

THE VALUE OF A VOICE:
CULTURE AND CRITIQUE IN KAZAKH AITYS POETRY

by

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In loving memory of Claudia and Dave DuBuisson

and in memory of Orazaly Dosposunov

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CHAPTER ONE
POETICS AND POLITICS

Aitys: culture, critique

The orienting topic around which this dissertation revolves is Kazakh *aitys*, improvisational poetry, one of the many oral and musical traditions linking Turkey across the Eurasian steppe to Mongolia and China. Literally meaning ‘shared talk,’ *aitys* refers both to a genre and to a competitive performance in which at least two characters or personae pit their words and wits toward victory, leaving their opponent trumped, sometimes literally speechless, without words. A victory is also marked by the use of *solu suzder* (beautiful words) and *adaly suzder* (ancestors’ words), words and phrases that mark particularly deep knowledge of previous cultural ‘texts,’ that employ metaphor, and that characterize a situation precisely, to great effect. *Aitys* is always performed in front of an audience, and by tradition it is audience approval that ultimately decides the winner. *Aitys* is always a dialogue (Zharmokhamedoly 2001: 26). One poet many voice both personae, but it is much more typical for two poets to engage in a verbal duel.¹

¹ Synonyms for *aitysu* (to talk to each other) include *tartysu* (to match up competitively), *daulasu* (to dispute one another), *zharysu* (to compete against one another), or *synasu* (to test, check, or criticize each other) (Auezov, 1964[1959]).

For the last twenty-odd years in Kazakhstan, elite sponsors have created an active national network of poets² who compete in live performances regularly around the country as well as to Kazakh populations beyond its borders. An extensive community of poets, students, mentors, cultural organizers, and sponsors, is well established in nearly every region of the country, and the tradition is perpetuating itself. This network considers itself to be recreating a great Kazakh tradition which was suppressed under the russohegemonic rule of the Soviet Union. In that sense, *aitys* is an interesting lens on postcolonial cultural production and the question of what “authentic culture” might be and who is legitimated to recreate it today. Culture, once the face of each republic’s titular ethnic nationality in the FSU, now occupies a place as the national face of an independent state. But now what is ethnic in form is nationalist, rather than socialist, in content.

Forms like *aitys* (improvisational poetry), *zhyrau* (epic singing), *terme* (moral lesson), *kuyi* (instrumental epic), as well as *dombyra* and *kobyz* (stringed instruments) playing are actively rehistoricized and developed as modes of cultural expertise in mentorship and performance (Adams 2004; Rouland 2005; cf Bourdieu 1993). In oral, epic, and musical traditions,³ a vision of ‘Kazakh Culture’ is located across and beyond the territory of the former republic. Those cultural projects, which in many ways echo previous Soviet models of nation-building,⁴ ultimately locate their sources

² Poets are both men and women, and typically range in age between 18 and 40.

³ See DeWeese 1994; Levin 1996; Radlov 1967; Reichl 2000; Winner 1958 for more extensive historical descriptions of the interlinking of such oral and musical traditions. Several musical compilations have recently emerged representative of a broadly shared cultural world such as *The Silk Road* (2006), *Afghanistan: On Marco Polo’s Road* (1997), *Music of Central Asia* (vol. 1-6, 2006-7), and the recordings of the Silk Road Project (silkroadproject.org).

⁴ For example, that each republic should be a territorial, ethnic, and linguistic whole. Of course such an ideal, born of political ideology as much as locally relevant difference, never actually existed (cf Hirsch 2005; Slezkine 1994; Suny 1998).

of legitimacy in broader cultural and historical worlds, in a primordial ethnic ancestry beyond the bounds of any nation-state. The ironic result of the “dogmatism” of Stalin’s definition of the nation (Tishkov 1997: 21) is it that the rhetoric of Kazakh nationalism provides material which musicians and poets can creatively exploit. Representing the *halykh* (Kazakh people), cultural artists can engage in a dialogue with the government of Kazakhstan – or, more accurately, participate in the ideological debate over the form and content of their nation.

Studies in linguistic anthropology have long demonstrated oral tradition and verbal art to be particularly charged and concentrated sites of ideology and social authority within communities (Briggs and Bauman 1990; Hymes 1981; Kuipers 1990, Scherzer 1990; Silverstein 1981; Tedlock 1983). Abu-Lughod and Caton have argued powerfully for an analysis of the social production and the political consequences of particular poetic genres in Egypt and Yemen, to emphasize poetry’s centrality as a mode of action or a cultural practice, an emergent space for the negotiation of values (Abu-Lughod 1986; Caton 1990; cf Bauman 1977). This resonates deeply with a focus on language as part of a broader political economy, one in which “the variety of verbal performance [is] a precondition for (and thus a defining characteristic of) the social division of labor itself – as practices constituting a social role, or as the objects of economic activity” (Irvine 1989: 4; cf Miller 2005).

My attention to verbal art and ideological contrast serve to locate language in a social economy, as well as in the ongoing reality of post-colonial nation-making. For the case of Kazakh-language *aitys* poetry in Kazakhstan, I describe (1) the tensions surrounding Kazakh and Russian language usage in the post-Soviet period,

(2) the mutually dependent dynamic between poets and elite politicians, as presented in the sponsorship of performances and (3) the dialogic nature of conflict in performance, and (4) the collusive nature of the “voices” present in performance. All are equally factors in understanding the socio-political critique which emerges in performance, and the implications thereof in competing valuations of Kazakhstan as a nation. These processes are the focus of this dissertation.

Kazakhstan as Nation

Across Central Asia, as elsewhere in the former Soviet Union, once republics declared independence and the ruling elite began reforming the communist republic apparatus into that of a national state, retraditionalization of the republic’s titular ethnic group was a ready recipe for nationalist self-legitimation.⁵ In the Central Asian context, nationalizing states (cf Brubaker 1996) had a multivalent agenda. In part, the task was to “recover” the history of ethnic groups “hidden” in the Soviet period, as well as to revitalize and develop the language and iconography of those ethnic groups. Kazakhstan’s government, in the transition from communist to national, has actively worked to reframe symbols of Kazakh culture into those of a Kazakhstani nation: language, religion, history, holidays, flag, currency, and poets (Cummings 2005: 89; see also Alexander and Buchli 2007; Olcott 2002; Smith 1998).

But the retraditionalization of cultural forms like Kazakh language and folklore as the national face of a state in Kazakhstan is complicated by the fact that nearly half the country’s population is not Kazakh. Kazakhstan, in the late Soviet

⁵ This pattern of nation-building in the former Soviet Union has been extensively described (cf Gleason 1997; Khazanov 1995; Kolsto 1999; Laitin 1998; Smith et.al. eds. 1998; Tishkov 1997).

period, was firmly a multiethnic state where Russians made up over forty percent of the population and where Russian language served as a “central unifying factor” across all ethnicities, particularly in urban areas (Holm-Hansen 1999: 163).

In the post-Soviet period, Kazakhstan’s government has had to walk a fine line in policy and practice between two basic positions: (1) internationalism, with an outward-looking Kazakhstan unified by civic and economic concerns, and (2) Kazakh nationalism, undergirded by a vision of shared history, culture, and language (cf Cummings 2005; Dave 2007; Schatz 2000). But as elsewhere in the former Soviet Union, ethnic nationalism is also a negative position – it relies on anger and sadness about collective victimization during the Soviet period⁶ and on contemporary anti-Russian sentiment. While this has not been as much an issue in other republics where Russians do not represent a significant percentage of the population, in Kazakhstan it is an obvious problem. Kazakhstan’s links to Russia, “economic, geopolitical, linguistic, and psychological,” forged deeply in the Soviet period and perduring today, are also the strongest of any of the former republics (Dave 2007: 1; cf Olcott 2002). In this context, language has come to serve as a major metaphor as the government juggles these two contradictory positions and the ensuing tension and debate.

In 1997 Kazakh became the republic’s official language, and Russian became a semi-official lingua franca. Despite the change in policy, there were minimal

⁶ All the former republics experienced collective trauma in the Soviet period in both the Stalinist purges and in World War II. In Central Asia, tens of thousands perished as a result of collectivization. Misguided Soviet agricultural and industrial expansion (rerouting water sources, lack of pollution regulation) have left thousands more sick, as has nuclear development and weapons testing in Kazakhstan specifically. For discussions of these historical experiences as a marker of collective identity, see Akiner 1995; Carrere d’Encausse 1993; Olcott 1995; Wolfel 2002.

practical changes in practice to change the situation in the country. In other words, the policy itself was Kazakh nationalist, but the status quo remained internationalist. Schatz (2000) notes that though “internationalism with an ethnic face” creates contradiction, it also has had the capacity to hide ambiguity under the guise of official coherence. It is a formula of cultural harmony familiar from the Soviet period, and as state strategy it is necessary and appealing because it contributes to interethnic stability.⁷ (fig. 1)



Figure 1: Billboard in Almaty 2004, "Harmony is the highest happiness"
photo by author

Playing down interethnic tension has become a basic strategy of the ruling elite in Kazakhstan. Dave (2007) sees this as a direct continuation of attitudes developed during the Soviet period, as the ruling elite remained in power during the transition from communist republic to independent nation:

⁷ In other former republics with higher percentages of Russians in the country’s population interethnic tension has tended to escalate, as in Georgia (Laitin 1998) or Ukraine (Wanner 1998).

