

# “You Uncultured Northerners Don’t Know What Rhythms Are”

The Ethnomusicologist Birthe Trærup’s Fieldwork in  
Yugoslavia, 1954–1976

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## *Abstract*

This article is a presentation of the ethnomusicologist Birthe Trærup (1930–2022) who was a pioneering fieldworker and disseminator of Eastern European folk music in the 1950s. She concentrated her fieldwork among Albanians in Kosovo in the period 1959–1976, but also visited other countries and other areas of the former Yugoslavia. Despite being a pioneer, she has not received the attention she deserves. The Danish Folklore Archive at the Royal Danish Library in Copenhagen contains a wide range of material donated and bequeathed by Trærup.

Keywords: female fieldworker, pioneer, Kosovo-Albanians

This article gives an overall presentation of the ethnomusicologist Birthe Trærup (1939–2022) and her fieldwork during the period 1959–1976 in the former Yugoslavia, primarily in Kosovo. It is mainly based on my survey and registration of the written and visual part of Trærup’s extensive material from fieldwork, research, and (in part) dissemination, submitted to the Danish Folklore Archive at the Royal Danish Library (DFS 2016/001; DFS 2018/005; DFS bnr. 19874–884).

In her day Birthe Trærup was a pioneer in Denmark and the Nordic countries when it came to doing ethnomusicological fieldwork in Eastern Europe and also through her wide-ranging dissemination of her knowledge of the subject. Besides teaching and publishing books, articles, and videos, she produced 122 thematic broadcasts for Danmarks Radio from the 1950s to the 1980s (Sørensen 2004:4–5). See the lists up to 2004 of Trærup’s books, articles, encyclopaedia articles, reviews, translations, CD and video booklets in connection with Inge Bruland’s interview with Birthe Trærup (Bruland 2004:22–29).

She was prominent on other fronts as well. In 1972 Trærup was the first woman to be employed as a lecturer at the Department of Musicology,

University of Copenhagen, by virtue of her research. She was thus also the first person in the department to teach the subject of ethnomusicology (Bruland 2004:8). She helped with the international dissemination of ethnomusicology, working closely for several years with her colleague, the ethnomusicologist and composer Poul Rovsing Olsen (PRO) of the Danish Folklore Archive. Together they created the basis for a research environment for the study of music that could not be embraced by a Western European understanding of music. This research environment developed into a natural part of the musicological research field (Kirkegaard & Sørensen 2022). From 1981 to 1986 she was also the first chairman – and the first chairwoman – of the Danish National Committee under the International Council for Traditional Music (Torp 2022).

Despite all this, she has never received the professional attention she deserves, as Annemette Kirkegaard, lecturer at the University of Copenhagen, and emeritus Søren Møller Sørensen write in their obituary of Trærup (Kirkegaard & Sørensen 2022). On the other hand, she has left behind material from her fieldwork for future research, which will make it possible to examine and analyse, from new angles and with a new focus, her activities as a fieldworker, researcher, and disseminator; her written records and sound recordings; the possible impact of her fieldwork on those she recorded; and its possible significance for the local population in Kosovo today. There are diary entries, letters, and photos/slides that could serve as a basis for an ethnological study of what fieldworkers do during their breaks and their “everyday life” when they are in the field, such as repairing an old wooden bridge so that it could support the field expedition’s van, or when a fieldworker bursts into convulsive laughter at the donkey bray that they are recording, and on another occasion does a brilliant performance with a hula hoop on one leg (DFS bnr. 19877, II:e and 19877, I:22).

### “The People Who Play”

Trærup’s primary ethnomusicological fieldwork was conducted with the Albanian population of central Kosovo, with the Albanian Muslim Gorani people in the mountains south of Prizren, and among the area’s professional Roma musicians. Among the Albanians in central Kosovo, she was particularly interested in their epic and lyrical songs and in the long-necked lutes. Among the Gorani she documented several hundred lyrical songs and especially studied the wedding customs of the people. She was interested in the instruments, the music, the songs, the tunes, the singing styles, and the people behind them. The article “Wedding Musicians in Prizrenka Gora, Jugoslavia” clearly reflects her broad approach in her fieldwork. The article is divided into sections on instruments, repertoire (tunes, dances, songs), and other activities that could take place at a wedding, such as horse



