training in etiquette, table manners and nice behaviour.

Olga Skovran transferred her experience from the Sokol movement also to the "Kolo" dancers, by working with them on the culture of movement and by creating the first choreographies that are part of the repertoire of this Ensemble even today. The dancing lessons that she taught the Ensemble were elaborated in detail and described in a *Workbook* which is kept even today in the "Kolo" Ensemble. In order to familiarize the dancers with traditional dances she often brought dancers from rural environments who demonstrated the dancing style that was characteristic of their own local environment.<sup>14</sup> Apart from the notebook for planning dancing lessons, Olga kept a special book where she wrote down her impressions on the artistic achievements of each individual dancer, but also data on their origin etc. When creating choreographies, it enabled her to make the correct selection of soloists who would give the best performance of certain elements of drama.<sup>15</sup> She turned her exceptional creative potential into 25 choreographies that presented the dancing characteristics of different parts of Yugoslavia. Among them "Dances from Serbia" occupy a special place, and which are today considered to be symbolic of this institution's repertoire. One can distinguish particular aspects of her work as being the knowledge of stage rules, the creative shaping of stage images and an exceptional sense of networking the

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<sup>12</sup> Д. Њаради, op. cit., 67.

<sup>13</sup> Б. Ђурић, op. cit., 48–51.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 45–46.

symphonized music background with the dancing forms, many of which were created or quite altered when compared to the data she collected in her field research.

Olga Skovran did not only contribute to the artistic field, she was also extremely successful as a manager because she created the management structure and operation of the entire institution. She was in charge of employment policy in regard of different staffing. She defined the work contents and repertoire, which comprised dances of all the nations of Yugoslavia. She performed managerial tasks (scheduling concerts and other activities) and participated in the organization of Yugoslavia's cultural diplomacy. Under her leadership, the "Kolo" Ensemble gave numerous concerts on the most important world stages and met numerous statesmen.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, these concerts augured political meetings or events organized by the Government of Yugoslavia. That is how "Kolo" played an important role in presenting Yugoslav national art to the world of capitalism and "breaking down" prejudice about Yugoslavia as a communist country. In that regard the following tours were organized: in Switzerland (1950), America (1956), Australia (1959), Japan (1959), Germany (1963) etc. The Ensemble was entrusted with the special task in getting closer to other cultures in 1955, when several month-long tours were organized in the countries of the Non-Aligned Movement (China, India, Egypt, Burma, Morocco, Tunisia, Indonesia, and other countries).

Based on the aforementioned, one can draw the conclusion that the broad spectrum of capabilities, knowledge and talents of Olga Skovran define this woman as an unprecedented leader in folklore professionalism in Yugoslavia and the region. The book published by the former dancer Bogdanka Đurić testifies to her life and dedicated work, and highlights Olga's fairness, authoritativeness, and respect for the principles of "order, work and discipline."<sup>17</sup> Memories of her and stories about her life are remembered even today in the world of folklore so that a kind of an urban myth has been created about the personality and work of this woman.

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<sup>16</sup> During multidecade long presenting of folklore arts abroad, the artists of the Ensemble "Kolo" performed at the prestigious world stages such as the Metropolitan Opera, Carnegie Hall, Theatre National de Chaillot, Teatro la Fenice, Большой театр, Cambridge Arts Theatre, Sydney Opera House and others.

<sup>17</sup> Б. Ђурић, op. cit., 38.

## **Snežana Jovanović's leadership position in the folklore professionalism of Kosovo and Metohija**

Snežana Jovanović, was born in Priština, in 1980. She has been the director of the professional "Venac" Ensemble of Folk Dances and Songs of Kosovo and Metohija in Gračanica since 2013. She was appointed to this function by the local authorities, with the aim of improving the success rate of this Ensemble's financial operations and its working method. The specificity of managing such a cultural institution in the given political circumstances (right after the bombing of Serbia and the mass expulsion of Serbs from Kosovo and Metohija) implied a great responsibility not only for "Venac" as an institution, but also for the entire Serbian community in this area. Snežana's education and experience, which she acquired after she graduated in Marketing and Entrepreneurship at the Faculty of Economy at the University of Priština, with an interim head office in Kosovska Mitrovica, served multiple purposes in resolving problems (administrative head office, work space and technical equipment, archives, and lack of professional staff) at the time. In other words, her professional competences combined with exceptional organizational capabilities paved the way for resolving the majority of technical, legal and administrative problems. Even though Snežana's education is not related to the domain of arts, she noticed the lack of a program strategy and the creation of the Ensemble's artistic work. To establish the proper program and artistic content of the Ensemble, she initiated cooperation with educational and cultural institutions and formed the Artistic Council, composed of renowned experts in the field of culture, as well as professors from the Department of Ethnomusicology of the Faculty of Music in Belgrade. Due to the lack of employment opportunities for a larger number of employees, she herself took on the position of artistic director, and engaged in the field of marketing and management of financial affairs. During the last ten years of leading the "Venac" Ensemble, Snežana's numerous contributions are reflected in the following achievements: obtaining work premises for the Ensemble within the House of Culture in Gračanica; increasing the number of full-time employees and part-time associates; improving the technical conditions for work; increasing the number of concerts (to over 50 annually in the country and abroad) and expanding the repertoire with new choreographies. She also worked to achieve significant visibility for the Ensemble's activities by posting its results on public social networks. She established the youth ensemble in Gračanica and several children's groups in Serbian settlements in the cen-

tral part of Kosovo and Metohija. She has supported the idea of conducting ethnomusicological and ethnochoreological research on the territory of Kosovo and Metohija and in 2020, launched the Center for Digitization which contains the music and dance materials of “Venac”.

