

On the Ruins of Empire: Central Asian Migrants' music in 21st Century Russian Metropolises

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Abstract

After the collapse of the USSR, the image of Russian metropolises has greatly changed due to the large migrant labour workforce coming from Central Asia and the Caucuses, who brought Islam to Moscow and St Petersburg. Pop culture has fused and manifested itself through new bands and groups, whose sound is widely spread through Central Asian/Caucasian cafés and restaurants. The article is developing the new approaches to the influence of the new economic and political issues of migrant labour in contemporary Russian entertaining style. Overall it will bring to picture of non-Russian face in contemporary Russian culture.

***Sulle rovine di un impero: la musica dei migranti dall'Asia Centrale nelle metropoli russe del XXI secolo.** Dopo il collasso dell'URSS, l'immagine delle metropoli russe è fortemente mutata in seguito all'arrivo di una grande quantità di forza lavoro immigrata dall'Asia Centrale e dal Caucaso, che ha portato l'Islam a Mosca e a San Pietroburgo. La cultura pop si è fusa e si è manifestata attraverso nuove band e gruppi il cui sound si è largamente diffuso attraverso i caffè e i ristoranti dell'Asia Centrale e del Caucaso. L'articolo sviluppa un nuovo approccio all'influenza esercitata dalla nuova realtà economica e politica dei lavoratori migranti sullo stile di intrattenimento russo contemporaneo. Nel suo insieme, intende portare alla luce il lato non-russo della cultura russa contemporanea.*

1. Introduction: Empires and migration

World history brings to our attention numerous examples of mass migrations which immediately followed the fall of empires. Historical formation of new diaspora as a rule

assumes the presence of various forms of cultural exchange, exhibiting differing value systems and differing ways of social organisation. Diasporas have always contributed in profound ways towards the economy, politics and culture both of their home and their resident countries. Presently this typical process of decolonisation is taking place among a number of nations and ethnic groups of the former USSR.

It is widely known that colonisation is a global phenomenon. Many large European and non European countries in 19-20th centuries went through such experience expanding their lands territories, conquering and subjugating lands and peoples, considering them backward and incapable of independent development, in need of care and a civilising mission. Russia's ruling regime was historically represented in the conquests of Central Asia and other areas (Abashin 2019: 74-75). According to the recent encounters «[...] studies that do accept the Russo-Soviet Empire's status as colonial examine how Russia has discursively shaped its "Orient", in particular, the nations in the Caucasus and Central Asia, [...] considering the Soviet colonialism in the Caucasus and Central Asia as a variant model of Western colonialism» (Koplatadze 2019: 469; see also Kujundzic 2000: 892). Scholars argue that the Russian state has been and remains an instrument of colonisation: it colonised the country on behalf of the global capitalist core while itself being integrated into European international society (Morozov 2015: 3).

However when in 1991 the USSR with 293,047,571 population, and 55 nationalities and ethnic groups, had collapsed it created a huge migration movement towards Russian metropolises.¹ Since the Soviet Union disappearance from the world's map, it brought a number of political and economic consequences opening migration flow with a massive number of immigrants from former Soviet republics (Denisenko, Light, and Strozza 2020)

Although migrations had a place in the history of the USSR from the very beginning of the country's establishment (Rahmonova-Schwarz 2010), its massive flow after the dissolution of the Soviet Union has grown profoundly (Heleniak 2004). When former republics's citizens moved to Russia from their homelands and particularly from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Southern outposts of Russian Federations, it has received the term of "The great migration" (De Tinguy 2004).

Nowadays immigration is seen as one of the key challenges of our planet. In the USA, for example, immigration represents the main source of population growth and cultural changes throughout the history of the country.² Over the years, the economic, social and political aspects of immigration have given rise to many debates and discussions, however following the liberalisation of immigration policy in 1965, the immigration phenomenon

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_the_Soviet_Union>, accessed on 4th November 2021.

² As the President Franklin D. Roosevelt said about the migration: «Remember, remember always, that all of us, and you and I especially, are descended from immigrants and revolutionists». Address at the Daughters of the American Revolution Convention, Washington, D.C., 21st April 1938.

has received legal recognition. In modernity, the numbers of immigrants in the USA have risen, reaching 44,728,502 in 2018.³

A similar situation is faced by a number of European countries.

