

## THE BALUCHI BENJU, A NEW TRADITIONAL INSTRUMENT

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### FOREWORD

In the years 1920 a little dulcimer fitted with a keyboard appeared in Karachi, brought from Japan by sailors. This musical toy became an essential specific Baluchi instrument after improvements, modifications, and the development of a virtuoso technique. This paper<sup>1</sup> describes the instrument, its technical aspects, its limits and advantages, as well as the position it occupies in Baluchi traditional and modern music.

It is based on field research, and in the absence of documentation on the testimony of a top musician who, on the track of his father, greatly contributed to the improvement of this instrument.

### MADE IN JAPAN

Baluchi professional music ensembles often have an instrument which has a strange name fitting perfectly with its “exotic” looks. The *benju* (also *banjo*, *binju* – see Figure Hors Texte<sup>2</sup> 1). Obviously, this dulcimer with a “typewriter” keyboard was not designed by Baluchi instrument makers. However it is an integral part of the Baluchi instrumentarium, and not as a simple addition. It is a predominant

instrument among others such as the *sorud* fiddle<sup>3</sup> (also *soruz* or *qeychak*, and holds the highest rank), the *tanburag* (a lute which provides the indispensable rhythmic background for almost all baluchi genres), the *doneli*, a double recorder (essential, but rare and never played in groups), the *doholak* (a double-headed drum accompanying light music with a heavy sound), the *rabab* lute (only in the north-western area). The synthesizer and electric organs are also played but only for traditional music, but never for “Baluchi pop”, although this genre also includes Baluchi instruments, as identity symbols.

Where does this instrument come from? The Baluchis claim that it was introduced by Japanese sailors about 70 years ago. Before that time, a small version of this instrument, also called *benju* or *bolbol-tarang*, spread into India. It was just a musical toy played by Japanese sailors sailing along the maritime Silk Road. This type of small dulcimer was made in Nagoya between 1911 and 1925 and was called *taishōgoto* (*taisho koto*) or *nagoya harp*<sup>4</sup>. It was also adopted in East Africa, often known as *taishokoto*. When it reached the Makran coast, it became a real professional traditional musical instrument. Since the 1960s, the Baluchi *benju* is no longer a simple musical toy. It has become a predominant instrument having a loud and bright sound. Its length reaches about 90 to 100 cm; its keyboard has 29 to 32 round keys playing a chromatic scale spanning two octaves and a third (from D to F).

### A GRADUAL TRANSFORMATION ACCORDING TO ABDULRAHMAN’S NARRATIVE

The metamorphosis, from the humble cross-breeding of a typewriter with a dulcimer is the brain-child of Juma Surizehi. I met him in the late seventies, in Baluchistan. His son, Abdulrahman<sup>5</sup> told me the

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<sup>1</sup> Lifted from a communication delivered in Taiwan, September 2003. It is revised and emended for NEMO.

<sup>2</sup> From this point on “FHT”.

<sup>3</sup> See FHT 2.

<sup>4</sup> Since the first version of this paper, we have acquired new data about the Japanese origins of the dulcimer, the *taishōgoto*, see pages [Anon. “Taishōgoto”, 2015; Anon. “What’s a TAISHOKOTO”] (visited on 2-11-2015).

<sup>5</sup> See photos in FHT 5: Abdulrahman Surizehi was born in 1960 in Sarāvan, lived in Karachi during his childhood, then came back to Sarāvan where I met him (with his father) the first time in 1978. After a few years he left for Karachi, then settled in Norway in 1987. Wilfried Ulrich, who is a specialist in this matter, related his

story of this instrument which, in spite of the importance he made about his father's work, sounded credible to me, at least for one detail: not only Juma was a good *benju* maker and a very fine performer, but his four sons were also *benju* players, two of them also makers. Later on, I had more reasons to believe in the myth about the design of the *benju*. One story says that the best *benju*(s) found in Baluchistan were made by members of Juma's family.

