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FEMALE CELEBRATIONS IN UZBEKISTAN AND AFGHANISTAN: THE POWER OF COSMOLOGY IN MUSICAL RITES

by Razia Sultanova

Uzbekistan is a Central Asian country with a population of 27 million. It is bordered by Afghanistan to the south, Turkmenistan to the west, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan to the north, and Tajikistan to the east. There is also a large Uzbek population living in the north of Afghanistan (figure 1).

Most of the female gatherings in that area relate to the system of celebrations based on a solar/lunar calendar or on different religious beliefs (predominantly Islam, but also other pre-Islamic beliefs, such as that in the female goddess from Manichaeism, Tengri cults, and Zoroastrianism). Women celebrate the most famous events like Navruz (pre-Islamic New Year celebration) with singing to the accompaniment of the *doira* (frame drum) or clapping. Many other ceremonies feature solo, duet, or choral singing and consist of repetitive forms of blessings, greetings, or jokes. Ceremonial singing is based on simple melodic patterns, short metric and rhythmic structures that date back to the time when singing was intended to protect, to deflect the power of spells and the evil eye. The music-making process in general is associated with the nature of the universe.

This paper explores how elements of cosmology affect the forms and content of music in Uzbek female communities from the same culture in the homeland population (Uzbekistan) and in the diaspora (Afghanistan). Conclusions are drawn from modern Uzbek pop music, where the traditional female image has a strong affiliation with the universe.

Mythical and cosmological views developed in Central Asia

Cosmology can be roughly defined as the study of the origin and evolution of the universe, associated with the motion of the solar system—the sun, moon, planets, comets, etc.¹

Scholars believe that at the very beginning of human history the sky was mythologically associated with the “mother goddess,” the giver of life, representing all time and space. Myths accounted for planetary cycles, marking days, nights, months, and years of unending time. So, in general, female cosmology was based on local beliefs that god is a woman.

There was a similar situation in Central Asian history. In ancient times nomads of the Great Steppes of Central Asia believed in a god of the sky called Tengri.² He

1. Cosmology in its connection to another Central Asian cultural phenomenon, Turkmen epic music, is explored in the book by Slawomira Zeranska-Kominek and Arnold Lebeuf (1997:223–81).

2. Tengrianism is a common faith for ancient Eurasian people. Originating in one of the most
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Figure 1. Map of Uzbekistan and neighbouring countries

created everything in the world from chaos and oceans. Tengri had two halves: the male and the female, Tengri Umai. Tengri Umai lived on the top of the mountain Sumera, in the high sky near the milky mountain lake, Sutkol. From the foot of Tengri Umai was born the goddess Ot-Ona (mother-fire), who resides in the fireplace of every house, being responsible for meals and warmth. According to the belief of Central Asian peoples, fire is sacred (Zhainadarov 2006:10–11).

In Zoroastrian times an Indo-Iranian cosmological figure, Anahita (Aredvi Sura Anahita in the Avestan language), was the goddess of water and rain. Associated with fertility, healing, and wisdom, she looked after the well-being of women, promoting fertility, safe childbirth, and making the life of women a little easier. In the area of Khorezm (west of Uzbekistan), Anahita became Ambar-Ona, whose power comes from the Amu-Darya River. Female shamans still invoke her name for the success of healing rituals. At Navruz (the pre-Islamic New Year celebration), songs in her honour are still sung during the preparation of the sacred meal *sumalyak* (Snesarev 1969:78).

In the Boisun area in the southern part of Uzbekistan, the story of the female goddess, Bibi-Seshanba (Lady Tuesday), is still widely popular today. Bibi-Seshanba is believed to be the protector of all women in the world. She is praised and her help is invoked whenever women gather together. At female gatherings in her honour, women sit on the floor around a tablecloth set for lunch, light candles, and put out the fire. All appeals are made to the goddess in collective prayers and sung ceremonies in a dark, smoky room. The ritual proceeds slowly, featuring praying aloud and singing devotional poetry at the beginning, which is the first and main part of the ceremony. This is followed by confessions when every participant joins the

ancient lands of the world—Sumeria—about 6000 years ago, Tengrianism is considered to be the basis for all other religions of the world: Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. But only in the Turkic-speaking world do people today still believe in Tengrianism (Zhainadarov 2006:245).

conversation and discussion across the table. The full ritual is performed, appropriately, on a Tuesday. The very name of the ritual means an appeal to Mother-Mushkulkushod, “the lady who solves problems.”

