

Psychology of the Perception of Kazakh Musical Epic¹

The Kazakh epic was an encyclopedia of the long history of the nation, and it exists in the oral tradition until today. The epic tradition (*zhyraulyq* -- from *zhyr* 'epic', 'epic poetry') has been best preserved in the South West and West of the modern Republic of Kazakhstan, especially in the Aral region where I have been working for years². In Kazakh culture, epic singers (the *zhyrau*) are keepers of a collective memory that connects oral traditions with shamanic spirituality and nomadic philosophy.

The *zhyraulyq* is a professional tradition. Its professionalism is demonstrated not only by the economic aspect that is making a livelihood from the performance, but also by the education and the level of mastery of the epic recital. The *zhyrau* must obtain a specific style of singing -- the vocal quality of the epic bard should be different from the voice of other singers. It should be characterized by dramatically oratorical recitative which he delivers in a raspy, guttural voice, accompanying himself on a two-stringed *dombra* (a plucked lute). The accompaniment is interwoven with the text, and a singer of tales cannot narrate a tale without it. The raspy vocal style is reminiscent of the sound of the *qobyz*, a two-stringed bowed lute played by Kazakh shamans. The magical power of the *zhyrau* extends to his instrument. It is considered that the instrument has its own soul, and can bring good or bad fortune. After the death of the bard, the instrument has to find a new owner; otherwise it will play at night and scare the children. That is why, before his death, the singer of tales usually finds the new owner of his instrument. This corresponds to the transfer of shamanistic power in ancient cultures.

The performance of the epic took place during the social meeting in a *yurt*, a woolen tent of the Central Asian nomads. The perception of musical epic in traditional milieu arises from the formation of a system of coordinates, of which extramusical factors constitute the basis.

In the context of the structure of socio-artistic institutions of the Kazakhs, perception of the epic is bound with the social status of the epic singer, the *zhyrau*, as spokesman of the higher, philosophical dimension of traditional life. The entire corpus of songs of the *zhyrau*, which includes classical epic tales as well as short philosophical essays, is perceived by the traditional audience as a holistic verbal act, a unitary action with its complex dramaturgy and dynamics.

Storytellers themselves understand their performance as the creation of a panorama of traditional life with which listeners can empathize, and this empathy becomes a way to measure the vitality of the human spirit.

The syncretism of perception encompasses also the non-isolatable nature of the act of epic music-making from its interactive context, where epic songs alternate with discussions (*monologue*, *dialogue*, and "*polylogue*") on various themes. Indeed, the songs themselves call for these discussions. The mastery of the discussants and their knowledge of tradition lead the singer, as it were, by analogy or association, and direct the selection of themes in the composition.

The singers themselves put emphasis on their dependence on the audience. This is conclusively evidenced in the statements made by individual *zhyrau*. For instance: "The expectations of the listeners give birth to song"; "The understanding of the deep essence of the song multiplies the strength and energizes the memory of the singer"; "The good listener is wings and buttress to the songs," and so like.

The traditional listener does not remain passive even in the performer-audience equation, and is involved in the utterance act. His role manifests itself in his participation in the discussions preceding and concluding song, as well as in the approving, appreciative exclamations shouted to the singer. Interestingly, these acclamations may not be spontaneous and chaotic, but have independent status in the framework of *musical* form. Knowledge of the canons of the tradition of perception of epic singing manifests itself at once on this parameter too, though it may seem fully personal. (Let us not forget that such supportive exclamations and encouraging shouts have also an opposite relationship: their influence on the progress of song and the inspiration they give to the singer of tales).

In the process of establishing contact with a new audience the *zhyrau* elicits the coming forth of a "group of experts," as it were, or that of a specialist, and in the course of the entire performance takes cues from the latter's perception. This person becomes an interpreter ("mediator") between the singer and the rest of the audience, and assists the song-recitalist in "entering" the act of music-making and "exiting" from it. It is he too, who kindles the discussions and determines the "subject" of music-making.

Following the customary sequence of epic genres, the *zhyrau* begins the singing with the *bastau*, i.e., "opening, introductory song." In *bastau*, a personal song of the *zhyrau*, created by him, may be performed. Alternatively, a *bastau* of some famous singer of tales of the past may be sung.

In it the singer calls for inspiration and establishes contact with the audience. The group of opening songs is important, but its basic function is to capture the audience's attention and to gradually prepare the listeners for the larger epic rendering. Then, normally without significant interruption, come the "words of edification," the so-called *terme* (lit. 'to string' -- 'to string something like pearls', 'threading'): a collection of aphorisms, which enunciate the ethic code of traditional society and its moral values.

The length of time that the *zhyrau* dwells on this level -- the *terme* level -- depends on the individuals who make up the audience: young/old, married/celibates, the prevalence of men or women, and so on, as well as on the audience's readiness for transition to lengthy recitation. And only after the basic group of listeners had formed itself does the *zhyrau* pass on to the narration proper of the epic subject (such as *Korogly*, *Qoblandy*, *Alpamys*, and some more). These major tales can contain up to twenty thousand lines.

In the progress toward the central moment of performance -- to the narration of long epic stories -- contact with the listeners changes in form. From the direct dialogue with the audience, the *zhyrau*, traveling through time and space, as it were, gradually autonomizes himself and "leads away" the listeners in his wake. This motion on the time scale is akin to the *shamanistic* act, and in many ways inherits its imperatives: widespread tales of some "wondrous happenings" at the moment of epic song-utterance (thunder, lightning, storm, and even rain in a region in which rainfall is extremely rare), taboos on interruption of the singing and other unwonted intrusions (it would be a violation of the process of birth of the song, that is like the birth of the human being), the dangers ensuing from the presence of ritually unclean persons (who had broken vows), belief in the incarnation of a protective spirit in the singer, and so on, and so forth.

