

“It’s Time to Drink Blood like its Sherbet”: Azerbaijani Women Ashiqs and the Transformation of Tradition

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Introduction

I have recently returned from two years of fieldwork in the Republic of Azerbaijan, where I researched the topic of women performers in the bardic *ashiq* genre. The Azerbaijani *ashiq* tradition arose in the 16th century in the atmosphere of early Safavid Iran. Combining Turkic epic poetics, Iranian philosophical mysticism, and Caucasian folkloric traditions, the main purpose of the *ashiq* was to perform heroic or romantic narrative epics called *dastan*. Having originally fanned out into the Caucasus from urban centers such as Tabriz in the 15th-18th centuries, travelling *ashiqs* accompanied themselves on a long necked lute called the *saz*. Neither fully a verbal nor musical tradition, words are inseparable from music, and the epics have a prose-poetry structure where the poetic portions are sung to the accompaniment of the *saz*. Didactic, lyrical, and religious songs frame and inform the performance of this genre, which is performed primarily at community events such as weddings, holidays and festivals.

Becoming a trans-Caucasian phenomenon in the 17th-18th centuries, professional multilingual *ashiqs* circled through urban centers such as Gence, Shemaxi, Yerevan, Tbilisi, and Derbend, serving as conduits for the communication of news, ideas, music, and culture. As *ashiqs* settled in the mountains of the lower Caucasus, distinct regional schools developed which absorbed a great deal of local musical and verbal lore. In north-eastern Azerbaijan, where *ashiqs* were patronized by the Shirvanshah khanate, the tradition developed into an ensemble with a *balaban* and a *nagara* drum. In the mountainous western and northern regions, a tradition of *tek saz* (*saz* only) prevailed. Not hampered by an ensemble, the solo *ashiq* could improvise more both musically and vocally, and these regions are famous for producing Azerbaijan’s *ashiq* virtuosos. These regions also saw the rise of women *ashiqs*, who merged into the art in the 18th and 19th centuries, proving themselves by competing in the verbal dueling contests, called *deyishme*, that prove an *ashiq*’s mastery. Today, in the Republic of Azerbaijan, many women are at the forefront of the art, often leading trends that use the dynamic tension between tradition and innovation to keep the art current and popular. In this paper I will briefly discuss the history of women in the genre, then discuss several examples of contemporary women’s *ashiq* art.

Women in the *ashiq* genre

It is impossible to say exactly when the first woman *ashiqs* began to perform. The title *ashiq* means literally “one who is in love,” and was originally taken on by members of Sufi orders to indicate their submission to love for the divine. In the 16th century Azeri-Turkic epic singers called *ozan*, an Oghuz genre related to the Central Asian epic singer/shaman, began to take on the title *ashiq* (Qasimli 2003: 94). This transformation

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seems to have been catalyzed by the rule of Shah Ismayil I (1447-1524), whose combination of romantic lyricism, Shi'a mysticism, and warrior ethics inform his own poetry written under the pen name Xatai. Shah Ismail patronized *ashiqs* at his court and used them to inspire his troops before battle (Ismayilzade 2004: 33). These first *ashiqs* were all men. However, the idea of a woman *ashiq*, that is, a woman who expresses the pain and longing of her heart with *saz* and song, exists in the *dastan* epic tradition, including romantic heroines such as Shah Sanem of the *Ashiq Garip dastani* and warrior heroines such as the fighter Arabzenge from the *Shah Ismail dastani*. Women characters in *dastan* frequently engage in verbal *deyishme* contests with men, and epics often present a woman as “pulling out three of her hairs and pressing them to her breast” to make a *saz*.

Historical women *ashiqs*, that is, who played *saz* professionally and took part in *ashiq majlises* (gatherings where a group of *ashiqs* play and compete), are known from the 18th century, beginning with the remarkable Ashiq Zernigar of Derbend, who (as legend has it) had beaten 39 *ashiqs* in a riddle contest and was waiting for the 40th to execute them all. When after a long verbal battle Ashiq Valeh of Qarabagh is able to win over her, she releases the others and marries him. While the story may be fictional, Ashiqs Valeh and Zernigar were real people, and I have been told that their graves stood side by side in Qarabagh, with *sazes* pictured on them, much like the graves of married *ashiqs*. Haci and Zulexha, pictured here. Ashiq Zulehxa, from the 19th century, was equally remarkable—as her grandson writes of her:

“From a very young age she showed a propensity for poetry and art. She knew the Arabic alphabet well. She took lessons and learned to recite the Qu’ran like a skillful master. Her youthful passions led her to become an aşiq. In 1902 Zuluuxa married Aşiq Haci from the same village, and they started a family and performed together as aşıqs.” (Katruxlu 1996: 391).

