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Alma B. Kunanbaeva

The Phenomenon of the Musical Epic Tradition in Kazakh Folklore

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The epic branch of folklore is part of the developed and currently productive field of Kazakh folk art. This is evident in the materials identified during recent expeditions and in the explosion of academic and public interest in this topic (recordings, radio programs, and publications).

The work of philologists and folklorists can provide a wealth of knowledge to ethnomusicologists. Kazakhstan's philologists and folklorists are especially helpful, the majority of whom (i.e., researchers) are not only experts, but also carriers of the epic tradition of certain regions of Kazakhstan. Their works include information valuable to musicologists about the forms of the epos, the basic genre classification of epic works, the ways the epos evolved, its historicism, its influence on contemporary culture, its interconnections with the heritage of various peoples, and the detailed characterization of common plots.

In the field of musicology, Boris G. Erzakovich deserves the main credit for the study of the Kazakh epos, in whose works we find the basic division of the Kazakh *melos*<sup>1</sup> into the song-like and the recitative as well as the typology of the musical shaping of epic tales. According to Erzakovich's classification, from the point of view of the musical form, the Kazakh epos has three basic types: *song-recitation*, *musical-illustrative*, and *musical-summarization*.

This article essentially concerns the first variety of the Kazakh musical epos – the song-recitation – as a more widespread and, possibly, genetically older form. I admit I have not yet encountered in my expeditions any examples of the illustrative form of epic plots (wherein the basic content of the tale is in prose, and the direct speech of characters is vocalized to song melodies of a lyric nature).

I also exclude from this study examples of the musical-summarization form of the epos (which presents a prose story on an epic subject, and then its instrumental version in the form of a concluding musical piece, executed on the *dombra*—a long-necked two-stringed lute made from walnut or maple and played by plucking). These works must be examined through specialized studies of the genre system of Kazakh instrumental music. The problems of the genetic, historical and morphological connection of the instrumental and vocal-speech forms of the Kazakh epos exceed the scope of this article and require special study.

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<sup>1</sup> *Melos*: the **melodic substance** of music and song, its **song-like tunefulness**. Etymologically it designates something in music parallel with the Greek concept of *logos*.

Taking into account the enormous extent of the territory populated by Kazakhs and the insufficient academic understanding of the folklore of the different regions of Kazakhstan as a whole, and from the point of view of the epos in particular, it is premature to speak about a certain unitary style or an epic Kazakh "dialect." Questions of the musical stylistic dialectology of Kazakhstan require the collection of factual material in considerably more detail.

However, even at the present level of academic understanding of the material it is possible to designate several regions of Kazakhstan where the vibrant presence of the epic tradition has caught the attention of researchers. It is between these regional traditions that researchers see structural and functional similarities which go beyond the limits of musical stylistic characteristics and which make it possible to unite them along a whole series of parameters into a unitary Kazakh epic tradition genre.

The Russian scholarship set the precedent and deserves enormous credit in pointing out the significance of the "folkloric tradition" concept, and advancing its documentation and study as an independent category. These scholars understood that the concept does not coincide with administrative divisions, and rather should be based on the study of the concrete musical practice of a people, closely related with its ethnic history.

In such cases in musical ethnography the discussion concerns the so-called "local" (dialectal) traditions which are connected with a specific musical style, have a set of stylistic characteristics that are idiosyncratic for each case, and sufficiently differentiated from adjacent (intra-ethnos) folklore traditions. In this sense, the ethnogeographical principle is foregrounded against the entire variety of inter-dialectal connections and internal laws governing their formation.

Recognizing the relevance of this perspective in contemporary folkloric studies, I consider it timely to raise a question about the qualitative nature of folklore traditions which has, as with folklore in general, a dominant characteristic of syncretisticality,<sup>2</sup> which comes out as a primordial, inherent, integral attribute of a genre.