“[T]he Soviet socialist state, through a mix of coercive, paternalistic, and egalitarian measures, forged a distinct sense of ethnic entitlement among its nations or ‘subjects.’ A growing assertion of ethnic entitlements went hand in hand with a steady depoliticization of ethnicity. This contradiction helps to illuminate another paradox – the communist-turned-nationalist phenomenon – the ability of the titular communist elites to portray themselves as representatives of their nation, despite having fully collaborated with the Soviet regime in the past” (5; cf Cummings 2005; Jones-Luong 2002).

Among the ruling elite today, the vast majority are Kazakh due to processes of “nationalization,” the process of replacing Russians with Kazakhs in prominent positions (Cummings 2005; Dave 2007). However, within the Kazakh elite there are two major groups: those who speak Kazakh and those who do not. From the internationalist perspective, a russophone leadership is unproblematic, as the country’s position and outward expansion on a global stage is the clear priority, and Russian language is seen as far more conducive to that end. From a Kazakh nationalist perspective, however, russophone Kazakhs are seen as *mankurttar*, those who have lost their cultural memory and therefore do not rebel.⁸ The process of Kazakh cultural production in Kazakhstan today reflects the Kazakh nationalist position, and therefore while “culture” is ideologically external to “politics,” the operations of power, cultural production is by definition highly political.

Aitys and a “Kazakh” identity

For contemporary *aitys* the presentation of history, language, and culture in the interests of unity is a basic premise of performance. There is a consistent but

⁸ The term was coined by famed Kirghiz author Chingiz Aitmatov in the popular novel *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years*, written in 1990 during the years of perestroika. It is a fictionalized account of a Kyrghyz man traumatized by his experiences fighting in WWII, and incorporates Kazakh folk myths. (see Dave 2007: 70). On the contemporary negative use of the term *mankurt* in a political context see also Smith et.al. eds. 1998: 140.

unremarked upon irony in poets' damnation of Soviet rule but celebration of an ethnic identity conceived largely in the terms of Soviet nationalities policy. In Kazakhstan, in addition to general resentment over the fate of millions of Kazakh lives lost to famine, exile, and war over the last century, there is also a clear contemporary moment of an 'awakening' of a *Kazakh* identity as read against Soviet Russia: the events of December 1986.

That month, known simply as *Zheltokhsan* (December), was the month which also clearly marked the beginning of the end of the USSR in Kazakhstan. Then Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev replaced Kazakh Dinmukhamed Kunayev with Russian Gennady Kolbin as First Secretary of Kazakhstan's Communist Party. This move represented a direct break with Soviet policy and tradition – that the head of each republic should be of that republic's titular nationality. Kazakhs were outraged, and thousands joined a large student protest in the central squares in the cities of Almaty, Taldykorgan, Shimkent, and Karaganda. For three days (the 16-19th), protestors clashed with police special forces. In addition to the immediate arrest and jailing of hundreds of citizens, police filmed all the protesters and continued to hunt, interrogate, and imprison people for months after the protest had ended, as the police had carefully filmed all those present at the demonstrations.⁹

The events unleashed waves of bad sentiment between ethnic Kazakhs and Russian leadership (which of course translated to interethnic conflict more immediately on the ground). The Kazakhstani government was trapped somewhere in-between, wishing to ameliorate Kazakh concerns but reluctant to move toward

⁹ On the December events see Aitbaioly and Toiboldy 1992; Dave 2007; Michaels 1996; Olcott 1995.

complete autonomy. Kolbin was eventually replaced as First Secretary by Nursultan Nazarbayev, who assumed the presidency post-independence on 16 December 1991, in a blatantly symbolic move meant to link Zheltoksan directly to national independence.¹⁰

Zheltoksan, not surprisingly, is an event consistently invoked in *aitys* performances, as the last egregious act of the Soviet Union against the Kazakh people. In the years following the December events, active efforts among poets, artists, musicians, and supportive cultural producers began to revamp traditions seen as particularly ‘Kazakh,’ to reclaim their pre-Soviet (and even pre-Russian) glory. Government, too, began to propel that activity. *Aitys* was quickly lauded, as it was not only entertaining, but a vehicle of sociopolitical conversation and critique.

Among the genres of poetry and music (listed above) which are a part of broader nationalist cultural production *aitys* is also quite literally political. In the contemporary period of competitions, roughly twenty years, one of the primary features of *aitys* performances is that poets criticize government for social and political ills ranging from alcoholism to nepotism. They sometimes do so in a general way, using general referents such as *deputat* (member of state senate). But poets also often specifically name individual leaders, including the president himself, which is technically illegal and an offense for which many other critics (independent journalists, opposition politicians) have been severely punished and even killed. A basic concern of this dissertation is to explain poets’ relative impunity.

¹⁰ This was more than a bit ironic, given that it was a conflict between Kunayev and Nazarbayev within the Secretariat that prompted the former into dialogue with Gorbachev in the first place; Kunayev worried about Nazarbayev’s intentions and wanted to prevent him from ascending in the party.

Kazakhstan's Political Context

Kazakhstan's seated president is Nursultan Nazabayev, formerly the party head of the Kazakh SSR. Like other Central Asian presidents, since he assumed power in 1991, he has managed to keep that office by means of constitutional amendments and manipulated elections.¹¹ The nature of power in Kazakhstan can be characterized as authoritarian patrimony (cf Cummings 2005; Dave 2007; Olcott 2002; Schatz 2004). Nazabayev has created a tiered system of centralized power, which centers on his family (namely his two daughters and their husbands) and expands outward among his extended kin network and former communist cadre leaders.¹² This group controls all major business in the country, most importantly oil production, and all the profits therefrom. The railroad, airline, media conglomerate, the largest bazaars, and all major development and construction projects, gas, diamonds – these are all ultimately controlled by the president, as their owners belong to his inner circle (Cummings, 2005; Dave 2007).¹³

On a countrywide scale, Nazabayev also maintained the centralized control of the previous socialist republic. The country is broken into fourteen administrative regions, each of which has a regional and municipal mayor, an *akim*. The country's capital Astana and largest city Almaty are treated as administrative regions and also have mayors. All mayors are presidential appointees, as are his cabinet ministers.

¹¹ One strategy Nazabayev has employed is to change the dates of presidential elections on short notice and without consensus, leaving other political parties without the time required by law to assemble the petitions necessary to participate in the election, making himself by default the only viable candidate (Cummings 2005: 102).

¹² See Schatz (2004) *Modern Clan Politics: The Power of 'Blood' in Kazakhstan and Beyond* for an illuminating discussion of the way that the rhetoric of 'clan,' seemingly an exclusionary blood-based term, actually functions to incorporate non-relatives and even some ethnic Russians into the structure of power.

¹³ On emerging alternate economies and systems of exchange in Kazakhstan, see Nazpary 2002 and Werner 1998, 2000.

Nazabayev regularly switches these individuals among posts, so as to discourage anyone from developing loyalty regionally (Schatz 2004).¹⁴

Within this system, power and fortune potentially abound, but they are largely limited to those in favor with the president, the implicit trade-off being lack of dissent. Dave (2007) explains the consequences of criticism for the clients of President Nazabayev's patronage: "Those who attempt to engage in economic or political activities seen as threatening to the ruling elite, or question the legitimacy of the existing political order, incur heavy penalties and face a disproportionate exercise of state coercion under the guise of law" (4). Of five major opposition figures who publicly charged the President's administration of corruption since 2002, two have been murdered, and three have been imprisoned.¹⁵ By Kazakhstan's law, a person is rendered ineligible to run for office if they have served jailtime. Criticism was

¹⁴ For an exposition of this "inner cadre," and an explanation of "the extraordinary degree of reshuffling" among the central elite in the 1990's, see Cummings 2005:49, 112. For a detailed analysis of Kazakhstan's electoral system and resultant conflict between centralized and regional power see Jones-Luong 2002 *Institutional Change and Political Continuity in Post-Soviet Central Asia.*, pp 213-252.

