



THE MUSIC OF CENTRAL ASIA

EDITED BY

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INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS
BLOOMINGTON AND INDIANAPOLIS

The co-editors and Indiana University Press gratefully acknowledge the support and collaboration of the Aga Khan Music Initiative, a program of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, in the publication of this volume, whose content has been enriched by the Music Initiative's activities.



AGA KHAN TRUST FOR CULTURE

Music Initiative



This book is a publication of
Indiana University Press
Office of Scholarly Publishing
Herman B Wells Library 350
1320 East 10th Street
Bloomington, Indiana 47405 USA
iupress.indiana.edu
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

The music of Central Asia / edited by Theodore Levin, Saida Daukeyeva,
and Elmira Köchümkulova.

pages cm

Includes index.

ISBN 978-0-253-01751-2 (cloth)—ISBN 978-0-253-01764-2 (ebook) 1. Music—Asia, Central—History and criticism. I. Levin, Theodore Craig, editor. II. Daukeyeva, Saida Diasovna, editor. III. Köchümkulova, Elmira, editor.

ML3758.A783M87 2015

780.958—dc23

2015020867

1 2 3 4 5 21 20 19 18 17 16

Front cover illustration: Sebastian Schutyser. Courtesy of the Aga Khan Music Initiative.



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CHAPTER 4 The Kyrgyz Epic *Manas*

ELMIRA KÖCHÜMKULOVA

Kyrgyz widely view the monumental epic *Manas* as the most treasured expression of their national heritage.¹ Composed entirely in oral form by generations of bards both well known and anonymous, *Manas* represents the epitome of Kyrgyz oral creativity and the summit of the Kyrgyz spiritual world.² The origins of *Manas* are unknown, but scholars have proposed that the oldest layers of the epic are rooted in traditional funeral laments (*koshok*) that glorified the life and deeds of heroes (see chapter 12). Some Kyrgyz scholars believe that a singer named Yramandyn Yrchy uul (the singer son of Yraman), who serves as one of the forty companions of the hero Manas in certain episodes of the epic, might have composed such a lament for a well-known historical hero whose life story and heroic deeds later became the contents of an epic song, and eventually developed into the epic *Manas*.³

THE *MANAS* TRILOGY

Manas is a biographical cycle that chronicles three generations of heroes: Manas, his son Semetey, and his grandson Seytek. Some sixty versions of the *Manas* trilogy, recorded from various epic singers and oral poets, exist at present. The longest version of the trilogy, at five hundred thousand poetic lines, is almost twenty times longer than *The Iliad* (15,693 lines) and *The Odyssey* (12,110 lines) together, and two and a half times as long as the Indian epic *Mahabharata*.⁴ *Manas* should not only be recognized for its vast size but valued for its exceptionally vivid poetic language and rich content. The size of the epic reflects the compositional process of extemporization, which is the main creative tool of Kyrgyz poets and epic singers. Oral composition and extemporized performance allow singers to add their own poetic verse lines without changing the main plot of the story. One singer may describe a battle scene in fifty verse lines while another singer describes the same scene in a hundred or more lines, depending on the extent of his historical and



cultural knowledge, improvisational skill, and the reaction of his audience. For this reason, the sixty-odd versions of *Manas* are all different lengths.

The plot of the *Manas* trilogy consists of the following principal episodes:

I. *Manas*

- Birth of Manas and his childhood
- First heroic deeds
- Marriage to Kanykey
- Military campaign against Beijing
- Death of Manas; destruction of his achievements

II. *Semetey*

- Kanykey's flight to Bukhara
- Semetey's childhood and his heroic deeds
- Semetey's return to Talas
- Semetey's marriage to Aychürök
- Semetey's battle against Kongurbay
- Semetey's death or mysterious disappearance

III. *Seytek*

- Destruction of Semetey's family; capture of Aychürök and Külchoro
- Seytek's upbringing in Kyiaz's palace
- Battles against internal enemies
- Seytek's marriage
- Seytek's defeat of external enemies and his own death⁵



The birth of Manas.

Illustration by Theodore Herzen for an edition of the *Manas* published in the late 1950s.

THE HERO MANAS

Medieval accounts of Central Asian history written in Persian, Chinese, Mongolian, and Old Uyghur chronicle many wars and battles between the Kyrgyz and other nomadic groups, as well as between the Kyrgyz and their sedentary-dwelling neighbors. The Kyrgyz regarded Kalmyks, Mongols, Manchus, and Chinese as traditional enemies. In difficult times, when the Kyrgyz were defeated by their enemies and exiled to faraway lands, people longed for a hero (*baatyr*) to reunite and protect them. Manas represents an archetype of such a hero. The archetype, however, is purely a literary creation, since no credible



Manas, the archetypal hero.

Illustration by Theodore Herzen for an edition of the *Manas* published in the late 1950s.

evidence of his historical existence has ever been found. Some Kyrgyz scholars, however, claim Genghis Khan to be a prototype of Manas. The Mongolian epic chronicle *The Secret History of the Mongols* contains one of the traditional themes of heroic epic song, the birth of the hero, Genghis Khan: “At the moment when he was born, he was holding in his right hand a clot of blood the size of a knuckle bone.”⁶ A similar theme is found in *Manas*, where the baby Manas is also born with a clot of blood in his hand. The wise man Akbalta brings the happy news to Manas’s father, Jakyp, and describes Manas’s birth:

When your Manas came out [from the womb]
 He landed straight on his feet!
 In his right hand, khan Manas
 Came out holding a clot of black blood . . .

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

The rich interweaving of sociocultural and historical realities in *Manas* makes it difficult to divide the events of the epic into historical periods. According to Kyrgyz scholars who contributed to the *Manas Encyclopedia*, published in 1995, some of the motifs and themes, as well as the human characters, in the epic seem to have already been established in the Old Turkic period, i.e., fifth to eighth centuries CE, and reflect religious beliefs and customs of that time.⁷ However, the epic also

The core geographical region in *Manas* is the territory of present-day Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, the Altai Mountains, and western China.



chronicles wars and battles between nomadic Turks and Kalmyks in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; indeed, the Kalmyks are depicted as traditional enemies in all Central Asian Turkic epics. *Manas* contains significant historical and sociocultural information about both the Kyrgyz and the nomadic and sedentary neighbors, tribes, states, and empires with which they historically interacted. We learn a great deal about the religious beliefs and practices of the Chinese, Kalmyks, and Manchus as well as about their military dress, arms, and strategies.

GEOGRAPHIC SCOPE OF *MANAS*

The geography covered in *Manas* is vast. The epic encompasses the entire Eurasian continent, extending all the way from the Caucasus and Crimea to Japan.⁸ Tibet, the Himalayas, India, Mecca, and various North African countries all appear in the epic. The core geographical regions in *Manas*, however, are the territories of present-day Kazakhstan, the Altai Mountains, China, and Inner Asia.⁹ Reciters not only mention these places but describe in some detail their flora and fauna. The version of *Manas* recorded from Sagymbay Orozbek uulu (1867–1930) contains over five hundred geographical place names and the names of over a hundred ethnic groups, most of which have been historically documented. Epic singers were also knowledgeable about geological events and demographic shifts, and recount such phenomena in *Manas*:

The mountains fell apart, turning into ravines,
Ravines shook, turning into mountains.
Many seas became extinct
Leaving only their names behind.
Every fifty years, people were new,
Every hundred years the earth was renewed.

DOCUMENTING *MANAS*

Modern scholarly documentation of Kyrgyz oral literature began in the second half of the nineteenth century with the Kazakh ethnographer Shoqan Valikhanov, who traveled among the Issyk-Kul Kyrgyz in the 1850s. Documentation continued with the work of German-Russian scholar Vasily Radloff, who conducted ethnographic research among the Kyrgyz in the 1860s. These two men recorded some of the main episodes of *Manas* and published them in Russian and German. In 1903, as part of the scholarly expeditions carried out by members of the Russian Geographical Society, several Russian scholars came to the Kyrgyz, recorded episodes from the *Manas* trilogy, and published their translations in a Russian-language prose edition.

Intensive documentation of Kyrgyz folklore, especially epic songs, dates from the early 1920s, when the new Soviet government began to implement policies that developed distinct national identities rooted in local languages and cultures for non-Russian peoples throughout the Soviet Union. A long version of *Manas* was transcribed from the recitation of Sagymbay Orozbek uulu, and the first sound recording of a *Manas* reciter was made after World War II. Transcription of the five-hundred-thousand-line version of *Manas* performed by Sayakbay Karala uulu began in 1936 and ended in 1947. By that time, as the singer himself noted, he could no longer recite the epic as well as he had in his younger years. The original text of Sayakbay's version was never fully published during the Soviet period, and when eventually it was, in 1995, the editors omitted many repetitions, stories, and perceived shortcomings.¹⁰

RECITATION STYLE OF *MANAS*

In contrast to other Kyrgyz and Turkic epic songs, *Manas* is not sung, but recited—primarily by men—without musical accompaniment.¹¹ The absence of an instrumental accompaniment in *Manas* recitation must be related to the fact that the singers use their hands to make all kinds of gestures and movements, and their hands must be free for that purpose. The Kyrgyz do not say that they “sing” *Manas* (*Manas yrda*) but rather that they “recite” *Manas* (*Manas ayt*). Moreover, the recitation of *Manas* involves not only reciting but acting. If the reciter describes a battle, he vividly recreates that scene for his audience. If he describes a horse race, he tries to give a sense of the race with his body movements and hand gestures. If he depicts a tragic scene—for example, the death of a hero—he expresses that by singing laments and crying, sometimes with actual tears. In other words, the reciter acts out the epic by speaking in the voice of each character.

All singers, including epic singers, were traditionally called *yrchy* (derived from *yr*: “song”). The term *jomokchu*, “storyteller” (derived from *jomok*, “story” or “folktale”) was also applied to epic singers. Such singers typically had a broad repertory that included folktales, wisdom poetry, improvised poems performed in the context of an *aitysh* (improvised poetry contest), and epic songs and *dastans* (long poems) sung to the accompaniment of a *komuz*. In Soviet times, the development and professionalization of Kyrgyz folk music resulted in the emergence of different types of musicians, such as the *tökmö aqyn* or *yrchy* (improvising oral poet and singer), *aqyn* (poet who writes poetry), *dastanchy* (singer of *dastans*), and *manaschy* (reciter of *Manas* or the *Manas* trilogy).¹² Their exclusive focus on *Manas* was a result of the strong national overtones that came to be associated with the epic.

Master performers of *Manas* traditionally had their own apprentice. Apprentices typically memorized a few episodes from the main stories. Later, if they possessed the gift of improvisation, they added their own words and innovations. In

the conventional performance practice of *Manas*, singers do not recite the entire epic. Rather, they recite separate episodes, such as the “Birth and Childhood of Manas,” “Manas’s Marriage to Kanykey,” “Kanykey’s Horse Race on Taytoru,” “The Great Campaign to Beijing,” and so on.

WATCH **Example 4.1.** Urkash Mambetaliev recites the episode “Chong Kazat” (The Great Campaign) from *Manas*. Filmed by Nurlanbek Nyshanov, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, 2011.

This video clip presents Urkash Mambetaliev (1935–2011), one of the last of the older generation of *manaschys* in Kyrgyzstan.¹³ Here, he recites an excerpt from a major episode in the epic *Manas*, “Chong Kazat” (The Great Campaign), in which the hero Manas leads his troops to Beijing to fight against the Chinese and their ruler-hero, Kongurbay. The warriors fight many days and many nights, and Manas and Kongurbay engage in a spear fight (*er saiysh*) in which each man tries to knock the other off his horse and kill him. The video excerpt begins where the hero Manas spots the enemy leader, Kongurbay Khan, trying to escape by crossing a river on his horse Algara.

Manas reaches Kongurbay and rips off Algara’s tail as Kongurbay crosses the river. Humiliated without his tail, the horse Algara wants to die heroically and tells Kongurbay to fight back against Manas. The two men test their strength by vying to see who can smash a giant rock.



Urkash Mambetaliev.
Courtesy of Urkash Mambetaliev.

*Eesi chygyp alangdap,
Atynyn bashyn burganda,
Kan jyttangan dayraga,
Kan Kongur boyun sunganda,
Manas jetip buruldu.
Algaranyn kuyrugy,
Sunganda kolgo urundu.
Manas bilekke chalyp tartkany
Ee, kyrk kulach attyn kuyrugy,*

*Osho túbünön beri julundu, uuu.
Kök joruday unguuyup,
Körchü bolsong Kongurbay,
Etten alyp tultuyp,
Oy, tuu kuyruktan ayylyp,
Tulpary bolso bultuuyup.*

Feeling desperate for his life,
The khan Kongur pulled his horse’s head
Towards the river, which smelled like blood,
And tried to cross the river.
Manas reached him from his back
And grabbed
Algara by his tail.
Manas wrapped his tail around his wrist,
The horse’s thick tail, which was as long as
forty arm spans,
Got ripped off from the bottom.
Like a gray vulture,
If you saw Kongurbay at that moment,
He looked angry.
Losing his beautiful tail,
His stallion was outraged.

*Ee, aman chygyp dayradan,
Osho kayrattanyyp turganda,
Oo, chabyshuudan kayran alp,
Kün bütköndö, tün бүтүп,
Kan aldyndagy kara atka,
Adamcha bölök til бүтүп.
Kongurbayga kep aytat,
Kep aytkanda dep aytat.
Ong kulagynan ayrlyyp,
Chunak kara at bolgoncho,*

*Kuyrugunan ayrlyyp,
Cholok kara at bolgoncho,*

Algan külük Algara

Aykashtan ölgön desinchi,

Kaiyptan bütkön Algara,

*Kazattan ölgön desinchi.
Kanymdy karga jesinchi,
Közümdü kuzgun oysunchu.
Söögümdön beri kaltyrbay,
Kömülör talap koysunchu.
Oo, menin jalymdy kashyp
berüüchü,*

*Janyma sherik boluuchu,
Ach Buudan kayda körünböyt.*

*Kalbasa baary kyrylyp,
Kaar alsa anda el kayda.*

*Ushuncha jurttan ayrlyyp,
El betin kantip karadyk?
Jer betin kantip karadyk?*

*Ölsök ölüp kalalyk,
Öküldögön Manastan,
Ölbösök namys alalyk.*

*Kayra suudan kechelik,
Keng Manaska jetelik.*

*Köz aynyan chang kыlyp,
Körgөndördü tang kыlyp,
Karysh kyla ketelik.*

Ee, oshondo kaaryn salgan Algara

They pulled themselves out of the river,
Stood there to fight back,
The strong man was ready for the fight.
When the day was over and night fell,
The black horse under the khan
Spoke like a human being.
He said to Kongurbay
The following words:
Losing my right ear,
I don't want to be called a one-eared black
horse.

Losing my tail,
I don't want to be called a tailless black
horse.

May people instead say that the galloper
Algara

Died when his tail got ripped when pulled
by a rope tied to another horse.

May people say instead that the magic
Algara

Died in a military campaign.

It is better if crows drink my blood and
Vultures pick my eyes.

It is better if all my bones are buried
In the ground, leaving no trace of me.

Oh, where is Ach Buudan [a horse's name],

Who can scratch my mane
And be my companion?

Have they all been massacred [by Manas]?
Where is our people

Losing so many of our warriors?
How can you look our people in the face

And go to our land?
For us, it is better to die here.

We must restore our pride
By fighting the proud Manas.

We should cross back through the river
And reach the big Manas.

Let's create fog from dust,
Surprise those who see it

By cutting [Manas] into pieces.

At that moment, the furious Algara

Atasynday köründü,
Oo, jaratkan Kökö Tengirdin
Batasynday köründü.
Aytpay salsa köründü
Oduraygan oshonun
Oozunan otu tögüldü.
Ok ötpögön sebil ton,

Ongdop kiydi temirdi.
Dayrany jara süzdürüp,
Algarany temindi.
Jetip alyp Manasty
Jep iyçhüdöy köründü.
Ee, tokto, Manas, toktogun!
Shashpa, Manas, shashpagyn!
Shashyp anda kachpagyn!
Menin karmashuuga karym bar,
Chabysuuga chamam bar,
Küröshüügö küchüm bar.
Arkalyktyñ Sary-Talaa
At jaryshmak oynoyluk,
Üzöngü boogo salyshyp,
Oodaryshmak oynoyluk,
Er kezegin bereli,
Eregishe kögörüp,
Küch synashsak küch synap,
Tooday tashy bölölük.
Andan ayla bolboso,
At üstündö süzüşüp,
At tizginin üzüşüp,
Myktap maydan bashtaylyk,
Ölümdön mynda kachpaylyk.
Oshondo kök jal Manasyng, ee
Bura tartyp keldi deyt,
Kongurga kezek berdi deyt.
Tonkoyup bütkön talaaga,
Tooday chuunu chach dedi.
Er bolsong körgö jitirip,
Ekige bölö chap dedi.

Oshondo, topchulugu bir toguz,
Tooday bolgon chong donguz,

Looked liked his [wise] father and
Sounded like the blessing of
The Creator, Kökö Tengir.¹⁴
It was unbelievable,
Flames of fire came out
From the big mouth of Kalcha [Kongurbay]
[Kongurbay] straightened his bullet-proof
iron body armor

On his body.
Riding on Algara,
He swam through the river.
He looked as if he would
Capture Manas and eat him up.
Hey, stop! Manas, stop!
Don't rush, Manas, don't rush!
Don't rush to run away!
I have strong arms to fight with you,
I have energy to come to blows with you,
I have strength to wrestle with you.
On the Sary-Talaa of Arkalyk,
Let's race on our horses,
Or wrestle on horseback
By putting our legs on the stirrup's string.
Let's have a real manly game
On horseback.
Or, if you want to test our strength,
Let's see who can break that giant rock.
If that doesn't work,
Let's come to blows on horseback
And rip each other's reins.
Let's start a real battle on the field.
Let's not fear death.
At that moment, the brave Manas
Came by, pulling his horse's head,
And gave the turn to Kongur, they say.
He told him to scatter a big clamor
On the wide open field.
If you are a brave man,
Make [that giant rock] disappear by
slashing it into two parts.
At that moment, he, the big wild boar as
big as a mountain
Who had huge button holders [on his coat],

Üpçhülügü bir toguz,
Üydöy bolgon chong donguz,
Tula boyun tumchulap,
Algarasyn kamchylap,
Oozunan otu tamchylap,
Ay tushunan bir koydu.
Ey, alachyktay choyun bash,
Aylantyp kelip chong tashty,
Alp Kongurbay bir koydu.
Alty aylanyp chapkancha,
Arstan Manas tim koydu.
Körchü bolsong Kongurdu
Shondo közü ketti chekcheyip,
Beli ketti mekcheyip.

Algarany moyundap,
Seksen kulach soyuldan,
Saby kaldy kolunda.
Oshol boydon kozgolboy,

Opol tash turat yolunda.
Oshondo on ekisinde ok atkan,

On üçhünö jetkende,
Ordo buzup joo chapkan.
Jylgaluu jerde jylky algan,
Koshogu menen kyz algan,

Kokuylatyp er saygan,
Jaydak tulpar koshtogon,

Jan alchuga okshogon,
Aybatynan buulup
Akpay dayra toktogon.
Arstan Manas baatyryng,

Kur kemerin chalyngyp,
Kuduretke jalynyp,
Jetip Manas chapkanda,
Jerdin kardy jarylyp
Ot chachyrap toktoldu.
Opol tash kulap ydyrap,

He, the big wild boar as big as a house
Securing his body and fixing his coat,
Struck his Algara with the whip,
Fixing his body and
Hitting his horse with the whip,
The giant Kongurbay
Approached the giant rock from one side
And, circling around it six times,
Knocked it with a huge iron mace.
Manas, the lion, watched him from the side
While he tried six times.
If you had seen Kongur at that moment,
His eyes popping,
His back bending, unable to withstand the
force!

He leaned forward onto Algara's neck,
From the eighty-meters-long mace
Only the handle was left in his hand.
The giant rock stood in his way and didn't
budge,
With no sign of damage.
At that moment, Manas, who shot arrows
at the age of twelve and
Played ordo,¹⁵ and struck at enemies
When he reached the age of thirteen,
Who drove off mares from steep slopes,
Who took a wife to whom a bridal song was
sung,
Who killed warriors with spears,
Who is accompanied by barebacked
stallions [to facilitate changing horses
in battle]
Who looked like a killer.
Fearing his might
Even the rivers stopped flowing.
Manas, the lion, approached from a
distance,
Tightening his belt around his waste.
Praying to God
Manas reached the rock and struck it.
The ground split open and
Burst into flames for a moment.
The giant rock split apart

Ordu menen jok boldu.
Aytylsa Manas taryhy,
Ee andan kalgan emespi,
Osho kara jerdin jarygy.

And disappeared into a crack in the earth.
If we tell the story of Manas,
The crack in the black earth
Remains from him.

STUDY QUESTIONS

How would you describe the performance style of *manaschy* Urkash Mambetaliev?

1. What techniques does the performer use to hold his audience's interest?
2. Most *manaschys* go into a deep trance state during their performance. Did you observe such a state in the performance of Urkash Mambetaliev?
3. Without the English translation, would you have been able to guess from the singer's gestures, facial expressions, emotions, and tone what kind of stories and scenes he is describing?

MANASCHYS AND THEIR VISIONARY DREAM

Great *manaschys* such as Sayakbay Karala uulu usually did not acknowledge that they learned *Manas* by serving as an apprentice to a master reciter. What was important for *manaschys* was the spiritual transformation that came as a result of a visionary dream (*tüsh* or *ayan*) in which the *manaschy* was visited by the hero Manas himself, or by other main characters in the epic. In the case of Sayakbay, the visionary dream came when he was in his early twenties. The transformational role of a dream in initiating the career of *manaschys* resonates with the accounts of *bakshys* or shamans who frequently speak of having experienced episodes of debilitating physical illness or psychological trauma that led to treatments by traditional healers or doctors. In these accounts, the treatments are unsuccessful and the illness persists until the future *bakshy* has an unusual dream that provides a sign to take up the "profession" of shamanizing in order to effect a cure. Having overcome his or her own illness, the *bakshy* tacitly accepts a responsibility to heal others. Following is a summary of the initiatic dream of *manaschy* Sayakbay Karala uulu that appears in the *Manas Encyclopedia*:

On his way from Semiz-Bel to Orto-Tokoy, Sayakbay saw a white yurt where there used to be an old big black rock. He became frightened from a loud noise that came from the sky, and fainted. He then woke up and entered the yurt, where he was offered food by Kanykey, the wife of Manas. When he came out from the yurt he met a man who told Sayakbay that he was happy that he and his companions had encountered him on their way to Beijing:



Causing a great calamity in the world,
 With about forty or fifty *tümön*¹⁶ of an army
 We are going on a war campaign
 To far away and hazy Beijing.