The specific goal of this article is the description of the phenomenon of the "Kazakh epic tradition," taken in its integrity as a model of the world of the epic system. One must bear in mind that the Kazakh epic tradition appears as a result of complex interrelations between a number of basic components, such as:

1. The system of epic genres;
2. The motivation of the epic tradition (this tradition's function, goal, or direction, i.e., purposefulness)
3. The epic audience;

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<sup>2</sup> *Syncretisticality*: From *syncretic*. A quality of fusing the substances of elements that are now usually differentiated (in modern times) but which may have been interrelated and indissoluble (in ancient times). *Primitive syncretism* is the theory of Alexander N. Veselovsky (1838-1906) that all arts come from a primary (i.e., primordial, prehistoric), indivisible form (see his *Historical Poetics*, 1940). {Tr.}

4. Storytelling<sup>3</sup> school, i.e., mechanisms of retention and reproduction of tradition and the issue of maintaining storytelling schools to professionalize the work of carrying tradition;
5. The personality of the epic “singer-of-tales” (hereafter, storyteller);
6. Epic *intonatsiia* – the intrinsic peculiarity in terms of musicality, style, form and articulation of the performance (hereafter, intonation);<sup>4</sup>
7. The musical epic mentality.

### 1. The system of epic genres.

Performance of epic tales about heroes is at the center of the epic tradition. Included in this tradition are the heroic legends which are both enormous in length and known to the entire Turkic language world, as well as the legends which may be limited in their geographic spread to the area occupied by one clan. Frequently these legends are included in the extensive cycles of clan genealogies, which carefully transmit the clan history from generation to generation. These are the predominantly topical-narrative works, saturated with concrete events and abounding with names of legendary personalities, which often have historical prototypes. Usually the study of the epos is limited to the study of precisely this field of traditional epic art. Undoubtedly, this approach is justifiable. But while a philologist-folklorist may see the justification for this limitation of approach to be self-evident, it is insufficient from an ethnomusicological point of view.

The fact is that around the performed stories and legends, there is a cluster of epic genres, as though around a unitary stem: but, strictly speaking, these genres do not resemble the epos in the mind of scholars, as they are not long narratives. Among these genres are the *terme*, *tolgau*, *osiet* (*naqyl soz*), *arnau*, *khat* and others. In essence, these are brief, plotless songs of edification, philosophical essays about life and death, as well as about place and the role of the human being, and also letter-messages, dedications, and admonitions. Also belonging to the genre subgroups inside the epic tradition are *bastau-en* (“song-beginnings”), which usually precede the performance of lengthy legends, in which the storyteller (*zhylrau* or *zhylshi*) invokes inspiration, and turns to the audience with an enumeration of the legends he or she knows. In the system of epic genres, ritual “genre doubles”<sup>5</sup> occupy an important place. These doubles are brought to life through the social role of the storyteller (more details about this later), for example, the songs of

<sup>3</sup> Here storyteller means *skazitel'*: an itinerant poet and singer who perpetuates the oral traditions of a family or village— according to Albert B. Lord, **the singer of tales**. {Tr.}

<sup>4</sup> Here, *intonation* does not imply the technical quality of performance (i.e., false or in tune) but rather the quality of the musical content. It refers to ‘thought-*intonatsiia*,’ as Boris Asafiev (1884-1949) termed it. *Intonatsiia* exists in human social consciousness. Human thought, in order to become expressed in sound, becomes *intonatsia*, i.e., is intoned. Consequently the process of intoning is a process of disclosure of the human consciousness in specific forms of musical art. Intoning is an activity of the human intellect, the distinctive ‘figural-intonational’ form of human thinking. Only the human being intones. (See: Izaly Zemtsovsky, “An Attempt at a Synthetic Paradigm,” in *Ethnomusicology*, v. 41 [1997], No. 2, 190-192. Also see Barbara Krader, “Recent Achievements in Soviet Ethnomusicology with Remarks on Russian Terminology,” *Yearbook for Traditional Music*, vol. 22 [1990], 9.)

