As we have seen, supporting education, vocational training and caring for the poor were the fundamental markers by which activists measured the success of their organization; any increase in the number of beds in a student dorm, of women enrolled in handiwork courses, or in scholarships granted to students in need were meticulously reported in associational journals and were the primary symbol of pride for activists throughout Yugoslavia. However, these activities, though they were the most direct manifestations of the voluntary association’s statutes, formed only a fraction of its undertakings. As a matter of fact, activists spent a great deal of energy organizing different leisure activities for recreation and sociability for their targeted population, including concerts, collective prayer, picnics and parties. Though researchers have generally played down the importance of voluntary associations’ event-planning functions, generally considering these activities to be of secondary importance, the capacity to provide a rich array and a well-regarded set of socializing activities was an important criterion in sanctioning the success of an association and its effective role in the public space. As remarked by Mikhail Bakhtin, every celebration or party, be it public or private, is a political one.¹ This chapter proposes a gendered analysis of the festive culture that the Muslims of Bosnia and Herzegovina were involved in in the interwar years, through the prism of the associational network.

A Festive Array

The associations depended upon their activists’ engagement in organizing events for many reasons, which throughout the first half of the twentieth century marked social life in the towns of Yugoslavia. First of all, because these activities generally involved an attendance fee, leisure activities were an additional source of income for the association’s assets, a source that could turn out to be more than welcome in periods when state aid was weak—for example, when the ripples of the Great Depression reached Southeastern Europe. Secondly, socializing activities were an essential tool for improving the organisation’s visibility outside of the tight-knit circle of its activists, in particular among those who were less receptive per se to the ethic of voluntary engagement. In other words—and though it may seem obvious—organizing a party or a picnic could often turn out to be more effective in drawing the sympathy of the population than organizing more pedagogical events such as public lectures or speeches. Last but not least, activists knew the extent to which social events were an important means for strengthening associational and, more broadly, social bonds; organizing leisure and recreational activities became thus a tool for reinforcing class, national and cultural boundaries, and stressing social distinctions. Of course, associations did not engineer their socialising practices in a vacuum. On the contrary, since their establishment in the early twentieth century they had been taking inspiration from a rich array of existing recreational activities from both the Ottoman and Habsburg period, as already been mentioned in Chapter One. Existing sources suggest that associations generally organized this kind of activity around the religious festive calendars in use in Yugoslavia. If we take just the Muslim associations, for example, socializing activities were clearly timed to coincide with the Islamic feasts, and thus were concentrated during Ramadan, and in particular on its final day (ramazanski bajram), or on the Festival of the Sacrifice (kurban bajram). Besides these dates, Muslim activists also scheduled their events according to other religious feast days that Muslims of the Yugoslav space shared with their non-Muslim fellows, in particular on July 20 (alidun for Muslims, and Saint Elijah’s Day for Christians) or on May 5 (hüdrellez for Muslims, and Saint George’s Day for Christians). A glance through the journals of that time clearly shows that even in the late 1930s, associational events were reg-
ularly held “on the fourth day of Bajram,”2 “the third day of Kurban Bajram,”3 “the first Friday after Aliđun,”4 and so on.

This adherence to a religious festive temporality was not simply due to some unmoving respect for habit, but also a conscious choice; in organizing events close to religious feasts, activists knew they could count on a greater philanthropic sensibility among the population, and often capitalize on the Islamic obligation of giving ritual alms (zekijat) to collect more funds. During the interwar years, some Muslim associations sometimes distanced themselves from the religious calendar when organizing socializing activities, and for the most part this was the case for cultural associations. Since its establishment, for example, the central and local branches of Narodna Uzdanica had organized their gatherings on feast days linked to Croatian national history. However, these cases remained rare, especially during the years of the royal dictatorship; for fear of having their association singled out as an anti-state organization by the Government, its leaders preferred to remain loyal to the Islamic, and thus less nationally-noted, calendar. The association that did implement widespread use of the national patriotic calendar was above all Gajret, which especially since its re-establishment after the Great War used dates borrowed from the Serbian national calendar as a way to stress their national brotherhood with their Orthodox fellows. Indeed, in the 1920s the Gajret central branch was in the habit of organizing its biggest balls on December 16, the birthday of King Aleksandar, and in the 1930s on September 6, for the birthday of the heir Petar.5 Of course, the motivation behind celebrating these dates was that it was an opportunity to demonstrate the loyalty of the main Muslim cultural association, and by extension of Muslim citizens, to the Yugoslav political project and symbolically their most important architects, the members of the Karadorđević dynasty.

This addition of a national-patriotic feast day to the Islamic festive calendar was not uniformly adopted across the Gajret network; space and gender variables influenced the introduction of these dates into the festive culture

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of the association. Even though, as we shall see in the following paragraphs, all throughout the interwar period Muslim women took part in social events in increasing numbers, Gajret female activists hardly ever took it upon themselves to organize their activities on national and patriotic feast days. Gatherings, tea-parties, and concerts organised by female branches continued to follow to a great extent the Islamic calendar, leaving to male activists, and in particular to the association’s central branch, the responsibility of celebrating dynastic and national feast days. Publicly celebrating the nation and the supreme political leader seems thus to have remained mostly a masculine prerogative. Moreover, besides the gender divide, there was also a geographical divide. In the case of both the principal Muslim cultural associations, national and patriotic dates—Yugoslav, Serbian, and Croatian alike—seem to have been appropriated only by activists in the main towns, especially in Sarajevo, Belgrade and Mostar. Associational branches in smaller towns continued to organize their social activities according to a religious calendar. This can be read as evidence of the limits, for the Muslim masses, to the nationalization process undertaken by cultural associations, and of the limited penetration into, and appropriation by Muslim society, of identification with Serbian, Croatian and Yugoslav national cause.

Besides having a temporal impact, voluntary associations also transformed the spatial nature of leisure practices, i.e., their place in the urban sphere. In the country’s principal cities, associations used existing institutional buildings for their social activities, such as the aforementioned Društveni dom and Officers Club in Sarajevo, or the Banski dvor in Banja Luka, erected in the early 1930s to host the office of the Governor. Associational student dorms, as they often had a spacious dining hall, or associational headquarters often became spaces where parties and theater performances were held. As the landscape of Yugoslav towns began to gradually transform and assume the spatial markers of Western modernity, private buildings like hotels and cinemas also entered into the associations’ list of most valued spaces for organizing fashionable social events. In smaller

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6 ABiH, FG, 10, 695, MŽPG Višegrad to GOG (February 18, 1931); ABiH, FG, 12, 208, GOG to MŽPG Sarajevo (January 15, 1932); HAS, NU14, 4, 461, MŽONU Sarajevo to GONU (December 11, 1929). On the same subject, see also “Zabava gajretova ženskog pododbora u Livnu,” Gajret, no. 7 (1929): 107; “Uspješan rad ženskog odbora u Stocu,” Gajret, no. 7 (1931): 197–8.
7 “Jedna vrlo uspjela gajretova zabava,” Gajret, no. 4 (1925): 64.
A Taste for Celebration

towns, where a lack of spacious modern buildings was felt most strongly, activists had to invent new strategies and enhance the scarce spatial resources they had. A good relationship with a local teacher or hodža could ensure for a local association the use of the local state-run or Muslim communal school; political and personal proximity with the local political notables could also provide access to spaces in a local town hall. Clearly, Muslim associations developed their festive culture using both “new” and “old,” as well as communal and extra-communal spaces, depending on their needs and the resources available.

If we look at festive practices, here too we can observe that activists always took existing social practices into account, opting for a fusion that lay somewhere between “tradition” and “innovation,” local routines and increasingly visible transnational habits. The result was an arsenal of festive practices capable of satisfying both the needs of each association, and the changing tastes of the population; the following examples can help us to better understand this important point. Though they did not all position themselves at the same point on the scale of pro-Western attitudes, no Muslim association completely abandoned traditional forms of sociability. The teferič,

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for example, a kind of picnic organized in green spaces near urban centers, had been an extremely popular activity since at least the late Ottoman period, and for this reason it was regularly appropriated by associations as well. On these occasions, members of the same family, or sometimes neighbours, met together, most commonly near a river or a spring, laid out rugs and spent the sunny hours of the day sitting, smoking, eating, singing and paying instruments (see figure 24).

During the interwar period, associations proved themselves to be highly skilled in adapting this kind of traditional form of sociability. In the spring of 1921, for example, Gajret activists from Prnjavor organized an associational teferič near their hometown. During the day, besides sitting, eating and playing instruments according to traditional practice, they also organized group activities for fostering literacy, invited the nationalist gymnastic society Soko to demonstrate its exercises, and filled the afternoon with public lectures on educational topics.9 This traditional form of sociability was thus brought closer to the association’s primary goals in the (self-)civilizing mission—educating and nationalizing the people.

Activists also adapted their socializing practices over time, proving themselves to be particularly sensitive to the changing tastes of the urban middle class, which thanks to people’s increasing mobility and the circulation of media—radio, journals, cinema—was more and more informed by new tastes from the capital and from abroad, in particular the United States. At a teferič organised by the local Sarajevo Gajret branch in 1939 for example, the picnic was organised in the courtyard of the recently inaugurated Gajret headquarters, and the event included a jazz band and modern dancing throughout the night.10 Thus, what had originally been an Ottoman form of sociability became less and less distinguishable from the parties that in the same period characterized the nightlife of the country’s more urban city centres, namely Belgrade and Zagreb.

