

# Music as Challenge for Women in Central Asia<sup>1)</sup>

*Janyl Jusubjan*

*Women can sing not only with delicacy  
But with the strength of warriors*

*Fergana Qasimova*

The richness and diversity of women's music of Central Asia is preconditioned by the historical, social and religious diversity of the region. This is the area where the northern nomadic civilizations of Turks and Mongols have interacted with more urbanized southern cultures of settled nations for thousands of years.

The northern influence is dominated by powerful bardic performances of epic tales. The instrumental pieces are short, often with introductory stories. They are performed solo and are often influenced by the spiritual power of Mother Nature. There is little difference in the repertoire and musical instruments between male and female musicians. Yet although the nomads tended to have more tolerance for female musicians, there has always been certain bias towards women – especially towards those who dared to enter clearly defined “men's” fields.

In southern urban music, elaborate music performance accompanied by beautiful voices is predominant. It comes with a strong impact from tradition that is influenced by Sufism and Islam. Music is often performed by small ensembles which invariably include a plucked instrument and a drum. Men tend to play more traditional instruments such as the *dutar* or the *gijak*, while women often play instruments of foreign origin such as the *rubab*. Music making was traditionally segregated. This tendency is still valid, especially in rural areas. In the pre-Soviet period, women's music used to be strictly censured. This has profoundly changed during the Soviet system with many women entering the music field and “not only have they acquired men's repertoire, but many have outperformed them”.<sup>2)</sup>

1) The paper is an adaptation of video presentation by a journalist from Kyrgyzia, who works in the Czech Republic.

2) From the personal interview of the author with Feirouz Nishanova, Director of Agha Khan's Music Initiative in Central Asia. Paris: Radio Free Europe's Kyrgyz Service, November 2008.

### Throat-singing among Women

Throat-singing is believed to be part of the music performance among the Turks, although few have retained it. Today Tatars, Bashkirs, Turkmens and some Kazakh tribes along the Caspian Sea have retained some traces of this style. Among Kyrgyz, it is slightly tangible in women's singing of some *yrs* (songs).

Throat-singing as performed by Tuva's Hun Hur Tu and other groups are known in the West as purely men's music. But there are women who do sing this style. However, there is a strong and deep-rooted superstition towards female throat singing.

Choduraa Tumat is the founding member of a music groups Tuva kyzy (Tuvan Girls) who perform native music through throat singing. Tumat had to overcome a tremendous opposition. "I learned a little kargyraa from listening to my grandmother. I didn't even know it was throat-singing. I just sang that way because I liked it. I didn't know that I could produce those sounds." She recalls how she started singing one of the genres of throat singing: "I sang so that the spirits of my homeland would always defend me. I went up to Kyzyl Taiga and sang without any fear of the spirits." Her group has been performing for some years. However, despite the international recognition, which invariably brings local fame, members of Tuva kyzy hear over and over again that women "are not supposed to do this" and even: "there should be a law forbidding women from throat-singing".<sup>3)</sup> The leader of Hun Hur Tu Sayan Bapa believes<sup>4)</sup> that throat singing creates tremendous vibrations, which are harmful to a women's reproductive system. This deep-seated superstition is widespread among Tuvans and was challenged when Tumat was pregnant and gave a birth to a baby girl.

Raisa Morodova has experienced similar fate. Born in 1967 in Altai Republic (Russia), she studied opera in Moscow and St. Petersburg. But after a prophetic dream she started to sing *kai* singing in accompaniment of *topshuur*. She believes that she is called to singing by nature: "It doesn't matter whether you are a man or a woman. What is important is to believe in the spirits of these rivers and springs and mountains; to go to springs and drink pure water, and to fill your kai with that purity so the spirits accept your offering".<sup>5)</sup> But she will probably have to live with inevitable remarks such as "Altai is too sacred a place for women to sing" throughout her performing life.

3) Levin, Theodore, and Valentina Suzukei. *Where Rivers and Mountains Sing. Sound, Music, and Nomadism in Tiva and Beyond*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 2006, pp. 200–203.

4) From the personal interview of the author with Sayan Bapa, 2006, Prague.

5) See Levin and Suzukei, p. 46.

