

History, Culture and Music in Kazakhstan

By Jacob Robishaw, Zarifah Agardy, and Stephanie Littig

University of Arizona

November 27, 2016

History

Kazakhstan is currently home to 17.5 million people with a rich history for a uniquely positioned country sharing 1450 miles of shoreline with the Caspian Sea. In fact, they are the 9th largest country in the world with a small army, small navy, and small air force. During the Soviet expansion, Kazakhstan played well into moving its nomadic Kazakh's sheep herders, farmers, and fisherman into urbanization efforts starting in the late 19th century and early 20th century into Soviet planned cities with wide streets, multi-storied buildings, and outlying industrialization surrounding the cities. Soviet and Slavic migration included 400,000 Russians, 1,000,000 Slavs, Germans, and Jews around the turn of the century. The majority of the settlements initially were spread out and tiny. With 7000 streams draining into the Aral and Caspian Seas, the native population ran a nomadic existence with goats, sheep, and pigs [swine] as their mainstay for economy. The Soviets were quick to notice the vast natural resources which spread out from the mostly hilly plateaus into the mountainous and arid areas of the country. Kazakhstan inherited Soviet exploitation of mining operations which fed the military complex with copper, zinc, lead, coal, titanium, manganese, and ultimately - uranium. Under Soviet rule, only 10% of the natives worked in the industrial complex although mining

operations did recruit many displaced natives with water pollution curtailing herd and agriculture enterprises. At the height of the Soviet rule, Kazakhstan housed the largest nuclear fleet the Soviets outfitted. The Caspian Sea was a natural home port for them. Another consideration for using Kazakhstan for the nuclear fleet was the uranium mining and enrichment program Russia implemented. Over 1,000,000 Kazakhs were exposed to the nuclear weapons testing which resulted in birth defects, cancer, and radiation poisoning not only for humans but in water supplies as well. In addition to the nuclear poisoning, the Soviet plans diverted the Aral Sea for agricultural irrigation [depleting the water levels] while the streams running back to the seas carried pesticides, DDT, and salinated water. Poisoning the soil, the food products grown in the soil, and the animals using the water sources created challenges for 3/5ths of the population [rural areas]. Russian was the forced official language of the land. For a 70% Muslim population who spoke a Turkic language, this posed a problem after declaring their independence with the Russian exodus in 1989. Newspapers, Media, Television, and Schools [Public and Universities] had to make a huge adjustment for Kazakh as the official language. Due to the large land mass [approx. 1000 miles by 1800 miles] the main cargo means is strictly by the efficient rail system inherited through the Soviet planners. For passenger traffic, airlines serve the majority of the population. This is expected with the rough mountainous north ends, arid desert in the south end and large areas of land rolling into the hilly plateau sections in between.

Ultimately, Kazakhs inherited problems posed by the military complex which favored Russians and Slavic workers initially but with the independence complete with a Supreme Court, full legislative process, and other urban planning organizations, some of the issues have

been mitigated. Public housing and public health were not priorities to the Soviets - creating housing shortages and health clinic dispensary shortages. Since 1995, the Kazakhs have made strides in setting up prenatal care facilities, adult rehabilitation, lower income health consulting clinics, and better accessibility in urban areas. There is still wide spread radiation poisoning, stable water source containment, and reasonable housing requisites to tackle. Yet with the abundant natural resources, companies like Chevron have made inroads to lifting the oil and natural gas from the licenses granted to assist in providing the revenue needed. The country is crisscrossed with networks of pipelines [adjacent to rail heads] to carry the revenue sources to the Caspian Sea for loading freighters to carry it to other countries who refine it.

Culture

The Kazakh people have a long tradition of being known as very hospitable and respectful. Children were taught to be welcoming and courteous from a young age, and this is reflected in the hospitality that is offered to all guests. Kazakh's enjoy having guests over to their homes for dinner because guests are considered to be a gift from God. If you were to visit a Kazakh household, even if you were expected or not, the household will greet you at the door and once inside you will be offered tea and bread. Bread is a sign of respect because it is seen as sacred. The Kazakh culture has a great deal of appreciation for food because it is considered as God's grace and they associate food with happiness, abundance, and prosperity. Due to these beliefs, it is forbidden to step on food, step over food, throw it on the ground, and leave food leftovers on a table or uncovered dishes of food overnight

Kazakhstan culture is based on the lifestyle of their nomadic and semi-nomadic ancestors. As a result of the nomadic lifestyle, the Kazakh's developed the yurt, which is one of the most efficient and practical portable homes. The traditional yurt has flexible framework that is made of willow wood and felt. Today, yurts can be built permanently on wooden platforms and with materials such as metal and wire rope. The yurt interior is exquisitely decorated with furniture, rugs, tapestries, and other decorations. It can include many rooms including bedrooms and kitchens.

The country has a strong interest in sports such as cycling, boxing, and weightlifting. Kazakhstan has achieved some success in international competitions such as winning eight medals in the Summer Olympics during 2004. Their most successful sport is cycling and the most notable Kazakh cyclist is Alexander Vinokourov who won third place in the 2003 Tour de France.

Music

When speaking on such a diverse topic, it is essential to iron out the details and differences so that one doesn't become confused or misinformed. There are two main types of music in Kazakhstan, one being instrumental, and the other vocal. Instrumental music was obviously without vocal accompaniment, and usually a piece of text was included, that told the story that the music was expressing. The vocal music can be separated into two major groups, at least for traditional songs. One group is "epic singing", which usually included descriptions of actual events or mythic events. The other genre is more of a dialogue, more of a back and forth between two singers. Another major difference should be noted between traditional and

modern Kazakh music, which share similarities, but have unshared styles. In traditional Kazakh music, one can also make the distinction between authentic folk music, and “folklorism”, where it is not a performance of music written centuries ago, but rather a fabrication of what such music would sound and feel like.

Between these diverse and distinct styles of music and song, one thing remains constant through all of them, that element being the dombyra. No matter if it is an ancient hymn or a recent pop song, the dombyra will always make an appearance one way or another, and usually will be the focal point of the piece. The dombyra is a mix between a violin and a guitar, a long-necked stringed instrument that is played by either strumming or plucking. The kazakh dombyra is different from other cultures in the fact that it possess frets, akin to a modern guitar. One might also find the sherta or zhetygen used in traditional folk pieces, used like the dombyra as they are string instruments played by plucking. While bowing to produce sound from a string instrument isn't the norm, there are exceptions, such as the qubyz. Wind instrumentals were not neglected, and many of the classical instruments are imitated by modern adaptations. The muiz syrnyai, for example, is a classical bugle, and the sazsyrynai appears to be a mix between a flute and a clarinet. Percussion instruments were likewise present, with the dabyl and dangyra, which are the predecessors to the tambourine, and the shyndauyl, which is comparable to a timpani. The most interesting instrument, other than the dombyra, is curious in the way that it isn't technically an instrument, but rather a vocal style, called tuva. This is a variation of overtone singing, where the singer produces one tone, and simultaneously produces one or more additional tones above the base sound. It is a guttural style, and requires a precise touch, else the vocal cords can become damaged.

References

ADAI; CD by Asylbek Ensepov; dombyra, sybyzgy, electronic instruments, vocals (tuva)

Eternal Melody, Kazakh kuis performed by qobyz, sybyzgy and other traditional music

Aksenov, A. N. Tuvan Folk Music. *Asian Music*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (1973), pp. 7-18.