Interestingly enough, in some cases voluntary associations were even able to transform religious sociability, in particular the mevlud. From the Arabic mawlid, this term traditionally referred to the celebration of the birth of the prophet Muhammad, and involved gatherings, recitations of the Quran, both

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10 ABiH, FG, 27, 880, Veliki proljetni teferič (1939).
in the public and private space, and was generally celebrated on the twelfth day of it, the third month of the Islamic calendar. Though this kind of celebration was for the most part segregated according to sex, it was in reality performed on many other occasions throughout the year, such as moving into a new home, or marriages and circumcisions.

In this respect, the description of a female mevlud, organized in 1928 by the local Gajret branch in Prnjavor (Northern Bosnia) is an interesting example of how associations were capable of transforming and moulding religious activities to their own ends. Held in the late afternoon in the town’s female mekteb, the celebration was open to Muslim and non-Muslim women alike. In the building’s three rooms, “there were twenty or so women from Kolo Srpskih Sestara and Hrvatska Žena,”¹¹ the two female Serbian and Croatian national associations. After a brief introduction by the local imam, who was himself a Gajret activist, the floor was opened to his daughter, Hafiza Ćejtan, who “with a gracious voice [gave] a lecture on bringing up children, which was followed by a speech by the local handiwork teacher, Fata Korić.”¹²

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At the very end of the celebration, Mira Marković, the delegate of the Serbian female association, spoke on behalf of the two female national associations present at the meeting. After giving a speech on the importance of schooling, she addressed the Muslim women present and asked them to educate their daughters. She assured her Muslim listeners that the two associations would provide financial support for their daughters’ enrolment at the local handiwork school and she pledged to organize a literacy class. She concluded urging the Muslim women present to form their own local female chapters. For Gajret, the conclusion of Marković’s speech was highly significant: “what success we will have when the three sisters [Muslim, Catholic-Croat and Orthodox-Serb] smile at each other and walk together along the path of cultural and educative progress!”

This case demonstrates the extent to which activists were particularly capable of adapting a traditional form of religious sociability and bringing it closer to the association’s goals. First of all, despite the religious character of this ritual, it was not a bula (the women responsible for the recitation of the Quran, and who normally ran female religious meetings), but two female Muslim state school teachers who spoke in public. Secondly and most importantly, by extending their invitation to Orthodox and Catholic women, and in particular activists from the two largest female nationalist associations in the country, Gajret activists lent a clearly national objective to this religious celebration: fostering interfaith solidarity among the women of Yugoslavia.

A Festive Empowerment

Of the changing repertoire of festive activities that were adapted and enlisted by voluntary associations, one in particular deserves special attention: the zabava (amusement, party). As we have seen in Chapter One, this practice had been introduced into Bosnia in the 1880s by Habsburg officials relocated to the province. During the interwar period, it gained increasing importance and visibility as an associational activity, especially for the cultural associations, and helped to shape the (night)life of city-dwellers throughout Yugoslavia. Since their appearance in Bosnia, these events had become

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far more than just fundraising events; associational parties became a veritable showcase for the activities of an association, and the most effective way to affirm an association’s successful participation in the public space. Early on, activists seem to have been aware of the important role of the zabava. In the early 1930s, the Gajret journal was quick to remark that parties “allow the members and sympathizers of a certain association to show... their devotion to the association itself, and to its ideology,”14 and that they should be considered to be “the crowning glory [sjajna kruna] of [the association’s] successes among the masses, in every field of public life.”15 The big novelty of the interwar period was that Muslim women, who during the pre-war period had remained absent from these events, entered the scene and became important actors of this performance of associational modernity. Perceived an eminently European form of leisure, interwar associational zabavas became as an arena in which Muslim women could negotiate their role and visibility in the Yugoslav society.16

Before launching into a gendered analysis of the interwar zabava, it is worth taking a moment to look more closely at this specific festive practice. During the interwar period, parties organized by Muslim cultural associations, like those organized by other associations in Bosnia and Yugoslavia, went through a certain degree of standardization. When we compare the programs of these events, we can see that they were mostly built around three principal moments: an opening address, generally given by a member of the association, and an opportunity to present the party within the historic context and goals of the association; followed by a concert, an amateur theater performance, or more rarely a ballet; and finally the ball, where attendees could often dance the most fashionable styles from the US and European capitals, and which involved all participants, both male and female. In addition to these three characterizing elements, organizers could incorporate other moments into the zabava, according to their economic and organizational capacity; e.g., banquets, raffles, the sale of trinkets, exhibitions of female handiwork, women’s beauty contests. This festive ritual, in which actions and words followed a prescribed form and order, was unique compared to the other socializing practices produced by voluntary associations, in

15 “Zabava kao manifestacija,” Gajret, no. 3 (1932): 34.
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terms of timing; starting around eight in the evening, they went on until very late, and often until dawn. *Zabava* thus were an opportunity for participants to experience the night outside of the private sphere, and to enjoy forms of sociability—in particular dancing—that they considered themselves to share with other city-dwellers in Yugoslavia. In other words, associational parties became performances of modernity, establishing the foundations for an urban identity that its participants felt they shared with one another, as well as with the rest of the urban population of Europe and the West.

Incidentally, as has already been noted by historians, Muslim women played a crucial role in associational parties, swiftly making the transition from spectators to planners. However, their presence and role in these carefully planned parties was not homogenous. Certainly, Muslim women played a major role in the practical organization of *Gajret* and *Narodna Uzdanica*’s parties; reports show, for instance, that the female activists of the two Muslim cultural associations generally established a temporary branch (*privremenii zabavni odbor*) in charge of organizing the party. Preparations began from a few weeks to a few months before the event, and annual parties in Sarajevo required two to three months’ work from the temporary party committee. The female activists’ involvement in party preparations was widely publicized in the associations’ journals, and the women were publicly celebrated in the press for their skilfulness and self-sacrifice. The *Gajret* journal in particular used epic language to celebrate the party organizers, describing them as “troops [čete] of hard-working [vrijedni] activists and members”\(^\text{17}\) who dedicated all of their energy to the success of the event. As an activist who organized the 1938 *Gajret* yearly party in Sarajevo put it, “we worked non-stop, day and night, as much as was required. Almost every day the committees responsible for the buffet, the raffle, program choices, etc. would meet. Everyone worked flat out and with one end in mind: the success of the party!”\(^\text{18}\) Women who excelled in these tasks were sometimes celebrated individually in the associational press; in 1928 for example, *Gajret*’s journal reported that a certain Ševka *hanuma* Pašić from Bijeljina had “been able to collect a good quantity of embroideries and other valuable


\(^{18}\) “Velika Gajretova zabava u Sarajevu,” 81.
objects for the raffle all by herself.” 19 Sometimes the work of these temporary party committees was also celebrated, and their portraits published, as was the case for the team working on Gajret’s party in Mostar in 1928. The members of this women-only group presented themselves dressed according to late-1920s fashion—short hair, dresses and skirts that showed their legs and arms, and long necklaces. Young, industrious, urban and unveiled, the activists of this temporary party committee are the portrait of what a Gajret Muslim female activist was meant to be (see figure 26). Organizing an associational party meant that Muslim women had to take on a vast array of responsibilities. First of all, they had to organize meetings in order to agree upon the program, often in coordination with male activists and also non-Muslim female activists from other associations. Partnerships between one or more associations were frequent, especially in smaller towns. In addition, they had to contact the associations’ donors to arrange the buffet and beverages—which, both in the case of Gajret and Narodna Uzdanica, regularly included alcohol, despite complaints from the Sarajevo Muslim anti-alcohol association Trezvenost, which regularly urged them “to give to the party an authentic Muslim and cultural character.” 20 Over the

20 HAS, NU14, 5, Trezvenost to Narodna Uzdanica (January 16, 1930).
following weeks the women had to organize rehearsals for the musical and theater performances, and go door-to-door to sell tickets and collect embroidery and other handiwork to be used as prizes for the raffle. In the days leading up to the party, the loot was often put on display in a shop in the town centre—as can be seen in the photograph above taken in Stolac in 1931—in order to entice a broader public to the zabava with the richness of the raffle prizes.
In the feverish hours preceding the party, some of the members of the temporary committee also met to make trinkets (flower bouquets or brooches bearing national or associational symbols, for example) to be sold on the night of the party; others collected carpets and flowers to decorate the place where the event would be held. Organizing an associational party was thus an activity that required women to develop decision-making and coordination skills, urban mobility, and to make use of their social networks, expanding them beyond family and community boundaries.

However, gaining access to this new practice was not always without risk for the women involved. As testified by many sources, a good portion of interwar associational zabavas had the potential to turn sour, especially during the Yugoslav general elections. In many cases, notables used parties to reinforce their own prestige, to publicly humiliate their opponents, or even to highlight an opposing political faction’s failure to take root in a local context. In other words, what at the outset was intended to showcase a certain association could rapidly turn into a theater for political conflict. This tendency to politicize the zabavas was already becoming visible in the aftermath of the Great War, when Gajret activists across the province denounced to the central branch and the press the disturbing actions of JMO sympathizers. The latter, regularly described by the activists as “slanderous reactionaries”21 or even “backward elements,”22 often went out of their way to turn the Gajret parties into failures, spreading rumors, highlighting their non-Muslim character, and inciting the Muslim population to boycott them. In some cases, the activists seem to have been able to save the party—and with it their own and the association’s reputation. For example, at a party organized in the town of Brod by local activists, “some local notable, and two or three elements of the intelligentsia, not only did not contribute to the success of the party, but they acted against it, with no success.”23 In that instance, the party was saved by inter-associational solidarity. Activists from Jedinstvo (Unity), a Yugoslav-ist association from the nearby town of Derventa, arrived at the last moment in support of the Muslim cultural association, and by their presence ensured that the party was not completely deserted.24

24 “Gajret,” 3.
Though for the most part they were unsuccessful, in rare cases these attempted sabotages were effective. In one case, in 1928 Gajret activists from the small village of Teslić (100 km north of Sarajevo) sadly admitted that the local population had heeded anti-Gajret rumors and preferred not to come.  

