Female Teachers: a New Concept of Traditional Master-Apprentice Knowledge Transmission in Central Asian Music (Ferghana Valley Case)

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Abstract

Female music-making in Middle East and Central Asia remains a little known phenomenon. Fergana Valley is an area particularly famous for its unique geographic location and exceptional cultural heritage and was chosen for being the birthplace of a host of the biggest stars in Uzbek music. The organization of land and the division of households in the area are very unique and are definitely worth being examined using gender study approach. Women have always played a critical role in maintaining the most precious music traditions throughout the Soviet period. This article combines both anthropological and ethnographic approaches, in order to explain the significance of the role of local women in preservation of traditional, popular and religious genres of musical performance.

Insegnanti donne: una nuova visione della trasmissione tradizionale della conoscenza maestro-allievo nella musica dell’Asia Centrale (il caso della Valle di Fergana). Le pratiche musicali femminili in Asia medio-orientale e centrale sono un fenomeno poco conosciuto. La Valle di Fergana è un’area particolarmente famosa per la posizione geografica unica e per l’eccezionale patrimonio culturale ed è stata scelta per essere il luogo di nascita di una moltitudine di grandi star della musica uzbeka. L’organizzazione del territorio e la distribuzione delle abitazioni nell’area sono del tutto uniche e assolutamente meritevoli di essere esaminate con l’approccio degli studi di genere. Le donne hanno avuto un ruolo centrale nel mantenere le preziose tradizioni musicali durante tutto il periodo sovietico. Il saggio combina approccio antropologico ed etnografico al fine di spiegare il ruolo delle donne del posto nel preservare i generi tradizionali, popolari e religiosi di esecuzione musicale.
In his novel *The Day Lasts More than a Hundred Years*, written during the time of Perestroika, the Kyrgyz writer Chingiz Aitmatov refers to a legend about a tribe who left their prisoners lying in the sun with a cap of raw camel hide stretched over their heads. As the camel hide dried, it compressed the prisoners’ skulls and so destroyed their memory and mind. The prisoners were then known as *mankurts*. In Aitmatov’s words, «A mankurt did not know where he was from. He did not know his name, did not remember his childhood, his father and his mother – to put it more simply, a mankurt did not realize that he was a human being» (Aitmatov 1981: 106-107). For centuries *mankurt* has been a frightening concept of misfortune for Central Asian people. And after years of cultures and ethnicities mixing, after the heavy hand of the Soviet Union and now rampant capitalism, it is all too easy to forget who you are. So, in Chingiz Aitmatov’s novel, who finally tried to rescue one of the characters? It was a mother, the woman Naiman-on, who tried to remind her *mankurt* son who he really was. The same thing happens in real life in Central Asia: a mother, a woman, very often helps culture to survive. My paper is about the role of female teachers in culture, art and music in Uzbekistan.

1.1. Ferghana Valley: a unique geographical and cultural phenomenon

One such area, unique in the world, is the oasis of Ferghana Valley. By 100 BC the valley was thoroughly settled, protected and productive, connected by the great Silk Road, and rapidly changing with the trade of different goods, ideas, people, religions, cultures and conquerors. Situated in the East of Uzbekistan on a major arm of the Silk Road in Central Asia, with its mythic and extensive ancient cities of Andijan and Margelan the Valley was until recently hidden from the world by the Soviets. Densely populated towns and cities co-existing with natural assets and rhythms keep the valley lush for all residents and visitors. It is important to remember that for centuries women in Muslim Central Asia, in Uzbekistan, and particularly in Ferghana Valley, were largely segregated from men, keeping within secluded parts of the home. Islamic law and local interpretations of Islam meant that many classes of women were traditionally subordinated to male power and authority, although female members of royal and aristocratic families were actively involved in literature and the arts, including performing arts.

According to the world famous interior designer and urban planning expert Gerry Forseth, Ferghana Valley is a very rare and peculiar place. The way how houses planed there, land used, the irrigation system installed, roadway and sidewalks paved, is witnessing the accurate well developed preservation of all natural resources evolving the area into exceptionally beautiful human settlement.
1.2. Land and house divisions in Ferghana Valley

**FIGURE 1.** Map of Ferghana Valley, Uzbekistan.

**FIGURE 2.** View on Ferghana Valley, Uzbekistan ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fergana_Valley](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fergana_Valley)).
Gerry Forseth (2009: 25) argues that every single house building, land organization and irrigation system arrangements in Ferghana Valley are real achievements in contemporary level of gardening design and urban construction. Their main characteristics are:

1) tree-shaded public roadway and sidewalks;
2) tree-shaded irrigation ditch with manual water-wheel pumps;
3) high protective courtyard walls;
4) private entrance archway and gate etc.

