

# Laughter and Crying in Kyrgyz Songs

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The most basic human emotions such as happiness and sadness are represented in the Kyrgyz music culture very clearly in simple but powerful forms. Some of the forms are lost while others are slowly disappearing from everyday life. This paper looks into several surviving and vanishing forms of old folk songs. It also explores the inner strength of the tradition, highlighting the revivalist attempts, including the ones with the participation of this paper's author in Europe.

## ***Koshok, Song for Deceased***

The death of a person is perhaps the most dramatic moment in life. The Kyrgyz have a clearly defined procedure for saying goodbye to the deceased. A *yurt* (nomadic felt tent) is put up; the corpse is wrapped in white cloth and positioned on the floor on the left side of the yurt behind a reed curtain. The body is kept there for three days so that all relatives from near and afar can come to say goodbye. Men approach the yurt with a loud cry, saying "Oh flicker fate, I have lost him/her for ever". Then he stands facing the outer side of the yurt, puts his hands on his back, and remains there crying for some time. Then he turns and hugs the other men. After this, they go in for tea and food.

It is different with women. When someone is approaching the house, women of the house hurry inside the yurt, sit facing the wall and start *koshok*, the mourning song. The female newcomer comes in and without greeting anyone joins the other women in mourning for the deceased. Every woman sings her own song, sometimes it is a simple four-liner which is repeated over and over with slight changes. Other women are more prolific: they sing about the life and deeds of the deceased in more elegant forms. All in all, the sound is polyphonic, if not cacophonic. The

singing goes on for some minutes. The women of the house are supposed to cry and grieve longer so that the others try to console them. The *koshok* ritual is repeated within 40 days while relatives and acquaintances continue coming without prior notice. The powerful ritual helps to ease the pain of the great loss.

*Koshok*, which originally seems to have meant simply “a song”, might have been in the origins of the heroic “Manas” epos itself. Manas, the Hero who defeated the Chinese and united Kyrgyz and Kypchak tribes, had 40 warrior friends - *Choros*. One of them, named *Jaisan*, was famed to be a bard so prolific that could praise the simple cover of the yurt “for half a day in a song” (“*Jalgyz uidun jabuusun jarym kunu yrdagan*”). He is said to have composed *koshok* when Manas died of the wounds inflicted by an enemy. It is possible that the Manas epos, the longest of its kind with 500,000 lines, developed from Jaisan's *koshok*. Similarly when the deceased is a distinguished person, a male bard sings an elaborated song praising him. Such songs would become widely known and performed by other bard generations after and looked at as independent pieces of a performed word.

Today, *koshok* is still part of the fabric of everyday life, especially in the provinces. Mostly older women keep up the tradition. The ability of the form to keep its ancient roots and yet allow adaptation to the (modern) reality is interesting to look at.

### ***New Koshok***

Each generation had their own reality which was reflected in songs, including the *koshok*. This example of “modern” *koshok* is a testimony to its own time: tumultuous 1990s after the fall of the USSR. The performer Ainagul Dujsheeva is from the Naryn region of Kyrgyzstan. She was born during Stalin's collectivization in a remote village Kara-Suu some 70 km from Chinese border. She became a medical assistant and brought up three sons alone after the death of her husband in a traffic accident. Her middle son Imangazy was killed in 1997 at the age of 36. His cruel

death in the hands of 17 people (first beaten, shot in head and chest, then burned and thrown into a wild river) is described in a book by Melis Makenbaev *How Heroes Die*<sup>1</sup>. His body was found after 18 months intact in an icy mountain river. Ainagul, who was 63 at that time of the tragedy, had performed this *koshok*<sup>2</sup>:

Oh the cruel fate,  
You (my son) did not keep any sheep in your yard  
Oh the cruel fate,  
You gave all money to the poor  
They burned you, they smoked your body  
We searched you for a year and a half  
Your son is left behind, poor baby, his steps are short  
My son, tie your horse with a strong knot  
You went to meet your father in the Real World  
Spend summer time with him, in the Pastures of Paradise<sup>3</sup>.

This *koshok* is also part of the book mentioned above, but the verses slightly differ. Obviously Ainagul Dujsheeva had more than one version of her *koshok*.

Today less and less young people perform *koshok*. The situation is aggravated by mass migration to the cities - funerals usually take place in the provinces at the birth place of the deceased, but more often only older, mostly male members of the bigger family travel to the funereal leaving the prospective *koshok* telling women behind.