¹⁵ These incidents are:

(1) (2) Galymzhan Zhakianov, former regional governor and leader of the opposition party Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan (DVK), and Mukhtar Ablyazov, former minister of Energy, Industry, and Trade and also a leader of DVK, were arrested, tried, and imprisoned in August 2002 for abuse of powers. Ablyazov received a pardon in exchange for resigning from public political life. Zhakianov was allegedly harassed while in poor health after suffering a heart attack, two of his employees were beaten by police, and the KNB repeatedly tried to force him to accept a pardon agreement like Ablyanov's. Human Rights Watch Vol. 16 No. 3

(3) Zamanbek Nurkadirov, former mayor of Almaty, in an open letter in 2003 demanded the resignation of the president on the grounds of corruption. He was killed in November 2005 (officials said he had committed suicide but forensic evidence – two shots to his chest and one to his head – evidenced murder.)

(4) Altynbek Sarsenbayev, former Kazakhstani ambassador to Russia, former minister of Information and former mayor of Almaty, and co-chair of opposition party Naghyz Ak Zhol, was murdered along with his driver and bodyguard in February of 2006.

(5) Bulat Abilov, independent businessman and co-chair of opposition party Naghyz Ak Zhol, served an eighteen month sentence for slander after being arrested and tried in 2004, one in an on-going series of harassments. Abilov was also detained for organizing a public assembly in protest of Sarsenbayev's death.

particularly unwanted at the time of my research (2003-2006), as parliamentary elections were held in 2004 and the presidential election in 2005.¹⁶

In addition to the jailing, harassment, and death of major opposition figures, the country's security service KNB (formerly KGB) keeps surveillance on all independent media. The BBC headquarters had recently moved when I began my research, as their former office had been found bugged. The Committee to Protect Journalists has consistently criticized Nazarbayev for his consolidation and control of media, as have Human Rights Watch, the Institute for War and Peace Reporting, the United States State Department, and various other media watch groups such as Reporters Without Borders.

The country's single largest media conglomerate, *KkXabar* (news) is owned by the president's daughter, Dariga Nazabayeva, as a result of in the privatization processes undertaken by the state in 1997. In that year, media companies were required to bid for their licenses, and the initial tender was set so high that only the inner cadre could afford to buy them. In subsequent years, efforts to sustain alternate or "opposition" media have met with strong-arm tactics from the state – arrests of lead personnel and fire-bombing of offices (Dave 2007; Olcott 2002).¹⁷ In this

¹⁶ The party *OTAN* (Fatherland) was formed in 1999 to prop the president in extra-constitutional early elections (Cummings 2005: 102). Nazarbayev and OTAN won the 2004-05 election cycle in a landslide; the elections were deemed undemocratic by both local and international observers (OSCE report 2004, 2005; Republican Network of International Monitors Report 2004, 2005). For more on the formation and activities of OTAN see Jones-Luong 2004 and Olcott 2002.

¹⁷ In 1998, opposition newspaper *XXI Vek* (21st Century) run by Akezhan Kazhegeldin (ousted as Prime Minister in 1997) had its offices firebombed and was subsequently forced to close (Olcott 2002). Sergei Duvanov, an independent journalist who reported on 'Kazakhgate,' corruption in dealings between the Kazakh government and American oil companies (namely Chevron), was arrested, tried and jailed for rape in dubious proceedings in 2003. <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/rights/articles/eav102902.shtml>) The owner of Kazakhstan's only openly opposition newspaper *Respublika*, Irina Petruchova, faces constant harassment, has been made to leave the country, and was arrested in 2005. The newspaper has been forced to shut its operations on several occasions and the offices were firebombed in 2002. (<http://www.rsf.org/Russian-police-step-up-harassment.html>)

environment, needless to say, freedom of political expression is highly limited. The question of why poets – singing all over the country not only in live performances but televised on the state media channel – get away with criticism becomes a basic one.

Aitys Poets

Renat was the first *akhyn* (poet) I interviewed, the first to take a chance on me, to come to my home and be awkwardly served tea (from bags) and cakes in the kitchen (my silly attempts at Kazakh hospitality, where the table is supposed to be in the formal room, piled with things to eat, and the tea should be freshly brewed). He was a very polite guest, but when we talked years later he laughed and said he'd thought it was pretty funny. He was nineteen when I met him, and even then he was a star. We talked for two hours straight. I asked him all the questions I'd fretfully prepared, and Renat answered them each seriously and thoughtfully. "I have a gift," he said, "My purpose is to voice the truth of the people."

Over the years I worked in the *aitys* community, interviewing participants, there came to be a few questions I asked of everyone: why do you do what you do? What is the point of *aitys*? How do you know *aitys* has been successful? Aman Zhol, a well established poet from Astana who has participated in the televised national *aitys* competitions for over a decade, explained that he should reach people's hearts and leave something there. "Even if someone's only [at *aitys*] for an hour, [he] will listen to beautiful, strong words," which he hopes will influence people by raising different ideas about the situations and issues they face in their lives. "*Aitys* has always been a medium for the people," he explained, "and so poets have a duty to be

honest.” Poets represent *all* people, Aman Zhol emphasized, they don’t belong to any one party¹⁸ or to one person.¹⁹

Similarly, the poet Balghymbek from Astana told me that *aitys* akhyns exist to raise the political consciousness of the people. The particular genre of Zhekpe Zhek (one-on-one, which he also refers to as simply *shyndykh*, truth) allows poets to do just that, because they can relay information about the political situation, “who is who and what is happening.” As a result of *aitys*, he noted, people living in the country now have access to a lot of new information. Generally, people’s standards for poets are very high because the tradition is *Kazakhtyng kasieti*, a feature or quality of Kazakhness. Both he and Renat agree that the talent can pass genetically, but ultimately it is a gift from God.

“If you have more knowledge, then your vision is more beautiful,” explained Dauletkere, Balghymbek’s contemporary and close friend. Dauletkere is also a successful akhyn in Kazakhstan, where he and his family moved from Mongolia years ago. When I asked him if he represents Mongolia when he sings *aitys* he grew defensive: “The land I represent is Kazakh land!” His goal, like Aman Zhol, is to influence his audiences, to give them information but to do so in a compelling way. If a poet does not tell the truth and make an effort to relay real circumstances, a poet is not an *akhyn*. The success of that effort depends on your opponent, explains Balghymbek – if two poets go in different directions they bore the people.

¹⁸ Here he used the Russian term *parti’a*, which means political party. Because at that time their primary sponsors were technically part of the governments party, poets faced much criticism for being talking heads. They were all very defensive about it, and the topic came up in my interviews and conversations with them whether I asked about it or not.

¹⁹ Here, again responding to general criticism, he means to any one sponsor.

Here, he means literally the people in the live audience, upon whom the success of every *aitys* depends. All the poets have explained this to me, how they feel the audience and sense their response, how audience support is palpable, how it brings confidence and happiness, how it can make the muses come faster. Poets feel the audience react – during performance they must make a connection. What is the point of all of this, how do we know *aitys* has been successful? Literally every single person I interviewed had the same answer: *it is satisfying*.

“It’s of course important to inform authorities in our country, but [here] you can’t criticize openly. But [poets] try, of course, try to say something important for the people. If people hear it, about the problems *they* think about, they’re very satisfied – you can tell from their reaction.” Reflecting on this point, Dauletkeere told me he likes it when people recognize him. “It’s a great pleasure because they don’t just recognize *you*, it means they recognized your words, it means you can influence people toward something.” But on whom and how can a poet’s words have influence?

The Dialogism of “Words”

Poets themselves draw a distinction between their words or phrases (*suzder*), and the concept of having a voice (*un*). In this dissertation I attempt to illuminate the distinction within the contexts of performance, learning, sponsorship, and politics. From an analytic perspective, the relationship between an *akhyn* and his or her *suzder* correlates to that between an utterance and the person who “animates” or actively produces that utterance (Goffman 1981:144). Poets want for their words to be

beautiful and powerful, as Dauletkere points out above, not just so that they themselves (or rather, their poetic personae) become famous, but rather so that the words are memorable, iterable. Words that are remembered will be repeated in contexts ranging far beyond that of the immediate performance, and will have an impact within a broader social world. Poets can create *suzder* which will be part of the *un*, the voice, of the *aitys* tradition.

There is no question for poets that their words are dialogic, that in the course of performance they are not single “authors” (where “author” is defined as “someone who has selected the sentiments that are being expressed and the words in which they are encoded,” *ibid.*). At a basic level, *aitys* literally means “shared talk,” and all poets know that the success of any given performance depends on their dialogue with an opponent. All poets have at least one mentor, and a group of peers with whom they perform and practice regularly. If they are old enough, they also have students. This group necessarily contributes over time to the quality of poets’ words and phrasing, and if possible, they are usually present when the poet performs.²⁰ Further, as the poets explain above, the audience plays a great role in the success or failure of performance – the audible level of vocal enthusiasm and clapping (or lack thereof) encourages (or discourages) poets.²¹

At any one competition, several pairs of poets compete, each establishing anew relationships with their audience which may be successful or no. And within the context of any one competition, there are also other types of “words” spoken

²⁰ A poet’s group will usually be in the audience, but in several performances I witnessed, members of the group actually came on stage to sit behind the poet where he or she could consult with them during competition.