The roots of this tradition lie in the distant past when Turkic people believed in Mother Umay, a Turkic goddess. Later these beliefs were transformed into the Islamic cults of Mother Aysha, the wife of the Prophet Mohammed, and of Mother Fatima, his daughter. Their image as protectors of fertility and patronesses of women became extremely popular with Islamic women.

Cosmology also plays an important role in Islamic culture as

the cosmos is inseparable from the Qur’anic conception of god as creator. God is the central reality, so the cosmos did not come into existence by chance or without ultimate purpose. Cosmos traditionally extends to the non-physical world, including heavens and angels. (Esposito 2004:58)

The most obvious connection between cosmology and the human soul is represented in Sufism, the mystical development within Islam which has embodied many other mystical pre-Islamic traditions

As an example of how the macrocosm, the whole universe, equals the microcosm, the human soul, let us take a Sufi poem “Husnu dil” (Beauty and heart) by Muhammadniyaz Nishoti (eighteenth century) from the Khorezm area, widely performed today in local female rituals. The poem is based on deep Sufi symbolism.

In the kingdom of Body there is a king, Mind (Reason), and he has a son, Heart. When Heart reaches adulthood his father presents him with a state and his mother gives him a book. In this book, Heart reads about Obi Hayot, Water or Source-of-Life, and then suddenly falls ill. His father talks to him; recognizing the problem, he calls his servant, Nazar (the name means Sight), and sends him to find the source of life. In the fifteen thousand lines of the poem narrating his search, Nazar encounters Pride, Honesty, Shame—in fact, every human characteristic—but nowhere does he find Source-of-Life. Finally, kind people like Intuition tell Nazar that the source he is looking for lies between the lips of Beauty, who is the daughter of another king called Love (Passion). Before Heart can find Beauty there are battles between the two kings, Mind/Reason and Love/Passion. Love is victorious. Finally, all the poem’s characters are united in the Garden of Perfection, and there is a feast where everyone sings and dances. Heart wins Beauty, and at the same time finds the Source of Life (Nishoti 1967:116). Here the human soul, with all its features and attributes, is described as the outside world, as the whole human universe, and so the macrocosm meets the microcosm as its equal.

This fundamental Sufi concept underlies different music-making forms used for Islamic religious celebrations such as Ramadan and Eid performed in Uzbek communities in the homeland and Afghanistan.

Lady Otin-Oys in Uzbekistan

In the traditional culture of Central Asia, and particularly in Uzbek culture, women and cosmological terms are closely linked. Two-thirds of the Uzbek population live in rural areas where music-making takes place in ceremonial contexts. Calendar events, religious rituals, rites of passage which incorporate religious patterns, and healing rituals are all still performed widely in rural areas (see Sultanova in press:159–60). The genres which women perform in the form of songs and rituals, and the way they are performed are affected by cosmological features. Those ceremonies are led by Otin-Oys, the Uzbek religious women held in great esteem who are considered to be highly-privileged members of society. In times of trouble or peace, on weekdays or on holidays, the Otin-Oys who help, support, or give advice to anyone in need are welcomed in each family and in every house. The social status of Otin-Oys, as well as the forms their activities take, symbolize aspects of the universe. People believe this is the reason they can influence the course of human destiny. The music they perform very often consists of chanted prayers and hymns, sung solo and in chorus with rhythmic clapping, sometimes ending with dance. In fact those rituals are essentially musical in nature; as in Muslim worship, prayers, devotional Sufi poetry, lamentations, and epic stories are considered sung when the words are recited in a way similar to singing, using the technique of elongating vowels (figure 2).