In the 1930s, it was Narodna Uzdanica in particular that encountered the most difficulties organizing successful parties. When they attempted to organize a party in Foča in September 1929, the local non-Muslim associations refused to help them, their justification being that they were pro-Gajret and could not cooperate with the rival Muslim cultural association. They also had trouble with a party held in Mostar in early 1930, when local civil and military officials refused to attend, in order to visibly underline the association’s political isolation.

Muslim women who decided to invest their time and energy organizing parties thus risked getting caught in the middle of local conflicts between male notables, and their efforts being misappropriated to these ends. A conflict around a party held by Gajret in the town of Zenica is a good example of how Muslim women could become involved in such conflicts. In 1930, Gajret local male activists wrote to the association’s central branch expressing sorrow and disappointment about a party that they had just organized. According to them, despite all their efforts the party turned out to be only a modest success, if not a complete failure. According to the activists, even in the early planning stages for their party, they met with the “hostility of certain persons who enjoy the trust of ignorant people, who are wealthy and who have a significant role in the public life of Zenica,” as well as from “the people leading prayer at the mosque.” From these words, we can infer that Gajret activists probably came up against secular local notables close to the JMO and religious officials from time to time. According to the report, in order ensure the failure of the zabava, Gajret’s adversaries targeted in particular Muslim women, publicly disapproving of their presence at such parties, and accusing those who became involved in organizing the event as immoral. The informal pressure they put on local Muslim women seems to have been effective: “if a Muslim woman works with

26 HAS, NU14, 4, 380, MONU Foča to GONU (September 5, 1929).
27 HAS, NU14, 5, 29, GONU to the Governor of the Primorska Governorate (February 12, 1930).
28 ABiH, FG, 9, 4053, MPG Zenica to GOG (November 3, 1930).
29 ABiH, FG, 9, 4053.
us” the report’s author continued with some regret “she is immediately met with general disdain.”30 As a partial justification for their failure, Gajret’s male activist tried to explain to the central branch the daily challenge that they faced in Zenica, where Muslim women still found it extremely difficult to be present in public; “if the central branch thinks that something can be done with [local] Muslim women, we bring to your attention the fact that in our town “cultural progress” is only evolving slowly and in a very limited manner.” To redress this situation, the Zenica activists proposed to the central branch an unusual solution; that the Gajret central branch parachute in from Sarajevo “the schoolgirls hosted in Gajret’s student dorm [in Sarajevo] to participate in our party.”31 In this way, they would be able to say that women had been present at the association’s next party, even if local women did not attend.

There are several elements that make this wired exchange between Gajret (male) activists in Zenica and Sarajevo interesting. Firstly, it confirms, as already established for the Habsburg period, that in order for an associational party to be considered a successful one, it had to include women, and they had to be very visible. This was of course true for all voluntary associations, and for Muslim cultural associations in particular, insofar as female emancipation was one of their key explicit objectives. Having women visibly present at a party was so important that local male activists, unable to get women from Zenica involved, did not think twice about asking their association’s central branch to “parachute” Muslim women in from Sarajevo, in order to preserve the reputation of the association and its activists. This exchange between male progressives also tells us much about of the unspoken conflict in the town; the opposing group, composed both of religious and non-religious notables, was ready to informally threaten the reputation of local women in order to achieve their goal to sabotage Gajret’s activities and its reputation among local people. Thus it seems that both fronts were clear about the importance of the “no women, no party” principle, and used Muslim women in order to accomplish their goals. This passage strongly mirrors and appears to confirm the teacher Nafija Baljak’s own feelings on the subject, which she expressed around the same period (see Chapter Four): Mus-

30 ABiH, FG, 9, 4053.  
31 ABiH, FG, 9, 4053.
Women who decided to become actively involved in associations, and in the public space more in general, risked being caught up in conflicts between Muslim notables.

Muslim Stars: Modern Femininity on the Stage

Though considered essential in sanctioning a zabava’s success, Muslim women were not uniformly present at associational parties. Of great importance during preparations, Muslim women appeared to be decisively marginalized when it came to the public address, i.e. the speech that was made at the party’s opening. This speech, doubtless the most solemn part of the evening, was considerably different in content between the two Muslim cultural associations. The opening speech at Gajret parties was very often of an openly patriotic nature, stressing allegiance to the nation and a clear commitment to the Yugoslav State and its royal dynasty. The king’s portrait, the Yugoslav flag, and flower compositions in blue, red and white, were invariably put on display during this first part of the ritual, while the Yugoslav national anthem was regularly played, followed by the association’s anthem. By contrast, the address at Narodna Uzdanica’s parties had a less political and national character. Given the association’s precarious situation since its establishment, and especially during the years of the royal dictatorship, the executive of the association mostly maintained a low profile, avoiding explicitly national references, and focusing uniquely on the association’s role in the enlightenment of the Muslim population. Despite these differences, the opening speech for the parties of these two Muslim cultural associations had one point in common: they remained exclusively a man’s affair. Both associations chose the speaker from among the members of the association’s male-only central branch, sometimes followed by a male representative of the state, i.e. a mayor, a military general or, during the 1930s, a provincial governor. Despite their key role in preparations, female activists remained thus at the margins of the zabava’s most political moment; during the speech, they participated only through applause and by joining in the triple živjeli (Hurrah!) at the end of the speech. A striking example of this associational patriotism can be found in the choreographed dance performance that opened Gajret’s yearly party in Sarajevo in March 1931 (see figure 28). As can be seen in this picture, Muslim women were on stage, dressed in traditional Muslim
clothes, but their faces unveiled. Young and richly dressed, they offer flowers to a cut-out of King Aleksandar, glorified at centre-stage beneath a palm tree. The presence of young men and women in the Yugoslav Sokol movement, as well as the banner “For the King and the Homeland” fixed above the stage of the Sarajevo National Theater, testify to the patriotic spirit that Gajret parties assumed during the years of the dictatorship (see figure 28).

After the address, the zabava entered into the central moment of its program, given over to a theater, choir or orchestral performance. In this section dedicated to artistic expression, women certainly played an important role. In order to make their parties appear more polished, Muslim cultural associations sometimes invited well-known artists from the bigger city centres of Yugoslavia. Narodna Uzdanica’s activists, for instance, regularly invited to their yearly party in Sarajevo opera singers like Vika Čaleta or Vilma Nožić-Janković, from the Opera of Ljubljana and Zagreb respectively.32 However, hosting professional performers from outside of Bosnia remained an option clearly outside of the budget of the majority of Bosnian associations. Instead,

as an alternative solution they generally entrusted the task of providing artistic performances at the zabava to those among the association’s members and sympathizers who had artistic skills e.g. conservatory students, amateur musicians, singers, and actors. Throughout the interwar period, choirs were the most frequently solicited to fulfil the associations’ artistic requirements. As we saw in Chapter One, the Muslim population in the Habsburg period had substantially neglected this kind of activity, leaving it to non-Muslims. After 1919, Muslim choirs gradually flourished throughout the province, as well as the number of Muslims in interfaith choirs. In the late 1920s, vocal ensembles gradually opened to women as well. In 1928, at a Gajret party in the town of Livno, Muslim women performed in public for the first time as singers, opening the way in the 1930s to the blossoming of several mixed choirs established and run by the Muslim cultural associations.33 As a matter of fact, the success of female voices at parties was a sudden phenomenon. In 1930, Gajret mixed choirs were established in Sarajevo and Mostar, each counting around sixty members, and in 1931 an entirely female Gajret choir with 26 members was founded in Banja Luka. This latter group, which usually performed wearing folk dress—as testified by the col-

lective self-portrait above (figure 29)—often went on tour in other towns of the province, and its reputation extended well beyond the borders of the Bosnian Krajna.34

Needless to say, the efforts invested by Muslim activists into establishing choirs was not simply a matter of finding a cheap and practical solution for the needs of the *zabava*. As they often wrote in the press, activists were well aware of the choirs’ function, which was “not only artistic, but also social.”35 Since their establishment, choirs had been seen as a way to implement the self-civilizing mission of the cultural association, familiarizing the Muslim youth with European, and in particular Slavic and south-Slavic composers. If we look at the repertoires of the Muslim choirs we can see, for example, that choirs drew from the music of Frédéric Chopin, Bedřich Smetana, Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, and also from lesser-known Serbian composers such as Petar Krstić or Stevan Mokranjac. However, the genre that was the authentic trademark of Muslim cultural associations, and that played a major role in the musical programme of the choirs, was the *sevdalinka*.