²¹ Pagliai (2002) also describes the dialogic relationships among poets and audiences and the consequences thereof for political commentary in the case of Italian verbal duels.

regularly: a head cultural organizer sits on stage with poets and functions as an MC, inviting poets to perform and often commenting on the performance. After the poets have all sung, they are judged by a jury sitting within the audience; a representative of the jury often stands to explain who has “won” the competition and to offer the reasoning behind that decision. At the end of each competition, all poets reassemble on stage and prizes are handed out to the top performers. Prizes are given by particular sponsors, who often pause to give a small speech to the audience. Poetic personae, audiences, cultural organizers, juries, mentors/students, and sponsors are all participants in the dialogic framework of performance and have various roles within that frame: as speakers, hearers, ratified listeners, etc. (cf Goffman 1974)

Dialogism and named relationships

There is another level at which *aitys* is dialogic: as a basic tenet of performance, poets must inhabit multiple social relationships: territorial, familial, historical. Poets always speak as and for a region, they are known and called by their first names and their region of origin. Poets also are always speaking as members of a particular maximal lineage group (Kaz: *ru*)²²; these groups are also loosely territorially defined. Another type of ancestry which poets claim is a connection with the famous *akhyndar* (poets) or *batyrlar* (warriors) who also come from their region.

In order to *aitysu*, to speak with or against an opponent, poets must verbally establish a fictive kinship relationship. Named kinship relationships, both lineal and affinal, are an entirely salient and normal part of everyday life for Kazakhs, and each

²² The Kazakh tribes normally invoked are the six of the middle horde: Arghyn, Naiman, Kipshak, Khongyrat, Uakh, and Kereu.

named relationship corresponds to a mutual attitude and decorum between kin.²³ For example, the relationship between older and younger siblings (or paternal cousins) is an advising one, while the relationship between a wife and her husband’s younger brother is a joking one. Naming a kinship relationship, for poets, defines the parameters of their subsequent performance and how their words are to be understood or judged within those parameters – what qualifies as a “good” phrase within the parameters of one relationship might be entirely inappropriate in another.

Poets tend to extend named kin relationships to other figures whom they assume (or wish to invoke) in the dialogic nature of their performance: god, “the ancestors” writ large, the audience, and finally, “the Kazakh people.” This type of kin naming takes place within the first few turns of talk. Poets always begin their performances by greeting their audience and establishing “who” they are. Consider for example this stereotypical opening by the poet Orazaly:

Oy, armysyng alty Alashtyng irgeli yeli!
Bedeli bes kharydai irgedegi.
Aittaryngyz bugingi khabyly bolyp,
akh nietting aghylysyn tuimeleri.

Oi, hello united tribes, knowledgeable people,
Your authority is like a yurt’s five foundations.
May your wishes today on Ait be fulfilled,
may your pure intentions be buttons undone!

Khazir men aruakh dep aighailasam,
batyrlar dulyghaly turgeledi.
Armysyng, akh samaily apalarym,
khadiri han khyzyndai kuibedegi.

Now if I shout for the ancestors,
Warriors stand in their armor [helmets].
Hello, my white-temple grandmothers,
Your authority is like that of a khan’s daughter.

Orazaly here names his audience as six united tribes, a “people” (*yel*), ancestors, warriors, and his own grandmothers, and he likens them to the kin of the khan. Further, he does so while simultaneously claiming the authority of those

²³ For a complete list of named Kazakh kin relationships and a discussion of appropriate comportment therein see Kim 2008. One possible exception to the kin rule would be the form *Khyz ben Zhigit* (girl and boy, or flirting) *aitys*, in which a man and woman of about the same age compete. That relationship is culturally understood as a joking relationship, an audience would certainly expect a humorous performance. Additionally, in the *Khyz ben Zhigit* performances I saw, at least one of the poets is joking about the possibility of marriage by alluding to potential affinal kinship relations.

groups. Naming is a way of calling attention to the dialogic nature of performance; what is critical is that ultimately, no one party is singly accountable for what is said. That is, there is no necessary relationship between the person(s) who *animate* a voice and the attribution of (or claim to) *agency* in that voice (cf Hill and Irvine 1992). The various characters and relationships poets assume, name, and invoke during performance all contribute to *degrees of obfuscation* which are essential to the effectiveness of what-is-said, as well as to the irreproachability of the speakers (ibid.) As Bauman (1992) notes, “our analyses of oral literature have tended to center on forms and instances of apparent – or assumed – full performance,” but we (linguistic anthropologists) should “extend our investigations to performances that are hedged, ambiguous, negotiated, shifting, or partial – instances where speakers may not wish to take full responsibility to their audiences for a display of communicative competence” (184).

“The people” as “principal”

Within the immediate performance context, poets-as-animators inhabit a variety of relationships with their opponents and audiences, with cultural organizers, juries, and sponsors, and with fictive figures named or invoked in their song. Within each relationship poets (and audiences) also inhabit different *frames*, and it is through “laminations” or layers of framing that the total “voice system” (cf Hill 1995; Irvine 1996) of the *aitys* competition is created. Even as they seek to distinguish themselves with beautiful or good *words*, all poets are very aware of their participation of the *aitys* tradition as a whole, that the tradition itself has some kind of *un*, voice, in

Kazakh history. But that voice, what poets describe as “the truth of the people,” has emerged both as a medium of [ethnic] cultural unity and as a vehicle of sociopolitical critique in contemporary performances. Poets do not claim direct responsibility for animating that voice in the *words* of their particular poetic persona, but rather together with all the other speech, relationships, and memory which is part of the tradition as a whole.

I would argue that the *suzder*, the words, of poets are best understood as what Vološinov (1998[1973]) termed *particularized direct discourse*, wherein “the authorial context ... is so constructed that the traits the author used to define a character cast heavy shadows on his directly reported speech” (134). Vološinov gives the specific example of a comedian – when that figure enters the stage, his audience expects to laugh. In the context of *aitys*, when the figure of “a poet” (any poet) enters the stage, both that poet and his or her audience(s) anticipate the way that a poet strives toward memorable words. As in Vološinov’s example, the context assumes *anticipated and disseminated reported speech* concealed in the authorial context” (ibid: 135). The only proviso I would make here is that Vološinov is working from a primarily literary paradigm, where he is taking “author” somewhat literally as the individual who pens the contexts and words of various “characters.” His use of the term overlaps with, but is not coterminous with, the use of the term by Goffman (1981).

Goffman distinguishes *author* from *animator* (defined above) but these roles are collapsed in Vološinov’s example of the comedian. Animator and author, in Goffman’s analysis, are further distinguished from *principal*, “someone whose

position is established by the words that are spoken, someone whose beliefs have been told, someone who is committed to what the words say” (ibid.: 144). As each poet intentionally assumes only a partial responsibility toward the “voice” of the tradition as a whole, they are ultimately but a part of the *principal* of *aitys*. The true principal, following poets’ claim, is an entirely hazy, and ostensibly polyphonic, category of “the Kazakh people.”

Ultimately, in its focus on a Goffmanian “principal,” this project diverges somewhat from previous studies of “voice” in linguistic anthropology which are arguably more concerned with elucidating the dialogism of the “animator.” Several studies of voice have focused on one speaker’s stretch of talk (or an ostensibly singly-authored text), and sought to identify and/or explicitly trace the various “voices” which inhabit it (cf Goodman 1998; Haviland 1991; Hill 1995; Keane 1991).²⁴ The case presented here, by contrast, is one in which one voice is attributed to a group, “the people,” which cannot possibly be homogeneous or monophonic but which encompasses many different social roles and identities and ways of speaking. That poets ideologically erase the social differentiation and multivocality of the group they claim to represent is of interest because, like the studies above, ultimately what is at stake is precisely *responsibility for what is said by that voice*. As Jane Hill elucidates at length in her analysis of a man’s narrative about the death of his son, what is at stake for the narrator is “a moral position among conflicting ways of speaking” (1995: 97). In that sense, a voice can be viewed as a *site of consciousness and subjectivity in discourse* (ibid.) to which a narrator can bear accountability.

²⁴ That is not to say that such a study would not be possible for *aitys*. Quite the opposite; it is certainly the case that as a genre, *aitys* is porous and poets regularly “quote” other genres and artists, both musically and verbally, to great effect. An example of a blatant switch in style is given in chapter two.