He then told Sayakbay: “I am Bakay, who finds his way in the dark and comes up with words of wisdom when they’re needed. I want to give you the *gülazyk*¹⁷ of Manas. Open your mouth.” He then introduced some of the forty companions of Manas. Bakay’s putting food in Sayakbay’s mouth signifies the idea of receiving the gift of singing from the wise man, Bakay.¹⁸

A contemporary example of a *manaschy* who traces his poetic inspiration to dreams is Rysbek Jumabaev. In Rysbek’s account, visionary dreams were connected to episodes of illness. Becoming a reciter of *Manas* cured his illness and gave him a way to respond to the visions in his dreams. Rysbek described these occurrences in a 2003 interview with Theodore Levin.

WATCH Example 4.2. Rysbek Jumabaev recites from *Manas*. Filmed by Saodat Ismailova and Carlos Casas, 2004.

Rysbek Jumabaev became a reciter of *Manas* to cure his illness and to respond to the visions in his dreams.
 Courtesy of Theodore Levin.

It all began when I was eleven and had a dream in which the famous *manaschy* Sayakbay recited the *Manas*. My father knew some episodes from the *Manas*, and when I was four years old, Sayakbay came to my house and blessed me so that I would become a *manaschy*. I started performing at small gatherings when I was sixteen. Then, in 1983, I started having stomachaches. I couldn’t eat, I couldn’t sleep. I went to various doctors and they gave me drugs, but nothing helped. I had stopped reciting *Manas* because there weren’t any invitations. Finally, I went to a clairvoyant who lives in Karakol—his name is Mirbek—and asked why I had fallen into this state. Mirbek said that I had become



ill because I had stopped reciting. He told me that I had to go to an ancient poplar tree near my home, slaughter a sheep as an offering, spend the night there, and rededicate myself to *Manas*. I took seven people with me. We slaughtered a lamb and boiled it. During the night, while I slept, my companions were awakened by a tremendous whooshing noise coming from the mountains. They woke me up, and I heard it, too. I couldn't believe my ears. My companions said that it was the sound of a spirit. I don't know, it was some kind of sign from God that a road was being opened. Soon after that, a film crew came and filmed me. And I had more dreams in which I saw Sayakbay reciting *Manas* in a beautiful form—one of the largest parts of *Manas*—and in the dream, *Manas's* forty knights came to me. I married and had children. I had three girls, and after I started to recite, I had a son. I answered the call of God and was rewarded. I named my son Syrghak, one of the main characters in the epic.¹⁹

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What aspects of theater do you see in Rysbek's performance?
2. In what ways is it similar to and different from the performance style of Urkash Mambetaliev?

SAYAKBAY MANASCHY, THE "HOMER OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY"

Sayakbay Karala uulu (1894–1971), whom the Kyrgyz call the “Homer of the twentieth century,” was one of the last great *manaschys* from whom the *Manas* trilogy—*Manas*, *Semetey*, and *Seytek*—was recorded. Altogether, Sayakbay's individual performance of the trilogy contained half a million verse lines. Sayakbay was born in the Issyk-Kul region of northern Kyrgyzstan. His family was poor, and they had to work for wealthy Kyrgyz to earn their living. Sayakbay began reciting *Manas* when he was around sixteen. Sayakbay heard the main stories of *Manas* from his grandmother, who probably narrated the epic in prose mixed with poetry.²⁰ People, including foreigners, who saw and listened to Sayakbay's recitation of *Manas* were very moved by his powerful spirit and great artistic talent. During his recitation, Sayakbay made his listeners cry and laugh. Listeners recounted that “while he was singing, we not only saw him before us, but pictured the epic's characters as well.”²¹ Chingiz Aitmatov compared Sayakbay's singing to a symphony orchestra: “Sayakbay was not only an oral poet, but a great artist and composer. Like a symphony orchestra, he varied and changed his voice a thousand times. He moved from tragedy to lyrical songs, from lyrics he moved



Kyrgyz epic singer Sayakbay Karala uulu, 1894–1971.



to drama, then within a short time he burst into tears, then became joyful, then tired, then became energetic again. Sometimes he sounded like a teeming army of soldiers, sometimes he became as calm as a lake, and sometimes he became like a fast and strong wind, and rushed like a river.”²²

WATCH

Example 4.3. Sayakbay Karala uulu recites excerpts from *Manas*. Filmed by Melis Ubukeev, around 1970.

These short excerpts from Sayakbay’s recitation give you a chance to see his performance style, which he varies according the theme of the story he is telling. Here Sayakbay recites the episode where the hero Manas returns from one of his battles against the Chinese without his close companions, who were killed in the battle. According to Kyrgyz custom, Manas approaches the yurt of one of the deceased men by crying aloud (*okürüü*) to give the men’s wives a sign that their husbands are dead.

Ayash,
Kötörböskö chara jok.
Kok jaldardan ayrlyp,
Kongülsüz kalgan beybaktyn,
Köt jakta erkek bala jok.
Toodogu jylky toguz san,

Toburchak buudan aralash.
Toburchak külük beesi jok,
Tosup ele alar eesi jok.
Adyrda jylky alty san,

Argymak buudan aralash.
Argymak külük beesi jok,

Aydap ele koyor eesi jok.
Karangy tün boldu,
Emne degen kün boldu?
Dep oshondo chyrkyrap,
Eki aiym yilap burkurap
Kosho chyky kök jalga,

Atangdyn körü dünüyö,
Ayashjan,

*Ayash,*²³
 You have no choice but to accept your fate.
 I lost my brave men [in the battle].
 You, the grief-stricken widow,
 Carry no child-son from him in your womb.
 Herds of mares consisting of great gallopers
 and amateur racing horses
 Are now left on their own on the mountains.
 Now, these stallions will go astray
 Without an owner who waits for them.
 Herds of mares consisting of great gallopers
 and amateur racing horses
 Are now left on their own on the hills.
 Now, these stallions and racing horses will go
 astray,
 Without an owner who looks after them.
 A dark night fell upon us.
 What will we do now [without him]?
 The widows began crying and screaming.
 Shedding tears
 The two ladies approached the gray-maned
 [Manas].
 Damn this world, the grave of your father.²⁴
 Dear *ayash*,



<i>Belesi biyik Beejindi</i>	We know that you had warned us that Beijing was far away and difficult to reach.
<i>Besh künchülük jol deding, Beejindin jaiy kor deding. Baygambar baspas Beejindin,</i>	You had told us that it was a five-day journey And that Beijing was a dangerous place to go. We learned about this land where the feet of the Prophet [Muhammad] had not walked
<i>Kazyp koygon orlorun, Kaynatyluu shorlorun, Ulamadan uladyñ.</i>	And the dungeons that they had dug To make their captives suffer. We learned these things from a learned religious man.
<i>Kayguulga baryp kelipsing, Janyngda жүргөн jarandy Jandashyp жүргөн karaandy Kaynap atkan Kakanga, ayash Belekke karmap beripsing Berenim, ayashjan, esen kelipsing.</i>	You came back from the battle, Leaving the men who went with you, Who always accompanied you To the teeming Kakans [Chinese], <i>ayash</i> , As a gift My dear, brave <i>ayash</i> , you returned home safely.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How would you compare Sayakbay's recitation style with that of Urkash Mambetaliev in example 4.1 and Rysbek Jumabaev in example 4.2?
2. From Sayakbay's tone, gestures, and emotions, can you guess the theme of the story he is narrating?
3. Identify the poetic features of his verse lines by underlining the initial and internal alliterations and end rhyme.

MANAS IN CONTEMPORARY KYRGYZSTAN

During the Soviet era, official culture policy portrayed the heroic epics of non-Russian peoples as a potential threat to the Soviet system, because they glorified the history of these peoples and carried powerful messages that could awaken people's pride in their national identity, history, and culture. As was the case with many other non-Russian heroic epics, *Manas* was condemned as "bourgeois-nationalist" and "religious" in its content. All of the published texts of *Manas* that appeared during the Soviet period were heavily edited and sanitized redactions designed to conform to the ideological mandate of Soviet nationalities policy and Socialist Realist aesthetics: to develop art, music, and literature that was "nationalist in form and socialist in content."

Following the breakup of the Soviet Union, Kyrgyzstan's first president, Askar Akaev (1991–2005), used some of the central ideas of *Manas* as a basis for building



A statue in front of Bishkek's Philharmonic Hall presents Manas holding a sword and accompanied by a dragon, the hero's guardian during his military campaigns.

Courtesy of Theodore Levin.

a new national ideology for independent Kyrgyzstan.²⁵ This ideology promoted a national awakening and cultural revival in which *Manas* played a leading role. Since independence, *Manas* has been taught in schools and universities, and children as young as four and five—typically boys but sometimes girls as well—recite from memory dozens of lines from popular episodes such as “The Childhood of Manas” or the miraculous “Birth of Manas.” Some have become *manaschys* themselves, whether amateur or professional, and major national celebrations of Kyrgyz culture often feature performances by young *manaschys*. The Kyrgyz Ministry of Culture organizes annual *manaschy* competitions in Bishkek with the aim of discovering, supporting, and motivating new talent as well as preserving the oral transmission of the epic. Several talented and dedicated *manaschys*, such as Rysbay Isakov and Samat Köchörbaev, each with his own particular recitation style, have performed abroad with other Kyrgyz musicians, including in the United States. Today’s *manaschys* are building on existing oral tradition by adapting it to a new social context and to contemporary musical tastes.

Examples 4.4 and 4.5 show two young *manaschys*. Rysbay Isakov performs not in the traditional style of a cappella solo recitation but with an instrumental background provided by an ensemble. Samat Köchörbaev has a charismatic style that has become popular among young audiences.

WATCH

Example 4.4. Rysbay Isakov recites excerpts from *Manas* with music by Ensemble Ordo-Sakhna. Recording courtesy of Ensemble Ordo-Sakhna.

This example shows a recitation by *manaschy* Rysbay Isakov (b. 1975) within the context of a concert performance in Bishkek by the folk-ethnographic ensemble Ordo-Sakhna. Rysbay has a distinctive recitation style, high vocal tone, and clear voice. In 2007, he won first prize in the national *Manas* recitation competition in Kyrgyzstan by reciting the popular episode “Kanikey’s Long-distance Horse Race on Taytoru” (Kanykey is the wife of Manas; Taytoru is his horse.) Rysbay actively participates in cultural events and music festivals that often involve *Manas* recitations, and he has strong feelings about the importance of preserving and popularizing *Manas* in contemporary Kyrgyzstan. He was selected as the main *manaschy* for a 2010 documentary film by Nurbek Egen, titled *Foreseeing*

the Birth of Manas. In an interview, Rysbay said that if he doesn't recite *Manas* often, his head feels heavy, as if he had been captured by an evil spirit (*jin*), and that he feels better after reciting *Manas*.

Since 2005, Rysbay has made three visits to the United States with Ensemble Ordo-Sakhna. Created in 1999 and directed by Shamil Japarov, Ordo-Sakhna aims to revive traditional forms of Kyrgyz folk art and music and adapt them to contemporary styles and tastes. Rysbay's recitation of "Kanykey's Long-distance Horse Race on Taytoru" has been a highlight of Ordo-Sakhna's concert program.



Rysbay Isakov and Ensemble Ordo-Sakhna.

Courtesy of Ordo-Sakhna.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. In your view, how successful is Rysbay Isakov and Ordo-Sakhna's adaptation of *Manas* recitation to performance by an ensemble? Does Ordo-Sakhna's musical accompaniment enhance the performance or distract from the narrative and the *manaschy* himself?
2. *Manaschys* were not traditionally accompanied by drums. Do you view Ordo-Sakhna's use of drumming as an interesting innovation, or is it artistically gratuitous?

WATCH

Example 4.5. Samat Köchörbaev recites the episode "Semetey's Encounter with Sary Taz" from the epic *Semetey* in the *Manas* trilogy. Filmed by Nurlanbek Nyshanov, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, 2011.

Upon the death of the hero Manas, Kanykey, Manas's wife, flees to Bukhara with her baby son, Semetey, and her old mother-in-law, Chiyurdy, to live with her father, Temirkhan. Little Semetey grows up in Bukhara without knowing the true story of his father and fatherland, Talas, until he reaches the age of twelve. One day, the twelve-year-old Semetey, while hunting with birds, encounters a coal miner named Sary Taz in the forest. When Semetey throws his falcon to capture a pheasant, the pheasant escapes into Sary Taz's small tent. Following the pheasant, the falcon flies into the tent. Semetey rudely asks Sary Taz to hand his falcon over to him. Sary Taz grows angry at Semetey's rude behavior and tells him that he does not belong there and that he should go to his own people and land in Talas.



Samat Köchörbaev.

Courtesy of Samat Köchörbaev.

*Tokoyung talaa jer emes,
Atang Manas kök jaldyn
Öpkösün jaryp öltürgön,
Kongurbay Kalcha men emes.
Belingdi bekem buup al,
Beren bolsong sen jetim,
Atangdyn moysop tashtagan
Kara kytay kan Kongur
Oshondon kunung kuup al.
O, atangdyn körü dünüyö,
Bu tokoy saga jer emes,
Enekengdin emchegin
Jara chaap kachyrgan
Abyke, Köbösh men emes.
Temirge belong bump al
Tentigen maga katylbay,
Kara kytay Kongurbay
Oshondun kunung kuup al.
Atangdyn körü dünüyö,
Shamal jokto temingen
Jeldey baykush bar beken?
Enesin ejem dep жүргөн,
Temirkandyn bakmasy,
Sendey baykush bar beken?
Atangdyn körü dünüyö,
Kömürchü bolup sendelip,
Körüngöndön til ukkan,
Mendey baykush bar beken?
Enesin ejem dep жүргөн
Temirkandyn bakmasy
Atangdyn körü jetim kul,
A, kokuy,
Sendey gana baykush
bar beken, uuuuu.
Sary Tazdan kep ugup,
Myna oshondo bereging,
Jering Talas dep ugup,
Ugup alyp sabylyp,
Közünün jashy on talaa.
Myna oshondo bereging,
Kömürchügo jalynyp,
Aylanaıyn Sary aba,*

This forest is not a field for you to play,
I'm not Kongurbay kalcha who killed
Your gray-maned father Manas
By smashing his lung.
Tie your waist tight [be strong and ready]
If you are brave, you, the orphan,
Take the revenge of your father's blood
From Kongurbay of the Kara Kytay [Chinese]
Who killed your father.
Oh, damn this world!
This forest is not your land and
I'm not Abyke and Köbösh
Who made your mother flee
By slashing her breast.
Tie your waist tight like an iron,
You, the vagabond, don't dare to hurt me!
Instead, take your father's blood revenge
From Kongurbay of the Kara Kytay [Chinese].
Damn this world!
There is no other thing than a breeze
That blows when there is no wind.
There is no unfortunate person like yourself,
Who is the adopted son of Temirkhan and
Who calls his own mother a sister.
Damn this world!
There is no one like me,
A destitute coal miner
Who is reproached by everyone.
You, who calls his mother a sister,
The adopted son of Temirkhan,
Damn you, the slave-orphan!
Oh, no!
There is no unfortunate person like yourself.

Hearing these words from Sary Taz
At that moment,
Learning that his land is Talas,
He was shaken,
Tears poured from his eyes,
At that moment,
He begged the coal miner:
Dear uncle Sary,

Emne deding balaga?
 Tuybagandy tuyguzdung,
 Tuura janyım sadaga.
 Kel abake kolungdu,
 Ushul sözüng chyn bolso,
 Körgözömün közüngö,
 Kishi körbös sonundu.
 A düynö ketken sher Manas,
 Ata ekeni chyn bolso,
 Baykush katyn Kanykey,
 Ene ekeni chyn bolso,
 Esen körsöm Talasty,
 Argyn menen kyrgyzga,
 Shang kötörüp alamyn.
 Atamday körüp abake,
 Kalyng kyrgyz kalkyna,
 Kan kötörüp alamyn.
 Aytkanymdy kylbasam,
 Töbösü achyk Kök ursun!

Töshü tuktüü Jer ursun!
 Atagy ursun Talastyn!
 Arbagy ursun Manastyn!

What did you just say to me, the boy?
 You told me what I didn't know.
 I'm ready to die for you.
 Give me your hand
 If these words of yours are indeed true,
 I will show you
 Great things that no man has seen before.
 The lion Manas, who left for the other world,
 If he is indeed my father,
 The poor woman, Kanykey,
 If she is indeed my mother,
 If I get to see Talas
 I will hold a great feast
 For the Argyn and Kyrgyz [people] there.
 I will treat you like my father and
 Elect you a khan
 For all the Kyrgyz people.
 If I don't carry out what I have told,
 May I be cursed by the Blue Sky which has an
 open top!
 May I be cursed by the Earth with a hairy chest!
 May I be cursed by the fame of Talas!
 May I be cursed by the spirit of Manas!

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How would you compare Samat Köchörbaev's recitation to the recitations of the two older *manaschys* in video examples 4.1 and 4.2?
2. What aspect of his performance style do you find particularly interesting?
3. What difference would it have made for Samat if the recitation had been performed before a live audience?
4. Some people find the *Manas* recitation boring and thus cannot listen to it for too long. Could you share your experiences of listening to these or other recitations of *Manas* by various *manaschys*?

WATCH

Example 4.6. Kulmat Sydykov recites the episode “Kanykeydin Taytorunu chapkany” (Kanykey's horse race on Taytoru) from *Manas*. Filmed by Nurlanbek Nyshanov, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, 2011.



Kulmat Sydykov.
Courtesy of Kulmat Sydykov.

This example, recited by the young *manaschy* Kulmat Sydykov, presents one of the popular episodes of *Manas* called “Kanykeydin Taytorunu chapkany” (Kanykey’s long-distance horse race on Taytoru). Kulmat is best known in Kyrgyzstan as a *dastanchy*—a singer of *dastans*—since his repertoire consists mainly of Kyrgyz long poems (*dastans*) and he sings to the accompaniment of a *komuz*. Like Rysbay Isakov he has a distinctive voice, and he likes to recite this popular episode from the *Manas*.

The episode takes place after Manas’s death, upon which his widow Kanykey flees to Bukhara with her baby Semetey and mother-in-law Chyiyrdy. Once in Bukhara, Kanykey decides to participate in a major long-distance horse race and feast organized by her father Temirkhan, the ruler of Bukhara, in honor of twelve-year-old Semetey.²⁶ Semetey grows up in Bukhara with his maternal grandfather Temirkhan without knowing the identity of his real father and mother. Kanykey, whom Semetey calls a sister, waits until Semetey reaches the age of twelve to tell him the truth. She risks her and Manas’s dignity by committing her old horse Taytoru to the race with the intention that, if Taytoru wins, she will tell Semetey the truth about his father and fatherland, Talas.

Long-distance horse races were a central feature of traditional life among the nomadic Kyrgyz, with the horses ridden by young boys and sometimes girls. All the praise and fame, however, usually went to the owner and trainer of the race-horses. As the owner of Taytoru, Kanykey waits desperately for the horses to reach the finish line, watching the horses from a distance through binoculars to see how Taytoru is placing in the race.

*Eey, mina oshondo Taytoru,
Baskanyna mal jetpey,
Bashkacha churkap alyptyr.*

*Jelgenine jel jetpey,
Jekeche churkap alyptir.*

*Enkeyishte kalganda,
Eliktey kolu saiylat.*

Ögö tarta bergende,

At that moment, Taytoru
Galloped with such an unusual pace
That no other animal would catch up with
him.

He galloped with such a distinct pace
That not even a breeze would catch up with
him.

When he came to a downhill,
His front hooves tightly grabbed on the
slope.

When he came to an uphill,

*Jal, kuyruğu jaiylat.
 Talaa tuzgö kelgende
 Tamany jerge tarsyldap,
 Kara bolot oozduk
 Kömököydö karsyldap,
 Tal jibektey kuyrugun
 Chatky ayakka chapkylap.
 Kökülün kökkö ыrgyтыр
 Könöktöy bolgon tuyagyn,
 Körüngön jerge mylgyтыр,
 Oynop ketchü nemedey,
 Oysongdop bashyn chulgutup,
 Maralday bolgon denesi,
 Kapkara changa bölönüp,
 Üstündөгү jash Aydar,
 Er kashyna jölönüp,
 Kele jatat Taytoru
 Ichi küyüp chok bolup,
 Örttönüp ketchü ot bolup.
 Buydala tüshüp dürbünü,
 Kayran eneng Kanykey,
 Kayra saldy toktolup.
 Myna oshondo karasang,
 Sary adyrmak urchukta,
 Salynган toonun tumshukta,
 Kerüüchünün jolunda,
 Kara Talas boyunda,
 Özüng körgön Taytoru,
 Kalgan eken janybar,
 Myna oshondo karasang,
 Otuz tulpar songunda.
 Aylanaiyn Taytoru,
 Belgilüü külük mal eleng,
 Kechee katagandyn kan Koshoy,
 Aksakalduu abakem,
 Kabylan Manas ölgöndö,

 Oshol azaga ele bergen
 mal eleng, uuuuu.
 Ee, serüündөтпös özүmdü,
 Shermende katyn dedirtip,

 Ubara kylba özүmdü.*

His mane and tail fluttered in the air.
 When he came to a flat field,
 His soles made sounds against the ground.
 The black steel bit
 Clattered against his palate.
 He hit his straight silky tail
 Against his rear legs.
 Throwing his forelock into the air
 With his hooves as big as a bucket,
 He ran, stepping all over the ground
 He became playful,
 Tossing his head from side to side
 His body, which became like that of a doe,
 Was covered in black dust.
 The young Aydar on his top,
 Leaned onto the saddle's head.
 Thus Taytoru was coming,
 Burning like embers inside,
 As if he were going to burst into flame.
 Quickly grabbing her binoculars,
 The noble mother, Kanykey,
 Looked again carefully.
 When she looked,
 On the far side of Sary Adyrmak mountain,
 In the foothills of the mountain,
 On the road to Kerüüchü,
 Near dark Talas,
 That Taytoru whom she saw,
 When she looked,
 The charger with the soul, was left behind
 Thirty stallions.
 Dear Taytoru,
 You were a famous galloper,
 Khan Koshoy of Katagan,
 My respected uncle with a white beard,
 Had given you to me as a contribution for
 the funeral
 When Manas, the tiger, had died.

 Don't ruin my dignity,
 Don't make people call me a shameless
 woman,
 Don't let my efforts be in vain.

