

Islamic and *Sufi* Soundscape in Central Asia: Genres, Rituals, and Laments

Razia SULTANOVA*

Abstract

In Central Asia, music is interwoven with every aspect of life. This study draws on 30 years of my ethnographic fieldwork examining *Islamic* and *Sufi* music forms in the region—specifically, the flow of local indigenous mystical knowledge within the rarely researched female communities’ practices. Furthermore, it combines methods of identifying musical features found in the mystical chanting and ceremonies of female communities in Central Asia that continue to survive despite the interdictions of the Soviet regime. The second part of the study discusses *Sufi* elements in contemporary pop music genres.

Keywords: Islamic culture, *Sufi* music, Ichkari, female religious rituals, *Otin-Oy*; DJ Pilgrim

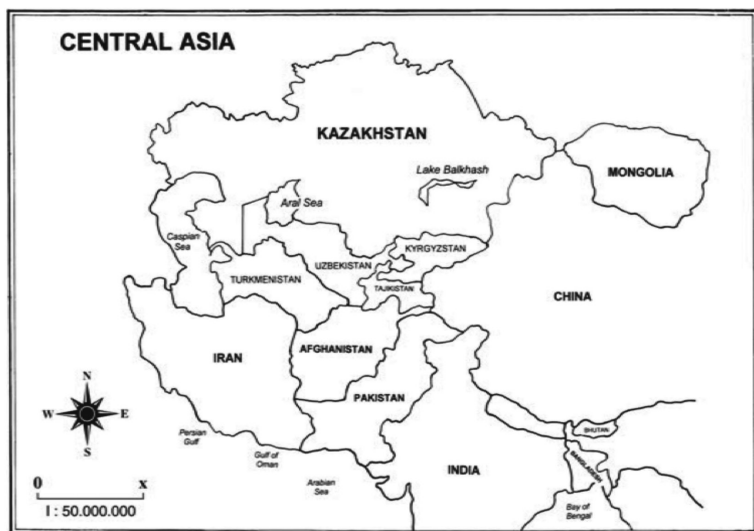


Figure 1. Map of Central Asia (by Razia Sultanova)

1. Introduction: Some Theoretical Perspectives

Historically, the concept of *Sufism* in the culture and music of Central Asia has changed since inception; it has also been subject to compromise due to changes in geographical and political forms through the years. Each generation living in the given region assumes a different attitude towards culture: the older generation prefers more traditional forms of *Sufism*, whereas the younger generation is attracted to innovation that ultimately contributes to the conceptual understanding of *Sufism*. Therefore, various aspects regarding the question

* University of Cambridge, UK.

of authenticity of *Sufism* promote different understandings of this mystical belief system represented in music.

Music, as an art, is based on sound expansion through pitch, rhythm, dynamics, and the sonic qualities of timbre. However, sound perception is different for Western and Eastern audiences. Regarding *Sufi* music, while Western audiences and academic readers may consider it merely as a music phenomenon, for an Eastern audience, or more precisely a Muslim audience, it has profound significance. In Islamic culture, *Sufi* music holds a deep devotional and sacred meaning, and therefore cannot be considered in the light of being listened to for entertainment or in the guise of a music performance at all.

If it is performed for entertainment, it could be considered purely as a music type. Otherwise, it is a ritual of devotion. Therefore, *Qur'an* recitation, calls for prayer, religious chanting, and devotional hymns are not regarded as music by a Muslim population. *Sufi* music has come to express the aesthetic core of globalised *Sufism*, but in doing so, it has become dislodged from many traditional *Sufi* practices [Bohlman 2002: 18].

However, the sound aspect of *Sufi zikr*, taken out of the related social, institutionalised Islamic forms, which have not survived in Central Asia, continues to be preserved and helps identify the presence of *Sufi* tradition largely destroyed by Soviet ideology, revealing images of the music of the past.