Under conditions of censorship and repression, if one function of “the voice of the people” is to critique government, then it is clearly in poets’ interests to make the agent of that voice as opaque as possible. Mikhail Bakhtin’s original discussion of “voice,” which has underlain all subsequent analysis in linguistic anthropology, has been recently critiqued for its vagueness, and particularly for its failure to sufficiently differentiate the concepts of individual and social voice.²⁵ Keane (2000) also explains how linguistic anthropologists have used one term to refer to both the sense of having a political voice, representative of a group, and the sense in which a voice represents one identity or point of view. But ultimately, the case of *aitys* I present here also collapses those meanings: its principle must be at once unified and political. But who or what is represented by “the voice of the people”?

Aitys as the Voice of Kazakh Nationalism

There is a ready and obvious option to understand “the voice” of the *aitys* tradition as that of Kazakh nationalism, writ large. As the outcome of nearly a century of cultural production, through the Soviet period and continuing today, there is no question that *aitys* firmly occupies the status of “folklore,” a genre of Kazakh literature. As I argue in the next chapter, particular poets and folklorists alike have become canonized, fundamental not only to *aitys*, but to the notion of an “authentic Kazakh culture.” These figures are “enshrined” in the literature and landscape of some imagined Kazakh cultural history in both text and mausoleum by professional

²⁵ Agha (2005) argues that the subset of “social voices” in Bakhtin’s analysis is better seen as a typology of *registers*, which each in turn index particular social types. A productive line of inquiry would then be to attune to the voicing contrasts supposed by Bakhtin, which can be identified in the shift from one register to another and attendant linguistic phenomena.

culture producers, working to some extent in conjunction with the state both in the Soviet era and in a new climate of “Eurasianism” in Kazakhstan today.

As I have argued here, the ruling elite are divided on their attitude toward “authentic Kazakh culture” – while most would agree that it is necessary, at least minimally as a set of symbols, the russophone internationalists who comprise a significant percentage of government do not think that propelling or promoting Kazakh language and culture (i.e. diverting funds or energies toward that end) is particularly necessary, let alone a priority. Kazakh language is associated with the past, Russian language with the future (cf Dave 2007). By contrast, Kazakh nationalists, the bilingual Kazakh-speaking elite, use language as a metaphor for discussing issues of heightened independence from Russia and a reclamation of a positively valued Kazakh cultural identity. It is from among their ranks that sponsors for *aitys* are to be found. While overt dissent is not tolerated by Nazabayev’s authoritarian regime, there is no clear penalty for sponsoring a cultural performance, even if the content of that performance is to some extent anti-government.

In fact, there are many rewards for members of the elite who promote and attach their names to *aitys* and other musical, poetic, and sport traditions in Kazakhstan: they become well-known among the Kazakh population who attends and attunes to those cultural events. Sponsors differentiate themselves as “good leaders,” in contrast to the uncaring leaders who continue to leave a vast majority of the country’s citizens largely disenfranchised. As I describe in chapter three, it is by firmly inhabiting the role of a Kazakh nationalist in performance that poets are able to carry off the sharpest sociopolitical critique; they blame the country’s problems on

the internationalist elite, the nepotistic and inattentive *mankurttar* who have lost their own culture and therefore fail to care about their own people.

In the third chapter I describe how *Aitys* poets are legitimated in and through contexts and relationships structured ideologically by a positive and valorized notion of Kazakh language itself as “rich” and “historic” in its own right. That ideology reverses the (post)colonial hegemony of Russian language as superior and civilized. There is no question that just as each poet learns to craft his or her wording and phrasing in Kazakh, if the *aitys* tradition itself has a voice, the language in which it must speak is Kazakh. Given the contested nature of language in Kazakhstan today, bilingual with a majority russophone population, it is no surprise that *aitys* performances, simply by virtue of their being *in Kazakh*, come to serve as a welcome unifying force for Kazakhs around the country. Similarly, the predominant use of named kinship metaphors as a structuring and maximally inclusive dialogic device is another trope of cultural unification.

That model of cultural performance is predicated on a particular structure of relative wealth within Kazakh communities: poets speak on behalf of a disenfranchised populace *to* an elite, and it is that elite which is responsible for funding poets’ performances. It is a relationship which is ideally mutually dependent, because *it is precisely this symbiosis which provides the grounds from whence poets can launch more serious sociopolitical critique*, as I describe in chapter four. However, there is a persistent threat that poets (and/or their organizers) will “sell out” to the interests of the elite who support them. In other words, the threat is that poets would no longer voice the people, but the elite.

In chapter five I investigate the nature of sponsorship in *aitys* performances, and offer three scenarios: one successful, where the relationship between poets and audience was foregrounded to the great joy of both, a second scenario where sponsors' self-interest poses a threat to the possibility of "selling out," and a third climate of sponsorship where sponsors used *aitys* as a way of promoting a broader political agenda, and unduly influenced the content of *aitys* such that sponsors themselves became the primary object of performance, to the great dissatisfaction of poets and audience alike. What is really lost for poets and audiences alike when sponsors overstep is the opportunity to dialogically demand accountability from government, to participate in an even minimally representative politics.

Value lost: to be "without voice"

If *aitys* is sold, it also means that "the Kazakh people," an as yet largely disenfranchised majority, lose one of their only channels of political participation; they lose their "voice." Looking at the tradition as a whole in a climate of authoritarian repression and censorship, as a vehicle of sociopolitical critique, it is readily apparent that, while not unconstrained and not without consequence, there remain sentiments expressed in performance which do not often get voiced in other public contexts. Moreover, because of the large numbers of people watching *aitys*, whether in live staged competitions or in televised versions, that critique is viewed and disseminated widely.

In chapters five and six I give two different examples of *aitys* competitions in which political criticism was next to absent, in both cases because of overzealous

sponsorship. In the first case I explain how one frustrated poet herself was able to exploit the traditional dialogic structure of *aitys* in a subsequent different sponsorship and performance context, to rally against this “selling out.” In the last case, in which *aitys* was performed in Russian, it becomes harder to see how poets might recover from the threat posed by sponsors. In order to understand that threat, what is lost in that context, in the concluding chapter I pose the question: what does it mean to be without a voice? “Voicelessness” is one of the harshest criticisms poets hurl at politicians, particularly seated senate members. What they mean is *the practical inability to effect change* – impotence. So few people or groups in Kazakhstan today are in a position to call attention to, let alone criticize, the authoritarian and centralizing government, and those who do are silenced. The “selling out” of *aitys* is, from the perspective of poets and audiences, the silencing of the “voice of the Kazakh people,” the citizens of the state.

A Note on Fieldwork

During each of the three years of my fieldwork, I investigated distinct aspects of the *aitus* tradition, and employed linguistic and ethnographic methods accordingly. My first year, funded by a Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Fellowship, was centered on understanding poets’ lives and performances. I attended and recorded regular national performances in the country’s former capital Almaty, and traveled regularly with poets to special performances throughout Kazakhstan, and in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Russia. Eight poets, as well as the primary organizer of *aitus* competitions and one primary sponsor, agreed to regular semi-structured interviews

over the course of the year. This gave me a sense of their competing responsibilities (to multiple jobs and families) over time. Spending time together also provided a context by which to begin analyzing the textual materials I recorded.

Poets consider themselves responsible for knowledge of Kazakh language, oral traditions, literatures, and history, as well as current events in all the regions of the contemporary nation and global news relevant to Central Asia. Many work either as professors of Kazakh literature or as journalists. I worked closely with them as well as with independent journalists in order to stay abreast of regionally relevant topics and events referenced by poets. I also made it a point to collaborate with the team at the state-controlled national television station responsible for live broadcasts of aitys competitions, as that team continually fought to keep live broadcasts of aitys on the air. This allowed me to contextualize and analyze poets' words in the broader framework of relative political and media unfreedom in which they speak.

Also during that first year, I made two trips to the Aitys Research Center at Eurasia University in the capital city of Astana, where historians and poets gave me a grounding in the cultural history of Kazakh poets and major figures and events referenced in aitys performances. The Department of Folklore at the Academy of Literature and the Arts also proved to be a fertile ground for archival research as well as for conversation and collaboration with local scholars engaged in textual analysis of Turkic oral traditions and cultural preservation projects. This connected me with colleagues and illuminated local intellectual ideologies of language, Culture, and oral tradition. Not fluent in Kazakh myself, I always worked with local translators, but in

that first year I was also fortunate to have a long-term research assistant, Zaure Batayeva, who traveled with me between Almaty and Astana, and to Moscow.