<sup>5</sup> See the article by A. Kunanbaeva “‘Genre Doubles’ as a Universal Characteristic of Traditional Culture” (2002).

the wedding and funeral cycles, such as *toi bastar*, *betashar* (the unveiling of the bride's face), as well as *konil aitu* and *konil kos* (songs of comfort, mourning, lamentation and condolence). The genres of epic tradition include works also dedicated to the significant events of the present, the way a newspaper chronicle serves us today, illustrating people's understanding of then-present day processes, and their judgments about them.

Of course this type of content does not exclusively belong to the system of epics. In the end, all manifestations of the artistic consciousness of a people are reduced to the modeling of the totality of world creation, and the determination of the position of the human being within it.

## **2. The motivation of the epic tradition.**

One of the factors uniting the abovementioned genres into a system is their functional use, i.e., their *purposefulness*. Though there is an apparent syncretism of functions inherent in any work of folklore, it cannot serve to unambiguously determine the purpose of the performance of a particular song. At the same time genres could have aesthetic, sacred, communicative, informative or other possible functions. The integrity of any genre system is, in my opinion, achieved primarily by the dominance of one function above all the functions present. The epic tradition has a dominant function as a teacher of ethics, being openly didactic, with a kind of sermonizing pathos and high ethical tension.

The entire system of epic genres first of all regulates the personality's social relations, intertwining a private life with the universal river of eternity, concentrating in each separate present moment the entire past and future. Altogether, systemized epic genres present a moral code, concretely defining the entire ethical value system of an ethnos. Historical conditions up to the very beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century caused the protection of the integrity of territory, language, and culture to remain topical. Together with an increase in ethnic self-awareness, this determined the domination of the socializing function of art, which was best suited to carry out the kind of structured genre system of the epos.

In order to protect the ethnos' present and future interests, the emerging new generation had to master the vital knowledge about a people's past: it was a requirement of life itself. Only the epic branch of Kazakh folk art, having accrued within itself many centuries of Kazakh historical experience, could carry out this role, and only the epic tradition preserved the flexible mechanism for the transfer of this experience.

### 3. The epic audience.

The way epic tradition clearly is directed at live listeners assumes the presence of an active audience, which rightfully can be called the "epic audience."<sup>6</sup> Coming out as the collective censor, the epic audience is located in an effective "dialogue" with the epic singer, and through him or her also with the entire world of the epos. The epic tradition can only function fully when it occurs in the epic milieu which developed within a system of accepted values. This milieu forms the tradition through the milieu's entire world view system, and generates powerful evolutionary impulses. The epic audience, realizing the epic tradition's potential, produces new generations of storytellers, thus preserving a means of succession in the transfer of the positive experience of history. At those historical moments unfavorable for the stable reproduction of the epic tradition, it is precisely the epic audience which becomes the passive keeper of tradition, fixing its basic parameters in memory. Thus, in the difficult times that came during and after World War II, when the natural life of tradition was disrupted, the epic audience really contributed to the revival of epic tradition in the Kyzylorda (formerly Kzyl-Ordinsky) region, where in recent decades the tradition remains vibrant.

### 4. Storytelling school.

One of the necessary conditions for the natural existence of epic tradition is a highly developed professionalization of practitioners of oral tradition, which preserves the mechanism of the tradition's transfer and reproduction. This professionalization takes the form of a traditional method of instruction and training within the framework of specific schools for storytellers using a teacher-student (or teacher-learner) system. Though schools of storytelling appear at first glance to be spontaneous, they represent durable and ancient traditions of learning and instruction. One of the most common types of school is that of the storytelling family dynasties, where one becomes familiar with the storytelling craft from the earliest years, at first passively, as a background fact of life. This stage of living traditions is identical for all people. Then, when the student is ready to try to reproduce a traditional performance, in the process of actively mastering storytelling practice and philosophy (a stage that takes place within the framework of either a formal, traditional school, or virtual, subconscious "school," where the student does not realize he or she is being taught), and later on beginning to appear as a teacher's practical understudy, the student is finally ready to appear independently.