Sufi music is a genre based on Islamic worship practices, which developed individually in each region of the Muslim world. Originating from local forms of chanting, *Sufi* music accumulated distinguishing features from these different areas: ‘*Sufi* sects formed wherever Islam spread, and for the most parts of acculturated local musics were used in Muslim worship’ [Bohlman 2002: 18]. In Central Asia, *Sufi* music is based on four regional types, according to the origin of four *Sufi* orders: *Yassavi* (*Turkestan*), *Nakshbandi* (*Bukhara*), *Qadiriya* (*Ferghana Valley*), *Kubraviya* (*Khorezm*). However, some types of chanting, such as the popular *Chor Zarb* ‘*La ilaha il Allah*,’ have become international, moving from one region to another, from one *Sufi Tariqa* to another.

2. Central Asia during the Soviet Era

The strong influence of Islam on Central Asian life can be discerned up to the present day. Like most Sunni people, the people of the region have inherited and followed Islam in every aspect of their lifestyle, family norms, legal system, and culture. During Soviet times, however, since religion was seen as ‘the opium of the people’ [Marx (1843) 1970], its practice was banned by the Soviet state. In this context, the elaborate system of Islamic ritual practice the exclusive medium, a cultural oasis, which strongly cemented the present and the past by allowing people from different generations to interact and to pass historical knowledge down the family line. The true significance of this phenomenon and its impact is assessed in the socio-historical

context described below.

The Soviets had clear political reasons for transforming what were formerly known as Turkestan and Bukhara and Khorezm, into five new republics (Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan). One of the reasons was the decision to implement a clear policy of divide and rule. Moscow did not want an ‘Islamic Turkestan’ to be a singular republic within the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). Moscow was particularly virulent in quashing all forms of Islamic identity that existed in the region, and sought its replacement with attempts to form loyalties of the people in the region to the newly created republics and Marxist ideology.

Martha Brill Olcott has argued that ‘Stalin drew the map of Soviet Central Asia not with an eye to consolidating the natural regions, but rather to reduce the prospects for regional unity. Five separate republics were formed, creating national units for ethnic communities that had yet to think of themselves as distinct nationalities. Moreover, boundaries were drawn to insure the presence of large irredentist populations in each republic’ [Olcott 2005: 43].

The Muslims of Central Asia were thus subjected to living within the Soviet Union under an authority and assumed identity to which they did not adhere. The emphasis which the Soviets placed upon ‘ethnicity’ was formulated to channel the allegiance of the Muslims in Central Asia towards the newly created republics, while simultaneously viciously suppressing their Islamic identity [Ahrari and Beal 1996: 23].

When the Islamic religious practice declined in the public sphere, women took it up. As we will see below, the same happened in *Sufism*: when male leadership was banned by Soviet policy, women took over and preserved that knowledge for future generations.

As a result of my 30-year study of this phenomenon, an integral system was discovered wherein Islam and *Sufism* appeared as complementary elements of the millennium-old Central Asian religious practice. Due to the local tradition of gender segregation in this region, women and men pray and perform rituals separately. However, in female communities, there exist numerous genres of *Sufi* music and a variety of religious rituals.

Central Asian religious and *Sufi* music has not yet been classified among the acknowledged music categories studied by musicologists. The reasons for this are not purely political — when all religions, including Islam, were banned — but are also of a musical nature. Religious and *Sufi* music was, and continues to be, performed mainly without instruments.

This fact led to the genre of Islamic religious music not being taken seriously enough by scholars in musicology. However, it is said that: ‘The conceptualisation of religious music as a chant or recitation, rather than music or song, reflects a fundamental Muslim belief in the supremacy of the word as the basis of all religious communication, starting from the revealed

word of the Qur'an itself, which constitutes the very foundation of Islam' [Qureshi 1972: 16]. However, no scholar has denied the importance of music in *Sufism*. 'Music is called by *Sufis Ghiza-i-ruh* (the food of the soul). Music, being the most divine art, elevates the soul to the higher spirit: music itself being unseen soon reaches the unseen; just as only the diamond can break the diamond, so musical vibrations are used to make the physical and mental vibrations inactive, in order that the *Sufi* may be elevated to the spiritual spheres,' wrote Hazrat Inayat Khan in his book '*A Sufi Message of Spiritual Liberty*' [Hazrat Inayat Khan 1914: 47].