Mohammad-Rezâ Darvishi<sup>6</sup> notes that the *benju* was originally made in Sarāvān, Iran, by Pakistani Balutchis. After they left, *benju*(s) were only made in Iran. This information was published in 2001 although the fact was known beforehand, and fits in with Juma Surizehi's return with his sons, to Karachi, where they lived before settling in Sarāvān. It is nevertheless possible that during the 2000s, other craftsmen took over *benju* making in Iranian Baluchistan.

Let's go back to the time when Japanese or other foreign sailors introduced this instrument. Juma Surizehi belonged to the *ostā* craftsmen social class which was considered by tribesmen as a low class, although they claimed with pride that the Baluchi culture stemmed from them, which is certainly true for music and instruments. Juma learned to play with a certain Nurbaksh, about whom we know nothing. Nurbaksh was also probably an *ostā* who did not belong to the dynasties of professional musicians, otherwise he would have played the *sorud*, and not the small *benju*. Discovering this instrument, Nurbaksh may have looked at it with two of his atavistic views: a craftsman's, but also a musician's. He may have said: "let's see how it sounds", and would have quickly learned to play it (a very easy task for a Baluchi *ostā*). Then he must have thought "let's see how it is made",

and dismantled an instrument, and made a copy of it, probably better than the original. He taught Juma to play the *benju*, and later showed him how to build it. He explained to him how to set the frets, by ear, from fourth up to fifth down (A, then D, then G, then C then F etc.). Nobody knows whence he learned the science.<sup>7</sup>

Juma, too, may have thought very often about the concept of this instrument. He had good ideas, but by respect for his teacher, he did not dare to use them. However, he did after Nurbaksh's death. Innovations are permitted, but one should not break the ethical rule which defines the relationship between master and disciple: Juma knew that he would go much further than his master.

He designed the new *benju* and solved many problems using more reliable materials. For instance the frets were changed every six months, but he found out that those made from gramophone needles lasted for years...

## HOW THE BENJU FOUND ITS PLACE IN TRADITIONAL BALUCHI MUSIC

Now twice as large and much louder, the *benju* had to find its place in the baluchi ensemble. Today, we might think nothing of it: there was no competition. There was no melodic lute in baluchi music except (in the north only) some fretted *tanburag* on which the left hand can hardly move to follow the versatility of Baluchi melodies often covering a range of one and half octave. On the *benju* keyboard, with little practice one could play scales and melisma at high velocity. Baluchs, like Iranians, love high pitched, bright sounds: thanks to its six or seven iron strings, even the *tanburag* sounds flat compared to it. Additionally, the *benju* is easy to tune (which is not the case of the *doneli* double recorder, and even the *sorud* with its 11-12 strings) and allows for easy transposition of melodies in different tonalities, which is very useful in group sessions.

The melody is played on the two central strings which are tuned *unisono*. The side strings which are symmetrically disposed to the right and the left are

→ first encounter with the *benju* and its eminent virtuoso, thirty years after: "In 1919 another Taishokoto came to Beluchestan [...]. The people must have thought, 'Hey that's a nice instrument but we need it to be twice as big!' They added two keys and it now has a string length of 81 cm and it's called the *Benju*. The very best *benju* player is Abdulrahman Surizehi, who has lived in Oslo, Norway for 20 years. In September 2008 I met him there [...]" – in [Ulrich], downloaded 14/11/2015.

<sup>6</sup> [Darvishi, 2001, p. 117]. This is the only source about the *benju* yet limited to an accurate organologic description. In his *Musiqi-e Baluchestān*, [Massoudieh, 1985], Mohammad-Taghi Massoudieh did not write one line about this instrument which however appears in several photos in the hands of A. Surizehi.

<sup>7</sup> Despite of the coherence of the resulting scale, when duos are played with the *sorud*, slight dissonances appear. One reason for this is that on the *benju* the trills span is half a tone while on the *sorud* it is smaller.

used as drones. These two sets of lateral strings are one of the principal features which favoured its adoption. One just needs plucking them rhythmically to reproduce the ostinato of a *tanburag*, as shown below. In a way one has two instruments in one.