The term implies compositions for voice, or a voice accompanied by an instrument, performed by both men and women. Being one of the rare genres considered to be specifically Bosnian, and associated with its Ottoman past, *sevdalinkas* had a special place in the musical repertoire of the Muslim choirs. As a *Gajret* activist wrote in 1931, “among our typically regional poems... the Bosnian *sevdalinka* has its own charm and beauty. The strong languid feeling contained in them clearly demonstrates that we have a deep sense of poetry and music, something that unfortunately is not always acknowledged by our brother fellow-nationals.”36 Bringing this genre of music to the fore was thus a way of refuting the assumption that Muslims were passive in the musical, and more broadly artistic domain, and to stress their capacity, and desire, to contribute to the construction of a Yugoslav musical canon. Finally, associations also acknowledged that choirs had an important socializing function. These organizations allowed young people of both sexes to get to know each other, and to travel the country thanks to the numerous tours. A *Gajret* activist explained in 1931 that the social ben-

34 1939 saw the creation of the first jazz band affiliated with the association; it was composed of twelve musicians who performed at associational parties: “Umjetnička sekcija mjesnog odbora Gajreta u Sarajevu,” *Gajret*, no. 7–9 (1939): 145–6.
efit of choir tours was mutual: “tours where choir members are hosted in
different regions produce a multitude of positive effects, both for the choir
members and for the inhabitants of the region they visit. Knowledge of the
different places and beautiful regions improves and completes the educa-
tion of each individual.” Since 1928, Muslim women engaged in choirs had
thus been able to travel, socialize, and—equally importantly—display their
artistic skills in public, in different towns across the country.

Generally speaking, when Muslim women pursued the scene the gen-
eral reaction seems to have been positive. The promotion of Bosnian folk
heritage, matched with the philanthropic goal of the associational choirs,
helped to counterbalance the negative reputation enjoyed by female sing-
ers in both Western and Ottoman society, where singing was left to socially
marginal women, and to specific ethnic groups, like Roma women. Never-
theless, there are cases in which collective female choir performances pro-
voked discontent and unrest. This was the case for a concert by the Sarajevo Gajret female choir scheduled to take place in Tuzla in May 1927. In a
period in which public singing performances by Muslim women were still
a novelty, the concert seems to have polarized the population of this Bos-
nian town. A local historian recalled that, even before their arrival in town,
the news of Muslim women singing in public set off rumors in town, and
provoked complaints from a part of the local population. A group of un-
specified conservatives even sent a letter to the Gajret central branch in Sa-
rajevo in an effort to convince the association to cancel the concert, say-
ing that Muslim women singers were not welcome. Despite this unfriendly
message, the tour was confirmed, and the choir was greeted upon arrival by
an impressive crowd at the railway station, including many local notables,
there to welcome the young women. On that occasion, Džemila Zaimović,
a young girl from the family of Muradbeg Zaimović, one of the most presti-
gious Muslim landowners in the region, gave a solemn welcoming speech,
directly addressing the young singers: “we, your companions from Tuzla,
are cheerful because we see in you the first forerunners of the first Muslim
activists for the enlightenment of Muslim women, that until now have lan-

38 Trišković, Tuzlanski vremeplov, vol. 1, 149.
39 On the Zaimović family from the region of Tuzla, see Kamberović, Begovski zemljišni posjedi, 472–6, and
in particular Ismail Hadžiahmetović, Muradbeg Zaimović: Legenda i istina (Tuzla: Zmaj od Bosne, 1997).
guished in darkness and ignorance.”

After having provoked such tension between local progressives and conservatives, the girls were led to the Hotel Bristol, one of the most lavish places in town, accompanied by people from the three main faiths.

Choirs, needless to say, privileged collective over individual effort. Their reputation was mostly connected to the harmony between the different parts, and not to any one individual. However, throughout the interwar period Muslim women emerged as solo singers, and their names were individually celebrated in the press. The majority of them reached some popularity on an urban, sometimes regional scale. For example, Šemsa Tudaković, an elementary school teacher and singer from the Gajret choir of Tuzla, enjoyed some success in the thirties as a solo singer, and was also invited to Sarajevo. However, the Muslim woman that reached by far the highest point of popularity in the interwar years as a singer was, without a doubt, Bahrija Nuri Hadžić (1904–1993). Born in Mostar in 1904, Bahrija was one of the four daughters of the aforementioned Osman Nuri Hadžić and of Bahija Vajzović, from a family of merchants of imported fine goods from the Posavina region. She thus grew up in an educated, wealthy urban middle-class family, open to influences from “outside,” both in terms of culture and of consumer goods. In the early 1920s, with the help of a Gajret scholarship, Bahrija moved to Belgrade to pursue her studies. After studying the pianoforte in the Yugoslav capital, in 1923 Bahrija attended the Vienna Academy of Music where she specialized in opera singing. She worked for a time at the Opera of Bern in Switzerland, and in 1931 became a member of the Opera of Belgrade, where she would work until the late 1930s. Known in the German press as Eine Grösse aus Belgrad, “the Belgrade Great,” Bahrija Nuri Hadžić led a very successful career for a decade or so, performing in some of the most important theaters in central Europe, as well as in Switzerland and Turkey. As the first Yugoslav Muslim female opera singer to be famous throughout Europe, her name was often associated with the operas of the German composer Richard Strauss, who Bahrija met on several occasions.

\[40\] Trifković, Tuzlanski vremeplov, vol. 1, 148.


\[42\] Nezirović, Monografija Bosanskog Šamca, 219–21.
occasions. She reached the height of success, and controversy, playing the role of Salome in Strauss’s opera of the same name in Belgrade. Due to the lethal sensuality of its protagonist, the opera was openly condemned by some supporters of the Serbian Orthodox church in 1931. Interestingly, even at the height of her career Bahrija kept in regular contact with Gajret and, when her international commitments made it possible, she often accepted to sing at the association’s parties in Sarajevo and Mostar. Regularly celebrated as “the queen of the evening,” Bahrija Nuri Hadžić contributed to a great extent to the success of the Gajret parties, where she was always welcomed warmly and praised to no end.

Given her extraordinary life and career, by the early 1930s Bahrija Nuri Hadžić was already receiving a great deal of attention from the press, and was not surprisingly greatly idealized, especially by progressive circles. The Gajret journal regularly celebrated her in enthusiastic terms, for thanks to her “our [Muslim] component has given to music its first recognized woman pioneer.” This was a recurrent idea in the Muslim press, that thanks to Bahrija Nuri Hadžić Muslims were finally able to contribute to Yugoslav and European music culture. The progressive Mustafa Mulalić, in his 1936 book Orijent na Zapadu further elaborated this idea, stating that the singer “brings glory throughout Europe to our Yugoslav music culture, and first of all brings honour to Yugoslav Muslims.” According to this author, the first Muslim woman singer was living proof that Yugoslav Muslims could shine in music as in every other Western artistic discipline. Because she had managed to build a solid international career, Bahrija Nuri Hadžić’s story invalidated the theory of Muslim backwardness and passivity in the cultural domain, and showed that they too could make a fruitful contribution to national cultural life.

To further clarify his argument, Mulalić presents a collage of a series of portraits of Bahrija Nuri Hadžić, both private and public. The series of portraits are a sketch of the woman in three different ages. In the first she is a child, posing seated in a very conventional manner, wearing a traditional

46 Mulalić, Orijent na zapadu, 379.
Bosnian Muslim costume; in the second half-length portrait she is a teenager, soberly dressed with a scarf on her head. The third is a stage picture from the opera Salome, where she poses as a diva; eyes wide open, caressing her neck, her smiling mouth shining with lipstick, her hair in finger waves. In this picture she adequately personifies the dangerous, lethally sensual, immoral leading character of Strauss’s opera, capable of subjugating kings with her dance, and of having the men who dared to resist her beheaded. The diagonal alignment of the pictures suggest an evolution across time, confirmed by the caption accompanying the collage: “Bahrija Nuri-Hadžić going through a cultural metamorphosis: wearing *dimija* [traditional clothes], wearing *jemenija* [traditional headscarf] and as ‘Salome.’”47 In the pages dedicated to the singer, Mulalić aptly explains the exceptional nature of her lifestyle and professional path, which made her a unique success story among Muslim women in the country: “Bahrija... whose musical culture and personal degree of civilization is not in keeping with the society she grew up in, proudly represents this musically backward community in the greatest musical capitals of Europe, especially in Vienna and Prague.”48 Of course, the cultural metamorphosis described by Mulalić could have left room for misunderstanding, suggesting that the logical result of the civilizational process was a monster woman, like the Salomé character. The author thus felt the need to shed light on this point, eliminating any possible doubt on Bahrija Nuri Hadžić’s morality: “besides her high degree of civilization, under her cultivated surface, it is nevertheless possible to see the little, patriarchal Bahrija wearing the *dimija*. Without her Quran, she does not dare to travel as Bahrija, nor to act on stage as Salome.”49 Mulalić’s reader can thus rest assured: Bahrija-Salomè is only fiction, an expression of artistic skill, a duty paid to the highest forms of European culture. In her real life, Bahrija is still a pious Muslim girl, and her biographical trajectory testifies that being Muslim and civilized were not an unsolvable antithesis, but that they can coexist in the same body. “Bahrija will not be the only one,”50 Mulalić states optimistically, expressing his faith in the future development of other interpreters of Western culture among the Muslim youth.