All those features have been reflected in Ferghana Valley’s cultural heritage.

1.3. “Foreground” and “background” divisions in Ferghana Valley’s society

There is a “foreground” and a “background” in Uzbek society expressed by a special division. Every community meeting there historically was held in separate parts of the household for males and females. The female area, the *ichkari*, was situated in a corner
of the courtyard, away from the entrance. There numerous female talents in music and dance were displayed unnoticed in regular female gatherings. The tradition of private gatherings goes back to court times when female participants only were seated in circles inside of palaces and pavilions.

The traditional Muslim household in Uzbekistan is divided into two separate parts: tashqari, the outer, male part and ichkari, the inner, female one. Historically, a woman’s life in a Muslim family was spent in this separate part of the house. Ichkari is off-limits to strangers, with entry strictly limited to family members, relatives, and children. Males from outside the family are never allowed to enter the ichkari. It is a separate world with its own rules, traditions, and life. This isolation of the female part of the household has played a crucial role in preserving and maintaining religious traditions, which have been mostly lost in the more exposed male part of the society. During my fieldwork I have met women who have never ventured beyond their ichkari, who have spent all their lives behind the high clay walls, bringing up their children. Usually, the ichkari of one household are interconnected with those of the neighbors, and so the female part of the society lives a hidden life, moving from one house to the whole village.

This spatial phenomenon reflects an ancient order of gender segregation. Scholars have associated it with the old arrangement in palaces, where the harems were always situated at the back of the buildings, hidden from strangers and guests. The harems of the Akhemenid rulers’ palaces (seventh to thirteenth centuries) provided the template for the later establishment of separate male and female quarters within Islamic palaces. The female area was where many women developed their performance and poetic skills.

This same structural division survives today in Uzbek and Tajik households, even through the times of different rulers and ideologies. Every household in Uzbekistan, particularly in rural areas, still follows the tashkari/ichkari division, with the ichkari remaining as an inner sanctum that is at the very heart of the house (Fig. 4).

Ichkari was off-limits to strangers. Entry was strictly confined to the family members only, as well as relatives and children. In this fashion, women lived in an enclosed environment, subject to few outside influences.

Being “locked” within the area, politically and socially cut off from the rest of the world, in Ferghana Valley new forms of the original teacher-apprentice relationship emerged within closed female communities. Many forms of music and entertainment were performed there but were unavailable to the observations and investigations of outsiders. So there were “female” music making forms and genres, which were transmitted from older generations to the younger. This is a little-known subject, but “Ignorance is not bliss” as they claim: we need to develop this study to open one of the amazing pages of human history (Sultanova 2016: 421-435).
2. Music and musicians in Ferghana Valley

In fact today one should acknowledge that Ferghana Valley was and is the native place of origin for the biggest Uzbek music stars: all contemporary female music stars (Munojat Yulchieva, Yulduz Usmanova, Sevara Nazarhan) originate from Ferghana Valley, whatever their main genre of performance, whether pop or classical music. All present male superstars (wedding icon, the famous singer Sherali Djuraev, ghijak – round-bodied spike fiddle – performer-star Abduhashim Ismailov and others) are also from Ferghana Valley. During the Soviet time political authorities as not to overcome the popularity of the pompous and more famous names of Samarqand and Bukhara overlooked this fact.

Kept inside for most of their lifetime, women developed their routines of art, culture and entertainment, which have been running for centuries. So, women built their world with their local customs and habits in everyday life, in gathering together for embroidering sessions, or to compose poetry and music. Certainly some kind of similar situation developed in the circles of aristocracy in the medieval Middle East, with a fashion for poetry creation in, for example, Iran (Szuppe 1994, 2003). However, that Persian female poetry was not widely incorporated into all music genres to emerge in the main repertoire of maqam genres, as happened in Uzbek-Tajik shashmaqam.
2.1. Female dutar performers
The chronicles of Uzbek history were written by men, and in musical treatises many men have been identified as great masters of dutar (long necked plucked lute), but the role of women in dutar as well as other music has been largely unrecorded. Nevertheless, drawing on a variety of sources, including literature, paintings, and photographs, we can trace evidence of women’s historical involvement with the dutar.