Was the musical argument enough to convince old traditional masters to adopt this instrument? They may have complained that it did not look Baluch, that it was not as beautiful as their own, too loud, too heavy, not easy to carry, too expensive, hard to find, that it uses a foreign technology out of reach of the *sorud* or *tanburag* makers, that its chromatic tempered scale is trivial, that it can't play vibrato, etc. Many arguments could have been raised against it, but the masters were probably open to innovations<sup>8</sup>. Perhaps they understood that this foreign instrument had now become Baluchi, since after all, it does not come from a neighbouring country and did not really exist as a musical instrument before Osta Juma gave it a new life, like his ancestors who had re-invented the *sarinda* and brought it to the perfection of the *sorud*. During the sixties, Baluchi music propagated in the country through radio, TV, and recordings, mainly thanks to the famous singer Fayz Mohammad Baloch (1901-1982<sup>9</sup>) who included the *benju* in his ensemble. Perhaps they felt that the new needs created by radio broadcasting could be satisfied by a modern looking instrument with no exogenic connotation. On the contrary, its technological advance could have been perceived as very consistent with new conditions of performance: radio, TV, amplifiers, which in any case needed an extended orchestra.

In any case, the adoption of a new instrument, especially in such a narrow Baluchi context, with its three or four instruments must have been supported by powerful motives which were not only musical or aesthetic, but ideological and pragmatic, including the demand for new needs.

Whatever the case, the *benju* never endangered the status of other instruments. It took its own specific

place and function, which evolved with time. Between native and exotic instruments, the *benju* managed to occupy a vacuum in the traditional ensemble and anticipated the appearance of Baluchi pop songs. Though perfectly integrated in light ensembles, its place is still a specific one, a fact which is due to several reasons.

### SPECIFICITY OF THE *BENJU*

First there are technical reasons. The *benju* is a complex instrument which requires sophisticated technology like electric saws, soldering, highly accurate measurements for the setting of fixed frets. It uses ready-made elements hard to find in the bazaar or hard to make such as pegs (as those used in zithers), or such as the tuning hammer, or even the piece of polycarbonate used for the bridge<sup>10</sup>, and oil colours. There is no standard about the wood essence giving the best sound. A. Surizehi, said that he had the best results from some old drift wood he bought in Karachi (probably teak)<sup>11</sup>. It requires steel strings of good quality, better than those of the *sorud* or *tanburag*.

Many strings are needed as they break every 30 minutes if plucked too hard. Compared to it, the *sorud* has all the characteristics of a traditional instrument, highly sophisticated in shape and conception, but simple to carve out of a piece of wood from the desert (*parpuk*, *tecomella undulata*), with a saw, an axe, a gouge, and a file.

All these characteristics define the *benju* as a *modern* instrument which can only be made in modern cities, and as noted by M-R. Darvishi<sup>12</sup> is found only in urban areas. Its cost, as well as its weight and its powerful sound, orientates it towards urban entertainment music performed on the Radio, at weddings, or designed for cassettes sold at bazaars, while the *sorud*, being a nomadic instrument easy to carry and to repair, remained the instrument of wandering musicians accompanying folk songs (*sowt*) of or trance sessions (*guāti-damāli*).

<sup>8</sup> Baluchs are an "open" ethnic group which has integrated several other ethnies; in addition, instrumentists and artisans (*ostā*) belong to a social layer that can be considered as proto-gypsies (nicknamed *Luli*), whose musical versatility is well known.

<sup>9</sup> For more information about this musician, see for example [Anon. « Faiz Mohammad Faizok », 2015].

<sup>10</sup> A. Surizehi tested all types of bridges and found polycarbonate better than any other material.

<sup>11</sup> Darvishi [2001, p.117] mentions the *hadd* and the *babur* (= *parpuk*?), which is used for the *sorud* and *tanburag*.

<sup>12</sup> [*ibid.*].

The electronic amplification of the *benju* represents the last step of its modernization. A. Surizehi says that the amplification must be used only when other instruments (mainly the *sorud*) are amplified. About the unexpected effects of amplification he has an interesting anecdote: one night he played many trance songs in his house with an amplification system. When he woke up the next morning, they told him that in the neighboring houses, all went into trance.

