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The Swan Dance: A Kazakh Healing Ritual from the Syr-Darya Region

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BUDAPEST, HUNGARY

The present field report contains data collected during my month of fieldwork in south-central Kazakhstan in June 2013. Between 2011 and 2013 I visited Bolatbek Erdäwlet-uly (Fig. 1), a famous epic story-teller (*jrav*), in his home in the city of Kentau (36 km northeast of the town of Türkistan) several times, and I collected extracts from epic songs, such as *Barak Batır*, *Edige*, *Shora*, and *Orak-Mamay*, from him. I also conducted interviews on his practice of performing epic songs and how he became a story-teller. Consistent with my earlier research among the Kyrgyz story-tellers (*manasçı*) (Somfai 2013, 52–3) was the fact that he too was initiated by the spirits (*arwak*). As is often the case with story-tellers (Somfai 2003, 182) among the Turkic peoples of Central Asia and South Siberia, for example the Altai-Kizhi and Telengit story-tellers (*kayçı*) Alekseĭ Kalkin and Arzhan Kezerekov, Bolatbek was also a spirit mediator (*baksı*)¹ and a clairvoyant (*köripker*). During our conversations he revealed to me that he had two female disciples (*şäkirt*) in his native town, Kazaly,² close to the receding Aral Sea. So when I encountered him the third time in 2013, he decided that he would visit his native town to perform epic stories there for the local nomads, and I accompanied him. It took us almost a day to get there because of rough roads and crossing the Syr-Darya river. We passed by the famous Baykongyr (Russian Baikonur) Cosmodrome situated only 134 km from Kazaly. We visited a nomadic settlement (Fig. 2) in the so-called Aral Karakum desert (not to be confused with the Karakum desert in Turkmenistan).

¹ See Divaev 1899, 307–8.

² By the Syr-darya River, 643 km from the town of Türkistan.



Fig. 1. Bolatbek Erdäwlet-uly, a famous Kazakh epic singer and spirit mediator (*baksı*) performing from the epic *Edige Batır* in a traditional yurt accompanied by the two-stringed instrument (*dombıra*), in the nomad settlement in the Arak Karakum Desert near Kazaly, Southern Kazakhstan. Photo: Dávid Somfai Kara, 2013.

Local people, especially the older generation, were happy to listen to some traditional epic songs (*jr*). Bolatbek performs epic songs from the Nogay epic cycle (*Kırımning Kırık Batırı*, see Reichl 2007, 44) that suggests that the nomad clans of the Nogay Horde (1440–1634) participated in the formation of the Western Kazakh also known as the Lesser Horde (Kishi Jüz).



Fig. 2. The nomad settlement in the Aral Karakum desert near Kazaly where the spirit-invoking ritual (*zikir*) took place in a yurt. Photo: Dávid Somfai Kara, 2013.

Spirit Invoking Ritual

Bolatbek had been performing the epic songs for two days, when the local people requested him to organize a spirit-invoking ritual (*zikir*) for them. Thus, Bolatbek called for his two female disciples, Liza and Shynar, who arrived the next morning. They also brought their sacred objects with them: whips (*kamsı*) and shovels (*kalak*). First, everybody had to leave the yurt where the ceremony would take place after sunset. Only Bolatbek and his two disciples entered the yurt with their sacred objects. Bolatbek said a Muslim prayer (*duga*) and blessed (*bata*) them and their paraphernalia (Fig. 3).

In Sufism, people believe that one can achieve an altered state of consciousness by repeating the name of God (Allah). This is called *ḍikr* in Arabic, or *zikir* in its Kazakh form. In Sufism, it is also believed that God chose certain people as his close friends (Ar. *aulyā'*, see Mélikoff 1987)³ and after their death their spirits (Ar. *arwāḥ*) would act as mediators between God and the people (Somfai 2013, 48). Of course, not everyone can communicate with the spirits. The spirits choose and initiate some people to become spirit-mediators, called *baksı* and *balger* in Kazakh. The spirit-mediators connect with the spirits during the *zikir* ritual to ask them to mediate requests and questions to God.