In the USSR straight after the collapse of the country in 1991, the image of Russian metropolises due to “The great migration” has significantly changed with the large migrant labour workforce coming from Central Asia and the Caucasus. According to the reports in mainstream media and later on social media, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the migration in Moscow and other large cities of Russia was an extremely negatively charged issue. The Russian Federation’s governments having little experience in migration policy has worked hard to create a wide-ranging scope of migration management system. If immediately after the collapse of the USSR when Central Asian countries’ gained its independence the situation with “the Great migration” to Russia was very difficult: besides sharp remarks and public insults immigrants faced all sorts of attacks on all fronts. The nationalistically minded masses and skinhead groups formed criminal gangs specifically targeting migrant workers, often humiliating and murdering them.

As the head of the Federal Migration Service K. Romodanovsky pointed out, 20 million labor migrants come to work to Russia every year, 10 million of them work illegally (von Twickel 2013). Until 2002, Russia did not have legislation on migration that met the minimum standards. Since 2013, a system has been introduced for migrants to purchase work patents.⁴

However, in Russia the attitude towards migrants by the Russian law enforcement agencies remains tense. Each time migrants meet a policeman on the streets of the city, they are required to present their passport and registration certificate, i.e. a work permit: rules which are still the subject of sharp discussion on the internet.

Now, thirty years after the USSR collapsed, has the reality of this phenomenon changed and been slowly replaced by a more positive and accepting atmosphere, aided by the new emergent forms of art and their popularity which serve as best proof of these changes. Although there is a regular passport control and a registration system for work permit to all newcomer-migrants, the new migrant population, – up to 1.2m in Moscow and 1m in St Petersburg (Mukomel 2005) – has resulted in an abundance of Uzbek, Kyrgyz and Caucasian cafeterias and restaurants, with live music performances on the streets, in bazaars, or in private theatres and concert halls.

Migrant workers from Central Asian republics these days still cover great distances in order to reach Russian remote cities and places in search of work. How do these groups of

³ <<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045219>>, accessed on 4th November 2021.

⁴ The Federal Migration Service is a state authority that regulates the registration of Russian and foreign citizens, as well as the execution and issuance of various documents established by the legislation of Russia. Since April 2016, these tasks have been carried out by the General Directorate for Migration of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation with their official site.

migrants survive? What are their artistic and cultural values? What music do they perform and listen to? What are the musical realities of Central Asian work migrant workers who arrive to settle down and work in the Russia's main metropolises like Moscow, St Petersburg? The aim of this article is to study migrant workers music in its social and cultural contexts, examining what is the music performed by Central Asian migrant-musicians and what that music means to its practitioners and audiences.

My study of that musical phenomenon focusing on Moscow and St Petersburg, investigating the influence of the new issues of migrant labour in contemporary Russia on music culture, is at the beginning stage. I'll question the entertaining style of contemporary music scene in Russian metropolises and new music sounds of non-Russian migrant workers in contemporary Russian culture. Exploration of musical genres that are created as a result of mass migration of younger Central Asian generations into new geographic settings, following advice of famous Russian ethnographer Alexander Zataevich «Preserve, study and multiply your national immaterial wealth» (Zataevich 1925), will help to realise the life giving force of Central Asian traditional culture. Within the huge variety of music genres created by Central Asian migrants the focus of our attention appears on two particular completely different artistic phenomena: the play *Akyn-Opera* in Moscow Teatr.doc and music by the St Petersburg's pop group Obmorok Imama.⁵ Their performers are Central Asian migrant musicians who have settled to continue their hard work in Russian metropolises.

Let us now turn to examine the styles of two musical phenomena which in the last decades have won wide-spread public recognition in Russia.