3. *Ichkari*: The Inner Part of the Uzbek Household

The traditional Muslim household in Uzbekistan is divided into two separate parts: *tashqari*, the outer, male part; and *ichkari*, the inner, female part. 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. Usually, the *ichkaris* of one household are interconnected with those of the neighbours; therefore, the female part of the society lives a hidden life, moving from one house to the other, and thus 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 [Dodkhudoeva 2003: 60].

Therefore, there exists a 'foreground' and a 'background' in Uzbek society, as expressed by a spatial division. Historically, every community meeting was held in separate parts of the household for males and females. The female area, *ichkari*, was situated in a corner of the courtyard, away from the entrance. In Ferghana Valley, being 'locked' within the area, socially cut off from the rest of the world, new forms of the original teacher-apprentice relationship emerged within closed female communities, wherein '*Otin-Oy*' a spiritual leader, became one of the main figures of social life of women, unavailable to the observations and investigations of outsiders.

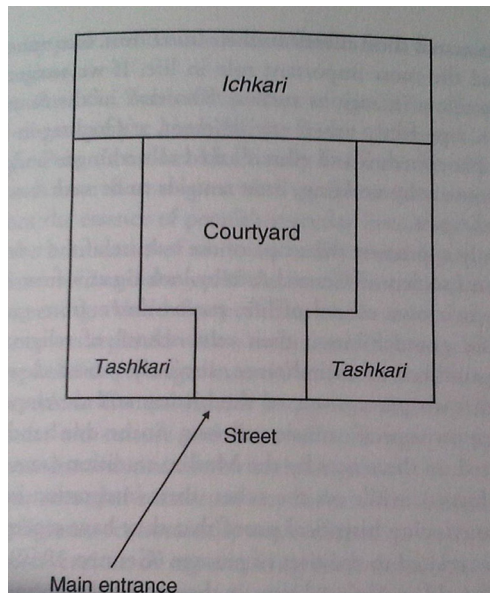


Figure 2. The scheme of the traditional Uzbek household (by Razia Sultanova)

4. *Otin-Oys* as Present Day Spiritual Leaders

The etymology of the word '*Otin-Oy*' is unclear. The term may have originated from the Chagatay word '*Hotin*' (*khâtin*) meaning 'schoolteacher'; however, a more descriptive explanation is necessary, since Chagatay and Uzbek languages are nearly identical. However, in Uzbek, '*Hotin*' means only 'woman' or 'wife.' In modern translation, this means a 'religiously educated woman,' a kind of female Mullah [Sultanova 2011: 126].

Let's look at the phenomenon of *Otin-Oy* from a social viewpoint. According to our numerous observations, *Otin-Oys* are:

- descendants of religious families or widows, or mothers of disabled children;
- supporters of female communities and leading figures in performing all rites of passages (birthdays, weddings, funerals, and mourning rituals);
- the main figures during the time of Islamic holidays.

Usually, *Otin-Oys* wear different coloured clothes for different rituals, though a white shawl used to cover hair dominates their attire. From a distance, the lifestyle of *Otin-Oy* is the same as that of everyone else. It is not easy to distinguish an *Otin-Oy* from among the crowd. The following is a daily life image of outstanding *Otin-Oy* Malika *Askarova* from Ferghana Valley (Uzbekistan).



