

## **Folklore and Folklife of Central Asian Women**

Although the idea of Central Asia as a distinct area of the world with its nomad shepherds, settled farmers, and city dwellers was introduced in 1843 by the geographer Alexander von Humboldt, the borders of Central Asia are still subject to multiple definitions. From geo-political and cultural perspectives, the region includes Xinjiang, the Tibetan Plateau, Mongolia, Afghanistan, Northern Iran, Eastern Pakistan, the Punjab of India, and five former Soviet republics—Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. This vast region contains the most vibrant part of the great Silk Road, the name given in 1877 by German scholar Ferdinand von Richthofen to the ancient trade caravan roads that ran from East Asia to the Mediterranean. Alternatively, the region may be defined by the ethnicities of its peoples, mainly Turkic, Iranian, and Mongolian. Women in Central Asian cultures have taken roles as diverse as wedding performers and shamans. Numerous female goddesses watch over their lives, and traditionally women have supported each other in their domestic and public roles.

Present-day nomadic groups—Buryats, Kalmyks, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Turkmens, Mongols, and Tibetans, to name a few—and sedentarized nomads like the Karakalpaks, for example, have different folkways, subscribe to different religions, and speak different languages. At root, however, they fall into only two distinct linguistic groups: Turkic and Mongolian, and this distinction resonates throughout nomadic culture. The agricultural regions of Central Asia (Ferghana Valley, for instance), which closely resemble California's inland valleys, were among the earliest farming areas in the history of humankind. Today the land is used largely for the cultivation of cotton, the so-called "white gold" of the region.

Central Asia is home to numerous forms of ethnic and cultural hybridization. It knows nomadic and sedentary peoples, mountain, valley, and city dwellers. The most striking differences occur between the cultural attributes of urban and rural Central Asia. Islamic influences are historically stronger in its sedentary southern regions, predominantly city-dwellers of mainly Iranian origin, by contrast with the northeast regions with strong animist-shamanist influences that are more typical for the steppe area with its rural herding people of mainly Turko-Mongol origin. The strict separation of men's and women's social events is more typical for the settled peoples than for the nomads.

The kaleidoscope of Central Asian cultures can be classified also by religion. Buddhist peoples include Mongols, Buryats, Khakas, Tibet, Kalmyks, and Tuvinians. Islamic peoples of Sunni denomination are Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Tajiks, Turkmens, Uighurs, Kyrgyzs, and small Ismailites enclaves in the Pamir Mountains region of Tajikistan.

In the mythology of Turkic peoples of Central Asia, there are two especially important deities: Jer-Su, god of earth-water, and Umai, goddess of women's nature and fertility. Umai is the wife of Tengri, the supreme pre-Islamic god of heaven. She is the spirit keeper of children; midwives address her during childbirth. Just after her wedding, a Kazakh young married woman puts butter into the hearth of her mother-in-law and calls upon Umai saying, "The fire-mother, the butter-mother, have mercy upon me!" Today, in Almaty, Kazakhstan, the Tengri-Umai Art Gallery and Festival are named after Jer-Su and Umai. The Turkic Umai can be compared with the Mongolian Ot – goddess of marriage and the earth as well as "queen of fire."

For the whole region, the division between women's and men's cultures is particularly significant. In general, this difference represents the inside world where women are responsible for recreating and preserving cultural structures within communities; and beyond, the outside world and the interactions of men. The major social roles of women are childbearing and transmission of cultural values, religion, and ethnic identity to the next generation. For women, social status and prestige depend strictly on their function and give them significant power within the community.

The gendering of everyday duties and performances can be explained in part by the fact that women's festivities have been served by female performers only. In the cities of Bukhara and Samarkand, such female entertainers were called *sazanda*. The majority were Bukharan Jews. In the Khorezm region of northwest Uzbekistan, such wedding entertainers are known as *khalfa*. They were from genealogically modest families and were often physically handicapped. In general, wedding parties have been and still are the most popular venue for Central Asian women's music-making.

In the past, professional female lamenters in the region were specialists. They knew the funeral rite with its sung dirges (called *agy* [plural *agylar*] among Turkmen, *zhoktau* among Kazakhs). But practically all women used to sing lullabies (*alla* among Tajiks, *khuva-khuv* among Turkmen). There are specific women's folksongs like the Turkmen *lele* timed to the spring season when tulips (*lele*) appear.

Traditionally arranged marriages are prevalent for Central Asian women. The bride's dowry is her life-long possession, inheritable only by her children. The dowry includes a complete set of clothing, household items, and (among the nomads) her own tent (*yurt*) and herds of sheep, horses, and camels. The amount and value of a woman's dowry

depends on the social class and wealth of the families involved. Nowadays, it may include a car and housing.