2. *Akyn-Opera*: «It is easier to sing than talk about our life experiences»

Speaking of such a new unprecedented genre as *Akyn-Opera*⁶ it is worth mentioning that the creation of this genre was closely tied to the birth of a new theatre in Moscow called Teatr.doc. The Moscow documentary theatre was founded by wife and husband Elena Gremina (1956-2018) and Mikhail Ugarov (1956-2018) in 2002 at the address: Tryohprudnyi Pereulok (Alley), 11/13, Entrance 1.⁷

The major part of performances by Teatr.doc takes place in form of “documentary theatre”, based on interviews and encounters with real people, relating their real-life

⁵ It is spelt in two different ways and is a play on words meaning “Fainting Imam” or “Fainting and mum” as an expression of shock.

⁶ The title *Akyn-Opera* was chosen by the Teatr.doc director Vsevolod Lisovsky. The title had double meanings: “opera” – signifying the singing performance as the major genre of the show, and “Akyn” (a Central Asian singer and improviser singing to the accompaniment of a musical instrument) – the indication of the presence of the old epic singing traditions widely spread in Central Asia.

⁷ Since 2015 it doesn't have a permanent venue and is currently held at Ul. Kazakova 8, building number 3.

stories and their recollections of the twists and turns of their fate. This kind of genre, founded on the cusp of art and everyday social analysis is realised through a series of performances focusing on modern and current themes interwoven with the present realities. Testimonies of real people are given a platform to be heard, which when combined with use of “verbatim” technique (derived from Latin, meaning “literal, actual”) and wider improvisation, recreates the illusion of events unfolding before the audience in real-time.

The founders of Teatr.doc, producers Gremlina and Ugarov brought their incredible idea to life in the tiny tattered cellar on the Tryohprudnyi Pereulok, 11/13, in centre of Moscow. Each consequent play was based on a real-life narrative of ordinary everyday people, as well as interviews with political strategists, football fans, support workers, former inmates etc. Among the plays, particularly notable is the well-received *Oxygen* by Ivan Vyrypaev. In its first year of existence Teatr.doc had launched 10 original plays.

The essence of the documentary genre lies in the fact that the playwrights do not draw their themes for the play by letting their imagination roam wild in fantasy realms, but rather borrow the subjects from real-life scenarios. They record unintentionally overheard dialogues and bits of conversations of people they have come across in the streets, or at the rubbish chute and around communal bins (common gossip spots), as well as interviewing passers-by, the homeless and the beggars. The classical theatrical genre is subject to the will of the producer and playwright but Teatr.doc – the documentary theatre with its unique *verbatim* style turns the entire concept of a play on its head.

Oftentimes, the responsibility for gathering the narrative for their future stage character falls to the actors themselves and the editors only arrange the collected conversation material into the final product. Up to 50 percent of the play can change from one performance to the next because each one represents an ongoing real-life conversation with ordinary people, including all their ums and aahs and natural pauses, all their slips of the tongue and uncensored swearwords and expressions. This is what gives rise to the often somewhat offensive and shocking names of the plays. Their authors are not concerned with lofty ideals, instead, their protagonists are often people from the bottom rung of society and the subjects explored address all the ills of this world.

Other techniques also used in this kind of theatre, are those of a deeper questioning, where the actor takes questions from the audience on behalf of the persona he is conveying, as well as theatrical games and training workshops. At times the audience find themselves involved in the interactive performance. The title *Akyn-Opera* was chosen by the Teatr.doc director Vsevolod Lisovsky. The title had double meanings: “opera” – signifying the singing performance as the major genre of the show, and “Akyn” (Central Asian improvising poet and singer) as the indication of the presence of the old improvising singing traditions widely spread in Central Asia.

Strictly speaking the production of *Akyn-Opera* at the Teatr.doc at the beginning of 2010 differed from other plays in that it was performed not by actors, but by the carriers of the documentary materials, the play’s authors, giving us an insight into their own lives.