All national poets move from training and performance at the regional level to national and international competitions. To study this progression, and to examine the influence of regional organizers and sponsors on performances, in my second and third years of research, I moved to Kyzylorda, Shimkent, and Semipolatinsk (regional capitals) for periods of three to six months to work as a participant observer in regional cultural affairs offices. The latter recruit and judge local poets for competitions, channel government and private sponsorship monies, advertise and stage competitions. With the help of office directors and staff, I gathered a wealth of textual documentation of present-day as well as Soviet-era aitus performances. With their help and connections, I was also able to go on cultural pilgrimages and to visit Soviet era poets' homes and shrines, a practice carried on by most currently performing poets today, which deeply enriched my ethnographic understanding of the aitus tradition.

As those second and third years of research were also alternately parliamentary and presidential election years, I wanted to get a sense of Kazakhstan's political awareness and involvement beyond official national discourses. I lived with multigenerational Kazakh-speaking families in each of the regions where I worked, which allowed me to stay current with local concerns and gossip, and to develop a lived sense of familial responsibility, daily gendered economies, and religious practices. These experiences deeply enriched my understanding of poets' jokes and metaphors, and also allowed me to experience the

country's cultural and political events as part of a televisual [imagined] audience. I documented the level of political awareness and cultural participation of my extended kin and work networks in different regions by noting media consumption, event participation, and discussion of topics and events in homes and in gatherings.

In my third and final year of research, funded by a Wenner Gren Individual Research grant, I examined sponsorship. I chose to be a participant observer at a school for the artistically gifted in Shimkent where *aitys* is taught and in an *aitys* mentorship network in Semei. In both, experienced poets serve as administrators and teachers, helping to channel younger poets into public performances and into relationships with cultural affairs offices and with sponsors. I attended classes with young poets and musicians, watched rehearsals, and accompanied them to public performances, and became a regular group photographer. From interviews and regional sponsors, as well as from visits to their business enterprises I learned that by sponsoring "cultural projects" like *aitys*, the political elite could simultaneously act to "voice" dissent from regional and national governments while gaining popular prestige at both levels. Their patronage allowed young poets variously to work their way through school and/or support their families; the relationship between poets and their sponsors is mutually beneficial.

I undertook the final trip for this research project in the summer of 2007. Three research assistants and I worked together to transcribe and translate the final set of materials from my collection of interviews and performances necessary to complete the dissertation.

CHAPTER TWO

CULTURAL PRODUCTION

Introduction: Culture Producers in Central Asia

Many of the various colleagues with whom I worked in my time in Kazakhstan could be classed as ‘culture producers,’ a term defined for the particular case of post-Soviet Central Asia by Laura Adams in her work with the cultural elite in Uzbekistan. In the sense of the term as she uses it, culture producers are not easily distinguished from ‘intellectuals.’ They are dependent on the state for their livelihood and thus swept up in nation-building projects (ethnic republics in the Soviet era, ethnic nation-states in the present day), and together with the media are the main agents of a top-down transmission of ideology.

Adams notes that the power of culture producers, that is, following Foucault, “actions at work on a field of possibilities, enabling or hindering certain actions,” (i.e. the capacity for novel or opposition work) is next to none in Uzbekistan, more specifically in an environment “constituted largely by Soviet legacies and contemporary state priorities.” (1994: 96) If culture producers are meant, in part, to produce the ‘nation,’ (an ethno-territorial group) their work is no longer necessary in a post-USSR polity where national sovereignty is de facto and ‘cultural’ issues (the

most predominant of which is language) “were quickly coopted by the [ruling] Karimov²⁶ regime” (ibid.: 99).

Adams argues that in Uzbekistan, culture producers continue to directly support Karimov’s nationalist ideological agenda due to “the lack of organizational and social diversity which serve as bases for developing oppositional ideas, the high level of professional integration of intellectuals with the state fostered by the Soviet system, and the consistent repressive nature of the Karimov regime.” (ibid.: 101) The contemporary production of Kazakh culture is also a fundamental aspect of a nationalist self-imagining. The Kazakhstani case ultimately differs from Uzbekistan, though, because Nazabayev’s regime is less authoritarian, and because the regime is internally divided.

However, the bulk of research and media in the reproduction of Kazakh culture in Kazakhstan correlates to a Kazakh nationalist agenda. Culture producers today are not seeking to greatly modify the conceptions of Kazakh culture and history developed during the Soviet period. Neither the epistemological frameworks for understanding those topics, nor their performative representations, are significantly changed. This is not due entirely to repression, as in Uzbekistan, but because it is in the interests of Kazakh culture producers to work within a recognizable and extant framework. That framework of cultural production is comprised of three major “sites” or elements. Two of these sites are direct continuations of institutions created in the Kazakh SSR: the Academy of Literature and Arts in Almaty (part of the

²⁶ Islam Karimov is the president of Uzbekistan, in office since the country’s independence in 1991, after several self-granted term extensions. He reportedly learned Uzbek at an accelerated rate at that time in order to legitimate himself as a national leader after scorning “national issues” during his tenure as communist leader in the then Uzbek SSR (Gleason 1997).

broader Academy of Sciences), and the offices of cultural affairs at the regional and municipal level throughout the country. The offices of cultural affairs, further, work closely together with the multiple loci throughout the country of artistic masters (such as musicians and poets) and their students, a point to which I return at the end of this chapter.

The third component of contemporary cultural (re) production is an elite level of organizers and sponsors who established a new research center in the new capital city, Astana. This last group has worked actively (and at great expense) to revitalize the *aitys* tradition as a means to promote a particular vision of culture and nation – it is a nationalist vision wherein a romanticized (and generalized) view of Kazakh culture and history is heavily valorized. Thus in the case of Kazakhstan I use the term ‘culture producer’ in a broader sense, following Verdery’s characterization of socialist intellectuals, as a position: culture producers are the “sometimes occupants of a site that is privileged in forming and transmitting discourses, in constituting thereby the means through which society is ‘thought’ by its members, and in forming human subjectivities.” (Verdery 1991: 17)²⁷

In Kazakhstan today various culture producers work together (sometimes intentionally, sometimes not) to perpetuate *aitys* as a genre of Kazakh folklore, as “authentic culture.” They do so by “enshrining” particular poets, in text and in mausoleums. Those poets become canonical representatives not just of a tradition of verbal art, but of “Kazakh culture” more broadly. This is a process not of invention (cf Hobsbawm and Ranger, eds. 1983) but of retraditionalization, the endowing of

²⁷ Other anthropologists have used the term to refer to the production of cultural citizenship, as through education (see for example Levinson, Foley, and Holland, eds. 1996). On folklore as a mode of cultural production, see Fabian 1990 (cf Mahon 2000).

“tradition” not as an inherent quality but rather “as a symbolic construction by which people in the present establish connections with a meaningful past and endow particular cultural forms with value and authority” (Bauman 1992). A mantle of authenticity ultimately serves to protect poets when they criticize the government: they are safe occupants of the innocuous space provided by “folklore.”

Folklore in the Academy of Literature and the Arts

The Academy was a space created for the specific purpose of knowing culture. As an institution it is the rendering of an ideology of cultures, and it houses a group of historians, musicologists, folklorists, and those who study comparative literature, all of whom are licensed to study particular genres and forms (output) of that particular object which is ‘Kazakh culture.’ Folklore is something which national cultures have. It is, literally, the lore of the folk – various forms of epic poetry both spoken and sung – which are of interest in that these forms have *characteristics* which are identifiably ‘Kazakh,’ that is, which can be bound to a particular group of people ranging over a particular territory, and can be used factually to identify that group with respect to other (similar) cultural groups.

The characterization of *aitys* as a (prolific) *genre of Kazakh oral literature* is formulaic in academic articles and dissertations emanating from the ALA.²⁸ In the encyclopedia articles compiled by the broader Academy of Sciences and by local universities,²⁹ this characterization becomes definition: ‘folklore’ becomes fact. Spanning several decades, these articles vary only slightly in their content; all

²⁸ See Gabullin 1968; Sudikov 1974, Tebegenov 2002, Torsynov 1976, 2003; Umbataev 1992.

²⁹ Specifically in Academy’s compiled definitional volumes on “Kazakh Literature” (Mukhanov et.al. eds. 1964; Axmetov et.al. eds. 1988b)

describe *aitys* as an art (*uiner*) and identify it as a Kazakh custom or tradition (*dastu*). All make example of and often quote extensively from very well-known *aitys* of times past, rendered texts of which are to be found in the archives, together with the name of the poets who ostensibly sang them and the folklorist or ethnographer who ostensibly discovered them. They are largely devoid of details about their performance context, particularly information about what audience(s) might have been present.