³ The most famous of these Sufi saints were Arslan-Báb and Khoja Ahmad Yasawi from the twelfth century.



Fig. 3. Bolatbek gives blessing (*bata*) to his disciples, Liza (in the picture) with the magic shovel in her hand. The other disciple, Shynar is in the yurt.
Photo: Dávid Somfai Kara, 2013.



Fig. 4. The two spirit mediators (*bakst*) heat up their magic shovels by the fire outside the yurt. Photo: Dávid Somfai Kara, 2013.

After Bolatbek blessed the two disciples, they went outside and lit a fire close to the yurt in the desert. Then they started to heat up their shovels for the ritual (Fig. 4). Meanwhile people sat down in the yurt in a circle by the wall opposite the door. The disciples then entered the house and Liza knelt down in front of the participants. They said a short prayer before the ritual. After that Liza suddenly stood up and started to run around the center of the house while performing her special ritual dance (*biy*). The Kazakh and Kyrgyz, nomadic peoples of northern Central Asia, do not traditionally dance because they consider dance a sacred activity. Sedentary peoples of Central Asia, such as the Sarts, Uzbeks, Uyghurs, and Tajiks, do have profane dances, called by various distinct names and performed during feasts (*toy*) and other festivals (*bayram*).

Here Liza was imitating the movement of a swan (*akkuw*), lifting her arms up and down like two wings and running and spinning around (Pl. 5). Meanwhile she also performed the *zikir* by chanting *ya alla* (Oh, Allah), but there was no invocatory song. Shynar left the yurt and returned with Liza's shovel, that had been heated up in the fire outside. Then she handed it to Liza, who ran around in the house and licked the hot shovel several times (Pl. 6 *a*). Although the hot shovel did not burn her tongue, she heaved a little. Still running around, she touched the palms and the backs of the patients with the shovel, which was still very hot. All these things are performed to frighten the evil spirits away from the patients' bodies. The patients were citing *bismillah* (in the name of Allah) during the healing. She made a sick old woman sit in the middle of the yurt. While dancing around her she blew repeatedly towards her and then massaged her shoulders as part of the healing.

Healing with Hot Objects

Healing with hot objects is quite common in Central Asia and it sometimes involves the spitting of water (*uřik*), but Liza did not use water and she did not spit either (Basilov 1992, 155). She repeated the dancing and licking of the hot shovel two more times and during the dance she sometimes stopped in a strange position, lifting one of her arms over her head and reaching out with the other (Pl. 6 *b*). She turned towards one of the patients with her extended arm and started to diagnose the



Fig. 5. Liza goes around the patients and strikes their palms with the hot shovel to heal them of the evil spirits causing illness and bad luck. Photo: Dávid Somfai Kara, 2013.

patient's diseases and earlier traumas. She also ran around with the hot shovel, chasing the evil spirits out of the patients' bodies, and struck their palms and backs (Fig. 5). Liza was now in a state of trance and sweating heavily. She danced again but then suddenly stopped and knelt down to say another prayer to conclude her *zikir*.

Chasing away the Demons

In Central Asia it is widely believed that all kinds of diseases are caused by evil spirits (*jin*) controlled by Shaytan (Satan). The *baksı* in the state of trance are able, assisted by the spirits and the power of God (*Allanın kudireti*), to see these spirits and can chase them away with hot objects, spitting water and striking them with whips. Demonstrating the strength of the *baksı* also helps to impress and frighten the evil spirits. Liza licked the hot shovel, while Zamanbek, a *baksı* in Sayram, swallowed a knife and lifted a heavy millstone to achieve a similar effect (Somfai and Torma 2005, 184). At the end, Liza knelt down again

and performed another prayer with the patients. Afterwards Shynar started her own ritual while Liza assisted her by taking the heated shovel into the yurt. Shynar performed a similar kind of *zikir*, but she was only running around inside the house with her whip (*kamşı*). She symbolically hit the patients with her magic whip to chase away the spirits (Pl. 7 a). Then she also grabbed her hot shovel, decorated with little rattles (Pl. 7 b), and continued to run around in the yurt. She performed the *ušík* ritual, but not by licking the shovel: she simply spat on the shovel and blew on the patients while striking their palms with the hot implement.

