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МУЗЫКА, МИФТЕР ЖАНА ТООЛОР: КЫРГЫЗСТАНДАГЫ КӨЧМӨНДӨР ЭСТЕТИКАСЫ**MUSIC, MYTHS, AND MOUNTAINS: NOMAD AESTHETICS IN KYRGYZSTAN****МУЗЫКА, МИФЫ И ГОРЫ: ЭСТЕТИКА КОЧЕВНИКОВ В КЫРГЫЗСТАНЕ**

Abstract. Mountains have preserved an outstanding cultural diversity because of their difficult accessibility. Despite high levels of cultural diversity among populations and ethnic groups over short distances, mountain people suffer from isolation, both from one another and from the rest of the world. Cultures can vary tremendously from one mountain valley to another; languages and artistic expressions, such as music and dance, and even entire sets of values and religious belief systems, may differ from one village to another within the same mountain range. In a rapidly globalizing world we must be particularly concerned with protecting cultural diversity, promoting cultural pluralism, and preserving tangible and intangible cultural heritage of mountainous regions.

This paper examines the mountain music of Kyrgyzstan and provides us with new insights in which both music and myths help us to understand one of the montane peoples and cultures in Central Asia. This paper also reveals how symbolic meanings and values of mountain music are constituted into what is considered the “Kyrgyz” element in mountain music and it helps to construct a broader understanding of cultural issues concerning ‘music, myths, and mountains.’

Keywords: music; myths; mountains; nomad aesthetics; cultural heritage; Kyrgyzstan

Аннотация. Тоолор жетүүгө кыйын болгондон улам эң сонун маданий көп түрдүүлүктү сактап калган. Жакын арадагы калктар менен этникалык топтордун маданий ар түрдүүлүгүнүн жогорку деңгээлине карабастан, тоолуктар бири-биринен да, дүйнөнүн калган бөлүгүнөн да обочолонуудан жапа чегишет. Бир тоо өрөөнүндөгү жана экинчисиндеги маданияттар ар түрдүү болушу мүмкүн; музыка жана бий сыяктуу тилдер жана көркөм сөз айкалыштары, атүгүл баалуулуктардын жана диний ишенимдердин тутумдарынын бүтүндөй топтому бир эле тоо кыркасындагы бир айылдан экинчи айылда айырмаланышы мүмкүн. Тез ааламдашып жаткан дүйнөдө биз өзгөчө маданий көп түрдүүлүктү коргоого, маданий плюрализмди жайылтууга, тоолуу аймактардын материалдык жана материалдык эмес маданий мурастарын сактоого кам көрүшүбүз керек. Бул эмгек Кыргызстандын тоо музыкасын изилдеп, музыка менен мифтердин Борбордук Азиядагы тоо элдеринин жана маданияттарынын бирин түшүнүүгө жардам берген жаңы түшүнүктөрдү берет. Бул эмгек ошондой эле тоо музыкасындагы «кыргыз» элементи катары эсептелген тоо музыкасынын символдук маанилери менен баалуулуктары кандайча камтылганын ачып берет жана «музыка, мифтер жана тоолорго» байланыштуу маданий маселелерди кеңири түшүнүүгө жардам берет.

Негизги сөздөр: музыка; мифтер; тоолор; көчмөн эстетикасы; маданий мурас; Кыргызстан.

Аннотация. Горы сохранили выдающееся культурное разнообразие из-за своей труднодоступности. Несмотря на высокий уровень культурного разнообразия среди ближайших населений и этнических групп, горные народы страдают от изоляции как друг от друга, так и от остального мира. Культуры одной горной долины могут сильно различаться от другой; языки и художественные выражения, такие как музыка и танцы, и даже целые наборы ценностей и религиозных верований одной деревни могут различаться от другой в пределах даже одного горного хребта. В быстро глобализирующемся мире мы должны быть особенно обеспокоены защитой культурного разнообразия, продвижением культурного плюрализма

и сохранением материального и нематериального культурного наследия горных регионов. В этой статье рассматривается горная музыка Кыргызстана и даются новые идеи, в которых и музыка, и мифы помогают нам понять один из горных народов и культур Центральной Азии. В этой статье также раскрываются, как символические значения и ценности горной музыки формируются в том, что считается «кыргызским» элементом в горной музыке, и это помогает сформировать более широкое понимание культурных вопросов, касающихся «музыки, мифов и гор». **Ключевые слова:** музыка; мифы; горы; эстетика кочевников; культурное наследие; Кыргызстан.

This paper examines the mountain music of Kyrgyzstan and provides us with new insights in which both music and myths help us to understand one of the montane peoples and cultures in Central Asia. This paper also reveals how symbolic meanings and values of mountain music are constituted into what is considered the “Kyrgyz” element in mountain music and it helps to construct a broader understanding of cultural issues concerning ‘music, myths, and mountains.’