Figure 1. Birthe Trærup between musicians at a bar in Vraniste, Kosovo, 17 August 1959. The musician “Ramce” (left) has said that the most talented musicians have to play when some difficult dance is to be performed; but when the girls were dancing, he thought nothing of going out to have a pee. Photographer: unknown. (Dansk Folkemindesamling, DFS bnr. 19877:23; DFS 2016/001, VI A, volume I:16; Prizren, 25.6.75)

racing, wrestling, and more recently football matches. But it was especially “the people who play” she was interested in. The article therefore continues with sections describing who the musicians were; how they organized themselves; the function of each member of the band; informal learning; the musicians’ performing season; economic circumstances, living conditions, and dress; the disadvantages of being a musician; the tale of Jakup’s shawm; a little about Jakup’s famous uncle; and finally an extract from a conversation with a musician about this famous uncle (Trærup 1977; see also Trærup 2005 (1996–97) about her fieldwork: <http://www.scanderbeg.dk/Birthe-Traerup-Feltforskning.htm>). She returned to some of the musicians repeatedly, and some became her friends (Trærup 1962:10).

### From Classical Music to Ex-Yugoslav Folk Music

Inge Bruland’s interview from 2004 reveals that Birthe Trærup, very early in her life, was interested in both language and music, not least classical, but also with some knowledge of traditional Danish instrumental folk music. Her parents were musical (having previously played the piano), and her older brother (Ejner Trærup) became a composer and organist, while her grandfather (“Spil Jens Peter” Larsen) and his father before him had been

traditional fiddlers from Vendsyssel. She listened to classical music daily at home from childhood, and at high school she was active in choirs and in the school orchestra, where she played the violin. At the age of 15 she learned Esperanto and later Serbo-Croat and other languages. She was unsure whether to study music or languages, but she chose music and in 1959 gained her bachelor's degree (cand.mag.) with Serbo-Croatian as a minor subject (Bruland 2004:9–11). Her good ear for language undoubtedly enabled her to get into conversation with people wherever she went, establishing contacts and making friendships.

Her first acquaintance with Eastern European folk music came during her studies, when she was presented with a recording of “a very strange, two-part parallel song in untempered intervals from Istria [Kosovo]”. Shortly afterwards, in 1952, she was in Konstanz, Germany, at a conference where she saw a “Yugoslav documentary with folk dance and music, played on flutes and bagpipes, among other things”. In 1953, she attended the World Congress of Esperanto in Zagreb, where she witnessed a state ensemble of folk music (Bruland 2004:12–13). These musical experiences laid the first foundation for her lifelong preoccupation with Eastern European folk music – reinforced by a one-year Yugoslav exchange scholarship to Serbia and Croatia from autumn 1954 to spring 1955 (Trærup 1962:5; Bruland 2004:13 [wrongly dated 1953–54 by Bruland]).

Before starting at the Academy of Music and the Institute of Musicology in Belgrade in the autumn of 1954, and subsequently at the Institute of Folk Art in Zagreb, she spent a few weeks on her own in Zagreb. During ten days she “got to know a lot of wonderful people” and thus established contacts with whom she could spend the night when travelling. She had been to the opera five times, seen two films, and attended folk dancing once, she had visited museums, art collections, and an international market, she had made excursions to forests and villages in the surrounding area, and so on. In addition, she had given lectures in the Esperanto Club about Danish folk songs, singing five examples. The event was reported in a newspaper and led to a translation of the lecture into Croatian to be read on the radio, and once again Trærup sang the five songs. She wrote about this – and much more – on 10 September 1954, in a letter to her parents and her brother (DFS 2016/001, I B, 10.9.54). After one attempt at folk dancing, she had evidently decided to do more dancing – which apparently no one, perhaps not even herself, had thought would happen. Again she wrote home:

Prepare yourselves for a shock! I've started learning folk dance! Twice a week I hop and jump in a “kolo” [a chain dance]. It is glorious but strenuous, especially “drmes”, which requires shaking constantly, rhythmic, lovely... After two hours of “kolo” I am soaked in sweat. Next time I'll wear something light. [...]. (2016/001, A I, 23.10.54:5/55).