Figure 3: *Otin-Oy* Malika Askarova in daily life with a baby (photo by Razia Sultanova)

According to the scholarly identification, the genres of Islamic religious music are as following:

call to prayer, Qur’anic recitation, celebrations of rituals on the anniversary of Prophet Muhammad (*Mawlud*), prayer, praises and devotional songs (*Allahu-Akbar*, *Duo*, *Munajat*, *Na’is*, *Ghazals*, and *Qasyda*), and *Sufi* music — mystical practices of *Zikr* (*Dhikr*) performed as communal rituals [Neubauer and Doubleday 2000].

All these genres, except from call to prayers performed by Imams in mosques, are part of the rituals performed by *Otin-Oys*.

5. Classification of Religious Rituals led by *Otin-Oys*:

Ramadan (or *Uraza*) — A sacred month of Muslim history when the *Qur’an* was revealed. This is a fasting month in the Muslim tradition. During this holiday, the *Otin-Oys* are welcomed by each family, because they bless these families in the holy month of Ramadan. They pay particular attention to the oldest members in the neighbourhood, the ill, the disabled, the orphans, and the less fortunate. Sometimes, they organize *Zikr* rituals to commemorate this sacred month.

Mavlyud — The birthday of the Prophet Muhammad, which is celebrated with

constant praying, and religious singing. The performance marks any important event quite often.

Ashir-oy — Remembrance day of the Imams' death. Imams are the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, and Ali, his son-in-law. Sons of Ali, Imams Hasan and Hosseyn, were killed in the fight between the different factions. Their death is considered a holy death and is commemorated, especially by Shia Muslims.

Qurban-Haiyt — The celebration of Sacrifice devoted to Abraham's story: he was asked by God to sacrifice his son; however, subsequently, Allah gave him a sheep to sacrifice instead. In this celebration, people slaughter lambs as an offering, while praying and singing religious songs.

Hudoyi — This normally takes place to mark 3, 7, 40 days, 6 months, and 1 year of mourning. It is also the most common event for expressing any kind of gratitude to God in modern Uzbekistan. It includes a range of very different occasions: a recovery after a long illness, a happy return from a long journey, return of a son from the military service, child's enrolment at the University, and so on. These celebrations are performed in both rural and urban areas among female gatherings where the *Otin-Oy* conducts the event with prayer and recitations of the ancient *Sufi* poetry of Ahmad Yassavi, Mashrab, Alisher Navoiy, or others to mark the sacredness of the occasion, to thank God.



Figure 4: Female gathering *Hudoyi* in Denau (Surkhandarya district, Uzbekistan) performed by *Otin-Oy* Mukkaram Halilova (photo by Razia Sultanova)

6. Patterns of Rituals

The *Otin-Oys'* range of ritual performances is broad. While it comprises different genres, all of them commence with the same introduction '*Bismilla- Ir-rahmanim-rahim ...*' and end with

the formula ‘*Allahu akbar*.’ Many ritual sessions could also begin with *Fatiha*, which is the opening *Sura* from *Qur’an*. The main patterns of ritual performances are as follows:

- a) Ghazals, murabba, muhammas and the complex of classic poetic forms (Navoiy, Mashrab, Uvaisi, Yassavi, Huvaiddo, and other poets);
- b) *Marsias* or Elegies — *Arwahnama*, *Musanama*, *Kiyomat-nama*, dedicated to the spirits of the dead prophets;
- c) *Hikmats* (laments) or wisdom from poetry of the *Sufi* poet Ahmad Yassavi, etc.
- d) Descriptions of lives of holy religious people (‘*Hoja Bahovatdidin*,’ ‘*Ser malyak*,’ ‘There lived a man in Bagdad,’ ‘*Dedi-yor*’);
- e) Poetic instructions in ghazals of Hazini, Sufi Alloyar, Mashrab, and other *Sufi* poets;
- f) Epic parables, a kind of rhythmic prose (*Bibi-Seshanba*);
- g) *Zikr* (*Dhikr*): ritual of devotion, meditation, remembrance of Allah.