Figure 2. Otin-Oy Saboqad conducting a ritual in the village of Gusht Emas, Uzbekistan (photo: author, October 2003)



Figure 3. Widowed Otin-Oy Malika in daily life (photo: author, June 1999)

The destiny of Otin-Oys

Otin-Oys are very often widows or mothers of disabled children. Such a bitter destiny is considered to be the special mark of the universe. Having such children is taken to mean that the universe granted Otin-Oys a special capability in other fields, for example, being able to shuttle between two worlds, real and abstract, between life and death. It is not easy to distinguish an Otin-Oy in a crowd. The only characteristic feature is an element of clothing called *oq rumol*, a white headscarf which is worn during ritual performances. In the real world they are mothers, wives, and grandmothers; in the imaginary otherworld they are powerful rulers, significant and influential women who as sorceress-enchanters can totally change the destinies of other people (figure 3).

The power of Otin-Oys

Otin-Oys are expected to be supporters and transformers of the present life (healers, diviners) who have extra power extending to another world. For example, mourning rituals are considered to be patterns of “transmission time,” bridging this and another world. At funeral ceremonies I attended in Bukhara, relatives and friends of the deceased person wore photographs and pictures of their recently deceased family members on their turban (or headscarf) to send a message to another world through the singing of the Otin-Oy who thus acts as a guide between this and other worlds.

Awareness of the solar and lunar systems

Otin-Oys' daytime and work activity is not measured in terms of the present globally accepted hours of the working day. So, very often the early hours (4.00–5.00 a.m.) are considered to be the start of the day and, therefore, the right time for rituals. Their choice to celebrate certain days of the week—Tuesday, for example, as the most propitious day (Lady Tuesday ceremonies) or certain months of the year (the ninth month for Ramadan)—varies according to the lunar calendar and is derived from the ancient system of calculating time.

The main events of the Muslim religion—Ramadan (ninth month), Eid (end of Ramadan), Kurban Eid (celebration at the time of Haj, the pilgrimage to Mecca, two and a half months after Ramadan)—are also based on the lunar calendar. “Celebration” months thus vary from year to year and Otin-Oys work at night or in the daytime as necessary.

Faith and confessions

In a wide range of rituals performed by Otin-Oys, features from different religions—Islam, several pre-Islamic faiths, and pagan cults—are combined. So, very often at the beginning of a ceremony, Allah is mentioned first, and then prayers and songs are offered to the female goddess Bibi-Seshanba (Lady Tuesday), when seven symbols of Zoroastrianism (water, fire, mirror, flour, bread, oil, and honey,) are displayed on the tablecloth.

Awareness of colours

According to tradition, Sufi practice required a special awareness of colours. Different colours are worn for different rituals: in the Khorezm area white is the colour of mourning, while in the Tashkent-Ferghana area it is navy blue. The Sufi origins of some female ceremonies are obvious: the custom of the Qubraviya Sufi order is still maintained in female performances of traditional rites of passage. For example, Qubraviya colours proceed in the following order: white–yellow–light blue–green–dark blue–red–black. Here, the seven colours are associated with the seven states of the spirit of the Murid (master of the Sufi order): white–Islam (submission); yellow–*iman* (faith); light blue–*ihsan* (grace); green–*it'minan* (calmness); dark blue–*ikan* (confidence); red–*irfan* (enlightenment); and black–*hayajan* (admiration). All these reflect a different cosmological order (Negria 1991:140).

Awareness of biological time

The Otin-Oy's practice of setting mourning ceremonies on the first, third, fifth, seventh, and eleventh days after death, then, one month, three months, six months, one year, and so on, depends on the area in which such ceremonies are to take place and on the calendar system in use. Sufi traditions in Uzbekistan are based on sacred numbers (for example, eleven is the sacred number for Naqshbandiya) and belong to a different Sufi brotherhood calendar system

Otin-Oys are not allowed to perform the religious repertoire when they have their menstrual period, since at that time they are not considered physically “pure.”

Here biological features clash with the mystical ability of Otin-Oys to perform religious songs.