### **Aitysh: Bards' Competition**

The other genre of nomadic music culture where women have made important advances is the bards' competition. The traditional exchange of thoughts and ideas narrated through improvised poetry is a great and distinctive form of art among the Kyrgyz and the Kazakh. "You can behead a singer, but you cannot cut his tongue," says an old proverb.

This trade has always been dominated by men, but there were women who challenged their male counterparts, sometimes to their own distress. This tale pertaining to the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century was recorded from oral sources some 100 years later. The great bard Jengi-jok once faced a woman named Narkulbubu. When he was clearly losing the bardic competition, he said to the owner of the yurt in which they were seated: "Hey, host, look at this whore! When people allow a woman to sing, the strongmen will lose their respect." The host is believed to have answered: "Where are the men? Take this shameless woman out of the yurt!" And they dragged her out of the yurt".<sup>6)</sup>

Today, the *aitysh* (Kyrgyz) or *aitys* (Kazakh) is going through a revival period. Kazakh TV regularly features these competitions. The participants are taken on tours around Europe to show off the little understood yet exotic art. In Kyrgyzstan there was a studio sponsored by private funds devoted solely to *aitysh*, where older bards socialized and passed on their teachings to their younger colleagues. Competitions between the Kazakh and Kyrgyz bards are quite common. They draw big interest from both sides and the wittiest expressions are repeated all over again. At some of these competitions it is possible to witness women competing with men. Due to the Soviet legacy, the respect for women performers is evident, although it is possible that men try to tease women through indecent personal remarks.

### **Uljan Baibusynova: Female Singer of Men's Songs**

*Jyr* among Kazakhs is an older mode of slower and more meditative singing. This type of singing is of contrast to *ang*, which is more influenced by Western pop, even though it is based on traditions. The *jyrau* are usually men who are elderly respected bards narrating philosophically-laden old stories through songs.

Uljan Baibusynova is one of few women who successfully took up *jyraus'* repertoire. In her 30<sup>th</sup>, Baibusynova accompanies her vibrating low voice characteristic of *jyrau* with *dobra*, a two-string lute. She has been performing at famous stages in the world through Via Kabul, Bardic Divas and other projects by Agha Khan's Music Initiative in Central Asia. She seems to enjoy equally warm

6) Balbai Alagushev. *Aityshar*. Bishkek: Kyrgyzstan, 2006, p. 34

reception both abroad and at home. "I haven't encountered any bias for playing men's music. It is always the same, [people like it]", she said in an interview.<sup>7)</sup>

### **Seidana: The Epic Teller**

She was known in her region as a Semetei teller. Semetei is one of major epics among Kyrgyz. She grew up in a village in the west of Kyrgyzstan where the mausoleum devoted to mythical hero Manas attracts pilgrims from around the country. Seidana had eight children and was an ordinary village woman. Once she had a visionary dream, where she was requested to tell the story of Semetei, the grandson of Manas. She took it lightly. "I am an ordinary woman, and women don't tell epics" she thought. When her four sons died, she took their death as punishment for not following the orders given from the Heavens. Although her husband and other relatives were dismissive of her newly found talent, she continued telling the epic through old age. She will always be remembered as one of few women who have told an epic. There is a corner devoted to Seidana Semetei Teller at the museum devoted to Hero Manas. She died in 2006 at the age of 86.

### **Shashmaqom in the South**

Shashmaqom was music played by men for the men of the court. The singers had to have a beautiful and strong voice and physical strength to perform long pieces, some of which lasted an hour or so. In the southern areas of Central Asia, where Islam has had a strong impact, music-making by women was especially unwelcome, if not forbidden outright. Even now, no parents would dream that their daughter follow the road of a musician. Dancing is considered a particularly indecent profession for women to pursue. Attitudes largely changed during Communism, when women entered into many spheres of society, including music. Although the years since the dissolution of the USSR have seen the surge in traditionalism and conservatism, women continue to play an important role in music.

Ozadahan Ashurova is one of those who perform the eloquent shashmaqom music. Although she has been popular as a singer, her first husband and mother-in-law were against her singing. She had to leave her work from the National TV band although she performed at weddings where men and women mix together. Her second husband does not mind her performing in public, especially since the President of Tajikistan has given her family a 4-room apartment as a gesture of recognition for her contribution in popularizing traditional music forms.

7) From the personal interview of the author with Chok-Tal, Kyrgyzstan, 2005.



*Ozadahan Ashurova.*



*Music from the South.*