The musicians, Pamir Tajiks, work in Moscow doing low-paid work, since the civil war in their homeland has ruined their livelihoods and in order to support their families, they have left their homeland for another country. Once the Teatr.doc featured a play entitled *The battle of Moldavians over a Cardboard Box* about the life of Moldovan migrant workers in Moscow, and there has been a stream of plays about migrants, shown as part of a one-day Festival *Migrants Day at the Teatr.doc* on 24th November 2014. The Festival's repertoire had also included other plays on migrant subject like *The Uzbek, I was beaten in the street*, and *Slaves from Golyanovo*. The monospectacle *Uzbek* grew out of personal history of the author Talgat Batalov who moved from Tashkent to Moscow 6 years ago. Although, he does not feel himself a Russian, perhaps a Muscovite as moving to Moscow for him is rather a return to his and the countries' historical homeland. During the play performance there were two boxes on the stage. One was filled with the stories of people who moved to live in Russia from Central Asia. In the other box – real documents (passports, work permits, certificates of renunciation of citizenship, registration certificates, etc). Viewers are invited to consider these documents, each of which sometimes was available though life-changing decisions, sometimes – thanks to bribes. The stories of different people go through their personal experiences and experience of the author, who left his family and friends for another country, another social and cultural spheres. The history of external migration becomes the history of loneliness.⁸ The festival presented new projects in the genre of “witness theatre” (RS: or “reality show”) when performances are shown only once and involve discussion of the story with the public. *I was beaten on the street* about how migrants struggle was based on the evidence of victims of street attacks. That is, people talk about what they themselves experienced, but did not hear on the radio or read in the newspaper. In fact, a witness performance is an interactive communication with the public. A continuation of the “migrant” theme already mastered by the Theater. doc was the reality show *Slaves from Golyanovo* based on the study of release of migrant slaves from the grocery store. The stage was attended by those volunteers and activists who participated in the release operation of migrants from slavery, who helped them after their release, as well as employees of the Civic Assistance Committee, who are currently providing victims with legal assistance. The Moscow press wrote in sufficient detail about *Slaves from Golyanovo*. The release of several unfortunate people, deprived of normal living conditions, human rights and freedoms, took place on 30th October 2012, when activist liberators and television journalists came to one of Moscow's stores. According to migrants, the store owners – citizens of Kazakhstan – forced people to work for free, regularly beaten, and women were raped. Some of the slaves spent in captivity for years, others for several months. Only one of the former slaves, a resident of the Shymkent region of Kazakhstan, Bakie Kasymova, was invited to the stage of Teatr.doc. She told how she was invited to Moscow, how she was taken away her passport, how she was beaten and forced to work,

⁸ The poster announcing the show *Uzbek*: <<https://teatrdoc.ru/performances/882/>>.

how she was deprived of contact with others (Vasilieva 2012). As evidenced by the titles of these plays, the theatre is relating the harsh realities faced by the migrant workers in Moscow without embellishing the conditions in which they find themselves, but by describing them in colourful detail. «Central Asian janitors scoop major Russian theatre award!», screamed the head-lines when the *Akyn-Opera* received a special award at Russia's most prestigious theatre festival, the GoldenMask, held at Moscow's Bolshoi Theatre (Syrova 2014). It was originally planned that the performance of *Akyn-Opera* will take place not only on the stage of Teatr.doc, but also on construction sites, car washes and in hostels for migrants. However, these hopes did not materialise. As it turned out from a conversation with the director Vsevolod Lisovsky, such plans were long in coming. «Through the means of *Akyn-Opera* with our Teatr.doc group, – that is myself, Nana Greenstein, Nastya Patlay, Ruslan Malikov –, we only helped them tell their own stories related through their own music, we intended to give any migrant an opportunity to voice their reality. Our thinking was: let them come with their own story, and we will help turn it into a song (or dance). Not one of *Akyn-Opera's* performances was supposed to be the same». ⁹ In the *Akyn-Opera*, as mentioned above, performers share their life stories, alternating them with old songs in Tajik, Persian and Shughnan languages which are typical for migrants from Tajikistan. In Central Asia, the tradition of instant improvisational poetry performed by poet-storytellers such as akyn, bakshi, or ashug, remain strong and popular taking on diverse forms. «It is easier to sing than to talk about what I've experienced», says Adulmamad Bekmamadov, the main performer of *Akyn-Opera*. They do not read lines from a prepared play, but talk about their lives instead, sharing experiences and giving advice: what construction site is best in Moscow, what is the cheapest way to get to Moscow from Pamir mountains, their homesickness, etc. Of course, their stories are nothing more than a typical reaction of migrants to the loss of their home as a result of forced resettlement (Pistrick 2015).