Choir performances were not the only activity that made up the core of associative parties’ programme of activities. Activists, sometimes helped by local supporters of the association, in many cases took the guise of actors and organised amateur theater performances. The degree of sophistication of these performances varied a great deal from one place to another throughout Bosnia; the theater performances organized by cultural associations in

Figure 30. Bahrija Nuri Hadžić’s Cultural Metamorphosis, collage.  
Source: Mulalić, Orijent na zapadu, 331.

**With the Blessing of their Fathers: Muslim Women and the Theater**
Sarajevo had lavish stage sets, a broad cast, and were held in luxurious spaces. Vladimir Ćorović’s play *On* (Him) performed for the 1931 *Gajret* yearly assembly in Sarajevo, for example, took place at the National Theater and involved dozens of actors (including the pupils hosted at the association’s female student dorm in town), as well as rich folk costumes, and an impressive stage set representing the courtyard of a Bosnian traditional house.

Activists from the smallest villages had to organize their performances with considerably less human and material means, and to set up the stage in spaces that were not necessarily designed for theater performances, like elementary schools, town halls and hotel courtyards, and more rarely cinemas. The success of theater performances, which for the entire interwar period regularly made up a part of the *zabava* programme, depended on their ability to satisfy both the activists and the public. Some of the local activists who enjoyed organizing rehearsals and performing in public gradually began to consider amateur acting as a valuable form of leisure and socialization. The Muslim urban population seems to have been increasingly interested in attending theater performances, especially when the story put on stage was, as we shall see later, related to Bosnian Muslim everyday life. Last but not least, the central branches of cultural associations considered theater performances to be an invaluable tool for educating the population. In a society that remained illiterate for the most part, and for whom the ideas
expressed in the associations’ extensive written material remained inaccessible, theater provided a platform from which the association’s discourse could reach a broader stratum of the population, including those who could neither read nor write.

Choosing an appropriate script was a constant source of worry for the associations. The chosen text had to be of course compatible with the associational cultural agenda, and be in keeping with the tastes of the Muslim public—which, with the exception of a small elite in the main urban centres, was unfamiliar with the world of theater. Moreover, screenplays had to satisfy criteria of practical feasibility—especially when it came to the number and sex of the actors—the local availability of stage costumes, and the complexity of set designs. During Gajret and Narodna Uzdanica’s first forty years of activity, the scripts chosen for performances were predominantly written by Serbo-Croatian—such as Branislav Nušić, Marko Milinović and Milan Ogrizović—and in particular Bosnian-Muslim writers—especially Safvet beg Bašagić, Osman Đikić and Ahmet Muratbegović. Bosnian Muslim activists only very rarely attempted to put plays written by foreign writers on stage. In 1928 Gajret activists from Bijeljina decided to put on a performance of Homeland, a play by the Ottoman poet and playwright Namık Kemal (1840–1888). The town’s public reacted very coldly, one of the activists in charge of the performance stating that “a play like this turned out to be too lengthy and not at all suited to our [social] condition.” The activists seem to have learned their lesson and to have abandoned their ambitions of performing similar texts set outside of Bosnia and focused on the national question. “Next time” the activist continued “we will choose shorter texts that are about the people’s lives.” This episode seems to confirm a general feature of the expectations of the Muslim public during the interwar period; the scripts that were most appreciated were those that involved scenarios inspired by local daily life, with its characters, themes, and conflicts.

Organizing a decent set-up for an existing script could turn out to be an extremely difficult task for the activists. In many cases, the story was not considered to be morally appropriate for the audience, or the plot too complex to be easily followed. In other cases, the characters were too numerous for it to

be feasible to find enough suitable amateur actors. In the 1910s, to tackle this kind of problem, Muslim associations had already started inviting their own activists to write plays specifically for the association.\(^{53}\) This practice became increasingly widespread in the period between the two World Wars. In 1928 *Narodna Uzdanica* launched a writing competition, open to all its activists, in order that the association have at its disposal a collection of plays ready to be performed at associational parties.\(^{44}\) *Gajret* followed suit, and in the early 1930s published a collection of short texts, written by activists and selected by the central branch, to be performed by its local branches. The plays from this collection were designed to suit *Gajret*’s needs: the number of actors was reduced to 4 or 5, sets and costumes were kept to the bare minimum, and texts were simple and therefore suited to amateur performers. Moreover, associational theater mostly introduced characters from Muslim society, i.e. the rich land-owner, the urban poor, the elementary school teacher, the *hodža*, pupils, activists and so on.\(^{55}\) The texts were printed as unbound pamphlets, usually about 15 pages long, making it extremely easy to send them through the post from one local branch to another. In this way, the associations’ central chapters, which adopted the texts, could also maintain a certain amount of control over the content of the plays that were put on by their activists, even in the remotest of towns.

Just as was the case for amateur choirs, Muslim amateur theater troupes became mixed during the interwar period, and Muslim women gradually gained access to them. It was similarly the case that Muslims seem to have gained access to this art form with some delay in respect to non-Muslims. Bosnian Jewish and Orthodox women, for instance, were already involved in amateur theater by around 1900. The delay in Muslims’ familiarization with theater did not exclusively concern women; Muslims did not feel comfortable with plays written by non-Muslims in Serbo-Croatian, because often they found that the manner in which Islam and Muslims were presented in these texts was offensive. Furthermore, throughout the 1910s Muslim ama-

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\(^{55}\) Dževad Sulejmanpašić, *Zelen čovjek: Komedija u jednom činu iz muslimanskog seoskog života* (Sarajevo: Vlasništvo i naklada Gajreta, 1932); D. Imamović, *Dekret: Komad u jednom činu*, (Sarajevo: Vlasništvo i naklada Gajreta, 1932); Ismet Bejgorić, *Spas u revoli* (Sarajevo: Vlasništvo i naklada Gajreta, 1932); Dušan Stevović-Jazmin, *Gajret: Vodvil u jednom činu* (Sarajevo: Vlasništvo i naklada Gajreta, 1932); Vasko Hamović, *Vukodlaci: Komedija u jednom činu* (Sarajevo: Vlasništvo i naklada Gajreta, 1932).
teur actors “did not want to play non-Muslims characters, or characters with flawed morals.” Given this reticence, as highlighted by Mužin Rizvić, “it was therefore necessary to create local pieces, which were entirely suited to the spirit, mentality, literary tradition... of the Muslim population.”

Men’s interest in theater slowly gained ground throughout the 1910s, but the battle for women was considerably longer. With the exception of a few attempts during the Habsburg period, Muslim women remained detached from the world of theater, both as spectators and as actresses, until the early 1920s. In 1921, following the example of the Skopje Theater, the Theater of Sarajevo began to organize shows reserved only for women. These segregated shows, which, by no coincidence, were held on Friday afternoons, were explicitly introduced to “allow Muslim women to attend plays, free from embarrassment.” Thanks to these measures, from November of that year, several dozen Muslim women living in Sarajevo were able to attend a performance of *The Imaginary Invalid*. This novelty was surely a cause for concern in Muslim society, because a Muslim progressive journal felt the need to reassure its public, stating that Molière’s comedy “could do no damage to anybody’s morals.”

If, since the end of the Great War, the door to the theater was being timidly opened to Muslim women as spectators, the route to the stage as amateur actresses was not yet to be taken before almost another decade. In the 1920s, Muslim associational branches sought to find dramatic works which had either a minimal number of female characters, or none at all, and when there were female roles to be played, local non-Muslim elementary school teachers were often recruited to play the parts. Muslim women made their debut onstage in 1927, when Gajret’s production of Ćorović’s play *On* (Him) in Sarajevo featured, for the first time in Yugoslavia, an all-Muslim cast that included female actresses. Though traditionally considered to lie on the threshold between art and prostitution, being an amateur actress became increasingly accepted in Muslim society.
The theater performances scheduled during the *zabava* were not only relevant as a new arena for the visibility of Muslim women, and as a tool for the public expression of their skills. Associational theater also provides an excellent prism through which we can consider the multitude of ways in which women were portrayed. It would be far too great a task to analyze every single play ever performed at these associational parties, with regards to gender. One play from *Gajret*’s repertoire is nevertheless particularly interesting for the sake of analysis; eloquently entitled “The Emancipated Woman”, it was written by two *Gajret* activists. The work won the 1932 dramatic writing competition organized by the central branch, and was therefore printed and put on stage many times in interwar Bosnia.\(^{61}\)

Set in a small and remote village in Eastern Bosnia, the script is populated with several characters who embody stereotypical figures, with easily identifiable markers of dress. Esad beg, the rich Muslim landowner, “dressed as a typical Bosnian beg, old, with grey hair and a mustache, but no beard,”\(^{62}\) is accompanied by his son Ešref, a provincial doctor who represents the Muslim intelligentsia. Ešref is “28 years old, with a travel suit and glasses.”\(^{63}\) Another notable character is Abid efendi, the local Islamic school teacher, an “old man, with a grey beard and hair, an *ahmedija* [the typical head-gear of Islamic officers], dressed like a *hodža* [religious teacher] with a long black tunic.”\(^{64}\) In Abid efendi’s family there are two women—his daughter Suada, an unveiled teacher at the local state school, who is a “young educated woman, dressed in a work-dress with long and not short sleeves, with neither décolleté nor make-up”;\(^{65}\) and Fadila, Suada’s cousin, who lives in the city and is staying temporarily in the village. Fadila is described as a “supermodern city girl with a modern hairstyle [*hipermoderna gradska djevojka sa modernom frizurom*], dressed in a short dress with short sleeves, with a large décolleté. Heavily made-up.”\(^{66}\) Surrounding these main characters are Abid efendi’s servants, male and female peasants dressed in traditional Muslim garb.