Dep oshentip jengekeng,

*Kayrat kylyp turalbay,
Kayra dürbü saldy ele,
Kayra karap kaldy ele,
Baya körgön Taytoru,
Tulparlygy bilinip,
Araanday oozun achyptyr,
Kan aralash ak köbük,
Omuroogo chachyptyr.
Baskanyna mal jetpey,
Bashkacha churkap alyptyr.*

*Jelgenine jel jetpey,
Jekeche churkap alyptir.*

*Atangdyn körü dünüyö,
Özüng körgön buudanyng
Otuzunan adashyp,
On ekige baryptyr.
Munu körgön jengengdin,
Köngülü jaman bölünüp,
Közünön jashy tögülüp,
Köksöp jürgön jüröktö,
Kök jaldary körünüp.
Atangdyn körü dünüyö,
Say söögü syzdap sögülüp,
Samap jürgön jüröktö,
Syrttandary körünüp.
Özüng körgön Taytoru,
Ötüp ketken düynödön,
Arbaktar süröp algan körünöt.
Aldy jagyng karasang,
Aysarala at mingen,
Jalang kylych baylangan,
Alty tümön at kelse,
Ayanbay turup kol salgan.
Aziz kandyn Almanbet,*

Ayashymdyn aty dep,

*Myna oshondo karasang,
Aysarala at minip,*

Saying these words, your dear sister-in-law
[Kanykey]

Became impatient
And looked through her binoculars again.
When she looked again,
Taytoru, whom she saw a while ago,
Showed his real stamina,
He opened his mouth wide
And splashed white foam
Onto his chest.
He galloped with such an unusual pace
That no other animal would catch up with
him.

He galloped with such a distinct pace
That not even a breeze would catch up with
him.

Damn this world,
That stallion whom she saw a while ago
Coming behind thirty horses
Was now coming behind twelve horses.
Seeing this, your dear sister-in-law
Became so excited,
Tears poured from her eyes.
She saw those brave warriors [their spirits]
Whom she had been missing.
Damn this world,
Her entire body and bones ached
When she saw those strong warriors
Whom she had been longing for.
Taytoru, whom she saw a while ago,
The spirits of these men
Cheered for him by his side.
In front of him,
Riding on his palomino horse,
Wearing a sword without a sheath
There was Aziz Khan's son Almanbet,
Who attacked without thinking
When approached by six thousand horse-
men.

Saying that Taytoru was the horse of his
friend's wife,
At that moment,
Riding on his Aysarala horse,

*Atangdyn körü Almanbet,
Kyikyrykty salyptyr,
Özüng körgön Torunu,
Kosho süröp kalyptyr.
Anyn artyn karasa,
Uzun boyluu keng daly,
Ayzakerdin yktuusu,
Kyrk choronun myktytsy,*

*Alyshsa adamdyn küchü jetpegen,
Arstandyn tishi ötpögön,
Kyrgyzdardyn kyraany,
Aybaltanyn Chubagy.
Myna oshondo er Chubak,
Kökala synduu at minip,
Ach albarstan ton kiyip,
Olbuy-solbuy kamchy urup,
Ong-tetiri teminip,
Jengekemdin aty dep,*

*Uguldu maga daty dep,
Baya körgön er Chubak,
Bu da süröp kalyptyr.
Anyn artyn karasang,
Kara bolot kyrgagy,
Kabylan Manas Syrgagy,
Atka jengil, taiga chak,
Ar ubakta jolgo sak,
Ulakandyn er Syrgak,
Jengekemdin aty dep,*

*Uguldu maga daty dep,
Kaiyp bolgon er Syrgak,*

*Kyikyrykty salyptyr,
Bu da süröp kalyptyr.
Anyn artyn karasang,
Kyrk choronun baary,
Kyikyrykty salyptyr.
Ajbay, Koshoy, er Bakay,*

Baykushumdun aty dep,

That cursed Almanbet,
With a great hue and cry
Cheered for Toru,
Whom she saw.
When Kanykey looked, behind [Almanbet]
There was a tall man with wide shoulders,
He was the skilled spearman
And the best of the forty companions [of
Manas],
No one equaled his strength in battle.
A lion's teeth could not penetrate his body.
The brave heart of the Kyrgyz
Was Aybalta's son, Chubak.
At that moment, the hero Chubak
Riding on a beautiful white horse
Wearing his coat of armor Ach albars²⁷
Hitting his horse with a whip on the sides
Kicking on the horse's sides with his legs,
Knowing that it was the horse of his sister-
in-law [Kanykey],
And hearing her call for support,
That brave Chubak,
He, too, was cheering [for Taytoru].
When Kanykey looked behind him,
The man, who is like a black cloud, was
Syrgak of Manas, the tiger,
He was quick and skilled in everything
And stayed alert on the road.
The brave Syrgak of Ulakan [his father]
Knowing that he was the horse of his sister-
in-law,
Hearing her call for support,
The brave Syrgak, who had disappeared
mysteriously,
Created a big hue and cry
And he, too, cheered for him.
When she [Kanykey] looked behind him,
All forty companions [of Manas]
Created a big hue and cry.
There were brave men Ajbay, Koshoy, and
Bakay,
Knowing that he was the horse of the poor
Kanykey,

*Oshondo bular dele süröp
alyptir, oooy.*

*Eey, anyn artyn karasang,
Asman menen jeringdin
Tiröösünön бүткөндөй.
Aiyng menen күнүндүн,
Bir özüñөн бүткөндөй.
Ay aldynda buluttun,
Salkynynan бүткөндөй,
Küpüldögön dayranyn,
Agymynan бүткөндөй.
Arka jagyn karasang,
Kyrk karyshkyr kabyshyp,*

*Jan jaktaryn karasang,
Kabylandar alyshyp,
Maylangan buuday жүздөнүп,
Küügüm tuman közdөнүп,
Atangdyn körü er Manas,
Baykushumdun aty dep,*

*Uguldu maga daty dep,
Oshondo özü ele süröp
alyptyr, oooy.*

They all, too, cheered for him.

Then, when she looked behind them,
As if created from the beam
Between the Sky and the Earth,
As if created from
The Moon and the Sun
As if created from
The cool shade of clouds under the Moon,
As if created from
The flow of a gushing river,
Behind them,
There were forty wolves fighting with each
other.

By his sides,
There were panthers wrestling,
His face looked like wheat smeared with oil,
His eyes looked like fog at dusk.
It was the damned, great hero Manas,
Knowing that Taytoru was the horse of his
poor wife,
Hearing her call for support,
At that moment he [Manas] himself
cheered for Taytoru.

NOTES

This chapter first appeared in a somewhat different form on the website of the Silkroad Foundation (<http://www.silkroadfoundation.org/toc/index.html>) and in *ECI Cultural Magazine* (www.ecieco.org) 2 (Fall/Winter 2006–2007): 58–61.

1. The epic *Manas* is also found among ethnic Kyrgyz living in China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, and a version of the epic has been published in a Chinese translation. In 2009, UNESCO inscribed the epic *Manas* in the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity on behalf of the People's Republic of China. China's initiative provoked protests in Kyrgyzstan, whose Ministry of Culture petitioned UNESCO to reconsider the inscription.

2. In summer 1995, with the support of UNESCO, Kyrgyzstan celebrated the one thousandth anniversary of Manas in the northern mountainous region of Talas, which is believed to be the homeland of the eponymous legendary hero. The government of Kyrgyzstan proudly presented nomadic history and culture to their guests by mounting a grand, open-air theatrical show that displayed the main scenes from the epic. It was the first, and remains the largest, national celebration that has taken place in Kyrgyzstan since its independence.

3. S. Musaev, *Epos Manas: nauchnopolularnyy ocherk* [The epic *Manas*: A scholarly-popular essay] (Frunze: Ilim, 1984), 117.

4. *Ibid.*, 98.

5. *Manas: Kyrgyz elinin baatyrdyk eposu*. Sayakbay Karalayevidin varyanty boyuncha [*Manas: The heroic epic of the Kyrgyz people. Version by Sayakbay Karalaeu*], 4 vols. (Bishkek: “Kyrgyzstan” basmasy, 1995), vol. 1: 11.

6. The 13th-century Mongolian epic chronicle *The Secret History of the Mongols* recounts the origin and history of the Mongols and builds stories around the life of Genghis Khan and his empire.

7. *Manas Entsiklopediyasy* [The *Manas* encyclopedia] (Bishkek: Izd-vo Glavnoi redaktsii Kyrgyzskoi entsiklopedii, 1995), 9.

8. *Ibid.*, 16.

9. *Ibid.*, 432.

10. Karalaeu, 6.

11. There have been some female singers, for example, Seyde ene, from whom some episodes were recorded during the Soviet period.

12. Some performers recited only the stories of the epic *Semetey*, the second part of the *Manas* trilogy. They were called *semeteychi* (reciter of *Semetey*).

13. In 2010, Urkash Mambetaliev published his own version of the *Semetey* epic.

14. Kök Tengir (Blue Sky Tengri) is the old Turkic name for God or Creator.

15. Ordo: a military game played with knucklebones.

16. *Tümön*: a military unit consisting of ten thousand warriors.

17. *Gülazyk*: a traditional food especially prepared to take on a long journey, such as a war campaign. The equivalent of pemmican, it was made from the meat of a horse, sheep, or deer, and it kept for a long time without spoiling.

18. *Manas Entsiklopediyasy*, 185.

19. Adapted from Theodore Levin with Valentina Süzükei, *Where Rivers and Mountains Sing: Sound, Music, and Nomadism in Tuva and Beyond* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 189–191.

20. *Manas Entsiklopediyasy*, 185.

21. *Ibid.*, 186

22. *Ibid.*

23. *Ayash*: a term of address used toward the wife or husband of a close friend.

24. This is a popular Kyrgyz curse or swearword used by men to express anger. Epic singers often insert the phrase when describing tragic events and scenes.

25. Askar Akaev, *Kyrgyzskaia gosudarstvennost' i narodnyi epos “Manas”* [Kyrgyz statehood and the folk epic *Manas*] (Bishkek: Uchkun, 2002).

26. In *Manas*, Temirkhan is presumed to represent the historical Timur (1336–1405), known in English as Tamerlane, founder of the Timurid dynasty, who traced his ancestry to the Mongol conqueror Genghis Khan.

27. Kyrgyz warriors named their coat of armor. Chubak named his armor “Ach albars” (hungry demon).



CHAPTER 10 *Aqyns* and Improvised Poetry Competitions among the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz

ELMIRA KÖCHÜMKULOVA AND
JANGÜL QOJAKHMETOVA

There's a popular Kyrgyz saying, "A red tongue (eloquence) is the best skill of all" (*Önör aldy—kyzyl til*). Indeed, the nomadic Kyrgyz and Kazakhs have long placed a high value on rhetorical skill (Kyrgyz: *chechendik*; Kazakh: *sheshendik*) and developed sophisticated forms of verbal art that are displayed in public competitions of improvised poetry, called *aitysh* (Kyrgyz) or *aitys* (Kazakh). Vasily Radlov, a Russian scholar who collected oral literature among the nomadic Kyrgyz in the nineteenth century, noted that the ordinary speech of the Kyrgyz sounds like poetry, and that they consider rhythmic speech to be the highest form of verbal art. Similarly, the Russian orientalist, writer, and diplomat, Petr Pashino, who visited Turkestan in the second half of the nineteenth century, observed that the Kazakhs constantly sing and improvise at the same time.

Kazakh and Kyrgyz oral tradition is intimately linked with the nomadic way of life that has provided a livelihood for myriad Turkic and Mongolian groups in the vast grasslands, mountain ranges, and steppe country of Central Eurasia. Beginning in the early 1930s, Soviet economic and cultural policies prescribed that nomads be resettled in villages, towns, and cities. Yet even in the conditions of sedentary life, nomadic heritage and oral tradition continue to be integral elements of national identity and culture. These elements have become increasingly important in the decades since 1991, when Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan became independent nations. Before the twentieth century, Kyrgyz and Kazakh nomads did not generally

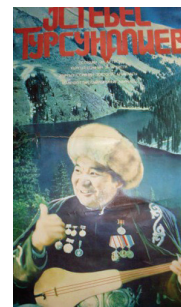


practice writing in their everyday lives, or carry books when traveling from pasture to pasture with their livestock. Instead, they had “living books” in the form of epic singers (Kyrgyz: *yrchys*; Kazakh: *jyrshys*, *jyraus*), oral poets (*aqyns*) who extemporized verse during the course of performance, and storytellers (*jomokchus*; *ängimeshis*) who were able to preserve traditional wisdom, cultural knowledge, history, and tribal genealogy in poetry, epic poems, songs, and instrumental music.

MASTERS OF ORAL POETRY AND MUSIC PERFORMANCE: YRCHY/JYRSHY, JYRAU, AND AQYN

Both the Kyrgyz and Kazakh languages—which are very similar—have the old word *yr/jyr* which derives from the Turkic *iyr*: “song,” “epic song.” Cognate with this word are the terms *yrchyl/jyrshy* and *jyrau*, meaning “oral poet,” “singer,” “musician,” “bard,” or “epic singer,” which refer to masters of oral poetry and music performance. Kyrgyz *yrchys* and Kazakh *jyrshys* sang improvised as well as pre-composed poetry in a variety of lyric and smaller epic genres and participated in oral poetry competitions, *aitysh* and *aitys*, accompanying themselves on the *komuz* (Kyrgyz three-stringed long-necked lute) and *dombyra* (Kazakh two-stringed long-necked lute). The Kazakh *jyraus*, as distinct from *jyrshys*, specialized in the performance and composition of large-scale epic poems and originally accompanied their recitation on the *qobyz* (Kazakh two-stringed fiddle), later transferring to the *dombyra*. (See chapters 5 and 11.)

In the nineteenth century, in response to broad social and musical change, the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz acquired a new term to designate an oral poet and musician: *aqyn*. This term, according to a commonly accepted opinion, derived from the Persian *ākhūn* (“preacher,” “orator,” “tutor”) and was adopted in Turkic languages under the influence of Persian language and literature and disseminated among the nomads with the spread of Islam.¹ An alternative etymological explanation offered by Kazakh scholars interprets *aqyn* as an originally Turkic word. According to this interpretation, it derives from the word *aqin* (“flow,” “stream,” “torrent”), alluding to the nature of *aqyns*’ oral improvisation associated with torrential flow, and its cognate words meaning “attack,” “strike,” “incursion,” which reflect the traditional understanding of *aqyns*’ performance in poetic contests as combat with an opponent representing a different clan, and a defense of one’s own clan.² *Aqyns* have overwhelmingly been male, but there were also female bards who challenged male contenders in improvised poetry competitions. Although *aqyns* primarily performed lyric poetry and participated in *aitysh/aitys*, they could also perform epic genres and were versatile oral poets and singers who accompanied themselves on musical instruments—typically the *komuz* (Kyrgyz) and *dombyra* (Kazakh). Kazakh *aqyns* also used the *qobyz* and button accordion (*syrnai*) to accompany



Posters of *aqyns* from the Soviet period.

A group of Kazakh *aqyns* with their instruments.

Courtesy of the Central State Archive of Film, Photography, and Sound Recordings of the Republic of Kazakhstan.



singing. In addition to composing orally, some *aqyns* who received a Muslim education and learned the Arabic script also wrote down their poetry and therefore came to be called *jazgych* (Kyrgyz) or *jazba* (Kazakh) *aqyns* (from *jaz*: “to write”).³

During the Soviet period, with the spread of literacy in the Latin and, later, the Cyrillic alphabet and the rising significance of written literature, a new group of poets emerged who composed poetry in writing (examples include the Kyrgyz poets Aaly Tokombaev and Alykul Osmonov, and the Kazakh poets Mayasar Japaqov and Isa Baizakov). These poets addressed new themes and adopted some of the literary norms and styles of Russian and Soviet poetic traditions. And while they did not compose or perform music, nor participate in *aitysh/aitys*, they did retain the name *aqyn*. In order to distinguish this new group of *aqyns* from traditional oral poets and singers, Kyrgyz and Kazakh scholars divided *aqyns* into three categories:

- *tökmö/tökpe* (from *tök*-: “to pour,” “to spill out words”) or *suyryp salma* (Kazakh: “here-and-now,” “on the spot”) *aqyns*: improvising oral poets;
- *jazgych/jazba aqyns*: eighteenth- and nineteenth-century poets who wrote down their poetry;
- *aqyns*: Soviet and post-Soviet poets who have composed poetry in writing.

Today most improvising oral poets can also compose written poetry. Meanwhile, the term *yrchy/jyrshy*, which formerly designated individuals who both composed and performed poetic texts, has come to refer exclusively to performers. In this chapter, we will focus on *tökmö/suyryp salma aqyns* (or *yrchys/jyrshys* in the older, pre-Soviet sense of the term), and on the improvisatory verse performed at poetry competitions, *aitysh/aitys*.

THE ART OF AQYNS: AQYNDYQ

In Kyrgyz and Kazakh nomadic societies, the art of improvising oral poets (Kyrgyz: *aqyndyq*, *yrchylık*, *tökmölük önör*; Kazakh: *aqyndyq*, *jyrshylyq öner*) was closely interwoven with everyday life. People very much enjoyed improvised music and poetry and invited performers to a variety of traditional ceremonies and festivities (Kyrgyz: *ash*, *toy*; Kazakh: *as*, *toy*), such as a celebration for a newborn child (*jeen-tek toy/shildekhana*), a circumcision feast (*sünnöt/sündet toy*), weddings (*üylönüü/üilenu toy*), funerals and memorial feasts (in particular, the one-year anniversary of the dead, *ash/as*), and community gatherings (*jiyn*). Within these festivities, an *aqyn* often acted as a master of ceremonies (*jarchi/jarshy*) who was in charge of the feast's entertainment "program" and conducted important life-cycle rituals that involved singing. These included the performance of a special wedding song (*betashar*) that accompanied the unveiling of a bride's face, and the performance of mourning laments (*koshok*, *joktoo/joqtau*) at funerals and memorial feasts (see chapter 12).

The repertory of *aqyns* included a variety of poetic and musical genres: storytelling (*jomok/ängime*) and epic narration (*jyr*, *dastan*, *qissa*); lyric (*qara öleng*), didactic, and wisdom poetry (*terme*, *jeldirme*, *tolghau*); wedding songs (*betashar*, *toy bastar*) and funeral lamentations (*koshok*, *joktoo/joqtau*); songs dedicated to particular themes (*arnau*) and instrumental music (*küü/küi*). In their youth, *aqyns* composed love songs (*ashykyk yrlary/ghashyqtyq jyrlary*) and, as they became older, they composed and sang philosophical and religious poetry that reinforced social mores and spiritual values.

Through their multifarious engagement in family and community affairs, *aqyns* and *yrchys/jyrshys* played important roles in nomadic society, facilitating communication and exchange, perpetuating memory and identity, and validating socially established customs and norms. Far from being just entertainers, they were highly esteemed bearers and transmitters of historical and cultural knowledge, traditional values, wisdom, and oral musical traditions. Such poets and singers assumed an elevated social status and high moral obligations before their community. The nineteenth-century Kyrgyz *yrchy* Arstanbek eloquently describes what kind of person an *yrchy* should be and what kind of roles he should play in society in an impromptu song that he sang to his pupil Jengijok:

<i>Oo, balam,</i>	Oh, my son,
<i>Yrchylik jaiyn aytaiyn,</i>	Let me tell you about being an <i>yrchy</i> :
<i>Yrchy bolsong synchy bol.</i>	If you want to be an <i>yrchy</i> , be a <i>synchy</i> , ⁴
<i>Argymak mingen baatyr bol.</i>	Be a brave man who rides on a stallion,
<i>Külük mingen küchtüü bol,</i>	Be a strong man who rides on a racehorse,
<i>Küydürgögö mizdüü bol.</i>	Be a sharp knife to one who's obnoxious,

*Jetimderge kömök bol,
 Jesirlerge jölök bol,
 Kankorlorgo kasap bol,
 Kalp aytkanga mazak bol.
 Ashta, toydo myrza bol,
 Akyndarga nuska bol.
 Karözgöy bolboy kalys bol,
 Koshomattan alys bol.
 Eregish chyksa elchi bol,
 El-jurtungdun kenchi bol.
 Kalktyn zaryn zardap öt,
 Kachanky yryn yrdap öt.
 Kalk köngülün chalkytyp,
 Kaniet alyp jyrgap öt.
 Balam,
 Synchylardyn synyn uk,
 Yrchylardyn yryn uk,
 Jomokchunu izdep uk,
 Ushakchyny uktap uk,
 Akyldandy angdap uk,
 Duduktardy jandap uk.
 Chechenderdin sözün uk,
 Kömömdördün köchün uk,
 Komuzchunun küüsün uk,
 Kiyakchyny kyldat uk,
 Choorchunu chordop uk,

 Temir komuz termeltet,
 Nazar salyp taasyn uk.
 Adebî jok yrchydan,
 Artynda jaman söz kalat.
 Anyk nuska yrchydan
 Aalamga ketchü kep kalat.⁵*

Be a help for orphans,
 Be the support for widows,
 Be the butcher to bloodsuckers,
 Be the mocker to liars,
 Be the gentleman at feasts,
 Be an example for *aqyns*,
 Be just and not wicked,
 Stay away from ingratiating,
 Be the conciliator during a fight,
 Be the treasure of your people,
 Sing the sorrows of people with sorrow,
 Sing the old songs that they like,
 Bring joy to people's hearts, and
 Lead a grateful and joyful life.
 My son,
 Learn the skills of *synchys*,
 Learn the songs of singers,
 Listen to the storytellers by chasing after them,
 Learn from gossipers in your sleep,
 Learn well the wisdom of the wise,
 Learn from the deaf by going close to them,
 Learn the words of eloquent men,
 Learn the wisdom of wise men,
 Learn the melodies of *komuz* players attentively,
 Learn the melodies of *kiyak* players clearly,
 Learn the music of *choor* [flute]
 players cheerfully,
 The *temir komuz* [jaw harp] makes one swing,
 Pay attention and learn it proficiently,
 Behind an ill-mannered singer
 Only bad words will remain.
 Behind a real singer,
 Words of wisdom will live forever!

In addition to its social role, the art of *aqyns* and *yrchys/jyrshys* was understood to have sacred significance. Like shamans (*bakshys/baqsys*) and epic bards (*manaschys/jyraus*), bearers of *aqyndyq* were believed to have their poetic and musical gift bestowed by supernatural powers, usually through a visionary dream (*ayan*) in which they were visited by a messenger, such as a saint, a sage, or the spirit of a famous late singer and poet-improviser. Their poetic improvisation and singing were thus imbued with magical qualities, and their performance at life-cycle

rituals and community festivities was understood to facilitate mediation between humans and the world of ancestor-spirits.