By the 19th century there are records of a number of women *ashiqs* such as Peri of Qarabag, Hamayil of Shemkir, and Besti of Kelbejar, all of whom performed together with their male colleagues at weddings and celebrations. Ashiq Besti (c.1840-1936) was a member of the Qurbani majlis (*majlis* in this case meaning a group of *ashiqs* who perform together regularly) along with Ashiq Alasgar, the 19th century’s most highly acclaimed *ashiq* poet. Besti became blind from weeping after seeing her beloved murdered by a rich landlord, and locals still tell that “when Aşiq Bəsti sang even the rocks would cry” (Pirsultanlı 2002, 45). In the 20th century, women *ashiqs* were well known in every region where *ashiq* music is played, including Nabat of Qarabag, who apprenticed with Ashiq Alasgar’s brother, Eskinaz of Tovuz, who sung the heroic Koroglu epic, and Ashiq Senem of Zagatala, who played tambur and composed long narrative poems 7 syllable *bayatis*.

An important feature about the women’s *ashiq* tradition in Azerbaijan is that it is not separate from the men’s tradition. Women *ashiqs* do not sing for female-only gatherings, such as the women’s wedding, and there is no evidence that they ever have in the past¹. Those women who are accepted as legitimate by the *ashiq* community

¹ The women’s wedding or *qiz toyu*, has a number of parts, including the henna ceremony. All songs during the women’s wedding are sung by non-professionals, usually relatives of the bride. The lyrics concentrate on preparing the bride for the difficult transition to married life, including laments and

played at the same venues and fulfilled the same functions as their male colleagues: “Among these peoples (*eller*) not one wedding, not one *iməçilik*² goes on without me” 80+ year old Ashiq Senem told scholar Aziza Cafarzade (Cafarzade 1975: 15). Contemporary *ashiqs*, male and female, stressed to me that in musical and verbal repertoire, performance rituals, performance contexts, professionalism, and training, women and male *ashiqs* were the same. Because the profession is considered a God given calling and not a form of entertainment, as poet Feride Hajieva told me, “parents who would never let their girl become a singer are thrilled when she picks up a *saz*.”

The *ashiq* in the contemporary world

The *ashiq* art in Azerbaijan has varied functions, reflecting its varied roots. *Ashiqs* divide their songs into four categories: spiritual (*ruhani*), courageous (*cenge*), romantic (*mehebbetli*), and sorrowful (*qemli*). Holidays and life cycle ceremonies require mostly romantic songs and lively *deyishme* contests. *Ashiqs* inspire soldiers in time of war with courageous songs, and whole brigades of them were sent to the front in WWII (Eldarova 33: 1984). *Ashiqs* also sing sorrowful songs to lament the losses and traumas of the nation, singing of tragedies such as the Qarabagh war in the 1990s. But perhaps the central function of the *ashiq* is to act as a transmitter, a center in which past and present, worldly and spiritual, legend and life meet in the magic of music and song. In this way, they still reflect their shamanic roots as a mediator between worlds. Through dastans, stories, proverbs, songs, poems, and digressions, *ashiqs* teach the moral and mystical heritage that is embedded in their tradition, as well as bringing new generations the poetry of the past.

The onset of the post-Soviet world after 1991 was traumatic for Azerbaijan, which saw the military occupation of Qarabagh and surrounding lands which triggered a massive internal refugee crisis. In addition the country began the painful transition to a market economy, with drastic effect on the entertainment industry. *Ashiqs* faced a sudden cut-off of state sponsorship and a market where they needed to compete with pop singers and classical musicians. While the popularity of *mugham* art music soared, *ashiqs* found themselves needing to overcome an association with being communist, conservative, rural, and old fashioned. Because the western mountain regions most affected by the Qarabagh war are also some of the strongest *ashiq* regions, many *ashiqs* and their base of supporters became refugees, so although their fan base is large it is economically disadvantaged. In addition, the *ashiq*'s main opportunity for support, the wedding, has changed from a multi-day event performed outside under a tent, to a ceremony of a few hours at a banquet hall, even in the countryside. Weddings now present no opportunities for the telling of lengthy *dastan*, and sometimes you cannot even hear the *ashiq* over the electric ensemble.

Women *ashiqs* in the contemporary world

“I used to hate seeing those old men *ashiqs* in their Stalin uniforms. But when the women came, it was something new. I started to watch.” So I was told by a professor at the National Conservatory in Baku, reflecting how women *ashiqs*, some of whom who

humorous songs. These songs are not in the *ashiq* repertoire. *Ashiqs* do, however, have an important role in the final wedding ceremony, attended by males and females.