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\(^{62}\) Alikalić and Imamović, *Emancipovana žena*, 3.

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The plot is simple, structured around a classic misunderstanding; Ešref and Suada want to marry, but Ešref’s father, Esad beg, opposes the marriage because Suada is a professional woman, a teacher in a state school, and is thus deemed immoral by the local population. When Esad beg visits the village to see the girl with his own eyes, he does not find Suada but instead meets Fadila. Sure that the visibly corrupted girl is his son’s beloved, Esad beg’s prejudices about emancipated women seem to be confirmed. At the end of the play, the misunderstanding is resolved when Esad beg meets Suada and sees how sober, self-sacrificing and submissive to her father’s will she is. Finally, the two fathers consent to the marriage.

The text was able to present the two cousins Suada and Fadila as opposite types of emancipated women. The teacher Suada represents without a doubt the appropriate kind of emancipation. In addition to her eloquent physical description, she is introduced by her servants in the following positive terms:

Oh God, what a strange world [dunjaluk]! Who would have guessed that Muslims among us today included women like that? If my late [rahmetli] grandfather returned from the grave, he would definitely think that this is the Day of Judgment [kijamet]! It’s amazing: Muslim and a teacher! How could this happen? Dear friends, this is reality now. But what is most amazing is that she prays five times a day, every single day! Yes, this is a diligent [vrijedna] girl. She is busy every day that God gave her on earth.67

Education, self-sacrifice, piousness; these qualities define the proper modern girl. As Suada’s father confirms, a solid family is not enough to produce this kind of woman. Gajret is also responsible for this proper modern education:

Throughout the time she attended school, Suada was at the Gajret female student dorm, and we parents know very well how the education given there is appropriate, from both a religious and social point of view. This is why we send our children there. In Sarajevo I have a brother to whom I could have sent her... but I preferred Gajret’s student dorm. That’s the reason she is now a good teacher and a good Muslim, and a good housewife.68

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67 Alikalić and Imamović, Emancipovana žena, 4.
68 Alikalić and Imamović, Emancipovana žena, 11.
But the best and most effective definition of the proper emancipatory path comes neither from the servant, nor from the father; it is Suada herself who, in a long monologue, explains her idea of female emancipation:

To me, [emancipation] is throwing away everything that has been rusty [hrđavo], breaking bad habits and prejudices that hinder our progress, and taking from the present only what is good and healthy, without taking everything just because it is modern [primiti samo ono što je zdravo i dobro, a nikako sve što je samo moderno]... We must recognize that in the past there were very beautiful costumes and things that we do not have to abandon. If we modernize completely [potpuno moderniziramo], and if we throw all our good habits away, the future for us will not be rosy at all.69

Of course, in staging the meaning and limits of appropriate female emancipation, the text also offers an anti-model—bad, deviated female emancipation. All this is embodied in the city girl Fadila, constructed as Suada’s flamboyant antithesis. Fadila sleeps too much, constantly reads French novels, dresses immodestly—“she is dressed like a circus performer [pehlivan]”70—and smokes, “and with [a] lit cigarette looks straight into [men’s] eyes.”71 In every stage direction of the play, Fadila is sexual and seductive toward every male (“whistles and wriggles naughtily [koketno zviždajući]”72). From the description offered by different characters, it is clear that she is also a bad Muslim and would make an even worse housewife: “she never prays, and she could consume in one night the entire treasure of the Sultan.”73 The dramatic plot is finally resolved by the two older characters, Esad beg and Abid efendi, who, as their titles reveal, represent the two traditional powers of Muslim society, rich landowners and ulemas. The proclamation of the marriage between the two young, educated Muslims is also an opportunity for pronouncing a condemnation of the character excluded by the happy ending, Fadila. The anathema for this improper emancipation is pronounced by one of the fathers, Esad beg:

69 Alikalić and Imamović, Emancipovana žena, 6–7.
70 Alikalić and Imamović, Emancipovana žena, 12.
71 Alikalić and Imamović, Emancipovana žena, 12.
72 Alikalić and Imamović, Emancipovana žena, 11.
73 Alikalić and Imamović, Emancipovana žena, 12.
Listen to her. She hisses like a snake \([\text{palucati}]\). It seems that you have nothing but your tongue. Do what you want, be free, modern and what you like. Just let me tell you something: it will be hard to find a man to marry you. There are no more men like that today. Today, even educated men no longer want such a woman. They too now seek a modest woman \([\text{skromna}]\), well-educated and a good housewife. Get it out of your mind that you will find a husband!\(^74\)

In its ingenuity, the principal value of this associational play was its capacity to embody the frontier between good and bad emancipation, and to dramatize them before the Muslim public. Namely, that Muslim women’s socio-economic integration should not fall into the domain of what were considered to be the excesses of European society; rather it should unite social purpose, economic initiative, morality, marriage and modesty. Even more interesting is that the two young protagonists’ relationship (Ešref, a doctor and Suada, an elementary school teacher, two typical profiles of the male and female Muslim intelligentsia) develops under the watchful eye of their respective fathers, who are members of the two ruling classes in traditional Muslim society: a landowner and a religious leader. Therefore, for the emancipation of women to be a positive thing, it had to occur through the safeguards of age, gender and class hierarchies. Last but not least, the explicit exclusion of Fadila from “proper emancipation” and marriage to an educated man is accompanied by the silent exclusion of Suada’s peasant servant. The latter, whose monologues are simply there for comic effect, remains uneducated and covered by her traditional headscarf throughout the play. Significantly, the train of emancipation does not seem to stop for her: the “proper emancipation,” then, had clear class boundaries and de facto left behind the majority of the rural population.

**Muslim Flappers**

We do not know how the guests at the party reacted to the staging of this “emancipated woman.” Did the Muslim women who attended these parties adopt Suada—modest, soberly-dressed, make-up-free Suada—as a model

\(^74\) Alikalhić and Imamović, *Emancipovana žena*, 16.
for their own femininity? Evidence from both journals and archives make us doubtful on this point. Of course, some Bosnian activists—from religious, feminist and temperance associations alike—regularly made their voices heard, asking that the party have a more moral tone, and more precisely that its guests’ outfits be soberer. In 1921, when the consequences of the Great War were still visible in the streets of Bosnian towns, progressive circles publicly condemned any inclination toward ostentation with regards to clothing or lifestyle in their fellow citizens, deeming luxury to be one of the least desirable outcomes of the post-war period. A new wave of moralizing attitudes among Yugoslav activists grew up in the early 1930s, a time when the Great Depression had also reached Yugoslavia. In 1932, awareness of the harsh conditions of the economic crisis convinced Sarajevo’s Gajret female activists, in partnership with other women’s and feminist organizations in the city, to manufacture brooches bearing the word skromnost (modesty), to be sold at the entrance of associational parties for 8 dinars. However, such calls for temperance remained mere lone voices. In the interwar period, associational parties were an opportunity for the Muslim urban middle class to live its own années folles; for both men and women, dressing according to international urban fashion was thus an important way of performing their own class, gender and urban identity, and a way of promoting the image of Muslims as a civilized component of a civilized nation.

If we look at their socializing activities as a whole, voluntary associations did not formally impose a strict dress code on their members and supporters. As can been seen from the abundance of photographs reproduced by the press, or preserved in the archives, men and women attended these parties dressed in a variety of different types of clothing. A significant number of the women who attended Gajret and Narodna Uzdanica teferić wore traditional Muslim female garments, such as the feredža and the peča, and this did not appear to be an issue, either for the organizers or the public. Similar tolerance for traditional female dress can be observed in other afternoon or evening events, such as the čajanka and mevluds. However, it was a different story for the zabave: held at night, these associational parties had become since the 1920s a place where both men and women were

75 “Luksus,” Domovina, no. 95 (1921): 4
76 ABiH, FG, 12, 1583, MZPG Sarajevo to GOG (June 17, 1932).
supposed to dress according to Western fashions, especially fashions from Paris in the 1920s, and then from Berlin in the 1930s. New interwar communication technologies made it possible for the urban Muslim middle class in Bosnia to follow clothing trends; as has already been noted for the case of Belgrade, even when people could not afford a travel to Paris, Berlin and New York, “the telegraph and telephone enabled up-to-date reporting, fashions from metropolitan streets were reproduced in illustrated magazines within a season’s time.”

Muslim women’s visible consumption of Western fashions at parties was of course put in the spotlight both by the organizers and the participants. Reports by the press about these parties always highlighted the presence of Muslim women in modern dress, expressing open satisfaction when Muslim women conformed to Western middle-class standards, and conversely when they abandoned Islamic markers. In 1928 for instance, a Gajret activist from Mostar described thus a party organized by the association in his city: “though the hall was extravagantly decorated, what attracted the most attention from the guests was the women who went unveiled, and dressed in the European style [potpuno evropski obućene]. They were admired for their impeccable behavior by all those present.” Of course, these examples of consumption of modernity could be found at varying degrees in the cities and in the country; while “unveiled women,” as they were described in the press reports, became a permanent fixture in the urban landscapes of Sarajevo and Mostar around 1920, things were very different in the smallest towns. In an association’s report about a party held in the small town of Brčko in 1929, the presence of women “entirely unveiled” was described as “something completely unprecedented for us here [neprimljena novotarija].” In one internal report (though other examples exist) for the local Gajret branch in Bijeljina in 1929, the secretary expressed his satisfaction that “fifty or so Muslim women arrived wearing beautiful clothes [toaletе], greatly impressing those present with their elegance, which would not have looked out of place on the elegant city women [dame].”