As a result of this kind of professionalization the storyteller's personality is formed: the basic pulsating nerve of a living epic tradition.

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<sup>6</sup> For more on this aspect of epic storytelling, see Boris Putilov (1919-1997) "Epic *Skazitel'stvo*: Typology and Specificity," 1997, Moscow, in Russian. Many basic characteristics of epic performance were brilliantly studied by B.N. Putilov on the basis of different ethnic traditions, including the Kazakh tradition. See especially the first part of the book "*Skazitel'* and Epic Milieu."

## 5. The personality of the epic storyteller.

The personality of the epic storyteller is a complex socio-psychological matter. The storyteller's actions clearly show the medium's aesthetic needs, the social-ethical standards and values of society, the psychological constants of behavior and other aspects of ethnic self-awareness. Storytellers make these things concrete through their behavior throughout their entire life, and in the process of creation they put them out into the world in the concentrated form of each single act of performance. The storyteller does not see his or herself as someone just "singing songs," but as being called to carry out an important mission. Hence, we see faith in the storyteller's magic gift, coming from the most ancient times. The storyteller understands his or her role as a living carrier and conductor of a system of spiritual values built over centuries, and this understanding is the storyteller's inalienable intellectual property, which superimposes its indelible imprint on all aspects of his or her life.

The storyteller's personality in the moment of performance becomes the dazzling intersection point between the entire enormous universe of the culture of the past (history, philosophy, folk ethics and aesthetics presented in the system of epic genres) and the goal-oriented future that is taking shape. This intersection occurs in an active dialogue with the epic audience, which at that given moment is embodying the present of the culture. The epic singer creates the entire epic world in sound by the very act of music-making, thus structuring the listeners' own life in their consciousness. This performance gives the listener greater understanding of his or her own personal life, activating the conscious perception of life, connecting the concrete person's single life to the whole self-awareness of a people.

The epic world does not consist of separate works, nor does it consist of just epic plots. The epic world sucks the listener into the rhythm of life itself being created and unfurled. Specifically, from these positions, on the assertion of the storyteller, the life of the human spirit is measured by the totality of the moments of empathy between the listeners and the storyteller. Time spent otherwise, not listening to epics, consists of the mortal existence of the body, living by memory. Hence, it becomes clear that there is need for a constant renewal of this dialogue, regardless of the fact that the dialogue's text is thoroughly known to all participants.

## 6. Epic intonation.

The *markedness*—the specific recognizable sound pattern—of epic intonation, its intense and elevated singing [literally—*intoning*], helps the storyteller fulfill his or her basic and crucial meditative function.

The very manner of epic singing at its root differs from song singing. Most importantly, it differs in its evident unusualness and specificity. The ancient nature of this manner of epic rendering can be seen by its comparability with the timbre of the *qobyz*, a shamanic

musical instrument. There have been some very interesting attempts at imitating the practitioners of this ancient magical instrumental timbre coloring, which are successful when done in a state of ecstatic enthusiasm. Let us add to this the existence in folk aesthetics of the special characteristics of the storyteller's manner (for instance, the term *dauysynyng qongyrauy bar* meaning "in its voice are special timbre overtones," where *qonyrau* means "small bell"). Thus, storytellers all through the Kyzylorda region have the melody in their repertoire called "Tasbergennin Mangramasy," used with different lyrics. The melody's author (the once-famous storyteller Tasbergen) possessed so powerful and uncommon a voice, that, it is said, as many as three hundred riders came from as far away as thirty kilometers from three directions just to hear him clear his throat before his performance. This melody, according to legend, was like the "mangrau" – the roar and lowing of animals.