Elements of cosmology in Central Asian rites thus cover a very different symbolic system offering a new dimension to every calendar, one that affects the measurement of years, seasons, months, lunar cycles, biological time, day, and night; one that affects signs of destiny, the choice of colours, and the significance of numbers. Certainly this versatile multifaceted awareness of time, meaning, numbers, colours, and so on has prehistoric cultural origins. Some of these traditions stem from Sufism, some are from Zoroastrianism or Tengri cults. However, self-sacrificing spiritual devotion such as that manifested in the religious activities of the Otin-Oys is highly significant for the area. Jahonotin Uvaysiy (1780–1845), the famous female Sufi poet from Ferghana Valley, who herself was an Otin-Oy, once wrote:

Dard ah'lig'a ishq do'konini qursam o'ldurur,
Qurmasam o'lam,

If I build a castle of love [i.e., mystical knowledge]
for the suffering people, they kill me!
If I don't build I die! (Uvaysiy 1980:58)

These lines by a great Uzbek female poet could apply to the whole phenomenon of Otin-Oys, these Uzbek religious women who transmitted Islamic tradition, folk religions, and cults with mystical knowledge throughout the period of Russian colonization, which started in the nineteenth century, and through Bolshevism, which has so recently ended. Their devotion to such ceremonial performances, their general resistance to accepting reality and the present flow of events, trying instead to influence them, to improve matters by attracting universal attention and support to correct reality, is highly remarkable. It always had a place in that area. When in the 1930s their husbands—being a *mullah* or an *ishan* (religious leaders)—were either killed or exiled by the Soviets because of their Islamic beliefs, the same could have happened to these women. They literally could have been killed for “building the castle of love,” for maintaining and transmitting Islamic knowledge and Sufi tradition to their children and other people. But, on the other hand, they could not fail to do so out of loyalty to their tradition and their faith. They would die in the eyes of God unless they built a spiritual “castle of love.”

So, these Otin-Oys celebrate the most famous community events covering all religions together, including healing and problem-solving rituals from pre-Islamic holidays (like Navruz, a pre-Islamic New Year celebration) to Ramadan or Eid. They are always ready to go on and on with their performance saying: “The limit? The sky is the limit!” (from an interview with Otin-Oy Malika Askarova, Sultanova, 2005:17)

Afghanistan: Music in female communities

Today the population of Afghanistan is estimated at more than 31 million, up to 5 million of whom are considered to be Uzbeks, who for centuries have lived in the

northern part of Afghanistan, just across the Amu-Daria River. My documentation is based on fieldwork I conducted in the northern part of Afghanistan, making recordings with Uzbek musicians in Mazar-i-Sharif, Shobergan, and Akcha.³

I went to Afghanistan in October 2006 at the time of Ramadan, during the very last days of that celebration which is so important in Muslim life. Female communities were bustling with many social activities. People paid visits to family members, relatives, friends, and neighbours, bringing presents and sweets, cooking the most fabulous dishes, visiting holy and famous places on their way. As in Uzbekistan, I saw large groups of women with their children gathering together for celebrations around the tablecloth in the sitting room. They were dressed in brightly coloured clothes. Songs, jokes, teasing dialogue, and songs were in the air. This festive mood was shared by everyone. Music sounded from the streets, from radio and TV. Staying in Shobergan, on the first day of Eid (Hayit) I attended a female gathering celebrating the end of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. I was invited to join the family, where about forty women with children had come to the living room to enjoy the celebration. The gathering lasted for more than three hours. Different genres of music, teasing, and religious songs were performed during the festivities. Sitting on the floor, women accompanied themselves playing on the *daf* (frame drum) and *chang-qobuz* (jew's harp). This performance occurred in a relaxed, free atmosphere and excitement was in the air (figure 4). The joke song "Noi-Noi" alternated with comic sung couplets "Taralalai," later followed by the purely religious "Qambar" and "Marhabo." Special attention was paid to the *sala-vat* (hymn) "Hush keldingiz" (You are welcome!). A middle-aged lady covered by a white scarf (identical to that worn by the Uzbek religious leaders, the Otin-Oy) and girls were singing glory to the Prophet.

Cosmology in Uzbek pop music (DJ Pilgrim)

Speaking of traditional culture represented by females, very often an elderly population, one might ask: What about the youth culture in that country? How important is "granny's school" for Uzbekistan? In fact, for Uzbekistan, the country where more than half of the population is under twenty-five years old, this is a very important question.

Uzbek pop music in the twenty-first century is remarkable for the rich variety of genres, languages, symbols, and styles, where female cosmology is represented. There are a number of interesting examples but I would like to highlight one in particular: the group DJ Pilgrim, founded by Ilhom Yulchiev and Dmitry Levin.