The progress of the Ensemble “Venac” in all fields, under the leadership of Snežana Jovanović, resulted in the development of folklore professionalism with a clear definition of the strategy of this institution, which has been carried out in several directions. One of them is to nurture and sustain the intangible cultural heritage of the Serbs in Kosovo and Metohija and its stage presentation in the country and abroad.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, positioning “Venac” as a socially accountable institution that is an important factor in connecting the Serb community in the mentioned area is of the utmost importance.

The good outcomes that Snežana Jovanović has achieved in her job testify to her great commitment to work and her strong organizational skills. In subordinating her private life completely to her professional engagement and at the same time expecting a high degree of discipline and responsibility from her employees, she has often encountered misunderstandings in the collective and the local environment. In other words, her dedication to work was mostly interpreted as careerism, marked also by her determination to apply adequate legal measures to protect the interests of the institution she represents. Fully aware of her leadership position in the cultural milieu and specific socio-political circumstances of the Serbian community in Kosovo and Metohija, whose success is accompanied by a constant willingness to fight, and her great persistence, professional and expert competence, Snežana points out that women in this area are still reluctant to engage in different types of professional challenges, and have the tendency to be satisfied with the female roles and stereotypes established in the patriarchal community.

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<sup>18</sup> Здравко Ранисављевић, “Кореографске (ре)интерпретације плесног наслеђа Косова и Метохије у пракси националног Ансамбла ‘Венац’” [“Choreographic (re)interpretations of the dance heritage of Kosovo and Metohija in the practice of the National Ensemble ‘Venac’”], in: Драгана Џицовић Сарајлић, Вера Обрадовић, Петар Ђуза (Eds), *Традиционално и савремено у уметности и образовању*, Косовска Митровица: Факултет уметности Универзитета у Приштини са привременим седиштем у Косовској Митровици, 2018, 361–370.

## Conclusion

Based on the data presented about the professional positions of Olga Skovran and Snežana Jovanović, the contextual – cultural-historical and socio-political – influences on the formation and manifestation of female leadership in various spheres of public life are clearly visible. On the one hand, Olga Skovran's work took place in the time of socialist Yugoslavia, when the political authorities initiated and carried out cultural diplomacy through the presentation of folklore art. This implied the state's significant financial support to the Ensemble "Kolo", which made managing this institution much easier for Olga Skovran and paved the way for the development of folklore professionalism. On the other hand, Snežana Jovanović's activities took place in the early decades of the 21st century, when the Republic of Serbia was facing a delicate political situation in the area of Kosovo and Metohija. Although the Ensemble "Venac" led by Snežana Jovanović received financial assistance from the state as time progressed, the process of bringing its ideas and goals to fruition has been accompanied by a series of aggravating circumstances caused by the unpleasant, present day, post-war events and danger the Serbian communities face in this territory.

The educational profile of the female directors of the mentioned state ensembles determined their professional activism, which is common in the field of a successful organizational structure, the meaning and visibility of the accomplished results, as well as selfless dedication to achieving the highest goals. The specific nature of Olga Skovran's leadership position is reflected in her direct professional-artistic (choreographic) engagement, which is why she is still an important name in the world of Serbian choreographed folklore.

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## Summary

Bearing in mind the assumptions about women's competences and stereotypes about gender roles, it is important to focus on the broader context of their actions. In this sense, the leadership position of women in managing professional folklore ensembles in Serbia is intriguing. In this paper their actions are observed through the significant and successful activity of Olga Skovran – the founder and the first director of the

Ensemble of Folk Dance and Song "Kolo" in Belgrade, and Snežana Jovanović – director of the Ensemble of Folk Dance and Song of Kosovo and Metohija "Venac" ("Wreath") from Gračanica. The leadership positions of these women are reflected through different historical periods (in the mid-20th century and in the initial decades of the 21st century) and through cultural and political circumstances. With their leadership abilities and artistic activity, they contributed to establishing, cultivating and developing professional folk dance ensembles in Serbia. Based on the data presented about the professional positions of Olga Skovran and Snežana Jovanović, the contextual – cultural-historical and socio-political – influences on the formation and manifestation of female leadership in various spheres of public life are clearly visible. On the one hand, Olga Skovran's work took place in the time of socialist Yugoslavia, when the political authorities initiated and carried out cultural diplomacy through the presentation of folklore art. This implied the state's significant financial support to the Ensemble "Kolo", which made managing this institution much easier for Olga Skovran and paved the way for the development of folklore professionalism. On the other hand, Snežana Jovanović's activities took place in the early decades of the 21st century, when the Republic of Serbia was facing a delicate political situation in the area of Kosovo and Metohija. Although the Ensemble "Venac" led by Snežana Jovanović received financial assistance from the state as time progressed, the process of bringing its ideas and goals to fruition has been accompanied by a series of aggravating circumstances caused by the unpleasant, present day, post-war events and danger the Serbian communities face in this territory.