To this day the Kazakh people put their faith in the magic gift of the storyteller, consisting not only of the ability to remember the many lines, but also in the huge emotional impact of epic intonation. During field work I repeatedly recorded such expressions as, for example, *arqasy bar*: "behind him (behind his back) one senses the patron spirit," and *arqasy kozyp ketti*: "[his/her] spine was set on fire (was in a state of ecstasy)." The storyteller was so powerfully carried by creative inspiration that he did not even pay attention to the need for a break when we had to change the recording tape, continuing to sing for nobody, as though performing before an imaginary audience. It is natural that the psycho-physiological state of the storyteller, conditioned chiefly by the social function of legend, is imprinted on all his musical expressions.

The intonation of the storyteller is far from the notorious "epic calmness," understood as a firmly impersonal demeanor. The storyteller, quite the opposite, has a dramatically saturated, expressive, oratory kind of speech. The information the storyteller brings to the listener is deduced not only from the text, or from the verbal level. Like any orator, the storyteller employs all means of action accessible to him or her. The verbal text gives the account of the event and subject, its value, its teachings about how to act, or even about a way of life. The melody transmits the storyteller's persuasiveness, a spirited assertion of truth, and the emotional reinforcement of the performance's outcome (right up to a kind of spell-bound state: a hypnotic state, in a sense). In other words, the meaning brought by the musical intonation here is not, and cannot be reduced to the verbal meaning alone. The musical epic intonation, inseparable from the word, has an independent goal. While the word gives the sense and meaning of narration, the performer's manner gives the *musical text* [as if the melody tells a story parallel to the narrative story] and the entire context of the genre, i.e., the essence of epic intonation.

## **7. The musical epic mentality.**

Epic intonation as a phenomenon does not just refer to the epic manner of singing. The complex phenomenon of epic intonation also includes the specific method of organizing the sonic material, structurally expressed in this triad: beginning, recitative, and

conclusion. In this crystallized form,<sup>7</sup> the beginning draws the listener's attention, and gives the necessary acceleration before starting the recitation of text, being sung in a prolonged sound, in the storyteller's upper vocal range. The central component of the triad is its formula of sharp clichéd rhythmic intonation, striving for multiple repetitions. The tendency is toward infinite build-up, disrupted by the "unexpected" deceleration in the last verse of the "tirade,"<sup>8</sup> which leads to the final, full stop in the conclusion. The central and final divisions of the epic are respectively named using the accepted folk terminology *uzyn sonar*: "long pursuit, hunting," and *kayyrma*: "turning." These terms fully correspond to the relationship between the central and final sections. The audience receives the prolonged notes, the jubilation<sup>9</sup> with the change of tempo and texture—in complete contradiction with the spoken [syllabic] pulsation—as the long-awaited conclusion, the purpose of the previous tension-building process.

Kazakh epic works were always performed with the instrumental accompaniment of the *dombra*, and this was reflected in the unique type of musical mentality in the epic tradition—a mentality which is not that of a song, by its nature. In the song tradition the instrument plays the accompaniment which frequently goes into unison with the melody; in epic intonation the instrument's value is somewhat different. The epic musical thought process does not operate with a separate melody, but a single, integrated set of vocal, muscular-motor and timbral components. The fact that a storyteller cannot recite the text of a story without the aid of an instrument, repeatedly noted by researchers, reveals the syncretic nature of the epic musical mentality, closely connected to ancient, primordial syncretism.<sup>10</sup>

Just to enumerate the components of the epic tradition's system for the purpose of this article reveals the incredible complexity of their interrelations within the system. However, the present day reality of the tradition is even more complicated. In each separate region the epic system influences the instrumental, song and ritual traditions of the locality, and these traditions in return influence the epic system. In practice, the epic tradition exists in complex symbiosis with the local style of a region, within the framework of certain storytelling schools, and in a particular storyteller's expression. At each level the tradition acquires its own specific profile and demonstrates a striking variety of incarnations.