A Ritual Dance and its Symbolism

In 2004 I also witnessed the spirit-invoking ritual (*oyun*) of a Kyrgyz *bakşı*, Abdylkadyr, when he performed a special dance (*talma biy*) around this magic flag (*tuu*) in the middle of the yurt to achieve an altered state of consciousness (Somfai, Hoppál and Sipos 2007, 56–8). He imitated the movement of a male camel (*buura*). In our case, Liza was imitating a swan, dancing around the center of the yurt. But what is the symbolism behind these animals? Abdylkadyr explained that his main helping spirit from the valley of Jay Ata appeared in the form of a camel that he mentioned in his invocation song but the spirit that initiated him appeared in the form of a ram. I have recorded rituals where one of the helping spirits of the Kazakh *baksı* Batyrkan (Altay Mountains, Mongolia) was a camel (Somfai, Kunkovács and Sipos 2006, 123). Liza also said that her helping spirit was a *peri* that appeared, turning into a swan. The *peri* is a fairy-like spirit that can turn into an animal (Diváev 1899, 310–11).

Among the Bugu, a Kyrgyz clan of the Ysyk-köl lake, there is a legend that the wife of their ancestor, Alseyit, was a *peri* who sometimes turned into a deer (*bugu*), whence she is called Bugu Ene (Deer Mother). From folklore materials we know that the leading clan of the Nogay Horde was the Manghyt, the wife of whose ancestor Angshybay was a *peri* who could turn into a swan (Somfai 2010, 123–4). Bolatbek also performs the story of Angshybay and his marriage to the swan girl. Edige of the Manghyt clan, who founded the Nogay Horde (1396–1634), claimed to be the descendant of Angshybay and the swan girl (DeWeese 1994, 430–2; Reichl 2007, 39–45).

From historical sources (e.g. *Tadkirat al-Bughra*; see Shaw 1875, Appendix 3–5), the leading clan of the Karluk Turks can be determined as being the Bughra (male camel). Satuq (934–55) was the first Turkic leader to convert to Islam, and he founded the Qarakhanid state (934–1212) in Central Asia. Before the Karluk Turks converted to Islam their leading clan Bughra probably worshiped the male camel and had some totemic beliefs as well. The Satuq Bughra khan was buried in the Jay Ata valley near Kashghar and Artush. So the question arises, whether there is a link between Satuq Bughra khan, the spirit of the male camel, and the Kyrgyz *bakši* invoking the spirit of this animal. If there is a link, we can also assume that it is no accident that the Kazakh of the Lesser Horde invoked the spirit of a swan lady, venerated as the wife of the Manghyt forefather. During my fieldwork I also recorded how members of the Kyrgyz Bugu clan invoke the spirit of Bugu Ene (Deer Mother) during their pilgrimage to the sacred valley of Manjyly-Ata by the Ysyk-köl (Somfai 2008, 189). We can presume that invoking these animal spirits during the Sufi *dikr* rituals is a pre-Islamic element within a Muslim custom.

Sufi Traditions and Fundamentalist Islam

As we have seen, although Bolatbek's *zikir* is a popular version of the Sufi ritual (*dikr*), Islamic fundamentalism is now attacking both Sufism and its popular form throughout Central Asia. The popular form of Sufism has survived the seventy years communist ideology, although during the Soviet period people were prosecuted, but Soviet ethnography tried to prove that these traditions were pre-Islamic, so-called "shamanic practices in Muslim disguise" (Baialieva 1972, 3–10; Basilov 1992, 10). Despite some pre-Islamic elements, such as the appearance of healing spirits (*peri*) in the form of animals, popular Islam and its rituals (e.g. *zikir* and *jaar*)⁴ are of Sufi origin and they have a thousand-year tradition in Central Asia (Kunkovác and Somfai Kara 2004; 162; Somfai Kara and Torma 2005, 181–3). In popular Islam people believe that the spirits of Sufi and other saints can mediate between them and

⁴ These are the Kazakh and Kyrgyz pronunciations of the Arabic words *dikr* and *jaar* (short form of *dikr bi-l-jabr* 'loud *dikr*').