Departure from the performance act (or "return") is likewise gradual and occurs at several levels: *tolgau* songs (musing on the foundation of being), and then *arnau*, dedications and well-wishes to listeners.

Considering the entire functional complex of traditional epic *zhyraulyq*, one can speak of the formation of a specific epic audience which could be defined as no less professional than the singer of tales. To the traditional listener, communion with the *zhyrau* is "journey," "ascension," "rebirth." The need for renewal of this communion owes itself not only to esthetic desiderata, but also to the recognition of the beneficent social function of the epic performer.

Change in the traditional life of the Kazakh in the context of well-known historical conditions, brought about the transformation of the basic criteria of being in our time. Thus, the esthetic approach to traditional art began to take root, a rupture of the holistic perception of the *zhyrau's* creativity had occurred, and discreteness of perception gradually began to take force: summing rather than synthesizing. This reflected itself on the repertoire of the contemporary epic performers, the singers of tales.

The great epic form began to shape itself differently, not through spiritual union of the community, but in subordination to narrowly musical norms. Autonomous perception of tunes and their "absolutization" in performance had begun. The logics inherent in the unfolding of the long epic gave way to brief songs of moralizing character. This reflected itself even in the terminological designation of the singer of tales: *termeshi* (lit., performer of *terme*).

Young and urban listeners often experience mere informational interest in epic tales today. This interest is satisfied after one or two hearings. More "comfortable" forms of appreciation of epos begin to prevail: a book, or the theatricalization of adapted versions. Furthermore, means of mass information with their bent toward many-voiced and variegated stage shows, consisting of two or three-minute "numbers" (i.e. a sequence of short onstage performances), have contributed to the processes of this transformation.

If restoration of traditional criteria and renaissance of the traditional perception are possible at all, they can only be achieved through active cultural self-cognizance and the return of culture to the "epic environment," to the distinctive epic milieu as a socio-artistic way of life.

Terme³

Open my heart! Overflow!
Speak my tongue! Stretch and grow!
With mind and thought together joined
Plumb the depths and pluck the pearl!
For all the thirsty assembled here
Let your saddle-bag untied appear!

For us what's called the people's coat
From of old by others cut,
Because in custom I'm no expert,
Its ends loosened are and frayed.
Humbly let me speak my words
And may the folk my faults forgive.
Oh my heart! Rush not nor stumble
Midst clamoring throng be not bewildered.
I am the student of a master,
Whose arm has skill, whose work is solid.
He traveled through the maze of words
And without coal his silver forged.
You've told my horse to ride straight on,
And my heart you've raised on high.
My people, let me touch your hearts,
Sweet mare's milk may I let you drink.
The blunderer has found his way,
I've entered the ring and loosed my clothes.
In this assembled market grand,
The goods with all their prices marked,
Both cheap and dear are on display.
The listeners thirsty side by side,
Oh my red tongue, be not afraid!
This is your day to speak and stretch!

¹ The paper was read at the 8th European Seminar in Ethnomusicology held in Geneva, September 1991 but was never published. I present here one of the most glorious sample of the Kazakh epical poetic genre *terme*. My text is but a brief comment to that song which translation is placed immediately after the paper. It has been included in the Festschrift dedicated to the jubilee of the distinguished Slovak colleague Dr. Ivan Mačák but the book has not yet published.

² See in more details in a few publications of mine (in English): "Kazakh Music," *The New Grove's Dictionary of Music & Musicians* (London, 2001), Second edition, vol. 13: 431--438; "Kazakh Music," *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music, Vol. 6: The Middle East*. Edited by Virginia Danielson, Scott Marcus, and Dwight Reynolds. New York and London: Routledge, 2002: 949--964; "The Kazakh Epic: Modernization and Return," *Turkish Music Quarterly*, Spring-Summer, vol. III (1990), nos. 2-3: 1--3; "The Kazakh Zhyrau as the Singer of Tales," *Ethnohistorische Wege und Lehrjahre eines Philosophen. Festschrift, dedicated to Prof. Lawrence Krader*. Ed. by D. Schorkowitz. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1995: 293--303; "Nomads," *The Silk Road: Connecting Cultures, Creating Trust. The 36th Annual Smithsonian Folklife Festival On the National Mall, Washington, D.C., 2000*: 81--87; "Nomadic Civilization as the Art of Interpretation," *Music Along the Silk Road* (The Silk Road Project at University of California at Berkeley, Cal Performances, 2003): 60—62.

³ This is the first English publication of the *terme* translated by Dr. Walter Feldman (New York) with my assistance. The text belongs to a famous Zhiembay-*zhyrau* (Zhiembay Duzbembet-uly, 1864--1929), father of Rustembek Zhiembayev (1905--1966) and grandfather of Kosheney (1946--1973) and Bidas (b. 1951) Rustembekov, all of whom were great singers of tales in their local tradition and belong to the so-called "family epic school" in the Southwestern Kazakhstan (Qarmaqshy district, Kyzylorda region). Fortunately, Bidas is very active today and runs a few groups of gifted children chosen to perform epic songs. Their repertoire is known to other bards of the region as well, and one of them is Almasbek Almatov (b. 1956) who has toured internationally throughout Western Europe, the USA, Russia, Turkey, and Mongolia.