Established in 1998, this group depicts in their multilingual songs the experience of the former Soviet Union's blend of "Estrada culture," which is "a staged performance built from a variety of entertaining genres" (Akbarov 1987:416; Keldysh 1990:659). The band's music was described by the *New York Times* as "a new genre of Uzbek-style Europop from upstarts" (Strauss 2000). In the video clip

3. My fieldwork was made possible by a grant from the Committee for Central and Inner Asia at the University of Cambridge.



Figure 4. Playing *daf* (frame drum): Eid celebration in a female community in Afghanistan (photo: author, October 2006)

of the song “On i ona” (He and she), the plot of unrequited love is shown in two alternating images. In one, the boy is in love and the girl does not share his feelings, driving the boy to commit suicide. In the other, a local old lady appears as symbol of the universe or as a goddess who comforts all who are broken-hearted. The boy (performed by Ilhom Yulchiev) tells his story; the old lady recites a medieval Sufi poem that has deep symbolic meaning.

Boy’s story:

Он её любит а она его нет,
 Он ей пишет а ей даже дела нет!
 Он её ищет но нигде её нет,
 Она красива но глупа,
 А он любовью слеп!

On eyë lyubit a ona ego net,
 On ei pishet a ei dazhe dela net!
 On eyë ishchet no nigde eyë net,
 Ona krasiva no glupa,
 A on lyubov’yu slep!

He loves her, she does not love him at all
 He writes her letters—she ignores them!
 He is longing to see her—but cannot find her anywhere!

She is beautiful but silly,
And he is blinded with love!

Old Lady's monologue:

Qoshigni qarosiga hol bo'lay arosiga
Saning rahming kelmaydiyo doday
Birovning bolasiga qoshing bilan ko'zinga
Oshno bo'ldim o'zinga
Aytolmayman yuzingayo, doday, Insof bersin o'zingga

To the blackness of your eyebrows
Let me be a beauty spot between them
You have no pity for the child of a stranger.
To your eyebrows and eyes
I became a friend to you,
I can't say it to your face,
Let God grant you fairness

Here, the distinction in the language of the texts is reinforced by the difference in music style. Though both songs have a similar melodic framework, the Russian lyrics come in brief phrases with simple rhythm and emotionally explicit sentences in the speech style of rap music. In contrast the Uzbek section is characterized by long phrases, melismas on vowels, and a melancholy melody.

Spiritual depth and an eternal subject turn the clip into a picture with a dual vision of earthly and cosmic love. Here we see an elderly woman who has become a symbol of eternal wisdom trying to protect an unhappy boy, to keep him away from the tragedy. However, her image is heavily transformed: with a clouded eye, hoarse voice, and rotten teeth she looks like a beggar. The common image of the well-respected “granny” is being mocked here in response to the teasing/defiant nature of the pop music style. Pop music comes together with the old ritualistic singing style of the female Otin-Oy repertoire. Two different languages—Russian and Uzbek—represent two levels of narrative: Russian is used to describe the love story, and Uzbek, deeply rooted in old poetic Sufi symbolism with its mystical *ghazal* poetry, is used to bring a philosophical side to that situation. If the teenage boy's story and action evoke the tragicomic style of the Italian Renaissance and a famous harlequin-related image, the old Uzbek lady introduced in a nagging “granny style” appears as a symbol of eternity (figure 5).

As one can see, in Uzbekistan Otin-Oy are believed to hold power over time and space, bringing together images of the past, present and future, life and death, solar and lunar features, Islamic and pre-Islamic traditions. Surviving every single new socio-political system, whether the Russian occupation of Central Asia in the nineteenth century or the ideological system of Soviet times, women have become, in a way, cultural “Salvation Army” workers. They are rulers of time and space, turning the wheel of time against the clock, safeguarding their performance duties, whatever the winds of socio-political change.



Figure 5. The Old Lady from the DJ Pilgrim’s song “On i ona” (photo: DJ Pilgrim 2006; used with permission)

Conclusions

So, what is cosmology in music? It can be defined as music-making forms realized in female rituals such as singing, reciting, narrating stories and legends associated with the universe, gods, and goddesses, and calling for their help and attention. In areas of Central Asia, known for their millennia-old beliefs, cosmology appears in a system of celebrations that accompany ancient calendar events that date back to prehistoric times.