The medieval miniaturist-artist Kamāl ud-Dīn Behzād (1450-1535) showing musical entertainments inside female parts of palaces depicted types of long-necked lute similar to the dutar in all book miniature paintings of that time. The evidence suggests that during that period women played various instruments, including long-necked lutes, in indoor court music. It is likely that they were both aristocratic women and professional entertainers.

The dutar remained especially prominent in Ferghana’s female professional traditions. A series of illustrated postcards, part of the private archives of the Uzbek historian Boris Golender, depicts life and folk music practice in the late 19th and early 20th century. One of the photographs, called “Female Dutar players in Kokand 19th century” brings to our attention six young girls with musical instruments in their hands (Fig. 5). All
the girls are traditionally dressed in the local casual silk padded gowns (nimcha) and cotton dresses (kuinak). They are sitting comfortably, smiling and relaxed on benches, the Uzbek supa found in courtyards outside the house, posing for the photographer with instruments on their knees: two hold dutars and one a tanbur (long-necked plucked fretted lute). By the way they are sitting and holding the instruments one can surmise that they are gathering together for possible entertainment.

Certainly seeing such documents depicting young female performers (there are many similar examples) our question must be, “Who were their teachers? Who taught those girls to play instruments?” One could hardly suggest that in Muslim Central Asia men would train girls. It is clear that these girls would not have been allowed to have male teachers and so it is obvious that female teachers trained them.

For some time female actresses played the dutar on stage in Andijan (Ferghana Valley’s biggest city) at the Theatre of Musical Drama, which was established in 1920. By 1997 the theatre had become moribund, but Kimsanhon Ahmedova, still maintains her skill as a dutar player. During my research on female dutar players in the interview in 1996 she told me that all actresses were required to be dutar players. The dramas were heavily interspersed with musical interludes, and there were purely musical sections outside the dramas, so the actresses sang and played the dutar on stage (Sultanova 2011).
A positive outcome of it for women was the fact that female professional musicians were encouraged to take up the work of contemporary women poets. In Ferghana several women musicians – Lutfihonim Sarymsakova, Mehro Abdullaeva and Bashorat Hojaeva – sang the poetry of Mukimy, accompanying themselves on their dutars. Another musician, Mavluda Agzamova, sang pieces by the female poets Toshmapulat and Furkat. But at the same time Mavluda Agzamova was a singer who maintained the Sufi tradition of playing dutar and singing Sufi songs throughout the whole Soviet period. Archives of the Uzbek State Radio house her recordings of Sufi songs like Topmadim (“Couldn’t find”), Munojot (“Ascend to God”), and many others. Today the most celebrated female dutar performer in Uzbekistan is Malika Ziyayeva (b. 1955), who is originally from the Ferghana city. She became a famous performer, teacher and innovator of dutar traditions in her own right. Malika Ziyayeva has made many recordings as a soloist, both with the State Radio of Uzbekistan and with the Moscow Recording Company, Melodia, who awarded her a Golden Recording Disk (Sultanova 1998).

2.2. Women-singers Maqamchi
The first famous Uzbek maqam performer among women was Berta Davydova (1927-2008). Born to the family of a rich Bukharian Jewish man in Margelan, in Ferghana Valley, from her early childhood Berta Davydova loved to sing. As a seventeen-year-old girl, she started to sing maqam covering a large repertoire of all parts of the cycle. Later
she went to Tajikistan to learn more ancient parts of the medieval *shashmaqam* cycle such as Nasry Bayet, Taronai Bayet, Talkinnin Baayet, etc. from Shahnozar Sohibov (People’s Artist of Uzbekistan) and Zirkiev, himself a *maqam* singer from the Bukharo school. Apart from that Berta Davydova sang the poetry of Navoi, Zeboniso, and Uvaisi, developing new *shashmaqam* versions. In her teaching experience she shared her *maqam* performance skills with young performers Nasiba Sattarova and Maryam Sattarova (who have themselves become already People’s Artist of Uzbekistan) and many others (Sultanova 2011).
Today there is no single fan of Uzbek music at home or abroad who does not know the name of outstanding woman singer Munojat Yulchieva. Even her name ‘Munojat’ means “Ascent to God”, which represents the true meaning of Sufism. Born in Ferghana Valley in tiny village Sherman Bulak she is indeed the brightest star amongst performers of classical Uzbek music at the end of the twentieth century. She was awarded the names “Honoured Artist of Uzbekistan” (1991), and “People’s Artist of Uzbekistan” (1994) and decorated with the highest state order “ Respect and Order of the People” (1998). Since 1998 Munojat Yulchieva is teaching in the Tashkent state Conservatory to sing the Uzbek classical music passing her skills to younger students (Sultanova 1997).