It should be noted that not one of the components of system individually, by itself, can be a sure indicator that an epic tradition is alive and vibrant.

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<sup>7</sup> The form is crystallized in the sense of the structure being standardized, stabilized, made canonical, as in the formation of a mold from which future pieces of art will be made. {Tr.}

<sup>8</sup> The prosodic term "tirade" (*tirada*) here describes the original and most ancient form of epic composition: a verse form in which an indefinite numbers of lines are joined by a single rhyme pattern and marked by a relatively complete poetic meaning (as one verbal phrase). Epic "tirades," consisting of short verses, are called *zhyr* (the origin of the word *zhyrau* – 'singer of tales').

<sup>9</sup> Jubilation here has the sense of the musical passage of vocalization without words, changing from what came previously, typically a passage done uniquely by different storytellers. {Tr.}

<sup>10</sup> *Primitive syncretism* is the theory of Alexander N. Veselovsky that all arts come from a primary (i.e., primordial, prehistoric), indivisible form (see his *Historical Poetics*, 1940) {Tr.}

For instance, in no way is the knowledge of a separate poetic text removed from the general context of the system of epic genres (which sometimes happens in the course of learning a published text) and performance in the tradition of song-like intoning sufficient to make an assertion about the vibrancy and safe preservation of a tradition, even in the case of the performance of a tradition's longest epic tale.

The musical tune by itself, separated from the other components of the epic system, also cannot serve as a comprehensive indicator of a tradition, since outside the live epic intonation and outside the social context it cannot be taken as the incontrovertible mark of an epic.

Tradition is only organic and fruitful in the presence of the collective action of all its components. Even one of the components of the system falling away leads gradually to its transformation, regeneration or extinction.

The destruction of systemic connections in the field of epic genres removes the basic functional center of tradition, a loss that is in turn perceptible in the manner of music making. For example, the major narrative epic tales have disappeared as they have been converted into short songs, with the admonition to moral behavior coming from the stage [rather than in a traditional community setting]: in other words, putting them before a [drastically] different audience.

The reverse effect can be seen in the changes of intonation caused by imitation of the opera and *estrada*,<sup>11</sup> and other kinds of modern performance valued in urban culture. This kind of vocal method deprives the epic tradition of the sort of impact which should—by definition—be produced by epic intonation.

This article by no means covers the complexity of the phenomenon of epic tradition. In the analytical process, it is unavoidable that one simplifies and roughens the subject, homogenizing and ignoring the large number of nuanced dialectical connections of tradition with the entire background context of its existence. An adequate reflection of tradition is really only possible within a process of artistic perception and creative reproduction, a process that is beyond the scope of analytical description. Nevertheless, despite the many limitations of our methodology, an attempt at the theoretical understanding and scientific description of the Kazakh epic tradition is necessary and timely, as it represents an important stage in the tradition's own development and self-awareness.

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<sup>11</sup> *Estrada*: a kind of small stage entertainment form that is still today extremely popular in Russia, Kazakhstan, and other post-Soviet countries.

In Place of a Bibliography<sup>12</sup>

Instead of giving this small article the entire extensive bibliography it requires, I will give just a few works that relate directly to the study of the Kazakh musical epos, the epic tradition and the art of the epic singer:

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\_\_\_\_\_. "Pevets i epos: o nekotorykh aspektakh sovremennogo izucheniia problemy." In the book: 'Dzhangar' i problemy epicheskogo tvorchestva tiurko-mongol'skikh narodov. Moscow, 1980. ["Singer and epos: on a few aspects of modern study of the problem" in the book "'Dzhangar' and the problems of the epic art of the Turkic-mongol peoples."]  
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Sergei Yu. Nekliudov. *Geroicheskie eposy mongol'skikh narodov*. Moscow, 1984. ["The heroic epic of the Mongol peoples."]

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<sup>12</sup> Citation author names and titles will be transliterated using the Library of Congress system of transliteration. {Tr.}