Cosmological aspects of Uzbek female rituals can be defined as traditional religious forms where the macrocosm, or universe, and microcosm, or human soul, are brought together. Being time-, space-, and colour-coded, these forms can also be used to appeal to the gods or goddesses for love, protection, or help with problem-solving.

During my fieldwork in female communities in both Uzbekistan and Afghanistan, I saw gatherings of female artists—weavers of *suzani* (traditional embroidered silk wall hangings)—weaving pattern after pattern, each seemingly unrelated to the other. Those patterns are usually associated with the sun and with the moon, the sky, stars, birds, flowers, and many other objects reflecting once again the same ages-old myths and beliefs. When the work was finally complete, those seemingly unrelated patterns would suddenly become a coherent picture. So too with this article. It is now time to draw the threads together into a conclusion that will make of this work a picture that ultimately makes sense.

Female communities both in Uzbekistan and Afghanistan maintain deeply rooted traditional cultural beliefs which amalgamate Islamic faith with elements of pre-Islamic mythological beliefs of a Zoroastrian, Manichean, or shamanic nature. Their rituals are mostly musical and their structure follows the elements of cosmological concepts, developed over the centuries. The main elements of this

cosmology are based on a dualistic understanding of divinity where, despite a predominantly “male” understanding of Islam, a strong image of pre-Islamic female goddesses is offered, along with mystical features of Sufism, where the macrocosm (universe) equals the microcosm (human soul).

There are significant differences between female gatherings and rituals as these are practiced in Afghanistan and Uzbekistan. If in Afghanistan the Islamic tradition has never been broken over the last two to three centuries, in Uzbekistan “the land was ploughed” by the Socialist revolution and by seventy years of Russian rule. Therefore, female rituals of the mainland Uzbek population worked out a complex “hidden underground art,” with a wealth of different elements, including Islamic and pre-Islamic celebrations like Bibi-Seshanba, while Afghani Uzbek female communities formed predominantly Islamic rituals with Qur’ānic reading as the main functional element in those gatherings.

The archetypes of the local cosmological beliefs are so deeply rooted that they can be found not only in the traditional communities, but also in the modern rock culture of Central Asian youth. The ancient symbols of Sufism are realized in pop music as simply as the image of old women singing symbolic poetry. For Uzbeks it is enough to see a woman singing an old-fashioned ritualistic song to associate themselves with the universe, safe and protected, as another pattern in the embroidery of life.

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Abstract in Uzbek

Fazoshunoslik keng ma'noda koinotning tabiatiyu fizik tuzumini o'rganadi. Tarixan fazoshunoslik tushunchalari odamzot madaniyatini shakllantirib kelgan. O'zbek madaniyatining musiqasida uning o'rni qanday? Ayollarning O'zbekiston va Afg'onistondagi majlislari shamsiy va qamariy taqvimlarga asoslangan bo'lib turli dinlarga taaluqlidir (Manixeizm va Zardushtlikdan kelib chiqqan ayol ilohiyatlar, Islom dinining yakkaxudoligi). Ayollar Islomdan avval tatbiq etilgan Navro'z kabi bayramlarni va yoxud islomiy bo'lgan Iyd bayramini doirada o'ynab, chapak chalib ashulalar bilan kutib olishadi. Turlicha boshqa marosimlar yakkaxonlik, jo'ranavozlik va yo qa'shilib kuylash hamda hamdu-na'tlar, duoyu salovatlariga asoslangan. Bu kabi marosimiy kuylar jo'ngina nag'malardan tashkil topgan bo'lib, ularning usullari hamda vaznlari qisqadir. Bu kabi nag'malar qadim zamonlardan qolgan va dastlab ular yomonlikdan, yovuz ko'zdan saqlash kabi ma'nolarni kasb etib koinot bilan uzviy aloqani anglatgan.

Maqola fazoshunoslikning tushunchalari O'zbekiston hamda Afg'onistonda yashovchi o'zbek ayollarining yig'inlariyu ularda ijro etiladigan musiqaning shakli va mazmunini o'rganadi.