Each story is a song. At the same time, the leitmotif in the *Akyn-Opera* is a repeating song performed by three voices chorus:

Sweet little fruit stone, my pearl you are!
 Good people from Pamir, we have come to Moscow,
 Sweet little fruit stone, my pearl you are!

Good people from Pamir, we have come to Moscow.
 No space in the flat:
 Five sleep on the couch, fifteen on the floor,
 Rolled up trousers for a pillow to rest our heads.

Sweet little fruit stone, my pearl you are!
 Good people from Pamir, we have come to Moscow!¹⁰

⁹ From my interview with Vsevolod Lisovsky, Moscow, 20th October 2019.

¹⁰ <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Su9R64nEOK8>>. The song from the Programme of *Akyn-Operas* in Russian language, has been translated in English.

The director of *Teatr.doc* Vsevolod Lisovsky, who came up with the idea for the production and, in general, the entire dynamic construct of the play, became the founding author of the *Akyn-Opera* project and the director of the play. The name *Akyn-Opera* is not without irony, in the sense that this performance demonstrates a kind of rebuff to the aesthetics of the splendour of the Russian stage culture, with its “opera shows” or grandiose performances. Here, in the small basement of *Teatr.doc*, against the backdrop of a white screen with lines of subtitles running across it, three Pamir Tajiks talk about the hardships of their lives. The telling posture of the performers and their behaviour on the stage, in their “naivety” are clearly not that of professional actors, as is the absolute absence of any “theatrical” intonation. They modestly enter the hall, greet the audience, which is not all used to this kind of treatment. Speaking about their joys and sorrows, they are shy, as if finding it hard to believe that people are taking the time to pay attention to them, disbelieving till last. They sometimes exchange a few words among one another during the play, as if not understanding the “rules of the stage”. As critics point out, Director Lisovsky’s intentions were clear: to give the floor to those who go unnoticed. Only in the theatre is it possible to discern another person, a little hero, facing his life problems, which suddenly, contrary to the existing logic, bring the viewers to a place where they begin to feel a connection to the character, gaining deeper understanding and sympathy (Freedman 2014).

And in this sense, an important element in *Akyn-Opera* performances is a method featuring the use of subtitles, which immediately turns out to be a construct generating new meaning. Between the presentation of their stories, the Pamirians sing songs in the best traditions of the akyns. Behind them on the white screen lines of subtitles appear, with the corresponding simultaneous translation subtitles in Russian translation.

It is clear to see, that the formation and development of art actively continues during historical periods of renewal and change, which for the post-Soviet period is represented by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the huge migratory influx of labour from the Central Asia, the Caucasus and other regions of southern Russia.

On the stage there are three people: both authors and performers of the play – Pokiz Kurbunasenova, Ajam Chakoboev, Abdulmamad Bekmamadov. They are ordinary people: cleaning lady in a tax collecting agency, assistant painter and tiler. All of them came from the Roshkalinsky district of the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region of Tajikistan. Here in Moscow they are called Tajiks, which is not entirely true, since they are Pamiri, Shugnans. They speak Russian with a strong accent. Their stage performance style is not based on any cues from a written script, but on stories about their own Moscow life riddled with difficulties. And in this performance they tell and sing about themselves to the accompaniment of *Tar* (a string-plucked lute) and *Doira-Daf* (an Uzbek-Tajik tambourine used in both classical and folk music). This is not surprising, considering the fact that the traditions of improvisational poetry in Central Asia, performed by akyns, bakhshis, and ashugs, remain strong.¹¹

¹¹ Video: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a0KgW1BRsfE>>.

Indeed, the critics' acknowledgements were highly positive and supportive. Among the audience' comments to the play there were some by Elena Volkova: «I involuntarily begin to edit in my mind the subtitle-text of the song and understand that it comes in the style of the biblical *Song of Songs*. For years they have not seen their families, and we do not see and do not hear them here... Visitors from Central Asia brought us their rich oral culture, which we scribes lost... Most of all I was touched by the emotional tenderness of the storytellers, their kindness unprecedented for Moscow. There were stories of arrests and deceits, dismissals and threats, but even not a note of bitterness sounded in them. On the contrary, the ironic euphemism "our friends" instead of "policemen" in the mouth of Abdulmamad Bekmamadov was accompanied by his good-natured smile. He talked about his unthinkable ordeals as if from the outside he described the funny fights of unreasonable boys».¹²