Mountains have preserved an outstanding cultural diversity because of their difficult accessibility. Despite high levels of cultural diversity among populations and ethnic groups over short distances, mountain people suffer from isolation, both from one another and from the rest of the world. Cultures can vary tremendously from one mountain valley to another; languages and artistic expressions, such as music and dance, and even entire sets of values and religious belief systems, may differ from one village to another within the same mountain range. In a rapidly globalizing world we must be particularly concerned with protecting cultural diversity, promoting cultural pluralism, and preserving tangible and intangible cultural heritage of mountainous regions.

Mountain communities tend strongly to develop and defend a distinctive cultural identity. Although social and economic dimensions are significant, music is frequently an important element, and a key marker of community identity, often tribal in nature. The livelihood of indigenous communities that retain their cultural identity, whether in highlands or lowlands, is often based on systems of “traditional ecological knowledge.” Such knowledge, with associated beliefs, behaviors, and land management practices is especially important for low intensity production systems in high mountains. Due to close association between music and culture or ethnicity, musical diversity can serve as an indicator of human diversity broadly.

A great diversity of cultures can be found in mountain areas, for various reasons. Many mountainous areas harbor ethnic minorities, and until recently, mountain people were often less exposed to the outside world than other societies, mainly due to difficult access. Yet mountain cultures have never been static. Trade across mountain passes and with downstream areas, and seasonal migration have often connected mountain people to the wider world. Such interaction complemented local knowledge and values with new ideas and skills.

The richness and diversity of this global heritage is at risk from rapid economic, social and cultural change. Reasons for this change include population pressure, poverty, migration, and the global dominance of urban values, transmitted to the most remote mountain areas by the mass media, standardized formal education, and tourism. Measures to counter this cultural erosion are needed, not least because cultural identity and self-esteem are essential ingredients for development.

Through modernization and mass media, even remote mountain valleys and settlements have become exposed to mainstream western culture, which is largely urban. Tourists traveling in mountains increase this exposure, which can lead to a severe risk of loss of orientation and of cultural identity, cultural homogenization, and the collapse of traditional cultures.

In most mountain regions, people have based their livelihoods on agriculture, pastoralism, and use of forest resources. This remains widely true, although very marked changes have occurred in some mountainous areas, gathering pace from the mid-twentieth century onward, with supplementary or entirely new sources of income, often located outside mountains proper. Traditional livelihoods in mountain environments have typically been created with difficulty and at some risk of failure.

As a ‘mountain nation,’ Kyrgyzstan’s rich and diverse cultural heritage stems from the

nomadic lifestyle of its people and its location on the Great Silk Road to China. In his discussion on the philosophy of mountains, Kakeev states: "Nomadic lifestyle related to mountains, can be seen as a special type of complex, self-organized evolutionary system 'human and mountains.' Mountains are not only the necessary condition of nomad's life, but also can affect...both the forms of government, and nomad's thinking. From the point of view of systems theory nomad society which has occurred in mountains, can include independent elements as separate communities in 'Gold bowls' and at the same time be a component of other system or network structure, for example, ethnic, superethnic, as [T]urkic, or wider [community], as the Soviet people, with them is present an indefinitely diverse form of communication carried out at all levels" (Kakeev 2002:10).

These diverse forms of communication have always been established by Kyrgyz *akyns*, the preeminent musical figure in nomadic culture. The *akyn* (bard) is a solo performer of oral poetry and lyrical song who typically accompanies himself or herself on *komuz*, a fretless strummed instrument with three silk or gut strings. Women have also played an important role in the Turkic bardic tradition. Certain epics, most notably the Kyrgyz *Manas*, are traditionally chanted *a cappella*.

Nomadic cultures have also produced virtuosic instrumental repertoires performed by soloists on strummed or bowed stringed instruments, woodwinds, and plucked idiophones. The distinguishing feature of these repertoires is their narrative quality: pieces typically tell stories by using a kind of musical onomatopoeia, for example, the pounding of horse's hooves or the singing of birds, all represented through musical sound. Individual innovation is highly valued, and *akyns* are performance artists who combine music with gesture, humor, and spontaneous improvisation to entertain their audience. Their music is an abstract representation of the natural rhythms of wind and flowing water, the shifting gait of a horse as it adjusts its pace to changes in terrain, or the loping of a camel—all central to the nomadic soundworld.