MASTER-APPRENTICE TRAINING

Notwithstanding the belief in an otherworldly source for the *aqyn*'s gift, the path to gaining mastery in *aqyndyq*, whether in the past or nowadays, is not an easy one. Becoming a master *aqyn* involves both self-learning and training with a master (*ustat/ustaz*) in a variety of domains: verbal improvisation and musical skills, knowledge of local history and culture, and an ability to storytell and entertain. An amateur oral poet among the Kyrgyz is called *jamakchy* (from *jamak*: "patch"). As the term suggests, *jamakchys* learn to patch together words and improvise verse lines with simple rhymes and alliterations. *Jamakchy* singers are typically young and have not yet gained enough knowledge, wisdom, and life experience to feel confident about their verbal improvisational skills. They would not be competitive in *aitysh* contests but test their verbal skill at smaller feasts and parties. Mastering verbal arts to the professional level expected of a *tökmö/tökpe* or *suyryp salma aqyn* requires practice, training, and exposure to the public, as well as traveling, communicating, and socializing. In addition to artistic talent and a good knowledge of history and culture, *tökmö aqyns* need an excellent memory and strong listening skills (*kuyma kulak/quıma qulaq*) in order to memorize the songs of other *aqyns* as well as the wise words of elders.

A young person who wants to become an *aqyn* first identifies a teacher or master (*ustat/ustaz*) willing to transmit wisdom along with the craft of performance: improvising and rhyming verse lines, singing, playing the *komuz* or *domyra*, and becoming an engaging storyteller and entertainer. Like athletes who undertake daily training regimes, amateur *aqyns* must train their mind, language skills, and voice. Serving as an apprentice (*shakirt/shäkirt*) to a master over a certain period of time, they acquire a subtle command of the art of improvisation, and toward the end of their study, they receive a spiritual and artistic valediction, or blessing (*bata*), from the master in which he offers words of advice for the *aqyn*'s future life. The well-known Kyrgyz *aqyn* Kalyk (1883–1953), gave the following advice to his pupil Osmonkul: "If one does not train, feed and take care of one's skill (*önör*) like a racehorse, it will get dull like a rusty knife. Thus one must constantly sharpen it. People need singers like us to tell their sorrows, to entertain them, and to express their thoughts and ideas in eloquent words."⁶ Another Kyrgyz *aqyn*, Barpy, said: "The essence of good words lies in song. The more one sings the more words will be composed. There are many different songs and they must be sung at the right place and time. Singers have a great responsibility depending on their fame and talent."⁷



Elmirbek aqyn.

Courtesy of Elmirbek Imanaliev.



Some poets gave their advice in poetry. For example, the Kyrgyz poet Korgol gave the following precepts to one of his students, Altymysh:

<i>Yr chykpayt balam oylonboy</i>	Words will come out without thinking,
<i>Kurch sözdü taap yrdagyn,</i>	Find sharp words to put together
<i>Kirpich kynap koygondoy.</i>	Like evenly stacked bricks,
<i>Kyialyng daana ergisin,</i>	Let your mind think clearly,
<i>Karyia atang Korgoldoy.</i> ⁸	Like your old father Korgol.

And to his student Tuuganbay, Korgol said:

<i>Badaldyn körkü shagynda,</i>	The beauty of a bush is in its branches,
<i>Baltayn küchü sabynda.</i>	The beauty of an ax is in its handle,
<i>Bal koshkondoy söz aytıp,</i>	Sing words as sweet as honey and
<i>Bargan jerge jangy yrda.</i>	New songs at every place you go.
<i>Buchkakka töönü chapkanday,</i>	Like a camel rider hitting a camel on the shin,
<i>Buydalbastan shar yrda!</i>	Sing fast without stumbling.
<i>Oymoktoy oozung shok bolso,</i>	If you have a bad mouth,
<i>Oyungda ырыng jok bolso,</i>	If you have no good songs,
<i>Köpchülökkö jakpasang,</i>	If people do not like you,
<i>Köröngöngö taarynba!</i> ⁹	Don't complain about your ineptitude!

The great nineteenth-century Kazakh *aqyn* Süünbai Aronuly gave this blessing to his pupil, Jambyl Jabaev (1846–1945), who subsequently became a famous *aqyn* in his own right:

<i>O, Jambyl, bata deding—berdim saghan,</i>	Oh, Jambyl, you asked for a blessing, and I give it to you,
<i>Baqytty, ömirli bol, jürgin aman.</i>	Be happy, live long, and keep well.
<i>Batasyn at ornyna berdi ghoi dep,</i>	Don't blame me,
<i>Qoimaghyn bylai shyghyp kinä maghan.</i>	Saying I gave you a blessing instead of a horse.
<i>Songynan Süünbaidyng ornyn basyp,</i>	As you follow in my footsteps,
<i>Tilingnen balyng tamsyn sorghalaghan.</i>	May the honey [of your words] flow from your tongue like a stream.
<i>Japagha riza bolsyn aita barghyn,</i>	May people be content with what you say,
<i>Osy men ökpelemei jürsin aman.</i> ¹⁰	May they not be upset by it and keep well.

The master's blessing initiates young *aqyns* into independent practice as professional performers, after which they further develop and refine their verbal and musical skills. In the past, depending on their personal characteristics, voice, and



oral-poetic improvisational skills, *aqyns* often acquired a “stage name” in the form of an epithet, such as *ak tangday* (white palate), *jez tangday* (copper palate), *too bulbulu* (mountain nightingale), *kara jaak* (black/sharp jaw), and *tökmö* (torrential rain). The titles were usually attached to the *aqyn*’s first name—for example, “Kara jaak Kalmyrza” (Black-jawed Kalmyrza), “Too bulbulu Toktogul” (Toktogul the Mountain Nightingale), “Jez tangday akyn Jengijok” (Jengijok with a Copper Palate), “Alymkul tökmö” (Alymkul, the Torrential [Rain]), “Eshmambet tulgara” (Eshmanbet the Black Horse), and “Okeanday Osmonkul” (Oceanic Osmonkul). Similar epithets are also used among contemporary *aqyns*. For example, the Kyrgyz *aqyn* Jengishbek Toktobekov is called “Avtomat” (Machine Gun) because he improvises verse lines as if shooting bullets from a machine gun. Another *aqyn*, Amantay Kutmanaliev, is nicknamed “Sary kashka” (Horse with a Yellow Spot on its Forehead) because he is fair-skinned, and Elmirebek Imanaliev is known as “Ak jaiyk” (Wide Pasture) on account of his calm personality, chubby body, and mellow voice.

Through gaining experience in performance, an *aqyn* prepares himself for participation in *aitysh/aitys*, the highest form of improvisatory verbal art.

ORAL POETRY COMPETITIONS: AITYSH/AITYS

The word *aitysh/aitys* is derived from the Turkic verb *ait* (“to tell,” “to say”) and means “verbal duel,” “quarrel,” or “dispute.” Although unique as a sophisticated type of improvised poetry contest, it is by no means the only dialogic art form among the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz. The competitive tradition has old historical origins in the cultures of Central Asian nomads, and is rooted in ritualized rivalry between different tribes and clans in tribal societies. Elements of competitiveness permeated various spheres of nomadic social and cultural life, including sports and martial arts, poetry and music. They found expression in wrestling (Kazakh: *qazaqsha küres*; Kyrgyz: *kürösh*), horse racing (Kazakh: *at jarys*, *bäige*; Kyrgyz: *at chabysh*, *bayge*), and horsemanship games, such as polo played with a goat carcass (Kazakh: *kökpar*; Kyrgyz: *kök börü*, *ulak*) and contests in archery (Kazakh: *jamby atu*; Kyrgyz: *jamby atmay*). They have also manifested themselves in sung poetic exchanges in ritual practice and in everyday life, such as dialogic incantations against livestock diseases (*bädik aitys*) performed by a shaman or by groups of young men and women, the wedding song (*jar-jar*) performed in alternation by friends of the groom and girlfriends of the bride at her farewell ceremony, and verses on various topics (*qara öleñg*) exchanged impromptu by amateur performers (Kazakh: *qaiymdasu*, *qaiym aitys*; Kyrgyz: *kaiym aitysh*, *alym sabak aitysh*).

Competitions could also take place between masters of rhetoric and jurists (*sheshens*, *biis*), epic performers (*yrchys/jyrshys*, *jyraus*), and, among Kazakhs, instrumental virtuosi (*dombyra* players) who competed in the performance of



Jambyl Jabaev.

Courtesy of the Central State Archive of Film, Photography, and Sound Recordings of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

An *aitys* of Kazakh *aqyns*.

Courtesy of the Central State Archive of Film, Photography, and Sound Recordings of the Republic of Kazakhstan.



narrative pieces, *küis* (*tartys*).¹¹ In contrast to ritual and everyday dialogic forms of singing, these forms of competitions all provided an arena for accomplished master performers. *Aitysh/aitys* presented the most challenging platform for *aqyns*, putting their intellect, knowledge, outlook, eloquence, wit, and oral poetic skill to the test before a live audience and determining a performer's eminence as a poet-improviser.

Traditionally, participants in *aitysh/aitys* or similar contests between master performers performed on behalf of different clans. A competition was forbidden between members of the same clan or distant paternal relatives. During the competition, they had to praise their own clans and find fault with their opponents' clans. Poetic and musical contests were therefore the highlight of large intertribal festivities, such as a memorial feast to mark the one-year anniversary of a person's death, a wedding, or a community gathering. Such festivities took place in mountain pastures (*jayloo/jailau*) during summer and autumn when fermented mare's milk (*qymyz*) was plentiful and animals had grown fat enough to be consumed. In addition

to *aitysh/aitys*, these festivities also featured competitive play and games, such as wrestling and horse racing. Large memorial feasts were planned far in advance, and people waited eagerly to listen to songs sung by well-known entertainers. An *aqyn* appointed as a master of ceremony would welcome guests, accompanying himself on the *komuz* or *dombyra*, and introduce the various singers, musicians, wrestlers, and horsemen. Memorial feasts lasted for several days so that people who came on horseback from long distances could rest and enjoy one another's company, share meals, watch horse games, and listen to the music and poetry of *aqyns*, especially to their *aitysh/aitys*. Many *aqyns* earned their living by singing, and as a sign of appreciation, wealthy hosts and clan leaders presented *aqyns* with gifts, such as horses, sheep, fur coats and hats, or money.

In the twentieth century, following the transformations in Kyrgyz and Kazakh societies that came about as a consequence of Soviet nationalities and cultural policies, the social connotation and content of *aitysh/aitys* changed: oral poet-improvisers started to perform not as representatives of particular clans and tribes but on behalf of their home regions and areas. The context of *aitysh/aitys* also changed, with performances typically relegated to a stage in a theater or concert hall as part of a state-supported event or as a specially organized and publicly attended spectacle. These changes notwithstanding, contemporary *aitysh/aitys* has maintained much of its traditional character and form, and it remains widely popular among connoisseurs of poetic eloquence and improvisation, providing a measure of an *aqyn's* mastery and ingenuity. The following sections outline the types, form, and poetic and musical structure of the Kyrgyz *aitysh* and Kazakh *aitys*.

TYPES OF COMPETITION

Based on form and content, Kyrgyz *aqyns* distinguish six principal types of *aitysh*:

- *alym sabak aitysh*: short exchange of poetic words
- *tabyshmak aitysh*: riddle *aitysh*
- *sanat aitysh*: wisdom *aitysh*
- *chechendik aitysh*: eloquence *aitysh*
- *kordoo aitysh*: insult *aitysh*
- *tamalashaluu aitysh*: entertainment *aitysh*

Alym sabak is the most interesting and difficult form of *aitysh*, and only master *aqyns* possess the requisite quick-wittedness and improvisational rhyming skills to compete in it successfully. *Alym sabak* is also one of the main methods that master *aqyns* use to train and test their students. In the *alym sabak aitysh*, two and sometimes three *aqyns* engage in a lively poetic dialogue by improvising short two- or four-line verses on a specific theme or topic. The main feature of this *aitysh* is the principle that contestants carry on the thought or idea initiated by an opponent



using the same initial alliteration and end rhyme provided by the opponent. The goal is not so much to beat one's opponents as to entertain the audience while at the same time learning about the improvisatory methods of other *aqyns*.

WATCH

Example 10.1. *Alym sabak aitysh* between senior master *aqyn* Tuuganbay and his pupil, Aaly *aqyn*.

Watch the *alym sabak aitysh* between senior master *aqyn* Tuuganbay Abdiyev (1937–2008) and his pupil, Aaly *aqyn*. The key principle of this type of poetic contest is to reply to one's opponent using the same number of syllables in a verse line and the same rhyming pattern as one's opponent. An *aqyn* who is not able to come up with a quick and correct response using a rhyming word is considered a loser in the contest.

TUUGANBAY:

*Kagazsyz yrđy jat aytkan,
Takalpy kalbay bat aytkan.
Toktogul, Kalyk, Jengijok,
Tolgop bir atang aty aytkan.
Alty sap menen bashtayly,
Balam,
Akyl oy tynsyn tak aytkyn.*

They improvised songs without paper [reading],
And sang them fast without stumbling.
I proudly pronounce the names of our fathers
Toktogul, Kalyk, and Jengijok.
Let's start our song with six verse lines,
My son,
Speak clearly and delight the mind.

AALY:

*Talanttyn alpy taza aytkan,
Talanttyn kalpy pas aytkan.
Maktasa kökkö chygaryp
Jakpasa any kashaytkan.*

These giant talents sang pure words.
Fake talents sang poor words.
They praised [good people] by making them fly in the sky.
They taught [bad people] a lesson by making them feel
the heat,
Elders like you spoke without stumbling.
Youth like me spoke without stumbling.

TUUGANBAY:

*Alty sap menen jakshy ayttyng,
Ar birin sözdün akty ayttyng.
Tört saptan emi bashtayly,
Töp kelsin baykap asta aytkyn.*

You did a good job with improvising the six-line verses.
You sang truth in each of your words.
Let's now sing with four-line verses,
Make sure that your words rhyme carefully.



AALY:

Ata,
 Ayt deding alty sapty ayttyym,
 A kayra tört dep bashka ayttyng.
 Eseptep ar bir sap yrđy,
 Atakeng,
 Esti alyp közdü chakchayttyng.

Father,
 You told me to sing a six-line-verse song, and I did,
 Then you told me to sing a four-line song.
 By counting each verse line,
 My dear father,
 You are making me scared.

TUUGANBAY:

Aytkandy tuura kabyl al,
 Balam,
 Akyn bol jurtung sagynar.
 Araket kylsang jakshylap,
 Ar jagy dele tabylar.

Understand me correctly,
 My son,
 Be the beloved *aqyn* of your people.
 If you try harder,
 You will find the rest of the words.

AALY:

Tak bilesinger baryngar,
 Tayaktyn eki jagy bar.
 Eki saptan dep aytat,
 Esingerge salyngar.

You all know obviously that
 A stick has two ends.
 We will switch now to a two-line-verse song,
 Pay attention to it.

TUUGANBAY:

Poyuzdun eki jolu bar,
 Adamdyn eki kolu bar.

A train track has two rails,
 A man has two hands.

AALY:

Pilus-minus eki san,
 Elektrdin togu bar.

There is plus and minus
 In electricity.

TUUGANBAY:

Bardyk ele düynönün,
 Bary menen jogu bar.

There is existence and non-existence
 In this world.

AALY:

Urgaachyny, erkekti
 Ushunu da oyunga al.

Don't forget,
 There is female and male.

TUUGANBAY:

Eki tashtan ot chygat,
 Eki zymdan tok chygat.

Rubbing two rocks gives a spark,
 Connecting two wires gives electricity.

AALY:

Dary menen pistondon
 "Dong!" dedirip ot chygat.

Gunpowder and caps
 Make a loud "bang!"

TUUGANBAY:

*Barysh menen kelish bar,
Alysh menen berish bar.*

There is going and coming.
There is taking and giving.

AALY:

*Tozok jana beyish bar,
Adyr jana tegiz bar.*

There is hell and heaven.
There is hill and plain.

TUUGANBAY:

*Batysh menen chygysh bar,
Jatysh menen turush bar.*

There is west and east.
There is sleeping and getting up.

AALY:

*Anda bir saptan yrga ötülü,
Mende mynday sunush bar.*

Now, let's switch to a one-line song,
This is my proposal.

TUUGANBAY:

Asmandagy kün jalgyz.

There is only one sun in the sky.

AALY:

Alla özüng bir jalgyz.

There is only one Allah [God].

TUUGANBAY:

Andan kiyin kim jalgyz?

What else is only one?

AALY:

Aysyz kara tün jalgyz.

A night without the moon is alone.

TUUGANBAY:

Asmandagy ay jalgyz.

The moon in the sky is alone.

AALY:

A düynödö jay jalgyz.

The place in the other world is alone.

TUUGANBAY:

Aylanyp turgan jer jalgyz.

The circling earth is alone.

AALY:

Baylanyp turgan er jalgyz.

A tied-up man [hero] is alone.

TUUGANBAY:

Bir spty eki bölölü.

Let's divide the verse line into two.

AALY:

Anda biyagyn aytyp körölü.

OK. Let's try to sing that way.

T-A: <i>Eki tering—ton bolboyt.</i>	Two sheep hides—can't make a coat.
T-A: <i>Eki tıyın—som bolboyt.</i>	Two coins—can't be called money.
T-A: <i>Uy terisi—ton bolboyt.</i>	A cowhide—can't be a coat.
T-A: <i>Urushchaak kishi—chong bolboyt.</i>	A quarrelsome person—can't succeed.
T-A: <i>Dümürü jok—bak bolboyt.</i>	A tree without roots—can't be a tree.
T-A: <i>Dülöy kishi—sak bolboyt.</i>	A deaf person—can't be cautious.
T-A: <i>Afırıste—ar bolboyt.</i>	A liar—has no shame.
T-A: <i>Afrikada—kar bolboyt.</i>	Africa—has no snow.
T-A: <i>Uzartyp emi—sozboylu.</i>	Let's not sing—too long.
T-A: <i>Ushunu menen—toktoylu.</i>	Let's stop—here.

STUDY QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITY

1. What does the *aitysh* reveal about the relationship between the two *aqyns*?
2. How would you evaluate the two men's poetic improvising skills? Do they observe the rule of the competition by maintaining alliteration and end rhyme? Whom would you select as the winner in this contest?
3. What kind of verbal skills do you think a person needs to be able to improvise one- or two-line verses with alliteration and rhyme within two or three seconds?
4. Oral poetry composition exercise: Test your verbal skill and wit by improvising short verse lines using similar themes and structures to those used by *aqyns*. You can make up a simple melody to fit your rhythmic template and try to sing and compete with a classmate, who, as your opponent, will have to respond to you in the same rhyming pattern.

The *tabyshmak aitysh* is performed in the form of a riddle. One of the *aqyns* begins the *aitysh* by asking riddle-like questions in poetry, and the opponent gives the answer, also in poetry. Only a few accounts of such *aitysh* survive in Kyrgyz oral tradition. The best-known *tabyshmak aitysh* is one that took place between a young woman, Talym kyz, and a man named Köböğ in the mid-nineteenth century. Talym decides to choose her future husband by engaging men in an *aitysh* that tests their knowledge and verbal skill. She promises to marry the one who comes up with the answer to her riddle, which is about nature, human beings, animals, and moral values.

LISTEN

Example 10.2. *Tabyshmak aitysh*, a riddle *aitysh* performed by Azamat Bolgonbaev.

This riddle *aitysh* between two Kyrgyz *yrchys* named Chongdu and Arstanbek, which took place in the mid-nineteenth century, has been preserved in oral tradition. In example 10.2, Azamat Bolgonbaev (b. 1983), sings the texts of both Chongdu and Arstanbek.

CHONGDU'S RIDDLE:

*Ary-ary bel bolot,
Oyloboý aýtsang jel bolot,
Atasy ölsö ne bolot?
Er ölüshsö joo bolot,
Enesi ölsö ne bolot?
Akyl ukkan zor bolot,
Aga-tuugan bel bolot,
Agasy ölsö ne bolot?
Kara chym basyp denesin,
Karyndash ölsö ne bolot?
Jengilin jerden aluuchu,
Jengeng ölsö ne bolot?
Ezilip tosup turuuchu,
Ejeng ölsö ne bolot?
Balkytyp turchu denengdi,
Balang ölsö ne bolot?
Totu kushtay kulpungan,
Kyzynq ölsö ne bolot?
Kerilip burchta olturgan,
Keling ölsö ne bolot?
Kapshytyngdy tolturgan,
Katynynq ölsö ne bolot?
Jurt jakshysy kadyrman,
Akylman ölsö ne bolot?
Eki el joolashsa,
Ebi ketip doolashsa,
Anyn jaiy ne bolot?*

ARSTANBEK'S ANSWER:

*Ataluu adam zor bolot,
Atasy ölgön kor bolot,
Askar toosu solkuldap,
Uragan menen teng bolot.
Enesi ölgön adamdyn,*

Chains of hills create passes,
Careless words are like a puff of air, but
What is it like losing one's father?
The death of heroes makes people enemies,
What is it like losing one's mother?
One who listens to wise words will succeed,
Relatives are one's support, so
What is it like losing one's older brother?
If buried under the black wet soil,
What is it like losing one's younger sister?¹²
What is it like losing one's sister-in-law,
Who eases everyone's work around the house?
What is it like losing one's older sister,
Who welcomes you with great joy?
What is it like losing one's child,
Who melts your body with his [her] smell?
What is it like losing one's daughter,
Who is as beautiful as a parrot?
What is it like losing one's daughter-in-law,
Who sits gracefully in the corner?
What is it like losing one's wife,
Who fills your house?
What is it like losing a wise man
Who is a respected leader?
If two people fight and
Demand retribution from each other,
What will happen to them?