2.3. Religious singers Otin-Oys
Now let’s turn our attention to another group of female teachers represented by religiously educated women, performers of spiritual chanting, Otin-Oys.

In remote parts of Uzbekistan one can meet women who have never been beyond
their female part of the house *ichkari*, who have spent all their lives behind the high clay walls, bringing up their children. Usually, *ichkaris* of one household are inter-connected with those of the neighbours, and so the female part of the society lives a hidden life, spreading from one house through the whole village.

The life of these women was a subject to few outside influences. One of the best examples of that phenomenon is the existence of ladies called *Otin-Oys*.

Who then are the *Otin-Oys* in Uzbekistan? Uneducated women in the common sense, nevertheless from the point of view of social life they are the upholders of a spiritual and religious knowledge which is accessible only to chosen people, the descendants of a spiritual social stratum. Suppressed by the policy of the communists, they remained underground for almost seventy years. Rejected by the authorities, this group of teachers was nevertheless held in great esteem by the local population. Their main features are listed below:

1. *Otin-Oys* are very often widows or mothers of disabled children;
2. *Otin-Oys* are female communities supporters;
3. *Otin-Oys* are leading figures in performing all rites of passages (birthdays, weddings, funerals and mourning);
4. *Otin-Oys* are the main figures at the time of Islamic holidays;
5. In *Otin-Oys’* rituals there are features of different religions (Zoroastrianism, Tengrianism, Manichaeism);
6. Different coloured clothes are worn for different *Otin-Oys’* rituals though the white shawl to cover hair is dominating.

Certainly the question which now arises is: what occasions do *Otin-Oys* mark with their chanting? In fact every stage in life is supposed to be signified by the *Otin-Oys’* performance, from the birth of a child, the beginning or end of every stage of child-rearing (the first teeth appearing, first haircut, first sitting/walking, beginning of nursery or school attendance); the ritual of initiation for boys (*Sunnat toy*); meeting classmates after graduating; applying for, obtaining or leaving a job; betrothal, wedding, divorce; hospitalisation/discharge from hospital; death and mourning rituals; and days of remembrance or commemoration. So, one can see that *Otin-Oys* appear in nearly every single situation in human life, though their female religious chanting has never been introduced to the academic reader (Fathi 1997, 1998, 2004).

The necessity to study the phenomenon of the *Otin-Oys* is these days increasing. It is not infrequently that young Uzbek women after their marriage as soon as they begin experience serious life difficulties start seeking support from the Almighty, from God, hence *Otin Oys’* religious activity becomes for them highly desirable. They invite *Otin-Oys* to their families, they try to be like them, studying their repertoire and style of performance.

Recently, while visiting Denau town in the south-eastern part of Uzbekistan, I was introduced to the local icon, *Otin Oy* Mukkaram Halilova.
She had a stunningly beautiful appearance and looked so young that at first I doubted whether she had ever had any appropriate training at all. However, it turned out she did and her training had been traditional and intensive. Her professional skills she learned from a famous local Otin-Oy. Her pure voice and her ability to perform rituals in a highly professional manner were very impressive. Having four children, a husband and a number of family duties kept her very busy. The only excuse for her to go out was the obligations of the Otin-Oy. She helped people and people loved her in response. The house where I was invited to observe her rituals was one of the richest in Denau: spacious rooms, traditionally decorated with local ornaments, massive lavish furniture, exclusive carpets on the floor, a refined set of cups and dishes, delicious food – all necessary attributes of wealthy people. Their aim of setting rituals for that family with this popular Otin-Oy was to mark the husband’s recent success in promotion (he had become the head of the local train station). Otin-Oy Mukkaram was present surrounded by a circle of friends and neighbours. She performed for a couple of hours, presenting a large range of suras and ghazals. She performed according to her own preference and choice with rare taste and confidence. Repetitions of rhythmical patterns, dynamic waves, and clear tone development were typical features of her style. Her unique voice, entire devotion and bright personality made this meeting with Otin-Oy Mukkaram Halilova unforgettable. Indeed there are no limits to the appearance of new, distinguished Otin-Oys in Uzbekistan.