According to the famous writer Aitmatov, long time ago Kyrgyz *akyns* would tell us in their songs and religions: "Think of nature the way

thou thinketh of thyself, take care of nature the way thou taketh care of thyself, otherwise, thou wilt not be the father of thy tribe any more, and thy progeny will wither like a dry root. Worship the mountain thou liveth upon, worship it as thy god and take care of its body the way thou taketh care of thy own body; otherwise, the mountain will take vengeance on thee and thy mind will be lost in the gully; and if thou lose thy mind, thy progeny will also fall into oblivion" (Aitmatov 2003:53).

Kyrgyz *akyns* also compete in exchanges of improvised verses (quatrains or couplets) known as *aytysh* (singing contest). Some of the competing *akyns* may achieve fame at the great song contests associated with the festivals. Why is it then that *aytysh* survived in only particular regions of Eurasia? Is there really a link between song contests and a certain type of social order, which can only be found in mountainous regions? Some scholars have pointed out that certain common factors such as isolation, homogeneity, reliance on oral transmission and agriculture give rise to ballads. After discussing the isolation of northeastern Scotland David Buchan concludes that "traditional balladry flourished in a nonliterate, homogeneous, agricultural society" (Buchan 1972:47). Maud Karpeles describes the region of North Carolina, Tennessee, Kentucky and Virginia in the USA as follows: "...until recently they had been more or less cut off from the rest of the world...Five years ago, when we were there, there were few roads... The mountain people lived in small more or less self-contained communities...Few could read and write..." (Karpeles 1973:96-97). Entwistle and Hodgart also agree that "the ballad society" is an isolated, self-sufficient community and oral transmission is one of its generic characteristics (Entwistle 1951:7 and Hodgart 1950:138).

It would seem as if all of the scholars above were describing my research site in Kyrgyzstan. Like "the ballad society" the mountainous areas were cut off from the rest of the country because of the poor conditions of the roads and severe winters. Oral transmission was certainly one of the major characteristics of the region because in some areas the illiteracy rate was as high as 99%.

According to Salidzan Dzigotov, an eminent scholar of Kyrgyz culture at Manas University in Bishkek (personal communication), we can

talk about isolation, homogeneity, reliance on oral transmission, and agriculture for the Kyrgyz people living in the mountains. They are non-literate, isolated, and self-sufficient.

How then can one explain the existence of a particular genre (*aytysh*) in Central Asia, especially in Kyrgyzstan? Isolation, homogeneity, dependency on oral transmission and agriculture seem to provide an ideal environment for singing, telling traditional tales or asking riddles, which people adopt to many purposes and different contexts. Everywhere people need to be entertained in order to fill large empty boxes of time in winter or in the month where there is no agricultural activity. It is normal that they choose the existing tradition with which they are familiar. As a result, some societies entertain themselves with ballads while others do it with song contests or storytelling or a combination of both.

Kyrgyz are traditionally nomadic and culturally, linguistically, and musically they are closely connected to the east with the Altai Turks (Altaian proper, Telengits, Teleuts, Khakas and Tofas) (Vinogradov 1958:27). There is strong evidence that song contests were prevalent among Turkic peoples in Eurasia: "Singing contests in Central Asia are by no means confined only to the [Kyrgyz] and the [Kazakhs]. One finds them also among other peoples speaking Turkman dialects...among the Telengites...the Shor, the Yakut...the Turkomans, and, finally, also among the Azerbaijanis" (Emsheimer 1956:28).

Song contests can also be found in Turkey. The primary center for song contests in Turkey is the mountainous northeastern region. Today, "the historical connection of *ashyks* [bards] in northeastern Turkey with Azerbaijani *ashyks* and Azerbaijani culture still continues" (Erdener 1995:32). In performance, "the musical skills of the *akyn*, *ashyk*, or *bakhshy* as a singer and player are at least as important as his skills as a narrator" (Reichl 1992:133).

Much of Kyrgyz mountain music developed out of a nomadic life style, which discouraged the development of large stationary instrumental ensembles, but rather emphasized the development of the most portable of all instruments, the human voice. Accompanying instruments were limited to small and portable strummed or bowed stringed instruments. When a culture is nomadic, it has few material goods

and, as such, instead of having many varied instruments, the people experiment with their voices to produce a variety of sounds and singing styles. Kyrgyz have preserved their nomadic way of life into the twentieth century and developed a unique musical culture different in some important respects from the other Central Asian groups.

Kyrgyz herders played composite chordophones or aerophones, as did other Central Asian nomads. Membranophones and idiophones were played in shamanist and military contexts. Like the *komuz*, the pastoral aerophones *choor* and *sibizgi* are used to accompany shepherds' cries. Among the historically nomadic Kyrgyz, epic singers, who perform epics such as 'Manas' and 'Er-Toshtuk,' are still an active part of community social life. They have retained forms of epic song exclusively in verse and their music is strongly linked to an archaic Inner Asian soundworld.