² A mandatory ‘voluntary’ workday, an institution from the Soviet period (Russian: *subbotnik*).

had formed into a collective called the Ashiq Peri Mejlisi in 1984, had begun to transform the art. Using the new medium of television, the Ashiq Peri Mejlisi theatricalized the genre in a way that made it more attractive to audiences. Using sets and costumes that evoked the traditional past and images of nature that evoked the idea of the mountain homeland, the women retained the classic repertoire of saz music and poetry, while also providing a forum to sing the lyrics of contemporary poets responding to current events. The Ashiq Peri Mejlisi brought women *ashiqs* out of local villages and onto a national stage, enlarging the audience base for the genre and inspiring the next generation of young women to take up the *saz*. Playing for a national audience and competing with other genres has attracted women innovators to the genre, while mass media has given them new expressive options to explore. Here I will show two examples.

Ashiq Samire

The first example is a music video by Ashiq Samire. Samire is a popular professional *ashiq* who teaches the art at the Azerbaijan State University of Culture and Art. She is from the western Tovuz region where she trained with a local *ustad* (master). Her poetry repertoire and saz technique are extremely traditional, and she is committed to the survival of the *ashiq* tradition: “*canimizda, qanimizda*” [“it is in our soul, it is in our blood”] she told me.

This music video began playing in 2005 on the Space TV, an independent channel geared towards young audiences, rather than the conservative State TV channel, which runs most of the folklore shows where *ashiqs* appear. It is not only the first *ashiq* ‘music video’, but it also got into the ‘top ten’ in competition with pop-music, showing a remarkable impact in a youthful demographic. Here Samire sings a courageous song from *Koroglu*, a *dastan* cycle of a famous outlaw warrior. Samire sings this to the *saz hava* “Misri” (Egyptian), named for Koroglu’s Egyptian sword:

My crazy ones, today is fighting day
It’s time to attack the traitorous country!
Brave warriors are known by their wounds
It’s time to drink blood like it’s sherbet!

Koroğlu will drink of the enemy’s blood
He is known for his couragous battlefield roar!
Cut down the vezir, take the khan captive
It’s time to pile corpses on top of each other!

Where is my brave Koroğlu?
Let him come forth to this battlefield!
When he pulls out his sword “Misri”
It will be colored in blood to the hilt!

Using visual symbols associated with the *ashiq* tradition, the video uses multimedia techniques to express the *ashiq*’s function as a mediator between past and future. Ashiq Samire stands at the center of time, while past, present, and future meet in her singing. The imagery, taken from the movies *Dede Qorqud* (1975), *Babek* (1979), and *Koroglu* (1960), emphasize a history of heroism and struggle, the interweaving of past and present with relentless images of courage, fortitude, and always, the *ashiq*, on a horse

with her *saz*, leading the way. In a contemporary way, she fulfills the *ashiq*'s role to call the troops to battle, to make a lament for the lost, and to inspire resurrection. Her costume, which she designed herself, is not a specific *ashiq* costume nor does it relate to a distinct historical period—rather it is meant to be evocative of the strength and glory of a multitude of legendary pasts, a glory that she hopes to renew. She links the heroic past with the present, expressing a sense of urgency with the running horses, and the pace of the music. By breaking the rhythm with a slow lament, Samire is able to emphasize the tragedy of Qarabag in a moving, meditative sequence, returning to the *ashiq* music to renew the sense of a need for action. Using a number of traditional elements with a spirit of postmodern montage and Soviet nostalgia in a multimedia package, this video is able to bring a powerful message to a very wide audience who would not normally be in the *ashiq*'s audience base.

Samire is not a musical or vocal innovator – her goal is to keep the tradition alive and powerful by using theatrical and visual media. A very different example is *Ashiq Zulfiyye*.

Zulfiyye Ibadova

There is no doubt that Adalet Nesibov, from Western Azerbaijan, is the first and foremost master of the instrumental *saz*, in whose playing, as Jean During pointed out, where “*ashiq* music, as it attains a high level of sophistication and is divorced from its essentially narrative function, comes close to what is commonly considered as art music having an end in itself” (1992: 21).

One of a few following the path of Adalet Nesibov in musical innovation, an outstanding example is Zulfiyye Ibadova, who has carved out her own style in the genre. And while she has horrified many traditionalists, she has greatly expanded the popularity of *ashiq* arts.