Today the situation with official religious education in Uzbekistan has changed. Whereas during Soviet times female students were not allowed to enter madrasah, these days they are welcomed. In 2006 I visited Jubari Kalon, the only madrasah for girls’ Islamic study in Bukhara. The madrasah was an impressive building with a number of rooms where girls receive a high standard of education, not only in reading the Qu’ran but also in sewing and computer skills. This is a new trend in the traditional form of religious education. Most of these girls obtained a scholarship to study a convenient subject. Girls there are obedient and friendly. They are lucky to have a chance to get a diploma in a prestigious academy. Most of them do not plan to take up Qu’ran reading as a future profession but just to enjoy years of study before getting married later. None of those girls knew the Otin-Oys’ repertoire based on Nats (praises to the Prophet Muhammad), Mavluds (celebrations of the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad), Marhabo (a religious genre of welcoming believer into Paradise), Munijats (prayers to God for the sake of salvation) etc. However these first steps in official policy made towards Muslim education in Uzbekistan seem to be very successful.

These days when you ask Otin-Oys about Tasawwuf (Sufism), some are very articulate and elaborate on it, others can hardly even understand this word. However, modern Otin-Oys, do not belong to any particular tariqat (Sufi Way), but to a mixture of various Sufi branches. Probably there is a simple explanation for this: being the wives of Ishåns...
(a descendant of the Prophet) of different tariqats (Sufi orders), no particular way became
dominant, but they just kept the main principle of devotion to God.

**Video example 1:** Otin-Oy Malika Asqarova (b.1955) is performing an excerpt from
the Sufi poems collection “Diwan-i-Hikmat” by Hoja Ahmad Yasawwi (d.1166). Re-

Sufi lament “Endi adashdim do’stlar”. Lyrics in Uzbek.

Endi adashdim do’stlar, kelgan yo’limdan.
Endi adashdim do’stlar, kelgan yo’limdan.
Turgan davlatlarim ketdi qolimdan
Ajraldim do’stlar yol’qiz gulimdan
Hechkim qutilmas faryod o’limdan,
Hechkim qutilmas do’stlar jallod olimdan

Dunyoni harqiz payoni yo’qdur
Ishqisiz kishilarimni imoni yo’qdur
Imonli qullar olganli yo’qdur
Hechkim qutilmas ushbu o’limdan
Hechkim qutilmas do’stlar faryod olimdan.

Bir kun tiriklik aylar g’animat
Bir kun tiriklik aylar g’animat
Dunyo sarosar andoq mehnat
Qo’yqim hargiz Odam-atoni,
Barcha payg’ambarlar shoh-gadoni
Hechkim qutilmas ushbu o’limdan
Hechkim qutilmas dod faryod olimdan.

Now I have lost my way, oh friends, / Now I have lost my way, my friends. / All my
wealth and riches have slipped through my fingers, / I have parted, my friends, with the
one and only flower – my Rose, / No one can save themselves from their death. / No one,
my friends, can save themselves from their death. // This world has no borders, / No faith
in passionless people. / Believers do not perish, / No one can save themselves from their
death. / No one, my friends, can save themselves from their death. // Realize that every
day of your life is fleeting, // Because in the world there is so much suffering, // Death has
not spared even Adam, // Not all prophets, kings and paupers. // No one can save them-
selves from their death. // No one can save themselves from their death.

Women played a crucial role in maintaining the Sufi tradition and particularly its
artistic side throughout the Soviet period. The Bolsheviks were determined to create an
atheistic world, therefore they saw Islam as a most reactionary ideology and Muslims
were pursued under various slogans, such as fighting Basmachis and later as Enemies
of the People. As a result, many Mullas, Ishans, Sufis and any religiously learned people
were either killed or sent to the camps of the Gulag. Some managed to flee the country.
Women were less exposed and vulnerable towards this Bolshevisation, and so they kept the religious traditions of their families, passing the sacred knowledge to their children. It was a kind of “reflected” Islam, “reflected” Sufism, and music played a very important role in maintaining the religious rituals and traditions.

3. Conclusion

So there are female musicians and female religious performers in Uzbek and Central Asian cultures. But, one can ask, what has this to do with the master-apprentice relationship within female circles? Otin-Oy is one of the main form of such relationship, which rescued the whole layer of spiritual chanting and the school of religious knowledge transfer in which music recitation is the basic form of performance. The style is taught, and is carefully transmitted from the older generation to the younger.

Teaching, i.e. knowledge transmission is the most important issue in safeguarding the process of cultural heritage. Today at a time of globalisation and therefore the loss of national identity the practice of oral transmission is left without support. The lack of knowledge of the female role in cultural development is still a burning issue. We scholars need to combine our efforts to observe this picture of female creativity in the arts before it has disappeared. To secure this process in the future we need to focus on it, investigating this phenomenon from different aspects in various parts in the world, including Central Asia and its oasis, the Ferghana Valley.
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