## TUNING AND PLAYING TECHNIQUE

A good reason for the integration of the *benju* in the Baluchi (and Sindi) instrumentarium is that it incorporates a typical and essential feature of the Baluchi music which is the presence of a rhythmic drone produced by the *tanburag* which is mandatory for all vocal and instrumental performance. This aptitude makes of it an almost-autonomous instrument.

On both sides of the melodic double string (4-5), are two symmetrical sets of accompaniment drone strings: 1, 2-3 and 6-7 (the 1<sup>st</sup> string being the closest to the player).

There are different tunings, but in all cases the melodic double string gives a *D*. The most current tuning is:

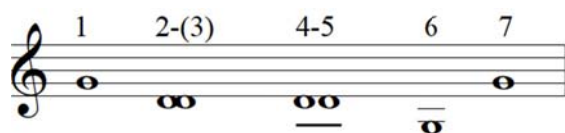


Fig. 1 The most current tuning of the *benju*.

Lateral strings can also be tuned in fifth (*G-C*, *kuk-e shir-bâm*)<sup>13</sup>.

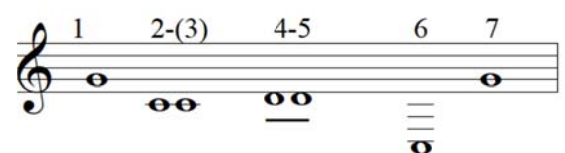


Fig. 2 Tuning of the *benju* in fifths.

The strings are plucked with a plectrum, in a way that makes it possible to play the drone and the notes of the melody at the same time or separately.

By doing this properly, the *benju* reproduces (though not integrally) the rhythmic drone of the *tanburag*.

The most usual *tanburag* rhythmic ostinato is a “quasi 3 beats” (*rāst panjag*) in which the tonic is *G* (like the *sa* for the Indian *raga*-s). It sounds like:



Fig. 3 Usual *Tanburag* rhythmic ostinato for *Benju* music.

The current tuning (*D G*) allows to reproduce easily the ostinato *F<sup>#</sup>-G D*. In the tuning in fifth, the tonic is lower (*D*) and the ostinato *C<sup>#</sup>-D A*.

It should be noted that the rhythmical ostinato drone of the “quasi 3 beats” (*rāst panjag*)<sup>14</sup>, accentuates the second beat and not the first one (see FHT 4).

In the “quasi 7 beats” (*sāsuli*)<sup>15</sup>, the accent is on the second and the fourth beats. This syncopated accentuation reproduces in a much more contrasted way the patterns of the *tanburag*. An ear non-familiar with Baluchi music will certainly be misled by this syncopation and assume that the enhanced second beat is the first one.

## LIMITS AND PARTICULARITIES

The keyboard of the *benju* allows for the left hand to perform all the basic melisma of the *sorud*, with almost the same fast speed, but without any possibility of vibrato, glissando or pitch shift. In ensemble performances, with its almost chromatic fixed scale, the *benju* often blurs the versatile intonations of the *sorud*. This is particularly problematic with some *sorud* players specialized in trance repertory who like lyrical pitch intonations. When played solo, the *benju* is fine but its trills can be made only on the interval of a half tone, which is much grosser and trivial than the subtle trills or vibratos of the *sorud* or flute (*nel*, or *doneli*).

Another problem is the existence of parasite resonance produced by the part of the string situated between the nut and the fret which produces the main note. It generates a “ghost scale” which moves *a contrario* to the main scale: when one plays *C D E*, the

<sup>14</sup> *Rāst panjag* = “even strumming.”

<sup>15</sup> This rhythm name has no musical signification.

<sup>13</sup> See [Darvishi, 2001, p. 113].

phantom resonance will give something like  $A^b F^\# F$ . The only way to avoid this would be to fit the *benju* with dampers of felt in order to neutralize the vibration of the part of the string stretching from the fret to the nut. This would mean to jump to another level of technology which is at present day out of reach of the Baluchs. Yet according to the traditional wisdom, instead of improving the means (that is the instrument), one has to improve the agent (the musician). The clever way to solve the problem is to adapt the left hand technique: if the little finger presses the button while the thumb (or another one) presses the next note, the ghost resonance cannot happen. To my knowledge only one *benju* player does this: Abdulrahman, the most gifted of Juma's four sons, himself also the best *benju* maker.