One who has a father has it all.
One whose father dies will be miserable.
It is as if a mighty mountain
Shakes and collapses.
One who loses one's mother

Chalkar bulak soolup,
 Changkagan menen teng bolot.
 Eti boyu ezilip,
 Ene dey süychü kim bolot?
 Agasy ölgön adamdyn,
 Aytarga sözü kem bolot,
 Arkalap jürchü kim bolot?
 Inisi ölgön adamdyn,
 Chabaarga kamchy kem bolot.
 Jatyndash saga dem bolot,
 Jatyndashtan ajyrash,
 Jalyn menen teng bolot.
 Karyndash ölsö kakshaysyng,
 Bar aylangdy tappaysyng.
 Jengesi ölgön adamdyn,
 Jengi jelden jyrtlyat,
 Jakasy kirden kyrkylat.
 Ejesi ölgön kishinin,
 Erkeler jeri az bolot,
 Ejenin közü ötkön song,
 Jeen degen jat bolot.
 Balasy ölgön adamdyn,
 Bar özögü örttönüp,
 Chok chachkan menen teng bolot.
 Kyzы ölgön adamdyn,
 Kabyrgasy bölünöt,
 Kanduu jashy tögülöt.
 Kelini ölgön adamdyn,
 Kermeden aty boshonup,
 Kemigen menen teng bolot.
 Katyny ölgön adamdyn,
 Kutu ketet üyünün.
 Akylman ötsö düynödön,
 Artyn da asyl söz kalat.
 Eki el joolashsa,
 Eldikten ketip doolashsa,
 Jetim menen jesirdin
 Sany elde köböyüp,
 Sayasy ketet jeringdin.
 Sandyraktap ar jerde,
 Sany ketet elingdin.¹⁴

Is like a dried-up spring
 That can't satisfy thirst.
 There will be no one like a mother
 To love and adore you.
 One who loses one's older brother
 Will not be able to speak confidently,
 And will have no one to back him up.
 One who loses one's younger brother
 Will have no horse whip to ride [his horse].
 Because a brother is your strength,
 Being separated from your brother
 Is like burning in flames.
 You feel forlorn and hopeless
 When you lose a younger sister.
 Losing a sister-in-law is like
 Having your sleeve ripped off by the wind
 Or your collar disintegrate from dirt.
 One who loses an older sister
 Will have no place to go to indulge oneself.
 After your older sister dies,
 Your nieces and nephews will be estranged.
 Losing one's child is like having
 Embers poured over your body and
 Burning to your bones.
 Losing a daughter
 Is like having one's ribs broken,
 You will shed tears of blood.
 Losing a daughter-in-law
 Is like losing one's horse and
 Losing a family member.
 Losing a wife
 Is like losing the *kut*¹³ of a house.
 If a wise man dies,
 Pearls of wisdom will remain behind him.
 If two groups of people fight and
 Demand retribution from one another,
 The number of orphans and widows
 Will increase in society,
 Your land will lose its spirit.
 Wandering everywhere like beggars,
 People will diminish.

STUDY QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITY

1. How would you compare the riddle *aitysh* to the preceding *alym sabak aitysh* with regard to the time span, poetic structure, performance style, and function of the *komuz*?
2. As represented in the performance of Azamat Bolgonbaev, how would you compare the verbal skills of the two poets in terms of their use of alliteration and end rhyme?
3. What kind of wisdom does the song contain about family relations in nomadic Kyrgyz society?
4. How do the two poets represented by the performer see the specific identity, image, role, and status of each family member?
5. Compose a short riddle poem about the significance of people or things in your family and life using the same poetic structure as in this poem. Try to use initial alliteration and end rhyme.

Kazakh *aitys* can similarly be divided into several types according to various distinguishing features. With regard to content, these include riddle (*jumbaq*), fable (*ötirik*), joke (*äzil*), and religious (*dini*) *aitys*, as well as *aitys* on a given topic or dedicated to a particular occasion. With regard to number, type, and gender of performers, they include *aitys* between individual *aqyns* or between several performers, between amateurs or professional *aqyns*, and between male or female *aqyns*, or between a young man and a girl (*qyz ben jigit aitysy*). There are also instances of *aitys* in which an *aqyn* competes with an animal (e.g., a horse) or an inanimate object (e.g., a *dombyra*), extemporizing verses both on his or her own behalf and on behalf of the opponent.

With regard to form, Kazakh *aqyns* distinguish two main types of *aitys*: *türe* and *süre*. In *türe aitysy* (from *türe söileu*, “to speak concisely, succinctly”), two or more *aqyns* exchange short, two- or four-line verses. In *süre aitysy* (“long,” “full-length” *aitys*), each of two opponents improvises at length in an effort to display intelligence, sharpness of mind, and skill at improvisation.¹⁵ Whereas *türe aitysy* can be performed by amateur, less skillful, and less experienced *aqyns*, participants in *süre aitysy* are necessarily master poet-improvisers who have a broad knowledge of the history of Kazakh tribes and clans, biographies of major historical personalities, and a range of topics relating to Kazakh culture, society, and politics.

WATCH

Example 10.3. *Süre aitysy* between Köken Shäkeev and Qonysbai Äbilov (excerpt), Almaty, Kazakhstan, 1985. From Jürsin Erman, *Aitysy 4. Torghai—Kökshetau oblystary aqyn-jyrshylarynyng öner saiysy* [Competition between the art of *aqyns* and *jyrshys* from the Torghai and Kökshetau regions], Almaty: Studiya Dastan, 2006.

Watch an excerpt from a *süre aitys* between Köken Shäkeev (1926–1999), an acclaimed senior *aqyn* from the Kökshetau region in northern Kazakhstan, and Qonysbai Äbilov (b. 1954), a junior *aqyn* from the neighboring Torghai district of the northern region of Qostanai. As the excerpt shows, each *aqyn* performs an extended poetic utterance in which he develops ideas about the social and cultural significance of *aitys* among the Kazakhs and demonstrates his knowledge of the history and culture of the opponent's home region. The poetic dialogue reveals the *aqyns'* high regard for the art of *aitys* and the regions they represent, as well as a respectful attitude toward each other in accordance with notions of age and seniority. It is an example of high poetic improvisation.

KÖKEN SHÄKEEV:

*Ou, köre mender eldegi, osy jerdegi de,
Ou, qysqasha sälem berdim-au, zerdelige.
Ou, qauym, osy aitysu oblystan
Ainaldy janga ömirding örneginde.*

*Ou, uaqyt tyghyz, shama joq naiqalugha,
Ou, ündemei durys bolmas jaiqalugha.
Sizderge sälem berdim, tuysqandar,
Qatysqan aqyndardyng baiqauynan, a, e.*

*Ou, aitys degen maqtanysh önerimiz,
Ou, el-jurtqa bergennen köp bererimiz.
Shynynda, aitys degen ruhani
Kün saiyn köterildi önerimiz.*

*Oi, aitystyng mäni nusqa, sözi nusqa,
Shangyraq kötergendei qurylysta.
Shynynda, aitys degen ruhani
Ainaldy äleumettik qubylsqa, a, e.*

*Ou, saqtaiyq aqyndyqtynq parasatyn
Jaqsygha jaqsy mäртеbesi jarasatyn.
Qaraghym Qonysjanym, jaqyndashy,
Üzengiles jürgege jarasatyn.*

*Ou, shashylghan asphalt jolda astyghyndai,
Teruge qus emespiz talasatyn.
Shashylghanda örneksiz ölung bolsa,
Körshining böten emes qarasatyn.*

Oh, spectators of this land,
Oh, I greet you, alert [listeners].
Oh, community, this *aitys* between districts
Has become an epitome of new life.

Oh, there is no time for lingering,
Oh, it is no good dragging your feet without saying a word.
I greet you, relatives,
At the parade of participating *aqyns*, ah, eh.

Oh, the art of *aitys* is our pride,
Oh, we give generously to the people.
Truly, *aitys* is our spiritual art
That has daily been lifted high.

Oh, the meaning of *aitys* is an exemplar, its word is a model,
It is akin to a *shangyraq*¹⁶ lifting a building.
Truly, *aitys* is a spiritual [art]
That has become a social phenomenon, ah, eh.

Oh, let us uphold the good sense of *aqyndyq*,
Matching each other in fine stature.
Dear Qonysjan, come closer,
It suits us to go side by side.

Oh, like grain scattered on an asphalt road,
We are not birds fighting to gather it.
When it comes to scattering a simple song,
We are not strange neighbors casting an
eye over each other.

*Ou, adamlar söilegenshe jat bolatyn,
Söilesken song bauyr bop tarasatyn.
Ou, ölemdi joqtan bardyng-au jelip ötti,
Torghaiyng shyn aqyn dep senim etse.*

*Közben körip, gazette jazyp eding,
Maqtai ber Kökshemizdi, tiling jetse.
Ou, otyrsyng arty qazir “Torghaiym” dep,
“Sol üshin bugün uzaq tolghaimyn” dep.*

*Torghaiyng saghan da orta, maghan da orta,
Otyr ghoi, “Aghang sözün sozбайn” dep.*

*Ol “sygha syi, sisyz sugha barady”
degen söz bar,
“Älipting artyn kütüp ozбайn” dep.*

*Ou, keshegi Yrghyz-Torghai öngirinde
Bilemiz Amangeldining ömirin de.
Serik bolghan batyrgha, batyrgha Älibiding
Erligi, öjettigi köngilimde.*

*Ou, zäulim üi, teatr men saraiyng bar,
Kömir, temir, baqsisyng qalaiyng bar.
Mektebingdi salghyzsang, Ybyraiym,
Oi, ülgü eter pana aqyn aghaiynyng bar.*

*Bilemin qazirgi erleringdi,
Maqtaugha jaraitughyn talaiyng bar.
Ou, bilemin jaqsy menen esilingdi,
Shygharghan jaqsylyqpen esimingdi.*

*Qoi qoralas, jan-jandas körshim eding,
Jaqsy körem ilgeri ösuingdi.
Ou, bar edi-au sizding jaqta tanystarym,
Ou, qiyn boldy-au körshimmen alysqanym.*

*El senimi biyl da aqtalghandai,
Qaiyrly, qutty bolsyn tabystaryng!
Al, qaraghym, bereiin saghan kezek,
Jaqsy boldy-au aitysyp tabysqanym.*

Oh, until people have talked, they are strangers,
After they have talked, they part as brothers.
Oh, you can instantly make a song out of nothing,
Your Torghai has put its trust in you as true *aqyn*.

You wrote in a newspaper what you have seen,
Celebrate our Kökshes, if your language is adequate.
Oh, you are sitting now thinking, “My Torghai,
Today I shall long praise it in song.”

Torghai is close to both you and me.
You are sitting and thinking, “May *agha*¹⁷ spread
out his words.”

There is a saying, “Who gives a present gains a present,
who does not fetches the water,”
But “Don’t speak too soon,” as they say.

Oh, from the former Yrghyz-Torghai region
We know well the life of Amangeldi.¹⁸
A companion to the hero was the heroism and valor of Älibi,¹⁹
I remember that.

Oh, you have high buildings, palaces, and theaters,
You have coal, iron, and molten ore.
My Ybyrai,²⁰ if you built a school,
Oh, there are fellow *aqyns* who will praise you for setting
an example.

I know your contemporaries,
Many of them are praiseworthy.
Oh, I know the good and the best from your region,
Who have made their names by good deeds.

You are my close neighbor both in mingling flocks and
in kindred spirit,
I like it that you are prospering.
Oh, I have acquaintances in your area,
Oh, it is difficult to contest with a neighbor.

People’s trust seems to have been justified this year, as well,
Congratulations on your achievements!
And now, dear, I should give you your turn,
It is good that we have met to compete in an *aitys*.

QONYSBAI ÄBILOV:

Assalaumaghalaikum, Köken agha, ou,
Jürmisiz jairang qaghyp, esen, agha, ou?
Sizbenen sälemdesu maghan baqyt,
Mäz bolyp, aulyma ketem, agha, ou.

Ötken jyl esimingiz jüregimde,
Mänggilik alyp edi-au, neken agha, ou.
“Bul bala nege sonsha maqtady?” dep,
Sözime qaramangyz sekem alyp, ou.

Maqsatym el aldynda marapattau, ou,
Oiyım joq ishke bükken böten, agha, ou.
Ardaqty özingizdei aghalardy
Töbeme köterumen ötem, agha, ou.

Izbasar inilikke jarai alsam,
Mendaghy maqsatyma jetem, agha, ou.
Kezdesip qaldyq bugün, jolyngyzdy
Kiiikteı qalai kesip ötem, agha, ou?
A-yai, a-yai, a-yai . . .

Biledi örge süırer shamangdy är kim,
Aldyngyz berekesin shamandardyng.
Elime erte ösken, ardagerim,
Qalaisha auzym baryp jamandarmyn?

Keshegi el basyna kün tughanda,
Qolynga qarudy da, qalamdy (da) aldyng.
Khalqymnyng öner süıgen talabyna
Ishinen qalyng örtting aman qaldyng.
A-yai, a-yai, a-yai . . .

Ölengdi men de jastan qurap edim,
Aq bata bugün sizden surap edim.
Aqan men Birjan shyqqan Kökshetaudan
Kelding be jeldei esip, Qulagerim?
A-yai, a-yai, a-yai . . .

Körkine Kökshening kim talasady, ei?
Ataghy Alataudan äri asady, ei.
Shyngyna örlep ösken aghashtary
Ybyrai ükisindei jarasady, ei.

Peace be upon you, Köken agha, oh,
Are you happy and well, agha, oh?
It is a pleasure for me to greet you,
I shall return to my *auyl* overjoyed, agha, oh.

Your name is in my heart from last year,
It will stay there forever, the only agha, oh.
“Why is this child boasting so much?” you are thinking,
Don’t be looking at my words distrustfully, oh.

My goal before the people is to praise, oh,
There is no ulterior motive at the back of my mind, agha, oh.
Honorable senior people like yourself
I shall glorify, agha, oh.

If I am worthy of being [your] inheritor, [your] younger brother,
I have reached my goal, agha, oh.
We have met today,
How will I stand in your way like a saiga, agha, oh?
A-yai, a-yai, a-yai . . .

Everyone knows your surpassing strength,
You stripped the hapless of their success.
Matured for the sake of my people early on, my veteran,²¹
How can I get my tongue round speaking badly of you?

When calamity came to the former country,
You took in your hands both a weapon and a pen,
At the desire of the art-loving people
You stayed alive amid overwhelming fire.
A-yai, a-yai, a-yai . . .

I, too, have made verses in song from my youth,
Today I ask for your kind blessing.
From Kökshetau, [the homeland of] Aqan and Birjan,²²
Haven’t you come, blowing like a wind, my Qulager.²³
A-yai, a-yai, a-yai . . .

Who can rival the beauty of Kökshe, eh?
Its glory has spread beyond the Alatau [Mountains], eh.
Indeed, its towering fully grown trees
Are like Ybyrai’s feathers, eh.²⁴

*Aqylgha, aghajan, siz kende emessiz,
Aghattau söilep ketsem, jön demessiz.
Ardager Amangeldi, Älibidei*

Ul bergen Torghaiymdy kem demessiz.

*Otyrsyz är sözimnen shyrailanyp,
Shegelep aitqan sözim unai qalyyp.
Eki elding tuyn alyp topqa tüsken,*

Köpshilik bizdi endi synaidy alyp.

*Otyrmyz jüirikterdi jarystyryp,
Ne kerek bul mashina namys qylyp?
Qazaqtıng qasietti eki otauyn
Qaitemiz qaita-qaita salystyryp?
A-yai, a-yai, a-yai . . .*

Dear *agha*, there is no denying your intelligence,
If I say something amiss, don't take me wrong,
To the sons of my Torghai like the honorable
Amangeldi and Älibi
You are not inferior.

You are sitting and beaming with joy at my every word,
Liking what I say pointedly.
Raising the banners of the two regions, we are performing
before the audience,
People will now be judging us.

We are at the contest of orators,
What is this car²⁵ for, toward defending our honor?
Why compare all over again
The two sacred Kazakh homes?
A-yai, a-yai, a-yai . . .

STUDY QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITY

1. On the basis of this example, how would you describe the content and the poetic and musical structure of the Kazakh *süre aitys*? What, in your view, distinguishes this type of Kazakh *aitys* from, or makes it similar to, the types of Kyrgyz *aitysh* illustrated above?
2. In what ways do the two *aqyns* speak of the art of *aitys*?
3. What literary devices do they use to describe their homelands, Kökshetau and Torghai?
4. What do we learn about the relationship between the two *aqyns* from their form of address and communication with each other?
5. Analyze the rhyme structure used by each *aqyn* and explain how the verse is set to music.

FORM OF AN AITYSH/AITYS

An *aitysh/aitys* has a prescribed format. A competition begins with the *aqyns* greeting spectators and one another. If the contestants vary in age, they perform in order of seniority. In the past, following the greetings, *aqyns* necessarily introduced their tribe and clan background and home region. Here, for example, are the initial verse lines of the introduction (*tanystyru*) from an *aitys* between the nineteenth-century Kazakh *aqyns* Janaq and Tübek:

Janaq: *Uranymdy surasang arghyn, naiman,
Kedei Janaq deseng de ar qylmaimyn.*

If you, Naiman, ask about my clan,²⁶ it is Arghyn.
Even if you say, poor man Janaq, I shall not be disgraced.



Tübek: *Arghyn bolsang qaiteiin naimandaimyn*
*Küäm bar qai sertingnen taighandaimyn.*²⁷

I am Naiman, so what if you are Arghyn,
 I have evidence of what oath you have broken.

Present-day *aqyns* do not necessarily mention their tribe and clan origins. They can likewise identify themselves and their opponents with reference to their home region (for example, “a child of the west,” *Batystyng balasy*, or “the cream of Syr Darya,” *Syrdyng sümeui*) and characterize it by mentioning historical personalities—heroes, poets, musicians—who came from there. Thus, an *aqyn* from the Semei (Semipalatinsk) region in eastern Kazakhstan can be addressed as “a young colt reared in Abai’s homeland” (*Abai tughan öngirding töl qulyny*), with reference to Abai Qunanbaev (1845–1904), the great philosopher, poet, and composer born in this region.

After the greetings and introduction, *aqyns* begin to challenge each other by teasing, joking, or insulting. Their form of address reflects traditional notions of age, seniority, and gender, though contestants are also allowed to speak in ways that depart from the socially accepted modes of discourse. The following excerpt is from a nineteenth-century *aitysh* that took place in Talas between two well-known Kyrgyz *aqyns*. As the senior *aqyn*, Esenaman begins the *aitysh*:

<i>Amanby balam Jengijok,</i>	Greetings, my son, Jengijok!
<i>Abangdyn senden kemi jok.</i>	Your uncle is not less than you. ²⁸
<i>Ak kalpaktuu kyrgyzdan,</i>	Among the white <i>kalpak</i> ²⁹ Kyrgyz
<i>Aitysharga tengi jok.</i>	There is no one to compete with you.
<i>Alaman yrchÿ köp jüröt,</i>	There are many so-called <i>yrchys</i> ,
<i>Aytkanynyn ebi jok . . .</i>	But their words do not make much sense . . .

Aqyns compare themselves to a nightingale, cuckoo, skylark, or eagle. Thus, Esenaman praises himself with the following words:

<i>Torusumun jylkynyn,</i>	I am the bay one among the horses,
<i>Torgoyumun yrchynyn.</i>	I am the skylark among the singers.

His opponent Jengijok replies:

<i>Torusu bolsong jylkynyn,</i>	If you are the bay among the horses,
<i>Tokmokter toygo minbeybi?</i>	A man will beat and ride you at feasts.
<i>Torgoyu bolson yrchynyn,</i>	If you are the lark among the singers,
<i>Too jagalmay ilbeybi?</i>	A mountain hawk will seize you,
<i>Tobokelchil Jengijok</i>	I, the risk-taking Jengijok,
<i>Töböcü jok kak bashÿ</i>	You bastard with no head,
<i>Tomsortorun bilbeybi?</i>	I’ll put you down like this!

It is the spectators who judge the *aqyns*’ verbal skill and determine the winner. Formerly, *aqyns* themselves would stop the contest when they felt they were losing



to their opponent, and the loser or the *aqyns'* pupils subsequently disseminated the *aitys* orally. Today, formal *aitysh/aitys* competitions organized for special occasions have a predetermined time limit, and they are judged by a group of judges (Kyrgyz: *kalystar tobu*; Kazakh: *qazylar alqasy*) consisting of five to ten people who are knowledgeable about Kyrgyz and Kazakh oral traditions. The judges usually include senior master poets, singers, folklorists, writers, and journalists. They evaluate the contestants according to several criteria. In an interview, the Kyrgyz *aqyn* Aaly Tutkuchev explained these criteria as they apply to both a traditional and a contemporary *aitysh*:

The main criteria for judging an *aqyn* are the content, use of words, and rhyme of their song. Then of course their *komuz*, whether it matches their voice. Then they look at how you conduct yourself on stage. The last thing is your costume—whether it has a national flavor. You can't just wear a black suit. Also, in the past *aqyns* could sing as long as they wanted to. Today, the judges give us twenty minutes and interrupt us after the time is up. In the past, *aqyns* competed until one of them withdrew from the contest. People would notice who was losing and who was winning, and they would identify the winner. Today, it's difficult to identify the winner in twenty minutes, and that's why it takes at least ten judges to evaluate the *aqyns* fairly.

Of key importance in *aitysh/aitys* is the reaction and disposition of the audience. Many *aqyns* of the past and present age have pointed out that the enthusiastic response of listeners, true connoisseurs of this art, is a prerequisite for creative inspiration that allows talent and improvisational flair to shine. A good *aqyn's* performance is usually punctuated by bursts of applause, supportive cries, and exclamations of admiration and delight (Kyrgyz: “*Bali! Barakelde!*” [Good for you!], “*Azamat!*” [Good job!], “*Söz emes beken!*” [Nicely said!] “*Ak söz!*” [That is true!]; Kazakh: “*Oi, de!*” [Oh, say!], “*Ei,*” “*Ua-u,*” “*Shirkin-ai,*” “*Pai-pai*”). Such cries and exclamations usually mark ends of verse lines and are uttered in response to the *aqyns'* jokes and witticisms. They create an atmosphere of joyfulness and excitement, spurring the *aqyns* to further banter and wordplay.

POETIC AND MUSICAL STRUCTURE

Verbal and musical elements of *aitysh/aitys* are closely interrelated. Oral poetic improvisation is carried out on the basis of a recurrent vocal tune or melody called *obon* in Kyrgyz and *saryn* or *maqam* in Kazakh.³⁰ Every *aqyn* has in his repertory one or several personal or borrowed tunes that provide a musical framework for verbal extemporization, facilitate articulation of a text's meaning, and enhance its impact on listeners.



Kazakh *aqyns* often begin their *saryns* from an opening cry on a held note sung in the middle or high register (“A,” “Ou,” “Ei,” “Ua-u”), which serves to attract the audience’s attention and helps an *aqyn* prepare to face a rival. Contemporary Kazakh *aqyns* explain the purpose of such exclamations as “the summoning of an *aqyn*’s inspiration.”³¹ Scholars also suggest that it may have served as a means of establishing a connection with spirit-protectors.³²

Vocal tunes of the Kazakh *aitys* can be of two main types: song (*än*) and recitative or tirade (*jyr*). Song tunes have a strophic form in which four lines of verse, or a strophe, sung in an eleven-syllable poetic meter (*qara öleñg*) with a common end rhyme in lines 1, 2, and 4 (aaba), compose a single musical unit. By contrast, the musical form of tirade tunes encompasses a succession of poetic lines in the seven-to-eight-syllable (*jyr*) or, less commonly, eleven-syllable meter that may or may not rhyme, though they are perceived as a unified poetic and melodic utterance. Song tunes are used in both amateur and professional types of *aitys*, while tirade tunes are more typical of the professional *aitys*. In the course of poetic and musical dialogue, contestants may improvise on the same tune (as in the examples of Kyrgyz *aitysh* provided earlier in the chapter) or exchange different tunes of the same or different type (song or tirade). Their choice determines the overall musical arrangement of the competition.