Allah. So people pray to these spirits and do pilgrimage (*ziyarat*) to their tombs (*mazār*). Fundamentalist Islam condemns these practices, claiming that there are no spirits and saints and only God should be respected and worshiped. They even cite Soviet scholars as the proof of these customs being pre-Islamic or shamanic (Somfai Kara 2016, 478–9). I was once witness to a big quarrel between Bolatbek and his son, who rejects the belief in spirits; his father accused him of being a Wahhābi follower. The spread of Islamic fundamentalism has already affected the lives of his disciples, Liza and Shynar, who are being prosecuted on the basis of the civil code of Kazakhstan. Fundamentalists are bribing the prosecutor's office to charge them with illegal healing, saying they cure people without proper medical qualification, which is against the law. So Liza and Shynar asked me if I could get some kind of international certificate to prove that they are qualified practitioners and not charlatans. Nowadays they are afraid to organize rituals openly, so Liza had given up practicing almost entirely. They were really thankful to us that with Bolatbek we organized a ritual for them in the nomadic settlement, under the guise of an epic story-performing night.

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Book Reviews

ANA MARIELLA BACIGALUPO. *Thunder Shaman: Making History with Mapuche Spirits in Chile and Patagonia*. Austin: University of Texas Press. 2016. ISBN: 9781477308981 (paperback). 288 pages.

Ana Mariella Bacigalupo describes her book as a hybrid that seeks "to understand rural Mapuche notions of time, history, continuity, change, and agency through a shamanic lens" (p. 11). The author does this through the life history of Francisca Kolipi Kurin, a Mapuche *machi* (shaman), who lived in the community of Millali in the Quepe area of Araucanía in southern Chile. Francisca was a "thunder shaman," initiated by the forces of the world at moments of crisis. Such a moment was the devastating earthquake of 1960, during which the force of thunder *machi* was unleashed. Francisca was struck by lightning and possessed by the spirit of Rosa Kurin a thunder *machi* who had lived in Millali in the nineteenth century. Rosa Kurin, a prestigious shaman who was part Mapuche and part German embodying both Mapuche and German powers in her practice, incorporated colonizers into Mapuche history and challenged their notion of civilization. Both women were important in challenging colonizers' notions of civilization and obliterating that history. Thunder *machi* do not go through the typical initiation or shamanic calling we are used to from other areas. Since they are initiated directly by a primordial force that cannot be controlled by humans their communities are ambivalent towards them. Francisca's ambivalence is evident in the fact that during her life she was suspected of sorcery by members of her community. While *machi* have a close relationship to horses, animals associated with masculinity, warfare, and engagement with outsiders, their spirits are inherited through the female line. *Machi* also embody cogendered identities as well as morally ambiguous persons.

The sources of the material presented in the book besides the author's observations and archival material are the community's collective memory after Francisca's death, their reactions to archival documents about



5 Liza performs the swan dance (*akkuw biyi*) in the yurt during her spirit-invoking ritual by running around and flapping her hands like wings. Photo: Dávid Somfai Kara, 2013.



6 a Liza takes the hot shovel into her hands and then starts to lick it to frighten the evil spirits (*jin*) away from the sick people. Photo: Dávid Somfai Kara, 2013.



6 b Liza holds her arm in a strange position as she diagnoses one of the patients, at whom her arm is pointing. Her arms act like a spiritual antenna, transmitting information between the patients and the spirits. Photo: Dávid Somfai Kara, 2013.



7 a Shynar, the other *bakşı*, also performs her spirit-invoking ritual by running around with a whip. She sometimes symbolically strikes the patients to chase away the *jin*-spirits. Photo: Dávid Somfai Kara, 2013.



7 b Shynar chants a prayer and holds her magic shovel in front of her. Although her shovel was also hot, she never licked it as Liza did during the ritual. Photo: Dávid Somfai Kara, 2013.