Abdulrahman Surizehi has lived in Norway since 1987. He still builds and sells his instruments and develops his technique. It is certain that Western instrument making developed his skills. He even made a *benju* with "neutral seconds" in order to perform Iranian or Arabian music, and he succeeded in elevating the artistic level of the *benju*. He has even surprised the Baluchs by performing Indian *raga* with it, and in a more convincing way, the Baluchi *zahirig*, or Baluchi *ragas*. Abdulrahman has lifted the technique of the *benju* up to the highest professional standards, in such a way that it can match with the *sorud* in terms of virtuosity and ability to follow the melisma of the voice.

From its creation until now, the *benju* has succeeded in entering into the traditional ensemble for the performance of songs (*sowt*, *nazink*, etc.) and also for trance sessions with its specific repertoire<sup>16</sup>. It can really bring some interesting brightness to these tunes if it is well played.

However the *benju* has hardly reached the ultimate circle of traditional professional music such as the *shervandi* (epic and lyric singing, accompanied by the fiddle). This is partly due to the fact that this artistic style is not very common in Karachi where the *benju* appeared, and partly to the fact that *shervandi* is much more difficult than any other genres.

<sup>16</sup> It is a vocal and instrumental repertoire of tunes which leaves much room for instrumental variation and improvisation. Even in ritual session it doesn't necessarily involves singing. The *benju* is able to trigger trance states as well as the *sorud*.

In the early 1990's Abdulrahman went to Baluchistan and started performing *shervandi* style on his instrument, including improvisation on many *zahirig* which he learned mainly from master Karimaksh Nuri in Karachi.<sup>17</sup> The guardians of this tradition said that they could not have imagined that it was possible to play the *zahirig* and the *shervandi* tunes on the *benju* and had no choice but to acknowledge this instrument and its young master, as fully representative of the great Baluchi tradition. Thus, in a series of concerts and recordings made in France, the king of the *sorud*, Rasulbaksh Zangeshāhi himself, played with the *benju*, and one third of the CD was devoted to *benju* solo, with *tanburag* accompaniment.<sup>18</sup>

Step by step the *benju* gained recognition thanks to its technical improvement and musical mastery. But apart from A. Surizehi, there were no masters of outstanding level. In Karachi, I recorded many solos from Mobārak Mango-piri, a brilliant and authentic performer too, but who's repertoire is limited to trance tunes and *sowt* (songs). His fingering is agitated and his rhythm is perfect, but his style is quite rough, he does not care about "ghost resonance", and does not make much nuances and trills. However he probably is the best interpreter in the *Sasuli Khorasāni* style (also called *jangali*), which he learned from his father, a good *sorud* player.<sup>19</sup>

Other *benju* players are most often of a lower professional level and can just play sing-song melodies in a simplified manner. The same holds true for Sindi *benju* players (whose instruments sound at a lower pitch).

The fiddle masters all agree that the *benju* is a very easy instrument to play, so that people who are not able to play *sorud* can at least make some

<sup>17</sup> The *zahirig* is a modal melody, a kind of Baluchi equivalent of the Indian *raga*. There are approximately 20 to 25 different *zahirig*, known only by a few professional musicians – see [During, 1997] (Persian translation: "*Zahirig-e baluchi va peydāyesh-e yek musiqi-ye 'kelasik'*", *Mahoor*, No 24, 2004, p. 11-31).

<sup>18</sup> [Various Artists, 1997], more information available at <http://www.discogs.com/Various-Baluchistan-La-Tradition-Instrumentale-Sorud-Benju-Doneli/release/4926101> (visited 14/11/2015). A. Surizehi appears several times on YouTube, as a soloist or along with other masters. See also the double CD with booklet [Abdulrahman Surizehi, 2008 or 2006].

<sup>19</sup> See his performance in the CD [Various Artists, 1995]. Also in the CD, [Various Artists, 2012] (recordings and accompanying notes by Jean During).



music with it. Abdulrahman himself acknowledged that he discovered and understood a lot of things when he started to learn the fiddle *sorud*.