From the time of her engagement, the bride-to-be moves into a mythological time and space full of danger from different spirits. Fear of the evil eye, evil words, and evil deeds command very careful arrangements of every step in the process of transporting her from the patronage of her own family's ancestors and spirits to her future house with its own ancestors and spirits. The community of women takes full responsibility for this rite of passage from girlhood into womanhood, teaching her as the new member of their society not only practical but also mythological knowledge and experience. Every element of the wedding ceremony—the special dress, set of jewelry and amulets; mores and rituals; the day and time of the ceremony; first contact with the in-laws; and introducing the bride to the fire of the new hearth—and the entire period before the birth of her first child is a fascinating drama for all those involved.

Concerns about a woman's fertility and the safety of her pregnancy bring a full array of rituals. They include food restrictions (pregnant women should not eat camel meat or particular parts of sheep, yet their other food caprices should be obeyed); a requirement to stay away from death ceremonies; and avoiding some ordinary work activities (such as bringing water from the river after dusk or participating in digging channels). Aside from the logical explanation of keeping pregnant women free from heavy labor, in the community another more mythological concept prevails. From their perspective, caring about pregnant women is supported and strengthened by the fear of her anger and curse. She is particularly powerful because of her unique position between life and death that makes her closer to the spirits and gods. Some peoples have a special celebration in

honor of a pregnant woman (*zharys kazan* among Kazakhs) which aims to help a pregnant woman give birth smoothly, quickly, and without complications.

Goddesses of fertility (among nomads, *Umai*; among settled peoples, *Bibi* [Mother] *Fathima*) are thought to be present during childbirth and to support the new mother. At the same time, however, evil spirits or witches are trying to steal the newborn soul. The placenta is extremely significant, and should be carefully stored (dried out in order to be used as a remedy later on) or buried accompanied with ritual precaution. The baby's first forty days are crucial because s/he is in the process of moving into the world of living things. During that time, the most important rituals symbolize transporting the child from the womb of the mother to the womb of the cradle. For instance, under the pillow or mattress would be put a bow, arrow, or knife for boys, or a mirror and spindle for girls.

The highest function of women is to preserve this world and to create and maintain peace. They put into shape their own world by organizing a living space where everyone can feel safe and protected. They decorate houses and tents because the adorned dwelling is the symbol of its security. They populate this living space with living beings, but women's fertility also exerts influence upon plants and livestock. As shown in the Mongolian film, *The Story of the Weeping Camel* (2004), for example, a productive young married woman cares for a mother camel during and after her difficult birthing experience to ensure harmony in the world.

The birth of sons is considered preferable for number of reasons. Unlike girls who leave home upon marriage, sons remain at their natal domicile and participate in hard manual labor, defend the house if necessary in a war, and care for aged parents. Taking into account the higher death rate of boys and warriors and the shorter duration of men's

life in general, the significance of male children is understandable. Hence, great social merit accrues to the mother who gives birth to boys. After the birth of several sons, the mother's social status rises; ultimately she reaches the highest position in a matriarchy, that of the crone or aged wise woman. Such respected women conduct all economic and political businesses within the family, but they do so through their husbands. Such a woman may not only teach her daughters and granddaughters how to weave, sew, cook, treat guests and so on, but she also obtains more general power over her children and grandchildren, handing down to them her life experience along with religious knowledge.

Uzbek *otines* provide good examples of such respected women. They are female experts in religion and ritual and hold honorary positions not only in their families but also in the Muslim community at large, where they serve at the same level as *mullahs* whose task is to preach the faith. In Turkestan and Bukhara, they teach Quran recitation, prayer, and literacy to girls and women. Though they do not receive money for their work, they are given traditional gifts by individuals for special prayers and blessings. During the Soviet period, an *otin* either became a teacher in the secular state system or a practitioner of communally necessary but publicly derided religious functions in the gendered world of Central Asian Islamic piety.

In traditional societies, every woman coexists in the mutually supported group of other women. These groups consist of women of various generations who back up their social activity with gossip and news about community goings-on. All information is discussed and considered in detail by all the women. Tradition thus takes the place of psychotherapy as a mode for externalizing problems and concerns, helping participants to avoid many conflicts in everyday life.

Traditional life in women's culture presupposes the exchange of information through storytelling. In order to resolve a concrete situation or a problem, women draw upon mythological, historical, and religious instances, as well as on fairytales and examples from their own experiences. Women also weave their everyday lives into artistic linens and poetic rugs. For every item, they choose the necessary genre pattern; it may be a fairytale for entertainment and moral lessons for children, or an epic love story for adolescents and teenagers. Thus, possession of folklore and especially the knowledge of folk poetics had an enormous place in women's education. Even their everyday language is deeply saturated with proverbs and traditional sayings. A woman's ability to compose a bride's laments while parting with family, to create lullabies for children, and to frame funeral dirges for deceased parents serve her as self-expression and demonstrate her wisdom, knowledge, and cultural competence. Poetic genres also include the *aitys*, public competitions in poetic improvisation popular among the nomads, and, in settled communities (limited to the "women's half" of the house), women's instrumental music-making, often with the *dutar*, a two-stringed lute. Women's musical abilities are highly prized and the source of much prestige.