80 “Gajretova zabava u Brčkom,” 122.
81 ABiH, FG, 7, 616, MPG Bijeljina to GOG (March 22, 1929).
Can we really state that at associational parties all Muslim identifying markers were erased from the public space? As we have seen up until this point, Islamic markers had of course been marginalized. However, this process of marginalization was accompanied by, and intersected with another process—the rediscovery of Muslim urban traditional garments. Especially in the early 1930s, Muslim men and women began to wear Muslim traditional clothes at parties. In particular, some members of Muslim landowning families wore to these associational parties extremely rich and elaborate clothing that had been passed down through the family, to the astonishment of the other participants. Descriptions and photographs of this phenomenon, which were published in social gazettes, are revealing (see figure 32); one example in particular is the photograph of young Mirza Hasiba Ruždija, published in an article about a 1936 Narodna Uzdanica party at which participants wore “popular dress”82 (see figure 33). The fact that she is wearing traditional clothing does not serve to signal continuity with the past; rather, it has the opposite effect, that is, to highlight her distance from it. Indeed, the girl has been photographed next to a radio, a luxury item at the time, which has been given a prominent position, as if to counterbalance her small stature. The Muslim intelligentsia saw the process of social transformation that had taken hold of Muslim society from the end of the nineteenth century to be so advanced and irreversible, that wearing old family clothing was considered to be nothing but folklore. The radio therefore serves to reassure the viewer that progress has arrived in this household, and that Mirza’s clothing is nothing but a temporary performance. An anonymous commentator’s thoughts about a Gajret party held in 1938, at which some guests wore splendid traditional clothing, provide food for thought: “The lounge and the rooms next to it [in the National Theater] looked impressive. The marvelous Persian rugs used as decoration were simply perfect. The lighting transformed the night into the brightest of days.” The guests, with their dresses, contributed to the show: “The public wore a wide range of different cuts and colors, where traditional Muslim clothes mixed and blurred together with elegant ball gowns. Boys and girls had however broken with traditional customs and were entertaining each other in a very intimate manner [djelovati vrlo intimno].”83

A unique moment for displaying new standards of Muslim physical femininity within the party ritual, and which deserves special attention, was a practice that spread in Muslim cultural associations, and in Yugoslav society more in general, during the interwar period: the female beauty contest. The story of this practice has been widely studied in the United States, where it is commonly accepted to have been established in the mid-nineteenth century.84 It spread in particular during the 1920s to Europe, and also beyond to Turkey and Japan.85 This practice, almost entirely conceived by men, has been severely criticized by second wave feminism as a tool for objectifying women—and this criticism is certainly true. However, as stressed by Hol-

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84 For its beginnings in the United States, and on the social context in which it developed, see among others Lois W. Banner, American Beauty: A Social History. Through Two Centuries of the American Idea, Ideal, and Image of the Beautiful Woman (New York: Knopf, 1983).

land Shissler, especially in societies structured along lines of sexual segregation, the beauty contest can also be an instrument for subverting existing gender roles: “in a society where women historically had been segregated from men not of their immediate family and carefully preserved from the gaze of outsiders, where family honor was understood to reside in the family’s women, and where ‘fallen’ women were sometimes killed to regain that lost honor, the ability to show one’s physical self in a public forum without fear of harm or dishonor was deeply radical.” Thus, in the case of Bosnian Muslim women, beauty contests can also be read as part of a radical repositioning of women in society.

The first reference to a beauty contest in the press dates back to 1920 in Sarajevo, when a Gajret party in the Officers Club held its first beauty contest for women. Information about this event is extremely fragmentary; we only know that a beauty queen was elected at a time when—as we have already seen—there was still a marked sexual segregation of the festive space, with the men sitting in the stalls and the women on the balcony. Incidentally, the golden age of beauty contests in Muslim associations was certainly the 1930s. Changes in the international arena probably affected the normalization of this kind of practice; since 1929 the Republic of Turkey had also started to have its own Miss Turkey competition. In 1932, a young Turkish woman, Keriman Halis Ece (1913–2012), after having won the Miss Turkey title, was also crowned Miss Universe 1932 in Spa, Belgium and thus became probably the first Muslim Miss Universe. Perhaps also for this reason, both Gajret and Narodna Uzdancica added this kind of show to their party programs more and more often. From available sources it is not possible to discern who selected the winner—whether it was the public or members of the central branch, whether they were men or also women, etc.—or how the winner was selected to be the next beauty queen—by cheering or through another means of voting. It is likely that, in addition to the visibility that this kind of event could assure for the participants and the winner, prizes were used as an incentive to join the contest—in Mostar in 1929, for example, the winner received a watch.

Information concerning the Muslim participants of these beauty contests is extremely limited. We know that they came from “good families,” that were usually educated, sometimes working as teachers. *Gajret* press reports sporadically revealed that other traits, such as a talent for art, singing and music, as well as commitment to the association, increased a woman’s chances of winning these contests.\(^{89}\) According to the progressive intellectual Mulalić, who dedicated a few pages of his 1936 book to this phenomenon, the winners of the associational beauty contest were considered to be quintessentially progressive women: beautiful, unveiled, educated, socially active. In illustration of these reflections, the author assembled a collage of a series of pictures taken by the *Gajret* journal, accompanied with his own caption: “Miss *Gajret*, Modern Muslim Women” (*Moderne muslimanke*).\(^{90}\) The pictures collected on this page are extremely interesting; head shots of young women, some of whom gaze into the camera front-on, while others are in three-quarter profile. Their clothes vary significantly, from the more soberly covered Miss Tuzla in a dark cape entirely covering her body (top right), to the more fancy flapper-like women such as Miss Mostar and Stolac, with bare shoulders, lipstick and bobbed hair (to the left of the picture). Miss Bijeljina, in the very middle of the composition, adopts a pose somewhat reminiscent of the silent movies. Despite their differences, all of these titleholders seem to have adopted the Western standards of female beauty of that time. Even without words, they embody modernity just by existing and deciding to be exposed to anyone’s gaze. In doing this, beauty contests also produced an ideal of Muslim femininity that made all religious markers invisible. If we take the pictures from Mulalić’s collage and compare them to those published in the fashion journals of the interwar years, one thing is particularly striking; it is impossible to know who is Muslim and who is not. Only the women’s names—Zahida, Ifeta, Šefika, etc.—testify to their Muslim identity, an identity that is privatized, made invisible. The veil, just like every other marker of Islam, is finally removed (see figure 34).

It is not possible say anything about how these women perceived their role as beauty queen; if they faced resistance in their families, if taking part in this practice added to or detracted from their social position, and potentially in the marriage market. What on the contrary is fairly clear in this

\(^{89}\) “Svečana gajretova zabava u Mostaru,” 107.

\(^{90}\) Mulalić, *Orijent na zapadu*, 258.
story, is the goal of the associations that organized these events. Whereas in other contexts, in particular in the United States where beauty contests originated, the practice was first invented for economic reasons (to advertise garments, to promote tourism, etc.), the same cannot be said of Bosnian Muslim cultural associations. Here beauty contests were, as in the Turkish case, “intended for effecting a social revolution at home, and for projecting a revolution to audiences abroad”;91 among the Muslim population, beauty

contests were a way to redefine the concepts of respectability and honor that traditionally were linked to the segregation and invisibility of the female body. Electing Muslim beauty queens and broadcasting their image was a way to affirm that being an honorable woman was compatible with being visible in society—in other words, it was a way to reconfigure the notion of respectability. At the same time, beauty contests were also a way to show to non-Muslims, both in Bosnia and elsewhere in Yugoslavia, that the Muslim component of the population was no less modern than the rest of the population, and that they were capable of contributing to the creation of an urban Yugoslav society.

**One-Stepping to Desegregation**

All of the prominent moments of the associational party described until this point, mostly performed on more or less improvised stages, represented a radical subversion of Muslim urban society’s existing gender norms. However, what can we say of the general public, of the activists and sympathizers that, on the other side of the stage, attended the party as simple guests? According to existing sources, it seems possible to state that they were also important agents of transformation in the domain of gender relations. Before, during and after the political addresses, the raffle, buffet and exhibitions, people chatted, socialized, smiled, and danced—in other words, men and women enacted a desegregation of the festive space.

This process occurred gradually, with different timings, in particular differing according to where a place lay on the town-city divide. If we begin this analysis in post-war Sarajevo, we can see that, though Muslim women were present at the associational parties, it does not follow from there that these parties were authentically mixed. As revealed, for example, in a 1920 report on a *Gajret* party in Sarajevo, activists maintained the principle of sexual segregation within the festive space. Taking advantage of the layout of the fancy Officers Club, the activists put male participants in the stalls, that is the majority of the hall; a specific part of the room, the balcony over the main entrance, was “reserved only for women.” This formula seems to have enjoyed a certain success; two years later, the activists resorted to the

same strategy and further developed the sexually segregated organization of the Officers Club. As written by an anonymous activist in the press, “near the balcony three completely separate rooms have been prepared for our women; they will be used for the organization of a separate buffet for our ladies and as a place for conversation.”93 The imperative of having women participate in the party was thus reconciled with a respect for norms of sexual segregation. Even in the most progressive towns of the province, after the war Muslim women and men shared the same space; they could see each other, but they could not directly approach each other.