Here is an example of ‘*Hikmat*’ (Lament) from the ‘*Diwan-i Hikmat*’ of Hoja Ahmad Yassavi (d.1166), performed by **Otin-oy Malika Askarova** (b. 1955), recorded by Razia Sultanova in 2002 in Andijan district, Ferghana valley, Uzbekistan:¹

7. Islamic Religious Singing in Northern Afghanistan

Another Central Asian area with strong Islamic and *Sufi* traditions is Afghanistan. In 2006, I had a lucky chance to conduct my fieldwork in Northern Afghanistan.

Staying in Sheberghān, on the first day of Eid (from Arabic: festival marking the end of the month-long dawn-to-sunset fasting of Ramadan), I was invited to a female gathering wherein approximately 40 women with children were celebrating.

During the three-hour long gathering, performances of different styles of music took place. Women accompanied themselves by playing on Daf (frame drum), and Chang - Qobuz (Jews’ harp). Special attention was paid to the purely religious singing of ‘Qambar,’ ‘Marhabo,’ ‘Salavat’ (hymn) and ‘Hush keldingiz’ (You are welcome!). A middle-aged lady, Hanipha Mullomhammad Niaz, with her head covered by a white scarf (identical to that worn by the Uzbek *Otin-Oy*), sung glory to the Prophet Muhammad with other girls:

Lailatul mehrojiga qilmak uchun siz rohbaror
 Quddisiro diydasiga to’tiyo hush keldingiz
 Kishvari izzat aro mahzanishini podishoh
 Shahsuvori korigari kibriyo hush keldingiz

1 <https://www.musicofcentralasia.org/Tracks/Chapter/25>. (Accessed on 08.10.2022)

Welcome, you panacea to the eye of Jerusalem
In kingdom of respect you owe a king,
Welcome, you superior cavalier,
To ascend to *Miraj* at night [Sultanova 2023: 59–60]



Figure 5. Hanipha Mullomuhammad Niaz is singing the religious hymn ‘Hush keldingiz’ (You are welcome!). Photo by Razia Sultanova, Sheberghān, Afghanistan, 2006.

8. *Sufi* Influence on Pop Music: Uzbek Band DJ Pilgrim

Uzbek pop music in the 21st century is remarkable for the rich variety of genres, languages, symbols, and styles including Islamic religious singing. The music of the group *DJ Pilgrim*, founded by Ilhom Yulchiev and Dmitryi Levin in 1998, was described by *The New York Times* as ‘a new genre of Uzbek-style Euro-pop from upstarts’ [Strauss 2000]. In the video clip of the song ‘On i ona’ (He and she), unrequited love is shown in two alternating images. In one, the boy is in love and the girl does not share his feelings, which drives the boy to suicide. In the other, a local old lady appears as a symbol of the universe or as a goddess who comforts all those broken-hearted. The boy (played by Ilhom Yulchiev) tells his story; the old lady recites a medieval *Sufi* poem that has a deep symbolic meaning.²

Boy’s story:

Он её любит а она его нет,
Он ей пишет а ей даже дела нет! Он её ищет но нигде её нет,

² *DJ-Pilgrim* ‘qoshingni qarosiga’ (to the blackness of your eyebrows): <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QamL7mjoP6A>>. (Accessed on 08.10.2022)

Она красива но глупа, А он любовью слеп!

On eyë lyubit a ona ego net, On ei pishet a ei dazhe dela net!

On eyë ishchet no nigde eyë net, Ona krasiva no glupa, A on lyubov'yu slep!

He loves her, she does not love him at all

He writes her letters — she ignores them!

He is longing to see her — but cannot find her anywhere!

She is beautiful but silly,

And he is blinded with love!