Someone called himself Aleksei had added his comments after the show says: «The very fact that the theme of immigrants, migrant workers was covered by the emigrants themselves is simply amazing. You inevitably believe this, becoming an involuntary participant in someone else's biography. It is remarkable that with the almost complete absence of the attributes of a traditional theatre – stage lights, scenery, music, props and the like –, the feeling of belonging to something important invariably remains throughout the performance. I can say that after watching the *Akyn-Opera* performance, my interest in the topic touched on, I was able to look at the problems of immigrants, their life and aspirations and hopes from a slightly different angle. This is truly catchy!».¹³

The purpose of *Teatr.doc* was to give the audience the opportunity to hear the voices of these migrants. Not in order to convince viewers that migrants are also people, but in order to begin to get to know for themselves exactly what kind of people. No one knows for sure how many migrant workers from the Caucasus and Central Asia live these days in Moscow and Russia as a whole. It is plain to see that there are millions of them. In addition to the fact that these people live in a mode of facing frequent violation of their human rights and are subjected to economic exploitation, they also find themselves in conditions of cultural isolation. They are separated from their national tradition both physically and mentally.

By translating a their songs and helping the audience to understand another language and the content of their songs, the authors of the play have accomplished a greater good, by making the unknown strange verses and concepts close and relatable to the audience. When you read these translated lines of songs on the stage screen, you suddenly realise that the songs of *Akyn Opera* are filled with the same meaning, legends, and ideas on which the whole of modern European culture is based, that is: on the totality and proximity of the opinions people form on the importance they ascribe to things and phenomena encountered in nature and our society.

¹² *Otzyv o spektakle Akyn-Opera* <<https://www.afisha.ru/performance/90819/reviews/?reviewId=538304>>.

¹³ <<https://www.afisha.ru/performance/90819/?reviewid=538304>>.

Thus, we are faced with a new artistic phenomenon based on the life history of a generation of post-Soviet migrant workers expressed via the language of music. Performers of this genre are usually young workers who have come to work in Moscow and wider Russia. In fact, on the stage of Teatr.doc, Akyn Opera performers do not sing and play the widely known versions of the opera genre, but rather offer a kind of storytelling or “mastery of tale” created on the basis of the situations or life-events they have experienced. This kind of “storytelling” can be described as a new nascent genre phenomenon of immigrant folklore.

So in what forms and how is this new art manifested? I believe their strength in a consistent presentation of events experienced and suffered by performers in epic form. We can assume that such “storytelling” was among the earliest manifestations of human culture, alongside tribal rituals. The storytelling did not imply to collective performance, but, on the contrary, singled out individuals with the best memory and artistic abilities, probably contributing to the emergence of professionalisation.¹⁴

Another specific feature is their sung-recitative style, because, as the musicians say: «singing about the past and the suffering is easier than telling». What makes the show so original is their improvisational manner – because each subsequent performance of the artists at Teatr.doc takes on a new look and form, featuring new elements every time.

3. The group Fainting Imam (Obmorok Imama)

The Fainting Imam group represents an entirely different phenomenon.¹⁵ This group often appears on television and features in various corporate shows. Fainting Imam or Fainting and Mum (a play on words in the double meaning of its name) is a Russian-Uzbek ethno-folk group with a paradoxical name. The group consists of leader Ikhtiyar Kadyrov (singer and performer on doira), Jurabek Abdullaev (on Tara) and Alexei Barakov (on the accordion, which is especially popular in the Khorezm region of Uzbekistan). The group was formed in 2004 and became famous within several weeks, having performed their instant hit in Moscow, St Petersburg and other nearby cities, with the following lyrics:

When I have last moved, I do not remember
 I guess I must have been drunk out of my mind
 My address is not a house or a street
 This is my current address:
 www Leningrad
 Spb dot ru
 www Leningrad
 Spb dot ru

¹⁴ Story-telling / narration – in its original meaning, the mastery of a tale: the fulfilment of epic tales, stories or fairy tales. In a broad cultural sense – the oral transmission of information. Unlike speech, narration implies the exclusive status of the narrator as an authoritative carrier of information. See Lord 2000.