Instrumental accompaniment also plays an important role in *aitysh/aitys*. In addition to facilitating a better delivery of the *aqyn*’s vocal tune, accompaniment on the *komuz* or *dombyra* stimulates poetic improvisation by helping create an emotional and psychological atmosphere that enables an *aqyn* to focus his mind and come up with a stream of improvised verses. Many *aqyns* have linked instrumental accompaniment to poetic inspiration. The Kazakh *aqyn* Köken Shäkeev succinctly summarized the role of the *dombyra* in an *aitys*:

<i>Dombyra sharshy topta qolgha tise,</i>	When I hold the <i>dombyra</i> in my hands
	before a large crowd,
<i>Özimdi ustai almaı jeligemin.</i>	I cannot restrain myself from
	getting excited. ³³

Aqyns from different regions of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan can be identified by local stylistic features in their music. For example, *aqyns* from the central, northern, and eastern areas of Kazakhstan known as Saryarqa, or Arqa, sing in the style of local folk and art songs (*än*) in a strophic form usually set to the eleven-syllable meter (*qara öleñg*), accompanying themselves on the *dombyra* by plucking the strings with individual fingers in the performance style of eastern Kazakhstan known as *shertpe*. By contrast, *aqyns* from western Kazakhstan tend to sing in a recitative or tirade style (*jyr*) based on the seven-to-eight-syllable meter, and accompany themselves by strumming, rather than plucking, the *dombyra*, in the style



Köken Shäkeev.

Courtesy of Köken Shäkeev’s family.





of western Kazakhstan known as *tökpe* (see chapters 11 and 14). These stylistic differences shape the character of a musical performance: while *aqyns* from Arqa tend to perform in a measured, lyrical manner, singing out their tunes and sustaining notes, performances of *aqyns* from western Kazakhstan are typically fast, dynamic, and impetuous.

WATCH

Example 10.4. *Aitys* between Amanjol Ältaev and Mels Qosymbaev (excerpt), Almaty, Kazakhstan, 1990. From Jürsin Erman, *Aitys 5* (VHS cassette) (Almaty: Center Records, 2002).

This excerpt of an *aitys* between Amanjol Ältaev (b. 1971), a well-known *aqyn* from the Qaraghandy region in central Kazakhstan, and Mels Qosymbaev (b. 1970), an *aqyn* from the city of Oral in western Kazakhstan, illustrates regional stylistic differences in the performance of *aqyns*.

AMANJOL ÄLTAEV:

*Eu, terbeltip mülqip jatqan, eu, shyngdaryngdy,
Serttesip segiz aqyn, au, syngha kirdi.*

*Köz salghan küreng baisha qalyng elim,
Ishinen daralap al shyn daryndy-au, ai.*

*Eu, baqty dep, bir basyna, ou, Kök Tängirden,
Syrlastym boz dalada, ou, jortqan ulmen.*

*Kaspiiding tolqynyndai tulap aqqan,
Armysyng, Melis aqyn, topqa kelgen-ai.*

*Eu, bügingi bul keruening, eu, nary sensing,
Mäueli sayasy mol-au, taly sensing,*

*Jasqanbai, künge jumsar, qart Kaspiiding
Aibarly basyndaghy baghy sensing.*

*Söz söyle ülken bolyp el aldynda,
Bügingi bul aitystyng shaly sensing-ai.*

*Eu, batystyng balasy eding, eu, arys mangdai,
Kezing joq alghy shepten, eu, qalysqandai.*

Oh, quiescent, oh, mountain peaks [of Alatau],³⁴
Eight *aqyns* have made a commitment, oh, and
entered the trial.

My numerous people, who are looking on,
Choose the most talented ones, oh, eh.

Oh, Blue Sky [Tengri], oh, bestow happiness on me,
Your prodigal son, oh, who has shared his innermost
thoughts with the feather-grass steppe.
Akin to the wild waves of the Caspian Sea,
Greetings to you, Mels *aqyn*, performing before
the audience, eh.

Oh, you are the leader,³⁵ oh, of today's caravan,
You are a blossoming, oh, shady tree,

Not afraid of the sun.
You are the luck of the fierce old Caspian Sea.

Having spoken and matured before the people,
You are the old man of today's *aitys*, eh.

Oh, you are a child of the west, oh, with a broad forehead,
There has been no time, oh, when you were falling
behind the forefront.





*Eu, nur tökken kün astynda enshi surap,
Baiqadyng segiz jüirik jarysqandai.
Talai düldül inimmen aityssamda,
Özingmen bolmaidy eken alysqanda, ei.*

Oh, looking for your allotted position³⁶ under the shining sun,
You witnessed how eight *aqyns* have competed.
With what eloquent younger brothers I might have competed,
It is not like competing with you, eh.

*Eu, qarsylas, bes qaruyng-ai sai sekildi,
Tulaidy jyr tolqynyng, eu, tai sekildi.*

Oh, opponent, you seem to be well prepared, ah,
[for the competition],³⁷
Waves of poetic song are roaring, oh, like a colt.

*Alshang basyp jaighastyng janyma kep,
Kökseudi bappen qozghap bai sekildi.*

Proudly you have stationed yourself beside me,
Like a rich man longing to get started in earnest.

*Bir kürkirep qoyasyng anda-sanda,
Sharq etip, jerge tüsken-au jai sekildi.*

You will rumble now and again,
And hiss like lightning, oh, striking the earth.

*Al, endi kezektesip-au aityssalyq,
Kezek shyqqan Kün menen Ai sekildi-au, ei . . .*

Let us now compete in an *aitys*, oh, one after the other,
Like the Sun and Moon coming out in turn, oh, eh . . .

MELS QOSYMBAEV:

Ä, e . . .
*Ei, aitysqqa bügin tüskenmin,
“Ashsyn” dep “Qudai baghymdy.”
Tuyaghy altyn tulpar jür,
Tabaiyn sening babyngdy.
Burynghy ötken shaldaryng
Tobyqtai sözben bitirgen
Toqtamaghan dauyndy.
Shabyt keldi maghan da.
Köpten beri körgen song,
Saghynyp Alatauymdy.
Alatau—mening taghdryym,
Qarsy alatyn qas qaiyp
Dauyl menen jauyndy.
Izdegenge suraghan,
Qasymnan mening tabyldy.
Keregi bolsa, alarsyng,
Tarazygha tarttyryp.
Men ortagha saldym barymdy,
Sol siyaqty söz degen.
Taba almaı erteng qalasyng,
Taqrgha shahsang taryngdy.
Amanjoldai qurdasym,
Kezdestirding aitysta
Melis degen shalyndy.*

Ah, eh . . .
Eh, I am taking part in the *aitys* today,
Thinking, “May God grant me luck.”
Racers with golden hooves gallop,
Let me find a way to you.
Old men of the past
Settled unending disputes
With concise words.
Inspiration has come to me, too.
Not having seen it for a long time,
I have missed my Alatau.
Alatau is my fate,
Meeting head-on
Storm and rain.
What I was looking for,
I found at my side.
If it has to be, you will win,
Tipping the scale.
I have laid bare all I have,
Words are like this.
Tomorrow you might not have found them,
As if you threw millet around on the bare ground.
My peer, Amanjol,
You have met at the *aitys*
An old man called Mels.



*Ei, "Jabysatyn shal ghoi!" dep,
 Bul Melis saghan ne qyldy-ai, e . . . ?
 Ei, khalaiyq otyr aldynda,
 Aqyndardan jyr tilep.
 Jyrmen de birge aitatyn
 Aluan da aluan syr tilep.
 Amanjol keldi, köreik,
 Shulatyp köpti büldirgen.
 Buidasyn jelge türdirgen,
 Bura tös bulttai kürkürep,
 Jaraspaidy bizderge.
 Alqagha salsa aitysta,
 Söz aitqanda sirkirep.
 Sen "shal" degen Melisting
 Saqaly tügil murty joq, e . . .*

Oh, thinking, "What a tenacious old man!"
 What has this Mels done to you, ah, eh . . . ?
 Oh, the audience is sitting in front of me,
 Longing for poetic words in song from the *aqyns*.
 Together with the sung poetry
 They are longing for a wide range of secrets.
 Amanjol came, let us see,
 Exploded and stirred up many.
 Turned the camel's bridle reins toward the wind,
 Rumbled like a thundercloud,
 This does not work for us.
 He performs before the crowd,
 Letting his words fall drop by drop.
 Mels, whom you call "an old man,"
 Doesn't even have a beard or a moustache, eh . . .

STUDY QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITY

1. How do the two *aqyns* address the audience and each other? What expressions, metaphors, and figures of speech do they use, and what meanings do these carry?
2. Listen to the exclamation on a held note that opens Mels Qosymbaev's performance (3:20–3:26). What, in your view, is the meaning and artistic function of this opening?
3. Which of the two types of *saryn*—the song type or tirade type—do each of the *aqyns* adopt in their performance?
4. Compare the structure of the *aqyns*' poetic improvisation, their singing style and manner of instrumental playing, as well as the overall character of their respective performances, and explain how they exemplify the styles of Arqa and western Kazakhstan.
5. Note the spectators' reaction to the *aqyns*' performance. At what points can you hear them cry out in response to the *aqyns*' words, and what do these exclamations express?

THE ROLE OF AQYNS IN SOCIETY AND POLITICS, PAST AND PRESENT

Aqyns have always played an important role and enjoyed a high status in Kazakh and Kyrgyz culture and society. Before adopting a sedentary life in the 1930s, male *aqyns* traveled freely from one mountain pasture to another to sing at various traditional festivities and events. Believed to be connected with spirits and endowed with knowledge and wisdom, they served as advisors to tribal leaders and khans on social and political issues, such as solving intertribal matters and disputes, in addition to acting as performers. Brave *aqyns* who wielded a sharp mind and caustic language dared to publicly criticize leaders for their wrongdoings

and injustices, and for not taking care of their own people, especially the poor and needy. *Aqyns* spoke on behalf of people who expected and valued justice and generosity in a ruler.

During the Soviet period, well-known *aqyns* played an important role in the preservation, continuity, and development of Kazakh and Kyrgyz oral traditions. They did so by adapting their singing to the new context of Soviet social and cultural life and thus contributing to the early establishment of Soviet rule among the nomads, and to the cultural development of Soviet Kazakhstan and Kirghizia [Kyrgyzstan]. Together with other musicians, *aqyns* traveled to remote steppe and mountain villages (*auyls*) to give concerts at which *aitysh/aitys* competitions were the highlight of the program. A younger generation of *aqyns* worked at theaters and philharmonic societies in Almaty and Bishkek (then Frunze) as well as at provincial and district Houses of Culture, which served as centers for community arts activities. Amid strict ideological censorship, *aqyns* were subject to orders from government authorities concerning what to sing and what not to sing. Songs from the Soviet era frequently glorified communism, the Soviet Union, its leaders, and its politically mandated “friendship among peoples.” The topic of religion, namely Islam, as well as spiritual values and sentiments related to the status of the Kazakh and Kyrgyz languages and national culture were taboo and thus excluded from the repertory. Aside from merely complying with the current ideology and voicing politically sanctioned topics, however, many *aqyns* genuinely supported the social and cultural changes implemented by the new political regime. They sang about Soviet achievements in industry, agriculture, and livestock production in Central Asia, and praised the “heroes of Soviet socialist labor” and “culture workers.” They expressed their feeling of gratitude for “the great father Lenin” (*uluu Lenin atabyz*) and “great Russian older brothers” (*uluu orus agabyz*) for bringing the “dawn of the October Revolution of 1917” to the “backward and poor” Central Asian peoples. During the Second World War (known in the Soviet Union as the Great Patriotic War), they raised patriotic spirits and called for civic courage in songs that achieved nationwide fame, for example, “My Leningrad’s Young Children” (*Leningradtyq örenim*) by the Kazakh *aqyn* Jambyl Jabaev, which was addressed to the blockaded residents of Leningrad, and “Farewell, Ala-Too Mountains! Your Son Left for the Battlefield!” (*Kosh Ala-Too, uulung ketti maydanga*) by the Kyrgyz *aqyn* Joomart Bökönbaev (1910–1944). To recognize their contribution to national culture-building, the state bestowed on them honorary titles and awards. The Kazakh *aqyn* Jambyl Jabaev was awarded the Stalin Prize, and appointed a member of the Supreme Council of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR). Another renowned *aqyn*, Kenen Äzirbaev, was granted the title Honored Artist and People’s *Aqyn* as well as membership in the Writers and Composers Unions of the Kazakh SSR. Two well-known Kyrgyz *aqyns*, Alymkul Üsönbaev and Estebes Tursunaliev, were



Estebes Tursunaliyev.



Kenen Äzirbaev.

Courtesy of the Central State Archive of Film, Photography, and Sound Recordings of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

designated People’s Artists of the USSR and appointed as deputies in the Supreme Council of the Kyrgyz SSR.

Classically trained composers of the Soviet era in Kazakhstan drew on the theatrical dimension of *aitys* as a resource for opera. Large scenes of *aitys* in which opera-singers perform a scored, pre-composed poetic and musical contest to the accompaniment of an orchestra are central to the dramaturgy of a number of Kazakh operas, such as “Aiman–Sholpan” (1938) by Evgenii Brusilovskii, “Abai” (1944) by Akhmet Jubanov and Latyf Khamidi, and, most notably, “Birjan–Sara” (1946) by Muqan Tölebaev, whose plot is based on the legendary nineteenth-century *aitys* between the well-known male and female *aqyns*, Birjan sal Qojaghu-luly and Sara Tastanbekqyzy.

In the 1980s, a period in which Russian language and culture became dominant in Central Asia, especially in the major cities of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, Kazakh and Kyrgyz intellectuals, including *aqyns*, feared that their language, traditional values, and oral heritage would be forgotten, since they were not taught in schools and universities, where the main language of instruction was Russian (up to 1991, only one secondary school in the capital city of Bishkek taught all subjects in Kyrgyz). To the surprise of many Kazakhs and Kyrgyz, however, by the mid-1990s, a group of young, vibrant *aqyns* endowed with strong national sentiments and pride, sharp tongues, and a diverse poetic repertory began to emerge. This new generation of post-Soviet *aqyns* often raises sensitive and critical issues such as the lack of state support for preserving and promoting Kazakh and Kyrgyz language and cultural heritage, the continuing dominance of Russian (which is still the official language of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan), corruption in the presidential administration, and more broadly, the problem of immorality and the need for stronger religious values. In Kyrgyzstan, in the run up to the fall 2010 parliamentary election, three well-known young *aqyns* showed their political activism by joining one of the newly established political parties.



Scene of *aitys* from the opera “Birjan–Sara” by Muqan Tölebaev.

Present-day *aqyns* have spoken forcefully about the importance of maintaining the traditional role of *aqyns* as bardic political advisors and pundits. During an interview for this chapter, one Kyrgyz *aqyn*, Jengishbek Toktobekov, put it as follows: “Since *aqyns* are close to their people, it would be best if the president heard what is happening among his people from the mouth of *aqyns*, because truth does not always reach our leader. We would tell him about who is who and what they are doing. Even without having an *aitysh* he could invite us to his office and say: ‘OK, sing to me about what is happening in society.’ We speak the truth, and no one can shut our mouths. We are freethinkers, like an eagle that flies freely. As the saying goes, ‘One can cut the head, but not the tongue’ (*Bash kesmek bar, til kesmek jok*). We are ready to speak on the people’s behalf.” Another *aqyn*, Aaly Tutkuchev, spoke about the influential role of *aqyns* in neighboring Kazakhstan: “[President] Nazarbaev once said, ‘I hear about which governor is doing what from the mouth of *aqyns*.’ Recently, when we were in Kazakhstan, one of the district governors looked at the twenty-six *aqyns* [standing on the stage] and said, ‘Dear *aqyns*, please sing carefully. As a result of your constant critique, I had to replace my seven vice-governors!’”



Kyrgyz *aqyns* on stage.

AITYS/AITYSH TODAY

In contemporary Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, *aitys/aitysh* poetry competitions have achieved new popularity. Nowadays they rarely take place within traditional ceremonies and festivities but have turned into autonomous staged spectacles that serve as major social and artistic events, attracting large audiences who flock to watch a younger generation of master improvisers compete in verbally pyrotechnic poetry duels. The popularity of poetry competitions has been fueled by the emergence of televised *aitys/aitysh* that capture a staged contest or are filmed in a television studio, as well as by the dissemination of video recordings of contests on the Internet and through social media. Since the 1990s, following independence, *aitys/aitysh* has been actively promoted by the Kazakh and Kyrgyz governments. Contemporary poetry contests are often dedicated to specific themes, such as the revival of national culture and language, traditions and customs, the problems of rural communities (*auyls*), ecology, health, education, or, in Kazakhstan, the repatriation of Kazakhs living abroad. Many contests are organized on the occasion of important historical and official dates and anniversaries, like those that recognize the birthdays of famous historical personalities, the creation of administrative regions, and (somewhat arbitrarily) the genesis of national epics, such as the Kyrgyz *Manas* or Kazakh *Qozy-Körpesh–Bayan-Sulu*.

Example 10.5. *Aitys* between Didar Qamiev and Ainur Tursunbaeva (excerpt), Shieli, Qyzylorda region, Kazakhstan, 2009. Video courtesy of Didar Qamiev.

This *aitys* between a male *aqyn* from Qaraghandy, Didar Qamiev, and a female bard from the city of Taraz, Ainur Tursunbaeva, took place in 2009 in the town of Shieli in the Qyzylorda region of southern Kazakhstan, and was dedicated to the eightieth anniversary of the Shieli district, the one hundredth anniversary of its native poet and playwright, Äbdilda Täjibaev, and the one hundred fiftieth anniversary of the great *aqyn* from the nineteenth and early-twentieth century, Imanjüsip Qutpanuly.

DIDAR QAMIEV:

*Bismillä, joldan taima, jaghyym, qane,
Tulpar e(di)m topqa tüsken babyndaghy.*

*Toi dübiri estilip osy jaqtan,
Qazaqtyghym oyandy qanymdaghy.*

*Arqadan Qarakesek balang keldi,
Qarakesek ettei bop qamyrdaghy.*

*Shieli qut daryghan kieli ölke,
Qundaghynan qasiet arylmady.*

Qaimaghy buzylmaghan qaimana jur,

Qashanda jaqsylqytyng qamyndaghy.

Ar-uyat, ädet-ghuryp, salt-dästätürin

Sary maidai saqtaghan qaryndaghy.

*Meirimmen qarsy alyp meimanyndy,
Peiling men nieting tarylady.*

*Assalaumaghalaiküm, Shielimning
Qaiyspas qaisar jurty qabyrghaly.*

*Äbdildamen artady ghasylargha,
Qazaqy qara ölengning qadir—mäni.*

*Bismillä,*³⁸ do not stray from the track, my tongue,
I am a racehorse in its prime performing before the public.

The tumult of a celebration is heard from here,
Kazakhness has woken up in my blood.

From Arqa your son, Qarakesek, has come,
The flesh and blood of the Qarakesek.³⁹

Shieli is a sacred region endowed with abundance,
Whose virtue has not disappeared since the cradle.

Tight-knit community the cream of whose crop
remains unspoiled,
Who always take care of the good.

Their honor and conscience, traditions and customs,
rites and conventions
Have been preserved like butter in an animal stomach.⁴⁰

You are welcoming your guest with hospitality,
Your graciousness and good intent have not diminished.

Peace be upon you, my Shieli's
Unyielding, steadfast, strong community.

[The name of] Äbdilda⁴¹ will be retained for centuries,
The power of a real Kazakh verse in song (*qara öleng*)
is in its meaning.



*Aghaiyn, toilaryngyz qutty bolsyn!
Güldeitin musulmannyng sabyr—baghy.*

*Ölengimdi uzattym özderinge,
Shapalaqpen tölensin qalyng maly.
Hai-la-li-li-la . . .*

*Köpshilik, endi bermen bas bura ber,
Shang qappai shauyp körsin jas Qulager.*

*Älemde erkek deitin bir qauym bar,
Men bolamyn solargha jas murager.*

*Erkek degen ejelden qoidan juas,
Oghan mening minezim—jaqsy дәlel.*

*Sen bolsang, sonyng bärin jengip bitting,
Köngilime kek turyp, kek bolyp ras turady ol.*

*Solardyng namysy üshin men kep turmyn,
Shamang jetse, auzyma tas tygha ber.*

*Erkekterding barlyghyn qoidai qyrghan,
Armysyng, Ainur deitin “qasqyr әiel”!
Hai-la-li-li-la . . .*

Bul Didar tap kelgenge shap berushi edi,

Qarsylas sonda qandai shaq kelushi edi?

*Aghaiyn, demeu berip otyryngdar,
Jamaghat, jas balagha jaq bolushy edi.*

*Sebebi janymdaghy Ainur apam,
Saiysqa sauysqandai saq kelushi edi.*

*Bayaghyda aitysqa shyqqan saiyn
Tal shybyqtai arular tap kelushi edi.*

*Al бүgingi qarsylas müldem bölek,
Barghan jerden bas bәige ap kelushi edi.*

Tәuekel, ne de bolsa, aitysaiyn,

Babyrn kelse, basyma baq qonushy edi.

Kinsfolk, congratulations on your celebration!
Patience blossoming among Muslims is a blessing.

I have extended my song for you,
May the reward⁴² be paid for by rounds of applause.
Hai-la-li-li-la . . .

Folk, now look at me,
May the young Qulager race ahead of its competitors.⁴³

There is a people in the world who are called men,
I am their young successor.

Men from old times are meeker than sheep,
Good evidence of this is my temperament.

As for you, you have won all of them,
So in my soul there is a sense of revenge, I want to
avenge [men].

I came here for the sake of their honor,
If you have the capability, try gagging me.

Slayer of all men like sheep,
Greetings to you, a “wolf-woman” called Ainur!
Hai-la-li-li-la . . .

This Didar, when he enters a competition, snatches
[his opponent],
What opponent can then outdo him?

Kinsfolk, lend your support,
People, come to the young boy’s defense.

This is because Ainur apa,⁴⁴ sitting beside me,
Has come to the contest like a wary magpie.

Once, when entering an *aitys*,
One would meet with beauties like willow twigs.

And today’s contestant is altogether different,
Whatever contest she goes to, she gets the main prize.