Figure 6: DJ-Pilgrim band performing “*Qoshingni carosiga*”

Old lady’s monologue: *Qoshigni qarosiga* (to the blackness of your eyebrows)

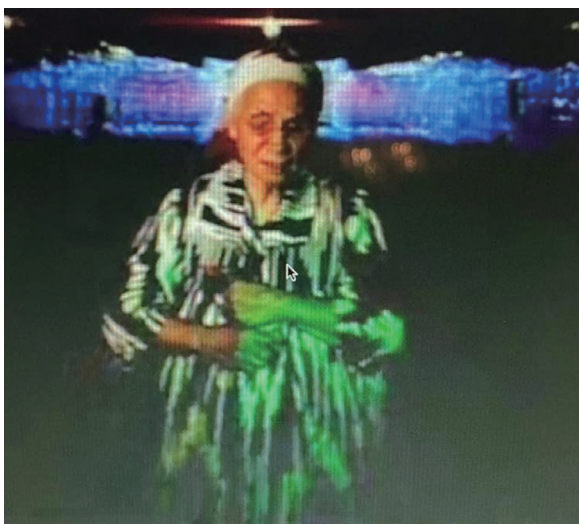


Figure 7: The *Otin-Oy* appearance in the song.

Qoshigni qarosiga hol bo'lay arosiga Saning rahming kelmaydiyo doday
Birovning bolasiga qoshing bilan ko'zinga Oshno bo'ldim o'zinga.
Aytolmayman yuzingayo, doday, Insof bersin o'zingga
To the blackness of your eyebrows
Let me be a beauty spot between them
You have no pity for the child of a stranger.

To your eyebrows and eyes
I became a friend to you,
I can't say it to your face,
Let God grant you fairness

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

Spiritual depth and an eternal subject transform the clip into an artwork, a picture with a dual vision of earthly and cosmic love. Here, we see an elderly woman, who has become a symbol of eternal wisdom, trying to protect an unhappy boy and to guard him away from the tragedy. However, her image is heavily transformed: with a clouded eye, hoarse voice, and rotten teeth, she looks like a beggar. The common image of the well-respected 'granny' is being mocked here in response to the teasing nature of the pop music style. Pop music comes together with the old ritualistic singing style of the female *Otin-Oy* repertoire. Two different languages—Russian and Uzbek—represent two levels of narrative: Russian is used to describe the love story, and Uzbek, deeply rooted in old poetic *Sufi* symbolism with its mystical *ghazal* poetry, is used to present a philosophical side regarding that situation. If the teenage boy's story and action evoke the tragicomic style of the Italian Renaissance and a famous harlequin-related image, the old Uzbek lady appears as a symbol of eternity, although introduced in a nagging 'granny style.' Therefore, the narration comes in a typical teenager's style: mocking and making fun of general authorities such as *Otin-Oys*, displaying their teenage rebellion, and so on [Sultanova 2008].

As one can see, in Uzbekistan, *Otin-Oys* are believed to have power over time and space, bringing together images of the past, present, and future; life and death; solar and lunar features; and Islamic and pre-Islamic traditions. Surviving every single new socio-political system, whether the Russian occupation of Central Asia in the 19th century or the ideological

system of Soviet times in the 20th century, women in this region have become, in a way, cultural ‘Salvation Army’ workers. They are rulers of time and space, turning back the wheel of time, safeguarding their performance duties, regardless of the socio-political changes.

9. Conclusion

Therefore, the scholarly investigation of the Islamic and *Sufi* heritage in Central Asia shows its multi-genre presence in various styles of music. Today, in the 21st century, these millennium-old Islamic genres of music are being performed in both urban and rural areas, thus proving relevant even in modern times. Such an ability to survive despite political bans and pressures shows *Sufi* music’s non-disappearing value, strength, and eternal vitality.

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- 1) *Dj-piligrim* “*qoshingni qarosiga*” (to the blackness of your eyebrows) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QamL7mjoP6A>>. (Accessed on 08.10.2022)
- 2) *Otin-oy Malika Askarova* performs “*Hikmat*” (Lament) — the excerpt from the “*Diwan-i Hikmat*” of *Hoja Ahmad Yassawi* (d.1166). <<https://www.musicofcentralasia.org/Tracks/Chapter/25>>. (Accessed on 08.10.2022)