Zulfiyyə İbadova began to play very young. She debuted at the Azerbaijan Philharmonic when she was 13 and became one of the original members of the Aşiq Peri majlisi at 16. She came from a family where several of her relatives had been *ashiqs* and showed musical talent at an early age. Her first instrument was what she called a “Russian tar” (a guitar):

I started to play *saz hava* on it, and one of our neighbors came by. “You should get that girl a *saz*.” He told my father...My father encouraged me; “Look at the power of the *saz*,” he told me. “The *saz* can defeat enemies. Koroğlu’s strength came half from his “Misri” sword, half from his *saz*.” (Recorded interview, March 7, 2006)

Now 35, Zulfiyye has an extremely successful career in Azerbaijan, as well as having been invited abroad to Turkey, Russia, Iran, and the United States. Her success is easy to understand, for as well as being a master musician she is a passionate and vibrant performer with a strong individual style. She has no musical training, and learned by ear in the Tovuz region where she was born. “Nobody taught me” she says, defying the assumption that an *ashiq* must be an apprentice for several years, but readily admits to being influenced by *ashiqs* such as Adalaet Nesibov and Mikayil Azaflı. Her grandfather and uncles were *ashiqs*, and she believes the talent was both in her blood and given to her by God. When I asked her how she reacts to those who condemn her innovations, she told me “Every artist tries to leave their own mark. Our roots are our treasury, we have a way of singing, a way of playing *saz*. It is a road you can go straight down, or you can go wandering, looking around here, taking a little rest there. Its like going on a

journey. I'm in my own world when I play, I am not thinking of what anyone else wants" (Interview, March 7 2006).

Zulfiyye has written a great deal of original music and lyrics, and likes combining the saz with other instruments, such as synthesizers and accordions, for a contemporary sound. Zulfiyye's vocal style, a low, relaxed and passionate voice, is very distinct from the tense, high pitched vocals that are traditional for *ashiqs*. Although there is a polished sensibility to her voice, she avoids much of the vocal ornamentation popular in urban styles. In this example, she is singing the sorrowful "Yandim Allah," I have Burned up, oh God, composed by the great 20th century *ashiq* Mikayil Azafli:

In this world's fire of sadness
I have burned up, oh God
From the moans and screams
I have burned up, oh God

From this world's tears
From its endless wars
From the flames that rise from every rock
I have burned up, oh God

From the pain given by this world
From love that died young
I am Azafli, from every horror
I have burned up, oh God

Conclusion: Innovation and the Power of the Powerless

Samire and Zulfiyye are certainly not the only women *ashiqs* who have brought innovations to the tradition, and there are of course male *ashiqs* as well. A question to be considered—are innovations harmful to the tradition, is it losing its character, or is it becoming a hybrid form of *ashiq*-pop? Certainly, some folklorists and musicologists in Azerbaijan are appalled, and feel that innovators are harming the genre. But the real test, I believe, is what is accepted and rejected by the *ashiq* community—which includes *ashiqs* themselves and their core audience base. And they have not rejected women innovators, who share the same stages as more traditional performers, and who receive praise for keeping the genre popular and attracting new and younger fans, and, most important, new and younger *ashiqs* to continue the tradition. The key is, perhaps, that they have not changed that which *ashiqs* themselves consider essential for the art—the *saz* and *soz* (the poetic word). "In *ashiq* music, there is *saz*, there is *soz*, there is art, and there are people. They should all be continued, they should all be expanded... I see young girls, learning saz, singing my songs, and I know I am on the right road" Zulfiyye told me, and most of the *ashiq* community agrees with her.

Bardic genres such as the *ashiq* are meant to carry narratives across space and time through the vehicle of music and poetic language. The *ashiq* genre has built in methods for preserving and transmitting information – musically, through an oral system of named frets and tunings that have kept the music stable over centuries, poetically through the need to memorize and transmit a cannon of poetry, and ritually through the framed beginning and ending of a performance. At the same time, the genre was never

meant to be static, but to remain as a living tradition, which would react to and express its own time.

Ashiqs are the voices of their communities—not just keeping history and tradition, but transforming the present by informing it with the power and beauty of legend. The *ashiq* is a mirror in which people see their individual stories of tragedy and hardship transformed into an ongoing narrative of heroism and hope. In this sense, the *ashiq* still very much the role and power of the shaman—who is called to mediate between spirit and flesh, between legend and life, between past present. It is a position of power and magic, still considered a calling, and a gift of God. In contemporary Azerbaijan, a number of women have stepped into this position, being not only the voice of but the inspiration, hope, and the transformative power of their community. Breaking away from some aspects of the tradition yet holding tightly to what they consider essential, it has been through their ability to seize on the innovative nature of the genre that they have been able to pull it successfully from the Soviet to the contemporary era. Representing the voices of rural, refugee, the dispossessed communities, women in the role of *ashiq* gain a voice of authority and a public platform. They represent the power of the powerless, and their ability to reach a wider audience is essential for this voice to be heard. By bringing this voice to a wider audience of urban dwellers, and youth, they work as a bridge to a new Azerbaijan which can incorporate the confusion and tragedy of a difficult past into a more hopeful present.

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