I’ll take the risk and, whatever happens, compete with her
in an *aitys*,
If I am well prepared, fortune will be on my side.



*Shiedei erinderi diril qaqqan,
Shielide jolyqty-au, aq kelinshek.*

*Shögerip Shielige tüiengizdi,
Kelipsiz üige tastap iengizdi.*

*Eriningdi shiedei dep otyrsam,
Qashyrmaiyn dep edim kiengizdi.*

*Aitystaghly eng jasy bolghannan song,
Özinge juptap qoidy, mine, bizdi.*

*Tättige bala ghana qumar bolady,
Menen basqa kim jeidi shiengizdi?
Hai-la-li-li-la . . .*

AINUR TURSUNBAEVA:

*Äi, bala, saghan ne boldy?
Qyzyq qoi myna qylyghyng.*

*Tüsinbei qaldym bul uldyng
Shielidegi shyrlyyn.*

*Shiengnen bügin jeimin dep,
Shie böridei uldyng.*

*Erkekting kegin alsyn dep,
Aidap saldy eken mungy kim?*

*Ony saghan jeu qaida?
Süiegi qatty bolmai ma?*

*Tatsang da täube shyrlynyyn,
lesi bar ghoi shiening.
Sony bilmei me bul inim?*

*Qaidaghly joqty jeimin dep,
Qaqalyp qalma, qulynym!*

*Bismillä sözdi bastaiyn,
Jyr-qymyz tögip sabamnan.*

*Asan qaighy atam jatqan jer,
Alashqa aty taralghan.*

*Dülei jel syndy ekspini,
Süleiler shyqqan arangnan.*

Her lips are trembling like cherries,⁴⁵
In Shieli I have met, oh, with a fair young lady.⁴⁶

You made your camel kneel in Shieli,
You came here, having left your master at home.

If I say that your lips are like cherries,
Let me not scare off your sanctity.⁴⁷

Since I am the youngest [contestant] at the *aitys*,
I was allotted to you.

Only a child loves sweets,
Who else but me will eat your cherries?
Hai-la-li-li-la . . .

Eh, child, what's up with you?
This trickery of yours is amusing.

I didn't understand this boy's
Squealing in Shieli.

You say you will eat cherries today,
Howling like a wolf.

You say you will avenge men,
Who is it that incites you?

How on earth are you going to eat them?
Aren't their stones going to be hard?

Even if you taste its juice,
The cherry has its master.
Doesn't this younger brother know this?

Having eaten whatever comes to hand,
Don't choke on it, my little kid!⁴⁸

Let me begin with the words *Bismillä*,
Pouring *qymyz*-song from my *saba*.⁴⁹

The land where the forefather Asan qaighy⁵⁰ is laid,
Whose name has spread throughout *Alash*.⁵¹

Impetuous like a wild wind,
Famous bards came from this area.



*Qanshama miras qaldy ghoi
Nar tulgha Nartai danamnan!*

How much heritage has been left
By my patron, sturdy Nartai!⁵²

*Qazyna qaldy qanshama
Imanjüsiptei babamnan!*

How much treasure has been left
By forefathers like Imanjüsip!⁵³

*Janazar batyr taghy bar,
Jebedei jaugha qadalghan.*

There is also Janazar batyr,⁵⁴
Who pierced enemies like an arrow.

*Shoqtyghy biik Mustafa,
Ruh berik qoi qamaldan.*

The high summit, Mustafa,⁵⁵
Whose spirit is stronger than a fortress.

*Shahmardan menen Äbdilda
Shieli topyraghynyng
Kirpishi bolyp qalanghan.*

Shahmardan⁵⁶ and Äbdilda
Were the building bricks
of Shieli earth.

*Qyryq bir engbek erining
Shyqqany ras qoi arangnan.*

It is true that forty-one Worker Heroes
Came from this area.

*Ybyrai menen Jadyra
Engbekten ornyn taba alghan.*

Ybyrai and Jadyra⁵⁷
Found their place thanks to their work.

*Tälim alady qyzdaryng
Altynshashtaiyn anamnan.*

Your girls follow the example of
Mothers like Altynshash.⁵⁸

*Önege alad(y) uldaryng
Quandyq, Asqar aghamnan.*

Your boys follow the model of
Senior men Quandyq and Asqar.⁵⁹

*Mukhambetqali aqynnyng
Elinen bugün bagha alghan.*

Aqyn Mukhambetqali
Is now appraised by the people.

*Äuendi ändi estimiz
Bakhtiyar änsi balangnan.*

We hear a melodious song
From your son, singer Bakhtiyar.⁶⁰

*Ruslandai eren ulyngnyng
Ortadan erte ketkeni.*

Your hero sons like Ruslan⁶¹
Passed away early.

*Jas aghyzbai ma janardan?
Eshqaisy(sy) kökten tüsken joq.*

Are you not shedding teardrops?
Not one of them came from the sky.

*Eshqaisy(sy) kökten tüsken joq,
Perzenttering bop sanalghan.*

Not one of them came from the sky.
They are all counted as your children.

*Qasietingnen när alghan,
Topyraghynyngan jaralghan.*

They sipped your virtue,
And were created from your soil.

*Armysyng, qairan Shielim,
Alyptar shyqqan Aq Ordam!*

Greetings to you, my dear Shieli,
The White Horde⁶² of larger-than-life men!



*Aitysta ötti Ainurdyng,
Tartyspen talai taghdyry.*

Many a destiny has passed as Ainur
Competed in the *aitys*.

*Taghdyrym qalai bolsa da,
Jaratqannyng sol jarlyghy.*

Whatever is my destiny,
It is the will of God.

*Qoidai ghyp bärin qyrdyng dep,
Estildi-au sözding qaldyghy.*

You said I slaughtered everyone like sheep,
I heard those last words of yours.

*Bekarys, Balghynbekterding
Jarasqan bizben än-jyry.*

With Bekarys and Balghynbek⁶³
I found common language through songs.

*Rinat pen Aibek, Mukhtarlar
Kötere bilgen baghamdy.*

Rinat and Aibek, Mukhtar
Rated me highly.

*Estilmei sözding qaldyghy,
Qoidai qyp qyrdyng deidi me?
Köngilding bul ma tarlyghy?*

I did not hear the rest of your words,
Did you say I slaughtered [everyone] like sheep?
Is this perhaps your jealousy?

*Qasqyr bop kimdi jep qoidym?
Ölmei-aq jür ghoi barlyghy!*

Who have I devoured like a wolf?
Everybody is alive and well!

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How does the *aitys* reflect the *aqyns*' notions of identity and relation to one another with regard to age and gender? How does the fact that it is a cross-gender contest (*qyz ben jigiti aitysy*) impact its content and the contestants' form of address?
2. How is the theme of the occasion developed in the *aqyns*' verses? How do they play with the name of the commemorated district, Shieli (from *shie*: "cherry")?
3. Define the type and structure of the *aitys*. In what poetic form and musical style do *aqyns* perform?
4. Describe the audience's reaction to the performance? What moments in the *aitys* are marked by the spectators' applause and exclamations?

Kazakhs and Kyrgyz have a long-standing tradition of travelling to each other's lands to engage in *aitys/aitysh* competitions at gatherings and festivities. Following this tradition, contemporary Kazakh and Kyrgyz *aqyns* have also exchanged invitations to participate in poetry contests dedicated to major national celebrations, such as Independence Day and anniversaries of well-known *aqyns*, cultural luminaries, and cities. Both Kazakh and Kyrgyz spectators enjoy such contests, which address a variety of historical and current cultural and socio-political ties and issues between two peoples and countries that share a common nomadic heritage as



Didar Qamiev (right).

Courtesy of Didar Qamiev.

well as the experience of seven decades of Soviet rule. The Kazakh government has been promoting international *aitys* competitions on a regular basis by awarding winners significant prizes such as cars and apartments. In Kyrgyzstan, deposed president Kurmanbek Bakiev officially sponsored two *aitysh* competitions between Kazakh and Kyrgyz *aqyns* in the cities of Bishkek (2008) and Osh (2009), allocating large winners' prizes from his presidential fund.

There are distinct differences in the performance style of Kazakh and Kyrgyz *aqyns*. They accompany themselves on two different stringed instruments, with different tunings that produce different kinds of melodies and sounds, and typically recite in different poetic meters. Aaly *aqyn* characterizes Kyrgyz and Kazakh songs as follows: "Kyrgyz songs are like their mountain ranges, which go up and down (*oyku-kayky*), whereas the songs of the Kazakhs are like their steppe: they like to stretch their voice 'Ay-goooy!' toward the steppe." One of the main reasons for the growing popularity of Kazakh and Kyrgyz *aitys/aitysh* competitions is related to the open and dynamic nature of the young post-Soviet generation of *aqyns*, who have a different outlook and understanding of Kazakh-Kyrgyz cultural and historical connections. Most often, contests between Kazakh and Kyrgyz *aqyns* take the form of an insult *aitysh* (Kyrgyz: *kordoo aitysh*). Insulting and belittling happen on a personal level, as well as on the basis of ethnicity or national identity. Most *aqyns* take personal insults as a form of humor, which is an acceptable norm of behavior in an *aitys/aitysh*. However, they can be sensitive about issues concerning their national culture, values, land, language, identity, and pride. In the end, however, competing *aqyns* always express mutual respect and genuine friendship, addressing one another as "*Qyrghyz bauyrlar*" ("Kyrgyz brothers") and "*Kazak*



boordoshtor” (“Kazakh brothers”). Since the point of the *aitys/aitysh* is to entertain spectators, *aqyns* often tease each other by pointing to personal physical features and singing styles. Teasing is more common and interesting in *aitys/aitysh* contests between male and female *aqyns*.

WATCH

Example 10.6. *Aitysh* between Aaly Tutkuchev and Qanysha Raisova (excerpt), Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, 2008.

This example is taken from an *aitysh* between Aaly Tutkuchev, the young male Kyrgyz *aqyn* from the Talas region of northern Kyrgyzstan, and Qanysha Raisova, a middle-aged female Kazakh *aqyn* from the Jetisu region of southeastern Kazakhstan. Their competition took place within the framework of an “international *aitysh*” between Kazakh and Kyrgyz *aqyns* sponsored by the former Kyrgyz president Kurmanbek Bakiiev, which took place in Bishkek in 2008. Qanysha Raisova was one of two female Kazakh *aqyns* who came to the *aitysh*. She and her Kyrgyz competitor, Aaly *aqyn*, became the finalists in the final round contest after being matched by drawing numbers from a hat.

QANYSHA:

*Aqyngha jarasady almas qylyq,
Otyrmыз biz önerdi almastyryp.
Aaly aituly aqyn ekensing ghoi,
Sözingdi jürersing almas buzyp.
Maira men Serik syndy köreilikshi,
Ädemi aitystardy jalghastyryp.*

Diamond-like [sharp] words befit *aqyns*,
We are sitting and exchanging our art.
Aaly, I learned that you are a famous *aqyn*.
Your words can destroy even diamonds.
Let’s try to compete like Maira and Serik,⁶⁴
By continuing [the tradition of] beautiful song contests.

AALY:

*Ardaktuu jengem Qanysham,
Siz menen бүгүн taanysham.
Albette Maira, Serik syiaktuu,
Siz menen бүгүн jarysham.
Albette zalkar akynsyz,
Kudaiym kylsa buyrukту,
Arkangyzda kalysham.
Birok,
Kudaiym kylsa buyrukту,
Artymdy bir top changytam.
Emi
Egemen kyrgyz kalkymdyn*

My esteemed *jenge*,⁶⁵ Qanysha,
I will get to know you today.
Of course, like Maira and Serik,
I will compete with you.
You are indeed a great *aqyn*.
If God wills it,
I will lose this contest with you.
However,
If God wills it,
I will leave you in the dust behind me.
Today
I have come to sing



Aldyna kelip kaldym da.
 Eldi körüp men бүгүн
 Ergigensip kaldym da.
 Ee, tuugandar, mynakey
 Jyiylgan jurtum bar mynda.
 Bular askasy asman tiregen,
 Arkary ak kar jiregen,
 Ala-Too bashyn jaylashyp,
 Allaga jakyn jaygashyp,
 Azattyk kündü tilegen.
 Eng biyik tördü jaylashyp,
 Egeme jakyn jaygashyp,
 Egemendikti tilegen.
 Kyraandary joodon el korgop,
 Kylychyn ayga bülögön.
 Al emi,
 Koy menen kosho kiyigi,
 Koroosunda tünögön.
 Butuna bulut orolup,
 Bulardyn kalpagy tiygen jyldyzka.
 Kabylan Manas tukumu,
 Kaygyryp turgan uchuru,
 Karaany toodoy Chyngizka.
 Birok,
 Ayla jok eken kanteyin,
 Allahym saigan buyrukka
 Kan tögüp ata-babalar,
 Kaltyrgan muras uul-kyzga.
 On jeti jylga toluptur
 Egemendik turmushka.
 Engkeyip tizem bögülüp,
 Elge aytam salam jügünüp,
 Egemen uluu kyrgyzka.
 Chyn ajal jetip kaygyrgan,
 Chyngyzynan ayyrylgan,
 Ak kalpak kyrgyz el da arman.
 Jana Maira jengem aytkanday,
 Kayrylbay ketken tör da arman.
 Sizdey ak kuusu kelip konboso,
 Aydyngduu Ysyk-Köl da arman.
 Jana Rahmatulla menen aityshpay,
 Bal sözünö balkyshpay,
 Maga kelip tush bolgon,

Before my independent Kyrgyz people.
 Seeing the people today
 I became inspired.
 Hey, brothers, you see
 My people who are gathered here.
 These people lived in high mountains
 Where the deer dig grass through the snow.
 Inhabiting the high Ala-Too Mountains,
 And thus being close to Allah [God],
 They wished freedom [from the USSR].
 Inhabiting the highest mountains,
 And thus being close to the Master [God],
 They desired independence.
 Their brave men protected people from their enemy,
 And sharpened their swords in the moonlight.
 Also,
 Their sheep and deer
 Slept in the same corral.⁶⁶
 They wrapped the clouds around their feet,
 Their kalpaks touched the stars.
 They are the descendants of Manas, the lion.
 These days they are sad,
 Grieving the loss of Chingiz,⁶⁷ who was their support, like a mountain.
 Alas,
 We have no choice but
 To submit to Allah's will.
 Our ancestors shed their blood [to protect their people]
 And left their heritage to their sons and daughters.
 Today, it has been seventeen years
 Of their independent existence.
 By kneeling down and bowing,
 I greet this people,
 The independent and great Kyrgyz [nation].
 The Kyrgyz people with white kalpak lament
 The loss of their Chingiz
 Who met his real death.
 As my Maira jenge said a while ago,
 An uninhabited mountain pasture laments.
 If a white swan like you does not land on it,
 The beautiful Issyk Kul⁶⁸ laments.
 Also, for not having had the chance to compete with Rahmatulla⁶⁹
 And thus not having heard his honey-like words,
 But instead for having been assigned to me,

Performer Profiles: Didar Qamiev

JANGÜL QOJAKHMETOVA

Jangül Qojakhmetova (JQ): Tell me about your family background. What brought you to the art of *aqyndyq* and *aitys* performance?

Didar Qamiev (DQ): I was born on December 10, 1988, in Aqbauyr village of Shet district in the Qaraghandy region. My grandfather, Qami, was adept in folk epics (*jyr*, *dastan*, *qissa*); he could extemporize a verse and song instantaneously. My grandfather immersed me from the age of five in the culture of folk oral literature. I inherited the *aqyn*'s talent, though, not only from him but also from my grandmother's ancestors; for example, the well-known *aqyn* Jäken Baituov. My father, Janat, played the *domyra*, guitar, and other musical instruments. He taught me how to play the *domyra*. My brothers, Aidar and Ulanghasyr, are also artists who have many times performed and won prizes at regional *aqyns'* *aitys*. It is my family environment that brought me to *aqyndyq*. As for *aitys*, I loved to listen to it from childhood.

JQ: Who do you consider to be your master?

DQ: First of all, Amanjol Ältaev. But I also consider all *aqyns* from Arqa to be my teachers. I regard myself as a pupil of all *aityskers* of the older generation with whom I have had a chance to associate. It is they who taught me the art of *aitys*.

JQ: What can you tell about the nature of poetic and musical improvisation (*suyryp salma*)? Do you consider yourself a *suyryp salma aqyn*?

DQ: Mukhtar Äuezov⁷⁴ wrote: "One of the great distinctive qualities of the Kazakh people is skill at improvisation, in particular instantaneous improvisation in an *aitys*." This is an impromptu poeticized response to the words of the opponent or a momentary reaction to what is happening around. It is not possible to learn the art of improvisation, since it is passed on from one's ancestors, with one's mother's milk. If an *aqyn* does not master improvisation, he has no right to call himself *aitysker*, because an *aitys aqyn* and improvisation are like twin brothers.

JQ: Are there special techniques of learning and teaching how to improvise? What does improvisation during an *aitys* depend on?

DQ: I think the ability to improvise is a biological quality that is inherited genetically. Teaching it specifically is to no avail. The *aqyn* himself should strive to develop, that is, to broaden his knowledge, erudition, and intellectual capacity. An *aqyn* should be well-versed in the history, clan genealogies, literature, and culture of his people. As for his ability to improvise, it has to do with creative inspiration, with the listening



Courtesy of Didar Qamiev.

audience, and with the tune he chooses.

JQ: In your view, from what age can the art of *aqyndyq* be taught? Are there any special schools for training *aqyns*?

DQ: The art of *aqyndyq* can be introduced to children from school age. In Qaraghandy, we have a school of *aqyns* called "Arqa." There are also *aqyns'* schools in Shymkent and in Astana, at the Gumilyov Eurasian National University. These schools have had considerable influence on the shaping of many contemporary *aqyns* of the young generation.

JQ: From what age can one perform at an *aitys*?

DQ: There are no age limits for performing at an *aitys*. Nowadays *aqyns* perform at an increasingly young age.

Performer Profiles: Didar Qamiev (CONTINUED)

JQ: At what age did you perform at an *aitys* for the first time? What type of *aitys* do you draw on in your performances?

DQ: I first performed at an *aitys* in 1999 during the regional festival “Arqa üni” (Arqa’s Melody) against the well-known *aqyn* from Qaraghandy, Tilegen Ädilev. I was eleven years old then. At that time, I usually performed at the *türe aitys*.

JQ: What is the purpose of different tunes (*saryns*) at *aitys*? And what is the role of the *dombyra* accompaniment?

DQ: Different tunes are used to appeal to the listeners and to display the special qualities of the *aqyn*’s voice. The *dombyra* helps the *aqyn* to think during the competition and brings out the expressive nature of the tune and the meaning of the words.

JQ: How do *aqyns* prepare for an *aitys*?

DQ: An *aqyn* will always be at his best if he is constantly learning. He must be knowledgeable about the people’s history, everyday life, and current news.

JQ: In your view, does the art of *aqyns’ aitys* have old historical origins?

DQ: *Aqyns’ aitys* as a genre of oral literature must have emerged with the Kazakh people. It has very deep historical roots.

JQ: Apart from *aitys*, what other oral poetic genres do you adopt in your creativity?

DQ: I compose and sing in the genres of *arnau* (dedication song), *jyr*, *dastan*, *tolghau*, *qissa*, *terme*, and others.

JQ: What can you say about the structure and procedure for developing *aitys*?

DQ: Because an *aqyns’ aitys* is a dialogic genre, it may have a variety of forms and unfold in many different ways. Each *aqyn* has his own techniques and tactics in *aitys*, and its development also depends on the *aqyns’* abilities and creative power. One of the common features of an *aqyn*’s performance, though, is the introductory exclamation that serves to summon the *aqyn*’s inspiration.

JQ: Is the tune (*saryn*) on which you base your performance your own or an adopted tune? What is the reason for the “migration” of tunes across the repertoires of different *aqyns*? How many tunes do you use as a basis for improvisation, and why?

DQ: The tune I mainly use for performance is one from Amanjol Ältaev which I once heard and liked. Usually the reason for the “migration” of a tune is that it suits one’s manner of poetic improvisation. This is why the same tunes can be used in *aitys* and in other improvisational poetic and musical genres. I mostly improvise on two tunes, as this allows for shifts between poetic meters and helps to hold spectators’ attention and raise their spirits.

JQ: How do you see the role of *aqyn* in the social and political life of the people past and present?

DQ: *Aqyns* have always given heart to the Kazakh people in times of hardship and misery. During the Great Patriotic War, in 1943, in Almaty a republic *aitys* took place at which *aqyns* raised people’s spirits and hopes. Contemporary *aitys* enlighten people and enrich them spiritually.

JQ: What was the biggest prize you ever won at an *aitys*?

DQ: For me there can be no bigger prize than the recognition of my people. It makes me happy if the people are in high spirits, and if they bestow their blessings on me. This is certainly the best prize ever!

Performer Profiles: Aaly Tutkuchev

ELMIRA KÖCHÜMKULOVA

Elmira Köchümkulova (EM): Tell me about yourself—your family and your village.

Aaly Tutkuchev (AT): I was born on December 9, 1983, at 1:00 PM, when all the nurses and doctors were on their lunch break. There were seven children in my family. I have two older sisters, two older brothers, and two younger sisters. I was born into an ordinary family, or as they say into a “poor peasant” family.⁷⁵ My mother is a housewife. I come from a small village called Aral (Island) in the Manas district of Talas province [in northern Kyrgyzstan]. The reason it is called Aral is because it is surrounded by mountains. Many well-known *aqyns* come from the same village, and I am the youngest.

EK: Who is your *ustat* (master), and how did he teach you?

AT: I have not just one *ustat*, but four. People ask me why I have four rather than one. For example, they say that Alymkul⁷⁶ learned from Toktogul⁷⁷ and therefore that one should learn from just one *ustat*. In the past, when technology wasn't developed, Alymkul had to travel from Talas to Ketmen Töbö to learn from Toktogul, whereas today, I can learn from Esteke [Estebes Tursunaliev] without seeing and meeting him. I can sit at home and listen to him on the radio and watch him on TV. If I sing in Esteke's style, it means that I learned from him. Therefore,

I can say that I learned from four *ustats*: Estebes Tursunaliev, Ashyraaly Aytaliev, Zamirbek Üsönbaev, and Tuuganbay Abdiev. Three of them are alive today.⁷⁸ I have a close relationship with all three. Breaking my relationship with them would be like breaking my relationship with God.

EK: How about techniques of poetic improvisation (*tökmölük*)? Do your *ustats* also teach you the secrets of their improvising techniques?

AT: Of course! I ask them to share their techniques. However, I used to think that these accomplished *aqyns* didn't feel nervous when they were on stage. I was wrong. They feel more nervous than I do, because the more famous you become, the greater people's expectations. If these *aqyns* feel nervous, then the *aqyn's* art (*önör*) has no limit, I thought, and there is no such thing as total mastery. Indeed, we never stop learning.