¹⁵ See their performance on YouTube: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H9OW1pWAVY>>.

When cops hassle me
 Saying I have no registration
 Then I answer calmly
 «This is my current address:
 www Leningrad
 Spb dot ru»¹⁶

This song mocks the all-Soviet hit *Moy Adres Sovetskiy Soyuz* (My address is the Soviet Union), a popular song symbolising the friendship of all Soviet peoples in the 1970-80s with Music by David Tukmanov, lyrics by Vladimir Haritonov.

Apart from comical songs representing a humiliated diaspora, and songs that make fun of the ethno-nationalising efforts of the Soviet Union, the group is famous for their Uzbek style remakes of *Katyusha* and other Russian pop and rock hits. Russians have become so enamoured of these performances in parodic Uzbek style, that the group now performs all over the place, including parties and wedding celebrations. Wearing Uzbek national costumes, playing Uzbek national instruments, singing in Russian with a strong Uzbek accent with rich melismatic voice embellishments, *Obmorok Imama* have gained a wide appeal amongst listeners performing remakes like world famous *Living Next Door to Alice* (Smokie) in the Russian remake version by Michail Bashakov, or *You are not alone* (Michael Jackson), or a comic performance of Ivan Krylov's fable *The Dragonfly and the Ant*, appealing in Russian with long Uzbek chanting decorative recitation styles.

This ensemble is characterised by its use of repertoire of already established well-known songs, brimming with Russian hits and sometimes even western songs which had already found an initial reincarnation and assimilation into the local bardic environment. As such, it presents an explicit attempt by the immigrants from the migrant community to vie for recognition of the host community (Gilroy 1993).

In all likelihood, this desire determines the choice of the main performance genre of the *Fainting Imam* group in the form of song parodies. Given the obvious musical talent of the performers, the audience, as a rule, finds their repertoire extremely amusing and appealing. Their repertoire is extensive since they are no strangers to either domestic nor foreign pop songs, borrowed from and easily recognised by the English-speaking world.¹⁷

However, their "X-factor" or their unique selling point is their humorous parody style of singing, on which most of their performances are based. This genre and the musicianship it requires is indeed impressive and the audience happily consume their songs, regularly inviting the group to perform at weddings and corporate events, and listening to them perform in cafés and restaurants.

¹⁶ The refrain comes from a famous remake of that song by Sergei Shnurov, performed by his band Leningrad under the name *WWW LENINGRAD SPB.RU* <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ZhaP75IU-AU>>.

¹⁷ *Fainting and Mum*, *WWW LENINGRAD SPB.RU* – Morning show on Channel 5; Performance at the Autumn Fair in Maardu (Estonia), *Fainting and Mum* – Omar Khayyam, etc. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H9OW1pWAVY&list=PL52098E538B1F7322>>, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a0KgWIBRsfE>>.

So, what is so special about this group? What is the secret of their success?

Most likely the main reason for the humorous style of the group's performance is its strong connection to the pure Uzbek cultural phenomenon called *Askiya*. *Askiya* (from the Arabic *azkiya*, literally "witty, resourceful") is a distinctive genre of oral folk traditional art, which was formed and spread in the Ferghana Valley and the Tashkent regions as a spectacular linguistic and cultural phenomenon. *Askiya* is a spiritual treasury that reflects the Uzbek worldview. *Askiya* is the Uzbek humorous phenomenon performed as a dialogue-competition in which life observations are instantly manifested in comic way. It is one of the main genre of Uzbek cultural heritage and was recognised in 2014 as Intangible Cultural Heritage by UNESCO.

Indeed, the typical for *Askiya* exchange of witticisms on a given topic between two or more participants, is present in the Fainting Imam's performance style. Every song gets their special satire-ironical interpretation which amplified with their exotic appearance. All artists dressed in Uzbek traditional clothing, playing Uzbek traditional instruments, but at the same time performing popular Russian hit songs has a distinct positive effect on their appeal. Indeed, this heralds the birth of a new musical genre – an "immigration remake".