Abdulrahman led the way, and recognized at least one *benju* player of the same level as his: Raja Bhai

Jaan from Karachi (see for example [Raja Bhai Jaan, 2011a; 2011b]) playing some *zahirig*. There are other players in India (where the *benju* is called *bolboltarang* and is often electrically amplified), but they do not belong to the Beluchi tradition.

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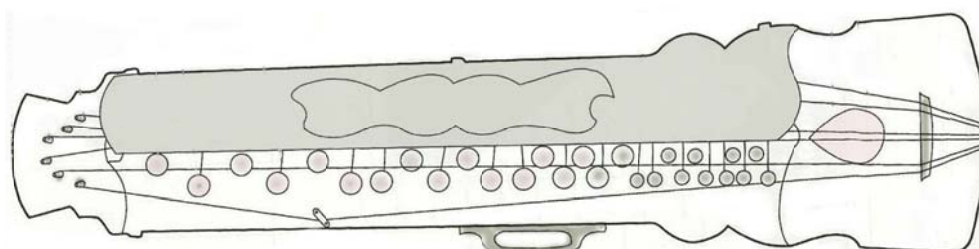
## PLATES



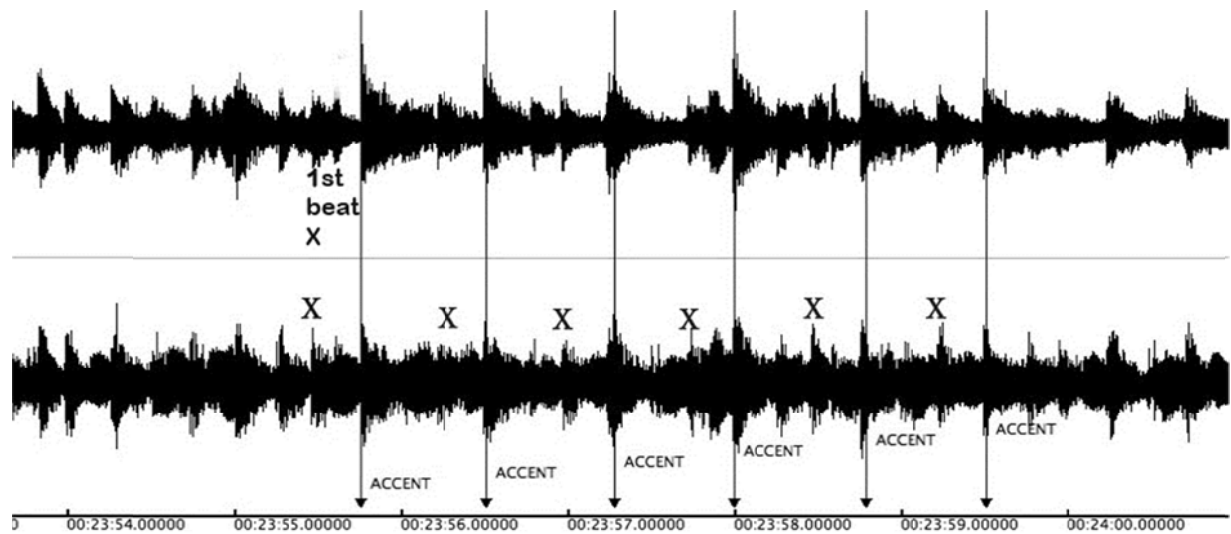
FHT 1. *Benju* player from Sarāvān (Iran) – photo J. During, 2004, Tehran.



FHT 2. Master Karmibaksh Nuri, playing the *sorud* – photo J. During, 1998, Karachi.



FHT 3. *Benju* sketch [Darvishi, 2001, p. 109]: note that in this sketch, there is no 3<sup>rd</sup> string. This string has probably been added by A. Surizehi.



FHT 4. Accentuation of the 2<sup>nd</sup> beat in a “quasi 3 beats” (click on the icon below to listen to the example – the audio file is also available for downloading at <http://nemo-online.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/benju.exemple.mp3>).



FHT 5. Abdulrahman Surizehi with his *benju* (left) and with a *dholak* player (right) – photos given to the author by A. Surizehi.