### ***Kyz korushuu*, Mourning for Bride**

There is another form of *koshok*, *kyz korushuu* or “seeing off the girl”. By Kyrgyz tradition, a girl who gets married becomes member of her husband's family till her death. There is a saying: “The married girl is

- 1) Makenbaev, M. (2000). *Baatyrlar emneden olot*. Bishkek: Kyrgyz Academy of Science, Kyrgyzstan.
- 2) Recorded by author in 1997 in Kant, north Kyrgyzstan, from Ainagul Dujsheeva.
- 3) Author's free translation, shortened.

behind the reed curtain”, (*Chykkan kyz chiyden tyshkary*). Reed curtain was used, as mentioned in the first part, as a dividing wall for a dead person in a yurt. This strong proverb signal that a married woman was considered dead by her family, that is why mother and sisters-in-law mourned her departure with a mourning song - *kyz korushuu*. The wailing of the song is similar to regular *koshok* but it is an almost lost tradition. The author recorded one piece of *kyz korushuu* in the Son-Kul region in Kyrgyzstan in 1997 in a shepherd's yurt. The session took place during a regular evening, not at a wedding. It was performed by a village woman who remembered two four-liners. Bellow is the rough translation of one four-liner:

Your horse's bridle is of raw leather  
Oh, young lady, your husband is young  
Raw leather will mature  
Oh, young lady, your husband will become a judge.

In Kyrgyz:

*Jash kayish eken oo jugonung ee;*  
*O kyz bijke, jash bala eken kujobung ee;*  
*Jash kajysh jurup ee ij boloor ee;*  
*O kyz bijke, jash bala jurup bij boloor ee.*

There are some other recorded *kyz korushuu* songs, but they are hardly performed at modern weddings which copy the Western style weddings in dress (white long open cut dress for a bride and black suit with a white shirt and tie for the groom) under accompaniment of “The Wedding March” by the German composer Felix Mendelssohn from 1842.

*Koshok* is considered as one of the most voluminous bodies of classical oral music tradition. Some 62,000 lines were recorded or written down by Soviet researchers. Some parts of the research were not allowed to be published. Only some years after independence, a collection of *koshok* (16,000 lines) was published as a separate book.<sup>4</sup>

4) Collective work (1998). *Koshoktor*. In People's Literature series. Bishkek: “Sham”.

## ***Bekbekei, Song of Shepherd Women***

Kyrgyz used to have much more different forms of musical entertainment than there are today. Farmers and horse keepers would have their own “anthems” as *Op majda* and *Shyryldang*. The young men and women would sing “Jar-jar” to the newly wed; in South Kyrgyzstan the Muslim holy Ramadan celebration would be accompanied with children singing special song (*Jaramazan*) as they went from door to door collecting sweets (not too different from the Christian traditions at Easter). During the Soviet Union, most of these songs were heard on the radio or at theatre performances at best. Today it occurs often that children go around the city apartment blocks singing *Jaramazan*.

There are two very old forms of fun-making songs to be presented here. One is specifically nomadic and female. “Bekbekei” is still beloved among women in the mountains. At least they know the words and when prompted, sing effortlessly, followed by deliberately loud hallooing and laughter. There might have been more variations, but the song as recorded by the author during her travel to the South-Eastern Naryn region in Kyrgyzstan in 1997 is more or less the same with what is to be found in the song books. The text goes as follows:

*Bekbekei* ran, crossed the hill  
The belt on the waist passed him well  
Saksakai ran, crossed the river bed  
The dagger on the thigh passed him well

The end of lassoc is made of hawthorn  
Thieves, wolves, beware of us  
The milk of sheep is aconite  
Who steals sheep will not have luck

The horse hair is shiny  
Who steals a horse will be childless  
The milk of a goat is absinth  
Only unscrupulous will steal the goat

In Kyrgyz:

*Bekbekei kachty bel ashty*  
*Beline bel boo jarashty*  
*Saksakai kachty sai ashty*  
*Sanyyna saadak jarashty*

*Ukurukuchu dolono*  
*Uuru bir bloboorüjo*  
*Koidun sütü korgoshun*  
*Koi uurdagan ongbosun*

*Jylkynyn jünü jyltyrak*  
*Jylky uurdagan kuu tuiak*  
*Echkinin sütü ermenden*  
*Echki uurdagan shermende*

The song is performed by women at night in open air, perhaps sitting around the fire. The star-filled sky is dark and the women's voices travel long distances around the surrounding snow-capped mountains. Men are at home resting after a long day of sheep tending. Now it is the women's turn to look after the animals. They sing, as their mothers and grandmothers did for ages, "Bekbekei", a song about a strange being who runs across hills with a knife fixed on his belt. They laugh between each rhyme. Their laughter was meant to scare off wolves and thieves. Everybody seems to enjoy the fun in the middle of the night.

The etymology of the word *bekbekei* is not known and from the context of the song it is only clear that it might have been a human being rather than an animal.

### ***Akyinek, Girls' Teaser***

The other form of songs which is clearly designed to cause laughter is *Akyinek*, or "Girls' Teaser."