While clearly demonstrating elements of a foreign ethnic culture, drawing the line of alienation in the geographical and physical sense of cultural space, the musicians mesmerise the audience to a humorous effect as they sing in broken Russian, with their strong accents, while at the same time using abundant melodic embellishments / vocal riffs in the spirit of traditional classical Uzbek *maqams*, with some exclamations of: «Yorey! Jonim! Woy!» – the equivalent of «Yeah! Baby! Come on!» thrown in for good measure.

«After all, music is an international phenomenon! We are Uzbeks, but we play this music in this particular way because we come from Uzbekistan, although we live and work here in Russia!» – from the very beginning the musicians seem to establish a kind of distance between the stage and the audience by distinguishing between "us" and "them". Amazingly, this works in their favour, and ensures success of the genre. Although in their being on-trend in choosing their repertoire and by indulging the tastes of the public, they declare "we are the same as you" despite the seeming division into "friends and strangers"! That is, the "Dressing-up" effect, known as part of phenomenon of "carnivalization" explored in famous works of Mikhail Bakhtin, here acts as a factor of distancing and alienation and yet at the same time as manifestation of "familiarity" (allowing them to appear familiar among strangers by making themselves strangers among their own).¹⁸ This case is an elaboration on Bakhtin's carnival theory at work, expressed through the aspects of modern performance art of the 21st century (Verbina 2016). While performing dressed in clothing typical to their Uzbek culture, the musicians demonstrate their distinct na-

¹⁸ Carnivalization is a concept introduced into study of literature by Mikhail Bakhtin and means the result of the influence of medieval carnival traditions on the culture and thinking of the New Age.

tional identity and cultural position, but by choosing the genre of song remakes, they are admitting: yes, we are distinct and different from you, but we also love your songs, although we do perform them in our own ways.

4. Epilogue

The analysis of Central Asian migrants' music art as an example of a new emerging phenomenon in the cultural life of these cities-megalopolises presents the challenge of cultural evaluation of modern art. Their oral performance highlights the profound depths of the artistic talent of Central Asian peoples attracting a wide audience.

In fact, it seems that the massive influx of Central Asian migrants into Russia observed in recent decades has led to the emergence of new creative phenomena, manifested primarily in the genre of popular music. It has come to be expressed both in form of bringing real-life stories to stage like in *Akyn-Opera*, and as numerous ethnic-style remakes presented by pop group Fainting Imam, performed using a comical parody approach.

Thus, upon closer examination of the current situation and of the birth and performance of new genres of pop music in Russian metropolises, the phenomenon of pop culture as an art form reflecting the complex immigrant realities can be readily identified. It would seem, that for current reality this topic is a challenging one, both in the sense of its methodology (Firth n.d.) and study, however, we can draw certain conclusions.

The obvious fact is that the presence of this expression of pop culture in modern Russia reflects the degree of progress that has been attained since the initial period of rejection of migrant communities who came there to work, clouded by the history of racist violence by the nationalists, which immediately followed the collapse of the USSR. It points to the gradually growing public acceptance of Islam, heralded by the advent of new pop groups such as Fainting Imam (Fainting And Mum) and the current common practice of Central Asian and Caucasian artists both participating in and even winning in the Russian version of *The Voice* talent show, echoed by visible changes like the construction of a massive new cathedral mosque. The recent public celebration of Navruz (the pre-Islamic New Year) at the Russian Museum of the East in Moscow, once again demonstrates Russia's new willingness to accept the changing social, cultural and demographic landscape.

Taking into account the social factors of the development of contemporary art expressed through the genre of pop music, it can be noted that an emergence of new genres and also a performing style which could be classed from my point of view as "immigrant urban folklore"¹⁹ is taking place. This genre is developing in the urban environment across

¹⁹ A similar working name for this phenomenon as "migrant folklore" has already been proposed by some researchers (Malakhov, Olimova, and Simon 2018). However, my definition as "immigrant urban folklore", seems to be more comprehensive and more convincing by virtue of determining the birthplace of such a genre.

Russia's largest cities. The reasons for the emergence of such genres remains an interesting subject matter for future research, since answers to questions like: What is the role of such phenomena in the culture of a modern city? How long will the process of formation and development of such a phenomenon last? – do not yet exist.

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