This institutionalized, inscribed, oral tradition is thus a sufficient precursor for the subsequent department on the social evolutionary timeline (and its corresponding row of offices in the academy hall): national literature. This section studies Kazakh nationality authors and their collected works vis a vis a revolutionary ethos. In this regard Kazakh poets and writers come to be co-opted as socialist messengers. World literature is the final stepping stone in the institutional generation and analysis of national cultural output. This is the department in which connections between Kazakh literature and the literature of other cultures is compared (cf Madanova 1997). The consequence of inscription within the Academy is that particular poets have been canonized as “the greats” of Kazakh oral and epic history, and they have been “enshrined” in two primary ways which both create and substantiate that canonical role: in text and in mausoleum.

Enshrining the canon in text

The Academy of Literature, in its department of national literature (above folklore but below world literature) has devoted a great deal of time, work, and

financial resources to collecting, translating, and publishing the works of particular poets, most notably *Suyinbai Aronoly*, *Zhambul Zhabaev*, and *Abai Kunanbaioly*.³⁰ These poets exist in a popular consciousness as heroic akhyns of the Kazakh people, with monuments and calendars, books and pictures everywhere around the country. They are constantly present, in discourse and image, in contexts of Kazakh nationalism. The anniversaries of their birthdates, in keeping with Soviet tradition, have become minor holidays, marked by events like conferences, *aitys* and other cultural performances around the country.

These particular poets were invoked as the literary or artistic ‘face’ of the Kazakh nationality during the Soviet period, precisely for their praise of first Russian (Suyinbai 1815-1898; Abai 1845-1904) and then Soviet rule (Zhambul 1846-1945). All three attended Russian schools, and in their capacity as leaders urged harmonious relations between Kazakhs and their external rulers -- Zhambul was awarded a prize in Moscow for his poetry praising Stalin. Now all three are constantly invoked in *aitys* performances as exemplary Kazakh poet-ancestors, but their Russia-friendliness is overlooked in favor of their status as Kazakh heroes.³¹ In a strikingly symbolic move conjoining poetic legacy with Kazakh nationalism, in 1996 – the 10th anniversary of Zheltoksan, the December riots – the state sponsored the building of massive statues of Abai (in Semei) and Zhambul (outside the museum of national history in Almaty).

³⁰ Other individual poets, notably Zhanak, received individual attention from the Academy (cf Suiinshaliyev 1978; Axmetov et.al. eds. 1988a), but that work (poetry, commentary and analysis) has not been swept up in nationalist reimagining in the same way as Suinbai, Zhambul, and Abai.

³¹ I thank Olga Maiorova for calling attention to the importance of this point.

In the archive and the publications of the Academy there is a record of each poet's various *aityses* (i.e. with whom, text, and sometimes date/location), as well as excerpted poetry together with analysis by one of the Academy's folklorists.³² Without question the most prominent position is given to the poet Abai. A branch of the Academy houses a museum dedicated to Abai. It is a room where his collected works are cased behind glass. Some are originals, many are translations – the number of different languages serves as a marker of literary import. The National Library in Almaty is also named for Abai, and has organized a website devoted to the *akhyn* where visitors can read from those texts and translations.³³ The National Theater is also renamed for him, and his statue stands outside the Republican Palace (see figure 2).

The ubiquity of Abai is due in large part to the writing of Mukhtar Auezov, the 20th century writer and Academy member responsible for most of the canonization of Kazakh poems, epics, and what he called 'folklore' in his own extensive body of research. His work was so all-encompassing and influential that the Academy of Literature and Arts itself today is named for him.³⁴ Auezov's most well-known publication is *Abai Zholy*, The Path of Abai, an enriched and semi-fictionalized biography of the life of the poet. Auezov, just like the Abai of whom he

³² On Suinbai see Umatbaev 1992. On Zhambul see Kydyrbaeva 2003; Normmaghambetova 1975; Sadyrbaioyly 1996; Temirghaly 1968.

³³ <http://www.abay.nabr.kz/index.php?lang=kk>

³⁴ Auezov's son, Murat Auezov, by virtue of his father's fame, is a prominent figure in Kazakhstan. In the 1990's, he was co-leader of a primary opposition group *Azamat* (citizen), but in 1997 accepted a position in Nazabayev's administration. Cummings (2005) cites him as an example of "co-optation" in the country's repressive cadre politics. Colleagues of mine who knew him personally explained that Murat had had to step down from political life in exchange for not being prosecuted for his opposition activities.

wrote and made his fame, has been firmly planted as an anchor in the tradition of Kazakh literature.



Figure 2: Abai at the Republican Palace (photo by author)

Enshrining the canon in mausoleum

The second way in which poets are enshrined is quite literal: the mausoleums of poets are common pilgrimage destinations for Kazakhs, either standing alone or as part of an extended trip. I have visited the shrines of all three poets for different reasons. Zhambul's birth-region, a southern province in Kazakhstan, was renamed after him posthumously. He lived the last part of his life in Almaty, and his estate there has been preserved by his descendants (current caretakers are his granddaughters). His mausoleum was built on this property, next to his house,

garage, and gardens. It is a highly trafficked tourist destination for locals and visitors alike, I was there first as an academic tourist during a summer language school in 2001. The second time I visited the property, in the summer of 2005, it was as one of five major holy sites on a healing pilgrimage with ethnomusicologist and friend Maggie Adams, her local friends, and a guide.

The holy sites on that tour also included the shrine of the poet Suyinbai, the mentor of Zhambul. At each of these shrines our group listened to a reading of the Koran. On pilgrimage, as well as in the home, the Koran is to be read at select times as a gift for the ancestors.³⁵ Zhambyl's shrine mausoleum is large, of typical blue and white patterned tile, surrounded by flowers and bushes in a large garden. Suyinbai's shrine by contrast was recently rebuilt under presidential orders; it is a modernist looking red brick structure that stands out prominently on an otherwise empty steppe landscape. There is a small caretaker's building nearby, occupied by an octogenarian who greets guests, accompanies them into shrine, and reads the Koran.

Shrine visitation is a fundamental aspect of family and spiritual life for most Kazakhs (cf Privratsky 2000). That these poets' shrines serve as regular pilgrimage destinations reflects their prominence in the canon of Kazakh culture. Their mausoleums also now occupy prominent positions in broader practices of shrine visitation, pilgrimage, ancestor worship, and Muslim tradition among Kazakhs today; the poets have become generalized ancestors.³⁶ Their writing and their lives have

³⁵ In his extensive ethnography of Kazakh spiritual life, Privratsky (2000) explains that the Muslim holy book "is seldom recited merely as a spiritual exercise for the edification of the soul; it is 'dedicated' or 'devoted' to the ancestor-spirits, because for Kazakhs Islam is the religion of their Muslim ancestors" (124).

³⁶ In Central Asia, shrine visitation is the rubric under which all types of pilgrimage should be understood, religious and otherwise. Central Asians tend to merge shrine visitation with visitations to other sites considered sacred. Those researchers who have explored the theme of specifically religious

come to serve as a microcosmic way of understanding a broader Kazakh cultural history.

Ancestor poets and Kazakh cultural history

The role of poet as a general cultural ancestor was nowhere more clear than in a trip I took to the shrine-mausoleum of the poet Abai. Auezov's multi-volume book *Put' Abai* (The Path of Abai) has established a story about Abai's life so well-known that it has come to structure the pilgrimage to Abai's home, mausoleum, and shrine in the northern province of Semei. I took that trip in spring of 2005, together with some local staff of an environmental NGO, some of my local "family" members, and a woman who made her living as an Abai guide. She was Kazakh, bilingual but speaking Russian to our group, as it included Russians and foreigners.

The first stop along the way was at a pass named for the great Kazakh *batyr* (warrior) *Koshibai*. It is a large hill in the middle of the steppe; at that time in the early spring, the steppe is astoundingly beautiful, covered with a bright almost lime-green grass. Shadows in the sky range from black to purple to clear blue. Our group climbed to the top of this large hill, gazing at the marvel of the immense surrounding view, and listened to our guide's story:

This place is named for the batyr Koshibai. He died at a young age, and so this place has special significance for young people. Koshibai wanted to do so much for his people, to protect them [but he died too young]. In this place was his village. Here you see this spring? Beside it there used to be a huge lake. Wild ducks and geese used to fly here – it's true nature here, after all. For the most part poor people lived here ... Here there is a special wind ... In the fall and spring the hill seems to rise – if you admire its height from below, it looks like a castle. Our wonderful

pilgrimage in Central Asia have used the topic as a way to argue against understandings of Islam in the region as 'unauthentic' or 'unofficial' (cf Abramson and Karimov 2006; Privratsky 2000; Roberts 2006).

author Auezov wrote about this place-ness³⁷ – his excellent story *Sirotskaya Dol'ya* (An Orphan's Fate). He wrote about a young girl *Gazira* whose father died, her old grandmother, her mother, and she was left an orphan. *Chenovniki*³⁸ driving past on the nearby road used to stop to help her, but one of them got very angry with the girl, and beat her. God knows what a disgrace. She ran to the grave of her father to hide and froze to death. They later found her there, and she is buried here. About thirty people are buried here, but no one lives here anymore. *Koishibai's Pass* is what this place is called. So there you have it – this story, our history.