Both in Belgrade and in Zagreb she was introduced to the transcription of melody recordings with local singers. In her letters home to Denmark she seems overwhelmed by how exciting it was, most of all the Croatian singing from Istria and the island of Krk: “As for me, I am so completely absorbed in my work. It’s *insanely* exciting.” She was busy every day, trying to transcribe steel tape recordings from Krk. She wrote in a letter on 7 February 1955 to her parents and brother that she had previously read articles in which “scholars” discussed whether the people on the island sang in “parallel seconds, minor thirds, diminished thirds, or in untempered minor thirds”. The latter is assumed, in Trærup’s words, “to be the least wrong”. She adds that they always sing duets in “‘thirds’ or ‘sixths’, and it sounds strident enough to chase ten Danish professors far away” (DFS 2016/001, I A, 7.2.55:103; Trærup 1962:5–6). But not Birthe Trærup.

Besides taking singing and piano lessons, during the two terms she had been taking lessons in Serbian, song literature, and folklore, she had practised singing three-quarter notes, participated in collecting/fieldwork, learned local folk dances, transcribed songs that were difficult/impossible to attach to the staff lines, and among many other things she had even found a singer-informant. When she thought she had grasped the rhythm, “her” singer shook his head and said, “You uncultured northerners don’t know what rhythms are...” (DFS 2016/001, I A, 5.11.54:65).

In the summer of 1955, when her one year of study was over, she went to Sarajevo, where she was introduced through the National Museum to Bosnian two-part singing and to the orientally influenced solo singing. During the same period she attended Yugoslavia’s Second Folklorist Congress in the Bjelasnica Mountains. From there she went to Skopje to spend a few months, participating as a student in a collecting and research trip with the Folklore Institute to an area near the Bulgarian border (Trærup 1962:6).

## Breakthrough as an Ethnomusicologist, 1959–1961

In 1959, the same year that Trærup graduated from university, she was asked to take part in a Scandinavian-German ethnomusicological field expedition to Kosovo and Macedonia and a little way into Greece. The expedition lasted for two and a half months from August to October. Besides Birthe Trærup, the expedition consisted of Ernst Emsheimer, director of the Stockholm Music Museum, and Felix Hoerburger, research associate at the Institut für Musikforschung in Regensburg. Emsheimer’s wife came along on the sidelines. The aim was to study musical life among Albanians outside Albania, in the neighbouring areas of Yugoslavia and Greece. Among other things, they documented a wedding in Vraniste over three days. On the Sunday evening on the second day of the wedding, however, Trærup had



Figure 2. A man mesmerizes the men, women, and children in a room with his singing. Krani, Kosovo, 7 September 1959. Photographer: probably Birthe Trærup. (Dansk Folkemindesamling, DFS bnr. 19877, I:47, picture 40).

had enough of fieldwork and wrote in her diary: “Late in the evening Felix and I went down to watch the dancing in front of the bridegroom’s house, although we were very tired. We had been filming all day and taking photographs and recording music, but now I wanted to join in properly. While Felix noted some male dances, I danced the kolo with the women in the bridegroom’s yard” (DFS 2016/001, II B, 16.8.59:38–39).

After the Scandinavian-German field expedition she remained in Yugoslavia for two years with a scholarship from the Yugoslav state. This gave her the chance to go on working with musical life among the two Albanian communities in Kosovo from 1959 to 1961. In her field diaries she discusses in various ways that she feels at home, that she belongs in Yugoslavia, and in February 1960 she expresses her great love for Zagreb, where she will stay for three weeks, close to the Folklore Institute, the theatre, and the Esperanto club. Things could not be any better:

I am in love with Zagreb. Several different factors contribute to this love, which I have also felt in the past when staying in Zagreb and which has always made me stay longer than intended. This time I could not extend the stay due to my strict work schedule. I have to spend the whole of March in Pristina, April in Vrnjacka Banja, May at the seaside, etc. But it will be three happy weeks in Zagreb. Maja found me a lovely room right in the centre (with Mrs Cipika, Amruseva 7), just two minutes from Trg Republike, ten minutes from the Institute [of Folk Art] or the theatre, five steps to the Esperanto club (Amruseva 5). In this way, I am really satisfied with the



Figure 3. Felix Hoerburger shows his skill with the hula hoop during a break on the way to fieldwork in Kosovo, 1959. Photographer: unknown. (Dansk Folkemindesamling, DFS bnr. 19778, picture 16; DFS 2016/001, XIX B:32 [in blue ink]).

room, which actually became my centre, where I could rest and change clothes in between my many activities. And the room was nicely furnished, which is rare in Yugoslavia. It cost 7,000 dinars without heating, and since I didn’t feel cold I found no reason to light the fire.