EK: On a recent television program, someone asked an interesting question about whether there should be a special school for *aqyns*.

AT: Yes, we should definitely open a school for *aqyns*. Last year, the Kyrgyz art of *tökmölük* was recognized by UNESCO as a Masterpiece of Intangible Cultural Heritage. In the past, the Kyrgyz did not know how to write and read, so they preserved their history orally in their language



Courtesy of Aaly Tutkuchev.

and in the *komuz* strings of *aqyns*. Therefore, it would be very wrong to disregard the great art of our ancestors. To tell the truth, the art of *tökmölük* was a tradition on the verge of disappearing. People were concerned that there would be no *aqyn* after Zamirbek Üsönbaev because during the Soviet period, *aqyns* and their poetry were strictly controlled. The KGB told them to write down the texts of their poetry before they went out to sing in front of people. Fortunately, the tradition was revived after Independence. Therefore, we should introduce such schools, and all schoolchildren should know about this unique tradition. Some people tell me, “I don't believe that you guys really improvise your poetry!” You see, the Kyrgyz themselves don't know the tradition and history of our ancestors. They don't believe in it, and that is really an example of *mankurtchuluk*.⁷⁹ If you clear the source of a spring, the water will flow better. There are

Performer Profiles: Aaly Tutkuchev (CONTINUED)

many interested children, but there is no one who can give them guidance. If one shows and explains to them, once they understand, there will be an interest. For example, at my school in the village, pictures of all the well-known *aqyns* that I mentioned used to be hanging on the wall. Seeing them, I would feel proud and dream of becoming a great *aqyn* like them and seeing my picture next to theirs. I was in the third grade when I had this wish. Had there been pictures of Karl Marx and Lenin instead of these *aqyns*, I wouldn't have been so inspired.

EK: At what point does an *aqyn* consider himself a *tökmö aqyn*? Are you a *tökmö aqyn*?

AT: No, I don't consider myself a *tökmö aqyn*. It's journalists who call us *tökmö aqyns*. If you want an example of a real *tökmö aqyn*, take Alymkul, from whom most of the versions of Kyrgyz *dastans* were recorded. When Alymkul sang the epic *Kojojash*, at the end of the epic, the hunter [Kojojash] gets stranded on a high cliff. At that moment the Gray Mother Goat (Sur Echki) curses him. It's a very powerful curse that makes you cry. So, when Alymkul sang this part, the people would cry and ask him, "Oh, dear Alymkul! Please don't let Kojojash die [by forcing him to throw himself over the cliff]. Save his life!" And Alymkul was able to change the end of the story

on the spot and make Kojojash live. That means that he was a real *tökmö*. He was able to pour words like rain, and play any melody (*küü*), compose songs, and sing *dastans*.

EK: Do you consider being an *aqyn* a profession?

AT: I personally consider it my profession, because I earn a living with this skill of mine. In the past, neither Toktogul nor Alymkul earned his living by farming or selling things in the bazaar. They only practiced poetry. They rode their horses and traveled among the people. Just imagine, they sang at five or six places every day. Every time they sang, their bounty grew larger. Today's *aqyn* sings once a month at most, and sometimes we don't sing at all, which means that we have to farm or sell goods to earn money.

EK: Are there special techniques of learning the skills of improvisation?

AT: Yes, but there are two specific environments in which I can't improvise. First, I can't improvise anything when I'm in a recording studio, because there's nothing there except a microphone or a video camera. And second, I can't improvise when five or six professors are examining me. On other occasions, especially when I see people sitting in front of me eagerly waiting to hear what I'm going to say, I have no problem improvising.

How can I disappoint the hope of many people? When you sing before an audience, you should cheer up the audience in the beginning by saying pleasant words. Then the people cheer for you by applauding and exclaiming things like "Oh, Bali!" ("Yes! Good job!"). These kinds of words make you feel happy, and words just begin coming out of your mouth. But you always have to be thinking on your feet, so that you say the right word at the right moment. While you're singing the first line, your brain must have the next words ready.

EK: People always say that wisdom comes as you get older. Being an *aqyn* requires knowledge of one's own history, culture, and tribal genealogy.

AT: Definitely. However, there's a saying "*Köp jashagan bilbeyt, köptü körgön bilet*" ("One who has lived long does not know, but one who has seen a lot knows more"). One must read and know a lot. You read more as you get older. Let's say that I'm competing with a Kazakh *aqyn*, and he asks me, "There was a hero called Ormon Khan [among the Kyrgyz],⁸⁰ and he had a special military tactic (known as *Ormon opuz*) in beating the Kazakhs. What kind of tactic was it?" It would be shameful for me if I didn't know my own history. So, like journalists, *aqyns* must have broad knowledge. Unfortunately, today our *aqyns* lack that knowledge.

Performer Profiles: Aaly Tutkuchev (CONTINUED)

EK: How is the *aqyn* repertory divided up? For example, do individual performers tend to have their own individualized repertoires? Do repertoires differ from region to region?

AT: Let me talk about one particular difference. Each region has its own *obon*, melody. There is the Talas melody and the southern melody, which are quite different. In the south, *aqyns* like Barpy⁸¹ sang without the accompaniment of *komuz*. And of course, there are also dialect differences.

We *aqyns* make a mistake. As the saying goes, “*Koldo bar altyndyn barky jok*” (One does not value the gold in one’s own hand). *Aqyns* who write their poetry immediately write down whatever they compose, even if it’s two lines, whereas we do not write it down, thinking that it’s ready to perform and there’s no

need to commit it to writing. This attitude will destroy us. We must write down our poetry, for after we die, our poems will just fly away in the air. If we write them down, they’ll be remembered. When I was younger, I used to think that writing down poems would be a shame because people would think that we just memorize and sing instead of improvising. Later I began to understand. If I sing well in a certain place, I remember those lines that I liked, and when I come home, I write them down. Words that aren’t particularly meaningful won’t be remembered. You usually remember words that make people happy and get a lot of applause. Today’s technology is great and handy; sometimes we *aqyns* record ourselves on our cell phone.

EK: What was the biggest prize you ever won in an *aitysh*?

AT: I won the grand prize in the 2005 *aitysh* that was held in Bishkek among Kyrgyz *aqyns*. I received five thousand dollars, but it wasn’t the money that made me happy. It was having my mother in the audience, who had not seen me sing onstage before that. I had invited her to this *aitysh*, and she was sitting in the audience. I did not expect to win the grand prize at the *aitysh*. People’s applause was a big inspiration for me, but my mother’s applause with tears running from her eyes meant so much for me. The fact that I was able to make my mother very happy was a big prize for me. I immediately bought a car with that money and said to myself: “It is okay if I am on foot, but may my mother not be on foot.” So I presented the car to my older brother, who lives with my mother in the village, and asked him to drive my mother around.

*Ardaktuu jenge sende arman.
Anan Sara kyz menen bir chykpay,
Kabyrgasynan chymchyshpay,
Kanteyin,
Sizge tush bolgon mende arman.*

QANYSHA:

*Aqyndar onda jinasyn,
Öleng men boigha bar küshin.
Tanylsyn mening qyrghyzgha,
Boiymdaghy nar küshim.*

*Jaqsylqapenen aitaiyn,
Jaqsy künnen jarylqasyn.*

The esteemed *jenge*, you lament.
And finally, for not singing with the girl, Sara,⁷⁰
And teasing her with words,
Alas,
For having been assigned to you, I lament.

May the *aqyns* gather
The whole power of their essence with song.
May the great power of my soul
Be known to the Kyrgyz.

Let me sing with goodwill,
May the good [independence] day be blessed.

*Qurmanbek degen ulyng bar,
Jurtyngnyng alghan alghysyn.*

*Qanatyng menen Rüsteming
Qir shalmatyghyn qarly shyn.
Ölengmen soghyt ketiin
Qyrghyz bauyrlar tauly müsün.*

*Aq qalpaqy aghaiyn,
Bauyrlarym armysyng!*

*Sulayman bayke jaghdaiym qiyndady,
Qanshanyng bir özingiz süiinghany.
Jaraspas Jetisudan kelgennen song,
Balamen bala bolyp süiilghany.*

*Rahmetulla qurdaspen shygham degen,
Rahmetulla manglaiyma büiirmady.*

*Men singlisi em, qaraghym, Sara apanyng,
Atqandai qyrghyzyna dara tanyım.
Qulyndy biesi edim **analar dyng**,
Men de seni ilestirip jaratamyn.*

*Sakhnagha jengeshe dep shygha kelding,
Sondyqtan men de äzildi taratamyn.
Myna otyrghan qasymda qaiynymdy,
Esten tandyrp auzyma qaratamyn.*

*Al onda özing tiisting qaghynyp sen,
Özinge-özing myqty bol balapanym.*

You have your son, [President] Kurmanbek,
Who received your people's appreciation.

Your Kanat and Rustem⁷¹
Are [like] pure snow-white peaks.
Let me build a mountainous monument
To the Kyrgyz brothers with a song.

Our kinsmen with the white *kalpaks*,
My brothers, my greetings to you!

Uncle Sulayman,⁷² I am in an awkward position,
You are admired by many.
I have come all the way from Jetisu inopportunistly
To compete with the little boy as if I were a boy.

I wished to compete with Rahmatulla, my contemporary,
But Rahmatulla wasn't assigned to me by fortune.

My dear, I am a younger sister of aunt Sara,
And I am like a startling daybreak to the Kyrgyz.
Like a colt after its mother mare
I like to follow you.

You came onto the stage addressing me as *jengeshe*,
So I shall pass around the joke.
I shall attract the attention of my *qaiyn*⁷³ sitting in front of me,
Making him laugh until he passes out.

You have started teasing me yourself,
Now watch out, my baby bird.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How is the fact that this is a cross-national contest reflected in its content? How do the *aqyns*' ways of addressing each other conform to traditional notions of age, seniority, and gender?
2. How are the two *aqyns* similar or different in their performance style, melody, use of instrumental accompaniment, and poetic compositional techniques?
3. What poetic meter do they use? Do they make similar use of alliteration and end rhyme?
4. How do the *aqyns* engage the audience as well as the judges to win their favor? When and how does the audience react to the singers?

NOTES

1. The word *ākhūn* is said to have been introduced as a title for Muslim clergy, or mullahs (Alkei Marghulan, “O nositelyakh drevnei poeticheskoi kul’tury kazakhskogo naroda” [On the bearers of the ancient poetic culture of the Kazakh people], in *Sbornik k 60-letiu M. O. Auezova* [Collection of articles for the 60th anniversary of the birth of M. O. Auezov] [Alma-Ata: Izdatel’stvo Akademii Nauk KazSSR, 1959], 78).

2. See Mahmud al-Kashghari, *Diwan Lughat at-Turk*, trans. Zifa-Alua Auezova, (Almaty: Daik-Press, 2005), 110; Marghulan, “O nositelyakh drevnei poeticheskoi kul’tury kazakhskogo naroda”; Edige Tursynov, *Vozniknovenie baqsy, aqynov, seri i jyrau* [The origins of *baqsys*, *aqyns*, *seris*, and *jyraus*] (Astana: IKF Foliant, 1999), 108–111.

3. Kyrgyz *jazgych aqyns* are also called *zamanachy aqyns* (from *zaman*: “time,” “period”), for they composed poetry about specific political and socio-cultural changes and problems of contemporary times (such as Russian settlers, land and pasture issues, and the role of Islam) that arose with the arrival of Russians in Central Asia in the 18th and 19th centuries. Kazakh *jazba aqyns*, in addition to composing individual poems, engaged in written poetry competitions (*jazba aitys*). Early examples of such competitions through correspondence come from the 19th century and include the *jazba aitys* between *aqyns* Aqan seri and Ismaghul and between Kete Jüsip and Qanly Jüsip.

4. *Synchy* (from *synda-*: “to judge,” “to criticize”) is a person who possesses the natural skill to judge people, as well as animals, mainly horses, by looking at their behavior, personality, language, and physical appearance.

5. B. Kebekova, comp., *Arstanbek* (Bishkek: Ilim, 1994), 136–139.

6. Abdysalim Obozkanov, *Tökmölkütün bashaty, kalyptanuu etaptary jana sinkrettüü tabiyaty* [The origin, development, and syncretism of *tökmölkük*] (Bishkek: Sham, 2006), 60.

7. *Ibid.*, 60.

8. *Ibid.*, 60–61.

9. *Ibid.*, 61.

10. Süiinbai Aronuly, *Shygharmalar: Tolghaular, syn-syqaq ölengder, aitystar* [Works: *Tolghaus*, satirical songs, *aitys*] (Almaty: Jazushy, 1990), 50.

11. Unlike Kazakh *dombyrashys*, Kyrgyz *komuzchus* and *aqyns* did not traditionally engage in *küü* competitions. In recent years, however, among young *komuz* players a form of instrumental contest has developed, known as *küü aitys*.

12. *Qaryndas/qaryndash* is a Kazakh and Kyrgyz kinship term used for a younger sister of a man. The term for a younger sister of an older sister is *singli/singdi*.

13. *Kut*: a Turkic word that has multiple meanings and is understood and used differently in various contexts. Here it means “fortune,” “luck,” “blessing,” “warmth.”

14. Kebekova, *Arstanbek*, 53.

15. The term *süre aitys* has been linked with the Arabic word *sura* (Kazakh *süre*) referring to a chapter from the Qur’an. This etymological interpretation highlights the scope and exhaustiveness of verbal utterances in *süre aitys*, as distinct from *türe aitys* (Svetlana Djanseitova, *Kazakhskaya muzykal’naya terminologiya: Uchebnoe posobie* [Kazakh music terminology: Study guide] [Alma-Ata: Almatinskaya gosudarstvennaya konservatoriya imeni Kurmangazy, 1991], 59.)

16. Wooden circllet at the top of the yurt.

17. Respectful form of address to an elder brother or senior man.
18. Amangeldi Imanov (1873–1919) was the leader of the anti-czarist uprising in the Torghai region in 1916 who actively participated in the establishment of the Soviet administration in the Kazakh steppe.
19. Älibi Jangeldin (1884–1953), originally from the Torghai region, was a revolutionary and companion-in-arms of Amangeldi Imanov in the 1916 uprising against the czarist domination.
20. Ybyrai Altynsarin (1841–1889), another famous native of Torghai, was a teacher and enlightener who initiated secular education among the Kazakhs.
21. The *aqyn* refers to the fact that his opponent was a veteran of World War II.
22. Aqan seri Qoramsauly (1843–1913) and Birjan sal Qojaghululy (1834–1897) were celebrated singer-songwriters who came from the Kökshetau region.
23. Qulager, Aqan seri's favorite horse, was known for his unrivalled qualities as a racer. He was killed during a horserace at the order of a wealthy man whose own horse was likely to lose. Aqan seri commemorated Qulager in a song that is prominent in the repertory of singers from the Saryarqa tradition.
24. Ybyrai Sandybaiuly (1860–1930) was a renowned singer-poet from Kökshetau who adorned his headpiece with owl feathers (*iki*)—traditionally an amulet that offered protection from the evil eye—and was therefore nicknamed *Ükili* Ybyrai (Ybyrai with Owl Feathers).
25. The main prize of the *aitys*.
26. Literally, a clan battle-cry (*uran*).
27. Jangül Qojakhmetova, *Muzyka kazakhskogo aitysa* [Music of the Kazakh *aitys*] (Qaraghandy: Glasir, 2012), 29.
28. Esenaman refers to the younger Jengijok as “my son” and to himself as “your uncle.”
29. *Kalpak*: national headdress made of white felt worn by Kyrgyz men.
30. The Turkic word *saryn*—also used among the Kazakhs with reference to ritual, domestic, and epic types of melody—is thought to have old origins as a designation of an *aitys* tune. The Arabic term *maqām*, on the other hand, came to be used more recently, as a loan word from performers of epic through the sharing of repertory between *aqyn* and *jyrshy*, and is more commonly applied in contemporary practice.
31. Qojakhmetova, *Muzyka kazakhskogo aitysa*, 51.
32. Saida Elemanova, *Kazakhskoe traditsionnoe pesennoe iskusstvo: Genezis i semantika* [Kazakh traditional song art: Genesis and semantics] (Almaty: Daik-Press, 2000), 70–71.
33. Köken Shäkeiuly, *Kökshem mening! Öleñ, jyrlar men aitystar* [My Kökshe! Songs, epic poems, and *aitys*] (Astana: Elorda, 2001), 100.
34. The *aqyn* refers to Alatau because the *aitys* took place in Almaty.
35. *Nar*, literally dromedary.
36. *Enshi*, literally share of inheritance given to elder sons in a family.
37. Literally “Your five weapons seem to be ready [for action]” (idiomatic expression).
38. From the Arabic Qur'anic phrase *Bismi Allāh* (In the name of God).
39. Qarakesek (literally black piece) is the name of a clan of the Arghyn tribe within the *Orta jüz* (Middle Horde). The *aqyn* plays with the word “Qarakesek” (“I am a dough-stuffed piece of meat”) to imply that he is a true descendant of the Qarakesek clan.
40. Among nomads, an animal stomach was used as a container for preserving butter. In such a container butter would stay fresh. The *aqyn* here implies that Shieli's traditions and customs have been preserved unspoiled.

41. Ābdilda Tājibaev (1909–1998), the poet and playwright on the occasion of whose anniversary the *aitys* was organized.
42. *Qalyng mal*, literally dowry, brideswealth.
43. Literally ahead of a cloud of dust raised by racing horses.
44. Respectful form of address to a senior woman.
45. The *aqyn* plays on the name of the region, Shieli (from *shie*, literally cherry).
46. *Kelinshek* is an address to a young married woman.
47. The *aqyn* implies that, even though he is flirting with his opponent, he does not want to be disrespectful toward her, a married woman.
48. *Qulyñ*, literally colt, a form of address to small children.
49. Song (*jyr*) is compared to fermented mare's milk (*qymyz*) poured from a leather flask (*saba*), traditionally used for making and preserving *qymyz*.
50. Asan qaighy is a Kazakh poet, philosopher, and legendary hero thought to have lived in the 14th–15th century.
51. *Alash* is here used with reference to an early confederation of Kazakh tribes.
52. Nartai Bekejanov (1890–1945) was an eminent *aqyn* originally from Shieli.
53. Imanjūsip Qutpanuly (1863–1929) was another famous *aqyn* whose name came to be associated with Shieli.
54. Janazar batyr was a companion-in-arms and military commander of Abylai Khan (18th c.).
55. Mustafa Shoqai (1890–1941) was a civic leader and politician who headed the Turkestan Autonomy (1917–1918), a short-lived unrecognized state that existed on the territories of present-day Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan.
56. Shahmardan Esenov (1927–1994) was a scholar-geologist and statesman, a former Minister of Geology and President of the Republic of Kazakhstan Academy of Sciences.
57. Ybyrai Jaqaeñ and Jadyra Taspambetova, Worker Heroes of Kazakhstan.
58. Contemporary writer and political leader Altynshash Jaghanova.
59. Writer Quandyq Tūmenbai and mathematician Asqar Jumadildaev.
60. Bakhtiyar Tailaqaev, a singer, Honored Artist of Kazakhstan, and cultural administrator in the Qyzylorda region.
61. Ruslan Bölebai, a young television journalist who died in 2009.
62. White Horde (*Aq Orda*) was a Turkic state on the territory of present-day Kazakhstan in the mid-13th–early 15th centuries. Here the *aqyn* refers to the White Horde in the sense of the homeland.
63. *Aqyns* who competed with Ainur Tursunbaeva.
64. Maira and Serik were a Kyrgyz and Kazakh pair of female and male *aqyns* who had competed before.
65. *Jenge/jengeshe*: a respected term of address used among the Kyrgyz, Kazakhs, and Uzbeks by a younger brother toward the wife of an older brother. Men call the wife of their older brothers and kinsmen *jenge*. Kyrgyz have a saying, “One of the thighs of the sister-in-law belongs to her husband's younger brother” (*Jengenin bir sany kaynisiniki*). This saying is related to an old practice among the nomadic Kyrgyz and Kazakhs wherein if a woman's husband died, the woman married her husband's younger brother to keep the young children in her husband's family. Mature younger brothers (*kayni/qaiyn*) often tease their *jenges/jengeshe*s, who in turn

teach them about courtship and marriage. In this *aitysh*, the young Aaly aqyn is trying to tease his older female opponent by establishing the traditional *jenge-kayni* relationship.

66. The *aqyn* is saying that the Kyrgyz people lived in harmony with nature.

67. A reference to the Kyrgyz writer Chingiz Aitmatov, who died in 2008.

68. **Issyk Kul**: the name of a large mountain lake in northern Kyrgyzstan that is a popular tourist attraction.

69. Rahmatulla: a middle-aged Kyrgyz *aqyn*.

70. Sara is the name of a young Kazakh female *aqyn* with whom Aaly previously competed in Kazakhstan.

71. These are two Kyrgyz wrestlers who won the gold and silver medals at the Beijing Olympic Games in 2010.

72. Here Qanysha is addressing Sulayman Kaiypov, who served as the head of the judges, sitting in the front row to evaluate the *aitysh*.

73. Husband's younger brother or male relative.

74. Mukhtar Äuezov (1897–1961) was an acclaimed Kazakh writer, playwright, and literary scholar who wrote a classic novel about the Kazakh philosopher, poet, and songwriter Abai Qunanbaev, *Abai joly* [The path of Abai].

75. Aaly said this sarcastically, referring to the popular statement used in textbook autobiographies of Soviet poets and writers. In the 1930s, due to Stalin's persecution of kulaks, many poets and writers hid their family background by saying that they came from a *jönököy*, “ordinary,” or *kedey-dyikan*, “poor peasant” family.

76. Alymkul Üsönbaev (1896–1963).

77. Toktogul Satylganov (1864–1933).

78. Today, only Zamirbek Üsönbaev (b. 1951) is alive.

79. *Mankurtchuluk* (*mankurtism* in Russian) comes from the word *mankurt*—a person who does not know, or has forgotten, his identity, culture, and language. The term is also used in the epic *Manas*, but it achieved widespread popularity in the Soviet Union in the 1980s after the Kyrgyz writer Chingiz Aitmatov (1928–2008) reintroduced it in his novel *A Day Lasts Longer than a Hundred Years*.

80. Ormon was the khan of the Kyrgyz Sarybagysh tribe in the 19th century. He defeated the Kazakh khan Kenesary in 1847.

81. Barpy Alykulov (1884–1949) was a well-known *aqyn* from southern Kyrgyzstan. He composed many philosophical, religious, and love poems and is known for his specific melodic style, and for singing without the *komuz*.