Kyrgyz horsemen were not only *komuz* players (*komuzchu*), but were probably the world's earliest *kyyak* players (*kyyakchi*). An instrument of nomadic life, the *kyyak* or *kyl-kyyak* (bowed stringed instrument) strung with horsehair strings, played with horsehair bows, and often featuring a carved horse's head at the end of the neck have an archaic history among the nomadic peoples of Central Asia and are closely linked to shamanism and spirit worship. Also connected with shamanism, the small plucked metal idiophone *temir ooz komuz* is one of the few instruments common to the whole of Central Asia, but it has evolved only in Kyrgyzstan.

Originating in a nomadic past, among the Kyrgyz, as well as other Central Asian nomadic peoples, traditional culture is basically oral, and the specific features of orally preserved and transmitted knowledge provide a key to understanding this culture. In such a social context, it was natural for music to assume a role far greater than mere entertainment. Indeed, for the Kyrgyz, music has been at the core of society, providing the mechanism through which social life is preserved and transmitted. For example, many kinds of music were incorporated into traditional hospitality rituals performed in the circular felt yurts that are home to the Kyrgyz nomads. Their music was influenced by the structure of society and by their religious complexes. Musical performances were typi-

cally accompanied by commentary, conversation, and interpretation. As a rule, each musical piece recounted the history of its own creation, and its performance included a story about its composer and about past performers. A variety of communication took place between the *akyn* and the audience, an event that was live rather than technological. Listeners participated actively, influencing the choice of repertoire and encouraging the performers.

Nomadism is significant in the cultural and historical development of the Turkic peoples. It is a form of life conditioned by economic necessities; as raisers of livestock the nomads have to move their animals to different pastures during the different seasons of the year. Their economically conditioned mobility has been enhanced from early times by the use of horses.

The kernel of Central Asia is historically the home of nomadic pastoralists. The history of the Kyrgyz can be traced to the second century CE; in the preceding 2000 years they were pastoral nomads and cattle-breeders and have remained predominantly so ever since. Agriculture has been a less important part of their economy. Chadwick argues that the material culture of the "nomads of former times was not on a high level. They had no more permanent architecture than a tent; no industries; little agriculture, and that only in isolated districts; and, as we have seen, no trade which can be regarded as organized" (Chadwick and Zhirmunsky 1969:14). Living mostly in hair yurts, the herders of the area have also traditionally been excellent horsemen and were formerly indefatigable warriors. The arts of song and dance have been more important to them than architecture and sculpture, and songs about horses and travels across long distances played a prominent part in the oral tradition and secular music of these nomadic peoples.

Among Kyrgyz nomads, all musical genres may have the same hierarchical status. In such conditions, musicians who play in cafes, at weddings or festivals, for dancing, and to accompany storytelling are respected no less than those who play more serious genres, and the social and rhetorical skills of the musician-entertainer are greatly admired. Virtuoso performers of Kyrgyz nomadic *komuz* music who once played to large crowds at traditional ceremonies and festivals, however, have seen

their audiences shrink as mass media encroaches on live entertainment. Today their difficult art is appreciated mostly by enlightened amateurs.

Mountains have specific environments and economies. These constitute specific development contexts, a reality that is often not well understood—or not taken into account—by policy- and decision-making institutions that are mainly located in urbanized and densely populated lowland areas. The Kyrgyz Republic is a country still undergoing political and economic transition. After 15 years of transition, cultural and artistic institutions and activities in Kyrgyzstan continue to lack clearly defined national and regional cultural policies. Culture is not a separate sphere within society but is rather inclusively incorporated in all sectors and strongly connected to political, economic and social issues. At the same time, Kyrgyzstan, until recently largely unknown outside the CIS countries, is now becoming a destination for cultural and eco-tourism.

Mountains are characterized by specific development challenges. Typically, these include maintenance of traditions and value systems due to difficult or limited access, economic and political marginality, outmigration, environmental sensitivity, diversity of livelihoods, and cultural diversity. These challenges, such as cultural change without loss of identity need to be addressed by specific policies, laws, and institutional arrangements at the international, national, and local levels.

The mountains of Kyrgyzstan raise a number of important questions in terms of socio-economical, ecological, and cultural development: Do our present analytic categories contribute to or detract from an understanding of the peoples of the mountains? Can we today continue to hide behind political neutrality as the cultures and ecologies of mountains are decimated? Is preserving the cultural environment just as important as preserving the environment?

Today these problems remain unsolved. As Asankaygy once said: "...To be conscious and cultural is not only to learn one of the eposes by heart and play the *komuz*; the most important thing is to be humane towards everything that is alive, towards the environment" (Aitmatov 2003:56). This is the essence of human culture.

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