Every morning I ate yoghurt and kifle or graham rolls in a milk bar. I got to the Institute at 8:30. (DFS 2016/001, III A:22 [February] 1960, see also III B:2).

The following month, we get a small concrete example of what the interaction between fieldworker(s) and singer(s) can result in. On March 11, Trærup had made recordings with two singers, one of them being Tahir Drenica. There was also a fourth person present: “The last and longest song Tahir improvised about all four of us and told the whole story of my journey” (DFS 2016/001, III A, 11.3.60:28).

She continued her fieldwork in varying conditions until 1976: after 1959–1961 she was back doing fieldwork in 1963, 1964, 1970, 1971, 1972, 1975, and 1976. She visited Yugoslavia in a different capacity in 1965 and 1988, when she also met some of the musicians again. In 1967 she arranged a concert tour in Denmark with three musicians from Kosovo, and likewise in 1973 with Tahir Drenica, one of the musicians with whom she seems to have had a long-standing friendship (DFS 2016/001, XVII B).

## Birthe Trærup's Material in the Danish Folklore Archive

Birthe Trærup's diverse material in the Danish Folklore Collection consist of written material, pictures, sound recordings, and a few edited videos. There are also books and articles that will not be mentioned here, there may be additional relevant material, as well.

*Written material and images* can be found in the Royal Danish Library's search system, [www.soeg.kb.dk](http://www.soeg.kb.dk). The material is only for use in the research reading room in the Black Diamond, the Royal Danish Library, Copenhagen.

To listen to *sound recordings*, contact the Danish Folklore Archive through the Royal Danish Library, [www.kb.dk](http://www.kb.dk): "Ask the library". The same applies to *videos*.

*Written material*: DFS 2016/001, "Birthe Trærup's collection concerning musical life in the former Yugoslavia, especially among two Albanian population groups in Kosovo". Distributed in eight archive boxes:

- Travel letters to her parents and brother – handwritten and fair-copied.
- Letters. Postcards.
- Field diaries– handwritten and partly fair-copied. Miscellaneous notes.
- Summaries of recording situations.
- Survey of informants.
- The informants' repertoires of song and music.
- Tune transcriptions.
- Transcriptions of lyrics.
- Transcriptions of interviews.
- Notes (registers) of photographs and slides.
- Registers of audio and video recordings.
- Conference notes.
- Thematically classified field material (e.g. on wedding customs).
- Tour schedule etc. for Kosovo musicians' tour in Denmark.
- Scripts of radio talks and other lectures.
- Articles.
- Overview of lectures at the University of Copenhagen.
- Biographical and family-related information on Trærup – including data on the fiddler "Spil Jens Peter" (Larsen), Birthe Trærup's grandfather.

*Written material*: DFS 2018/005, "Ethnomusicological material especially in Serbo-Croat from Birthe Trærup concerning Albanians in Kosovo". Donated by Minna Skafte Jensen. Concerns Birthe Trærup's recordings among Albanians in Kosovo. Three archive boxes:



- Notes in Serbo-Croat on expeditions etc. 1959–76.
- Film register in Serbo-Croat, “Goranska Svadba” 1966.
- Reviews in Danish and Serbo-Croatian of a concert tour in 1967 in Denmark with three musicians from Kosovo.
- Transcript in Serbo-Croat of an interview with two musicians from Kosovo in 1970 and list of singers.
- Script for the video “Albanian singers in Kosovo” and seven printed pages of tune transcriptions.

*Written material:* The digitized sound registers are collected under the title: “Danish Folklore Archive’s sound archive. Registers of sound recordings from the Balkan Peninsula. Birthe Trærup”.

*The image material* is divided into 11 picture items, DFS bnr. 19874–884, with the series title “Birthe Trærup’s ethnomusicological picture collection especially from Kosovo in the former Yugoslavia”. This includes photo albums, loose pictures, contact sheets, and slides with pictures of people and places from her study periods, excursions, visits, and fieldwork in Yugoslavia and adjacent countries; also including material by Birthe Trærup and other fieldworkers and colleagues – and of the fieldworkers’ breaks/“everyday life”.

*Audio recordings.* About 200 tape recordings from 1954–78 which have been digitized.

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*Image Archive:*

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