However, precisely at a moment in which it seemed to be fixed, this rule began to be challenged by women themselves. In 1921, an anonymous commentator stated in the press about the Gajret party in Sarajevo, that “it is our pleasure to remark that this party was popular especially among Muslim women [Muslimanski ženski svijet], who completely filled all the places in the balcony.” With even greater pleasure, the author went on to add: “We also had the opportunity to see several elegant Muslim ladies [dame] descend into the stalls among the public, without provoking any scandal or disappointment.”94 According to this testimony, it seems that not only did some Muslim women seem to decide to go down and mix with their male counterparts, but furthermore, the other participants did not appear to find any difficulty in accepting this new behavior, suggesting that rules of sexual segregation were weakening among the urban middle class in Sarajevo.

For years afterward, the extraordinary success of Gajret’s party in Sarajevo seems to have provided an additional reason for challenging sexual segregation in the festive space. As the associational press meticulously reported in 1925, “the balcony of the Officers’ Club was rapidly filled by [female] guests; therefore, Muslim women too had to look for places in the stalls.”95 By the mid-1920s, thanks to both women’s individual initiatives and organizational constraints, in Sarajevo the gender borders of the festive space were gradually beginning to fade away.

If we look at the cities of Sarajevo, Mostar and Banja Luka in particular, we can see that the enforcement of sexual segregation at parties was al-

ready falling away in the late 1920s, a moment marked by festive mixing. In 1928, at a series of parties and festivities celebrating Gajret’s 25-year anniversary, the process seems to have arrived at completion. In the 1930s, the descriptions of parties are more and more audacious, where “young men and women... engaged in lot of intimacy”; that is, chatting, dancing, and seducing each other. Of course, this chronology can be applied to the other major towns of Bosnia. The reports concerning the smaller and more isolated towns of the country offer a sensibly different picture, with activists even in the 1930s still having to cope with local expectations in terms of sexual segregation. For instance, in 1928 Gajret’s local branch in Ključ organized a two-day-long zabava: “The first party was held on March 24, the first day of Ramadan, while the entire program was repeated on March 25 for the female population.” In the mid-1930s, Narodna Uzdanica’s activists from Gračanica and Cazin adopted the same strategy, splitting their party across two days, in order to respect norms of sexual segregation. If some activists played creatively with timing, others played with space. In the early 1920s Gajret activists from Livno, for example, chose to do so with the different floors of the same building, an elementary school—the ground floor was reserved for men, and the first floor for women, creating a simultaneous but separated party. Despite these different temporalities, the festive space seems to have become increasingly desegregated throughout the towns of Bosnia, especially thanks to the growing popularity of a social practice that had until the 1910s been relatively unpopular for the Muslim population: social dances. The interwar decades are a period in which even the Muslim population caught a veritable dancing fever, and showed a strong predisposition for consuming different kinds of music, both from local tradition and from a transnational landscape of leisure. Whenever possible, the balls were assigned to amateur, associational or (rarely) professional orchestras; whenever this was difficult to organize, such as in the smallest associational branches, a borrowed gramophone substituted the real musicians and had people dancing for hours.

97 “Gajretova zabava u Ključu,” Gajret, no. 9 (1928): 141.
Requiring physical, and often openly sensual contact between a man and a woman in public, social dances represented *par excellence* an attack on the very core of segregation norms. Despite this, balls spread and became a regular fixture in Muslim urban life, even in the smallest towns. The musical programs organized by the Muslim cultural associations, which represented the most widespread opportunity for Muslims of both sexes to dance in interwar Yugoslavia, seem to have responded to a double necessity. It allowed the growing Muslim urban middle class to dance the most modern and popular dances that were fashionable in Belgrade and Zagreb, and in Western cities more in general, without abandoning local musical genres that still enjoyed widespread popularity among the local population. A musical program planned for a *Narodna Uzdanica* annual party in Sarajevo in 1930 is a good example of the musical variety that the Muslim cultural associations put on offer for its members and sympathizers. According to this program, the orchestra was requested to perform respectively the waltz, the *kolo*, the tango, the one-step, then another *kolo*, the waltz, the foxtrot, the tango, followed by yet another *kolo*, as well as the association’s anthem and a military march. This musical program, like other similar musical programs at associational parties, was extremely varied. First of all, this testifies to the enduring favor that the *kolo*—a folk dance common throughout the Yugoslav space and performed by a group of people arranged in a circle, with the soloists in the center—still enjoyed among the Muslim population. Folk dance was alternated with a very different musical genre, which entered the Bosnian space after 1878 and was closely associated with the Habsburg *belle époque*, and with its sophisticated middle class: the waltz. With its ordered appearance, this ballroom dance required physical, though codified, contact between the men and women, privileging harmony and grace in the movement of both partners. Similarly, the military march was also a musical genre already present during the pre-war period.

All of these genres that had seen their moment of glory before the war were mingled with contemporary musical genres, ones that had become extremely popular in interwar Yugoslavia, in particular in Belgrade and Zagreb. As has been highlighted by recent research, Yugoslavia was well connected to the “the landscape of foreign entertainment”; that is, to influ-

100 HAS, NU14, 5, 67 GONU to the commander of the military division in Sarajevo (February 28, 1930).
ences that arrived in the main cities from beyond state borders, and that connected them with other European cities. In a few rare but important cases, world-famous stars came directly to Yugoslavia. This was the case in 1929, when Josephine Baker, the American-born French singer and dancer, performed throughout that year in Belgrade. This event, widely covered by the Yugoslav press, meant that the inhabitants of Belgrade, and at least to a certain extent those who read the numerous press reports on this event, could familiarize themselves somewhat with Baker’s style of Charleston, *danse sauvage*, or banana dance.\(^{102}\) Beside these means, cheaply-printed sheet music enabled Bosnian musicians to rapidly learn to play the most recent dances, and thus allowed participants at these parties “to dance in step with their European contemporaries.”\(^{103}\) In order to satisfy these expectations, Muslim cultural associations thus ensured that musical genres such as the tango, the one-step and the foxtrot were played at their parties. These dance genres broke the ordered movement of the waltz and its extremely codified interactions between partners, and introduced body movements that were perceived to be disordered and openly sensual. Moreover, this second group of dances demanded more physical contact between partners, rather than simply holding hands. Associational parties, at which social dancing went on *do zora*, “until dawn,” became thus a privileged opportunity for transgression, breaking taboos on what were considered to be appropriate forms of socialization.

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The festive events analyzed in this chapter, as standardized activities performed at specific times and places, can tell us a great deal about the politically significant aspects of Muslim urban society and its transformations in the interwar years. Combining words and actions, festive events have been interpreted as collective performances of existing class, national, gender and religious hierarchies, and as tools for establishing, or reinforcing, collective loyalties. The *zabave* in particular, the modern festive event addressed at length in this chapter, was an arena in which different actors—e.g., its organizers, participants, and those who were excluded—could as-

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sert their conflicting interests and put their strategies into practice. Crucial to financing an association’s various activities, parties were a domain considered both practical and non-political, and for this reason well-adapted to women.

A closer look at associational parties shows us that the exposed female body was considered to be the principal marker of civilizational advancement. The invention of the New Muslim Woman was not only a reaction against the Orientalist discourse that depicted Muslims as unfit to survive in the post-Ottoman era. Through their consumption of “modern” and “European” material goods, these “Modern Muslim women” also reinforced and made visible the class boundaries of a rising urban middle class in search of political legitimacy and integration into the broader Yugoslav bourgeoisie, while also distinguishing themselves from both the majority of the Bosnian rural masses, perceived as deeply backward, and the urban poor. The “invisibilization” of confessional markers on women’s bodies served Gajret’s broader strategy of adapting to post-Ottoman circumstances: the Muslim minority could ensure its “survival” through rapid integration into the Serbian/Yugoslav national body, which required it to reduce the visibility of religion in the public space.

The domestication of a modern, European femininity among Bosnian Muslims was also troubling for Gajret’s (male) leadership. A pro-emancipation discourse was always accompanied by a stigmatization of the “wrong” kind of emancipation, revealing the anxieties connected to the transformation of the role of women: an improperly emancipated woman tempted men and renounced motherhood and self-sacrifice. Through the zabava ritual, the cultural associations traced their own path to a proper emancipation, one that was conducted by the “enlightened” (male) members of Muslim society, but that confined Muslim women far from decision-making processes. This paternalist emancipation, which conceived of Muslim women as objects of liberation rather than as subjects of self-liberation, is also indirectly visible in the absence of contact with suffragist associations. True emancipation did not include access to politics for women, and neither did it challenge the ideology of the separate spheres for men and women.

Nevertheless, it would be reductive to claim that festive events were simply a way to reinforce the inferior position of Muslim women. Preparing, experiencing and assisting in these parties meant a gradual but constant
conquest of the public space and, with the progressive erosion of sexual seg-
regation, an increase in female mobility in the festive/urban space. The do-
mestication of a modern festive culture meant that women became familiar
with new practices of self-expression, such as acting, dancing, singing, ex-
changing, and conquering the night (“till dawn”) outside the familial space,
which had previously been forbidden to women.