Two groups of girls collecting dung from neighboring habitations would tease each other with trifling quatrain (rhymes in four lines). The other side would be expected to answer with quatrain matching in wittiness. At the end of each quatrain, the girls shout "Akyja, akyia, akyi, akyi, akyia." The dictionary tells us that while saying "akyinek," the girls would tap their throats with the blade of their palms so that the word is chopped (interrupted) giving strange sound.

The subject of the teaser could be somebody's actual or imagined appearance, family characteristics or a specific situation in the community. Usually the issues in question are mundane or improbable; the verses are sometimes used simply to tease each other for fun. The elements of straight forward humiliation is also present, it is possible to imagine that such battle of wits could have led to real fight of women tearing at each other's hair.

This specific form of female communication or discourse is not known to be practiced in any systematic way today and can be considered as an almost disappearing form of archaic folklore.

The author experienced an example of spontaneous "akyjne" teasing in childhood at a boarding school in Bishkek. Before going to sleep in the dormitory, her class of 7/8 year old girls would tease the girls of the next class with following rhymes:

<i>«A» klass angkoo</i>	Class "A" is stupid
<i>Sabagynan jalkoo</i>	They are lazy in studies
<i>Ene tilden "2" alat</i>	They get "Ds" in Mother tongue class
<i>Eteginen bit alat</i>	Lice is found in their dress

To which the opposite group would respond:

<i>«B» klass bylchyk</i>	Class "B" is fat
<i>Yshtandary jyrtky</i>	Their trousers are torn
<i>Ene tilden "2" alat</i>	They get "Ds" in Mother tongue class
<i>Eteginen bit alat</i>	Lice is found in their dress

5) Yudahin, K. K. (1965). *Kirgizsko-russkij slovar*, Moskva: Sovetskaya entsiklopediya.

The singing was spontaneous, repeated once in a while, after which the opposing groups would feel content and sleep well!

There are at least two known cases of trying to revive *Akyinek* and both were performed on stage. One happened at the Cholpon-Ata resort, Kyrgyzstan, during the 2<sup>nd</sup> World Congress of the Kyrgyz Nation in 2003. The group of teenage girls dressed in national costumes marched through the stage; they sang in pairs, each from the opposite group and then gave floor to the next pair. The author, who was present at this rare staging, later helped to re-create the *Akyinek* on stage in Prague, Czech Republic. On March 8, 2008, on the International Day of Women, at the Kastan Theatre in Prague audience, a group of four women marched on the stage back and forth in pairs and teased each other. They performed to a mostly émigré audience including the visiting Kyrgyz Ombudsman, a leading human rights activist from Kyrgyzstan and to other Kyrgyz nationals based in Prague. This time, the issues were more serious: destitution at home (in Kyrgystan) forced people to leave their homeland in search of good fortune in foreign countries, the uplifting Tulip Revolution in 2005 and the huge disappointment that followed it. The original text was provided by Shailoobek Duisheev, the Kyrgyz poet and journalist based in Bishkek, but it was revised to give more focus on the reality of migrant lives. Despite the seriousness of the issues raised, the language of the Prague *Akyinek* was light and witty enough to cause frequent outburst of laughter from the audience.

If you ask who is my father  
He is the one who has a velvet pillow  
He is kind and generous  
He is from a wealthy background.

If your father is wealthy  
What are you doing here (in Europe)?  
Maybe you are the sister  
Of the guy who ran away (former president of Kyrgyzstan Askar Akaev)!



Even if you tended sheep  
You could live a decent life in Kochkor (district in Kyrgyzstan)  
Could you not find mud  
To make bricks for your house in Tokmok (a town in Kyrgyzstan)?

Don't you know that my uncle ( President K. Bakiev)  
Was supported by the masses?  
If you pity the previous one  
Then marry that guy (Askar Akaev)!

Менин атам сурасаң  
Берене кымкап жазданган  
Бейли жумшак алпейим  
Бектин уулу баштанган

Сенин атаң бек болсо  
Анан мында не келдиң  
Карындашы окшойсун  
Качып кеткен неменин

Кой баксаң да өйдөсүң  
Күнүн өтмөк Кочкордон  
Кыш куйганга ылайды  
Таппадыңбы Токмоктон

Эл башкарган акемди  
Эл колдогон, билип ал  
Аяп турсаң анчалык  
Аскарыңа тийип ал

The songs as *koshok* and *akyinek* belong to oldest and disappearing forms of music tradition, which served to entertain, and sooth human grief and sorrow. The widespread poverty, lack of forward looking state

strategy for the development of the fragile native culture, but first and foremost, the globalisation processes are working to finish their destruction. Yet, rare but focused local and foreign research and funding, as well as grass-root revivalist efforts combined with still lively native culture are helping to create supporting atmosphere for these beautifully idiosyncratic archaic music forms.