Women were excellent healers, specialists along with shamans in plant and food therapies, massage, and other branches of folk medicine, including bone-setting. Among Mongols, Buryats, Tibetans, Uzbeks, Kazakhs, the mountain Tajiks, the Sayan-Altai and Tuva peoples, to name a few, female shamans, known under various names, cared for the fire in the camp and made sacrifices to the fire of the clan for the sake of its prosperity and health. A daughter-in-law of Genghis Khan was such a woman. Generally speaking, women of high status (including great shamans) were well known in the Central Asian

past, especially among the nomads. The Tajik woman used to be the hostess of the hearth's fire, the *alou*; the kindling of the hearth was her exclusive duty. Russian anthropologists believe that sacralization of the fire became specifically part of women's religion within Central Asian Islam.

Among Central Asian nomadic peoples, women and men were almost equal in public entertainments, even wrestling, but especially in artistic contests like *aitys*. The life of Sara Tastanbekqyzy (1878-1916), a great Kazakh *akyn* (poet, musician, and improviser) provides an excellent example. As a young competitor, she recounted her own verbal duel with the legendary *akyn*, Birzhan-sal Kozhagulov (1831-1897). By custom, the defeated contestant recites from memory the entire poetic fight, and even to lose to such a master was a great honor. Their contest became the plot for the 1946 opera, "Birzhan and Sara," by Mukan Tulebaev (1913-1960).

Central Asia boasts an astonishing number of outstanding women performers. Among them are Dina Nurpeisova (1861-1955) from Western Kazakhstan, a glorious *dombra*-player and composer of the *kyui* (solo instrumental poems). Akhmetkyzy Akkyzdyn (1897-1986) was another prominent female *kyuishi* from Central Kazakhstan. Maira (Magira) Shamshutdinova (1896-1926) was an outstanding Kazakh singer and author of songs. Kazakh female singers who even conquered the opera stage include Kulash Bayseitova (1912-1957), Roza Baglanova (b. 1922), Roza Jamanova (b. 1928), Bibigil Tulegenova (b. 1929), and Roza Rymbaeva (b. 1957), as well as such renowned traditional epic singers of South Kazakhstan as Shamshat Tulepova (1929-2002) and Elmira Zhanabergenova (b. 1970), the author of numerous songs in the traditional epic style. Today, Zhadyra Amanova, a Kazakh woman who plays the *kobyz*, traditionally a

men's instrument of shamanic origin, is as famous in the region as are its female Uzbek poets, among whom are Zulfiya, Uvaysi, and Nodirabegim.

Nowadays women play even greater roles in the society. They are counted among the region's most famous poets (such as Akushtap Bakhtigereeva, Mariam Hakimjanova, Tursimkhan Abdrakhmanova, Fariza Ungarsinova, Marfuga Aitkhojina, Kuliash Akhmetova, Gulnar Salikbaeva, Gulrukhsor Sofieva, Tovshan Esenova, and Nadezhda Lushnikova), writers, composers (the most prominent are Gaziza Zhubanova (1927-1993) of Kazakhstan and Zarrina Mirshakar (b. 1947) of Tajikistan), artists, actors, journalists, teachers, and scholars. In the field of women's art and folklore study, several dozen excellent Ph.D. dissertations have been successfully defended by Central Asian women. Especially in the field of ethnography and folkloristics, these describe and analyze certain themes of traditional life which are approachable by and accessible only to women.

The effects of Soviet gender politics resounds strongly in Central Asia, particularly in cities and towns, where, among indigenous populations, men and women typically occupied separate social spaces. The Russification and sovietization of the ex-Soviet republics of Central Asia led to women's participation in new forms of the arts, in which they achieved high acclaim. These artists include celebrated Tajik singers of Bukharan Jewish descent such as Rena Galibova (1915-1995), extremely popular Uzbek female singers like Yulduz Uzmanova, a superstar whose fame began in 1991 when she won in the First Voice of Asia Festival, and Munadjat Yulchieva (b. 1960), whose her first name means "prayer" or "invocation," a brilliant performer of Uzbek folk and classic songs whose voice quality and range have been compared with that of America's Aretha Franklin. Sevara Nazarkhan, in her twenties, is another admired Uzbek singer,

songwriter and musician. These women have changed the traditional masculine image of Uzbek music in the West and at home. All remind us that female singers and instrumentalists traditionally epitomized high culture in the region. Most importantly, they show how the successful fusion of the traditional and the modern helps Central Asian women to make bold transitions onto the international music scene. Expert in the Mongolian traditional long song known as *urtyn duu*, Namjiliin Norovbanzad (1931-2001) is regarded as the greatest Mongol singer of the twentieth century. Popular singer Salamat Sadikova (b. 1956) represents the modern voice of Kyrgyzstan, working in a new fusion of tradition and modernity. All have their own CDs, video clips, and on-line blogs.

After the political and economic collapse of the USSR, women again heroically master new branches of business, trade, and the arts. The region's new market mentality and the growth of its business life throw down an enormous challenge to the women of Central Asia. But they have taken up the task, and their courageous voices are becoming stronger and louder.

Alma Kunanbaeva and Izaly Zemtsovsky

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