We gathered water from the spring at the pass,³⁹ and went on to have lunch in the huge hillside rock formation where Abai is said to have met the love of his life, a young girl named *Aigerim*, and we later took photos at a new love monument built for Abai and *Aigerim* a ways down the road. The region we were traveling through that day was the one place in which the *Arxary*⁴⁰ legendarily roamed. We were on our way to *Burule* (Wolves' Den) to the next stop on the tour, the museum created for the author *Mukhtar Auezov* himself, where our guide explained we could also see skins of these great wolves.

That type of mythical historical elision in fact structured the whole tour. Our guide was describing the land we traveled over in a series of stories – Kazakh warriors, an orphaned Kazakh girl, a love affair, authors, wolves – all of these are deeply tropes of Kazakh identity. The grey wolf is the mythic ancestor of the Turkic tribes. A Kazakh orphan is the most pitiable cultural figure– pity in hearing this story

³⁷ To the Russian noun *mesto* (place) she added the nominative particle *nost'* which is quite literally to act with words (cf Austin): the addition of *nost'* imbues a noun with *the quality of being*. One could compare this with the much more well-known example *glastnost'* (open-ness). In her word choice our guide and narrator is participating in the metapragmatic act of *making a place*. I say 'participating,' because as this is likely a gloss from the Kazakh *oryndykh* (place-ness), others are undoubtedly describing the 'ploaceness' of this spot as well – a collective effort in populist geography, the creation of and moving through a landscape. That this occurs on a pilgrimage to a poet's home is no accident.

³⁸ This is a Soviet term roughly equivalent to 'bosses;' in post-Soviet Central Asia it is derogatory.

³⁹ A clean water source is a typical component of a sacred site in Central Asia (cf Abramson and Karimov 2006). Tourists and pilgrims alike are supposed to bring clean water back for a sanctification of the home.

⁴⁰ These are *arghali* (*Ovis ammon*) found throughout Central Asia.

reinforces a sense that an ideal is communal and family life.⁴¹ In these stories and our movement, we were enacting an understanding of land in the terms of a generalized Kazakh history.⁴²

I would use the word ‘tour’ rather than ‘pilgrimage’ to describe that day’s activity simply because we did not actively pray that day, even though we did end the



Figure 3: Memorial to Abai, Semei region, photo by author

tour at Abai’s shrine-mausoleum⁴³ and stop at a mosque on the ride home to admire the beautiful rugs there.

⁴¹ It is also interesting that the antagonist in this day’s particular tale was a Soviet *chenovnik*; one possible interpretation is that if Kazakhs leave each other alone, they will be beaten down by the Soviet system.

⁴² In his ethnography of the Western Apache, Basso dwells analytically on the ways that acts like naming a site, and telling stories about it, serve to fuse land, ancestry, and contemporary life; Basso calls this ‘place-making,’ which “is a way of constructing history itself, of inventing it, of fashioning novel versions of ‘what happened here’” (Basso 1996: 6).

The significance of the tour for our group was not religious, but a form of cultural tourism. It was, in our moving across the land, visiting places, and our guide telling stories, very much a local exercise in identity formation. That Abai is an exemplar of Kazakhness predicated the tour. The structure of the tour, based on the story of Abai's life written by Auezov, is rewritten anew on the tour itself. The Abai-Auezov dyad is a product of the processes of cultural entextualization through the Soviet period and continuing today. But as the Abai tour demonstrates, the enshrinement of that dyad takes places not just in the textual canon of Kazakh literature or state-sponsored cultural production, but in an actively lived landscape of Kazakh mythic history.

The Place of Aitys in the Cultural Canon

Aitys is recognizable as a genre, as a cultural form, due to the work of ethnographers and folklorists at the Academy. But this group does not include contemporary *aitys* poets as a part of its canon. Within the academy, after a semi-exhaustive search, I could not find academic articles which described or indeed even mentioned contemporary *aitys*. And indeed, the Academy maintained a strained and somewhat distant relationship with the national circuit of performing poets. It is a position widely shared among the cultural intelligentsia and perhaps best summarized by ethnographer Gulnar Kendirbaeva, who distinguishes “scientific folklorism, i.e., authentic folklore that is consciously studied, reproduced, and popularized by

⁴³ After paying appropriate homage to the home and belongings of Abai – furniture, rugs, weapons, an enormous standing furnace, horse stables – we moved across a ways to a series of white conical shapes jutting bizarrely from the steppe. They are intentionally noticeable from a great distance, but when you come close to the building, it turns out they are just one small part of the roof covering one side of an enormous outdoor amphitheatre, which is reached through a circular series of tunnels underground.

specialists and amateurs to preserve and better understand it” from both “ideological folklorism” (driven by state policy) and “pop music” or “professional art” (1994: 100). Scientific folklorism is the work done by urban intellectuals, like those at the Academy.

Kundirbaeva claims that the tradition of *aitys* suffered both in the hands of ideological and ‘pop’ folklorists. In the Soviet period, because *aitys* was coopted by the Soviet state as a political economic sound-piece, “this ideological aspect ultimately led to the genre’s deterioration and loss of uniqueness” (ibid.: 99).

Similarly, in the contemporary performance context, on stage and television, Kundirbaeva claims that “the very soul of the *aitys* – it’s sparkling, instantaneous, and situation improvisation (*suryp-salma*) – is lost.” She feels that in today’s *aitys* topics such as “production, patriotism, and (especially) everyday life [have] watered down the aesthetic content of the *aitys*” (ibid. 106).⁴⁴

Some of Kundirbaeva’s colleagues at the Academy shared similar sentiments. The director overseeing the *aitys* archive, upon learning that contemporary *aitys* was the focus of my research, dismissed me out of hand: “That is not a project.”⁴⁵ The vice-rector of the Academy at the time was not dismissive, but rather a combination of bemused and bitter. He and some of his colleagues had not been invited to the recent performances in Almaty (where the Academy is housed just blocks away from the national theater), and he felt slighted. He also felt that the tradition today did not

⁴⁴ It is not clear, in Kundirbaeva’s analysis, when and if *aitys* ever had a glory day as a “real” oral tradition. She cites Auezov (1961) in saying that the tradition was beginning to die out in the late 19th century, but regularly refers to *aitys* as “the most popular musical and poetic genres of the Kazakh people” (105).

⁴⁵ I did ultimately end up working for several weeks at the *aitys* archive because the institute director, himself a folklorist and a friend of a friend, allowed me to do so, despite his vocal worry about “foreign researchers who “use our materials and give us nothing in return”

represent ‘real’ *aitys*, but was rather a showbusiness propped up simply for the purpose of making money. The poets were either selling out or being taken advantage of.⁴⁶

Contemporary Aitys

Aitys as a widely popular form of televised entertainment, the “showbusiness” to which the vice-rector referred, is the result of work not by the Academy but by a new group of cultural producers. Sidestepping the Academy, but working fully in conjunction with regional cultural affairs offices, a cultural elite based in Astana and Almaty has been able to gently wrest the function of culture producer: to exploit infrastructural frameworks and coopt their expertise. After Zheltoksan, the December 1986 riots, a poet named Zhursin Zhursin began traveling round the country to find practicing *aitys* poets and to bring them together in competition. He is the man directly responsible for linking poets through regions together with elite sponsors in a new national performance network. The network’s staged performances throughout the country are now televised on one of the country’s major stations. At the time of my research, it was the state media conglomerate *KkXabar* owned by the President’s daughter, a point I discuss here below.

As a result, Zhursin has become one of the most well-known media figures in the Kazakh-speaking community stretching through Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. The influence of this network goes beyond Central Asia, as Zhursin is also in a position to forge ties, via *aitys*, to poets and cultural organizers in Mongolia, China,

⁴⁶ Personal interview 22 April 2004. The fear about ‘selling out’ is one more widely shared across the *aitys* community itself, a topic I take up at length in chapter 5 and in the conclusion.

and Russia. During the time of my research (2003-2006), Kazakhstani poets in Zhursin's national network traveled to all those regions to perform. When I left the field, in addition to the demands of the *aitys* network, he had been named head of Kazakh Radio, a prestigious post previously held by a famous Kazakh pop singer.

What Zhursin has proved in his tenure as the self-instated head of all *aitys* is that 'knowing' culture, or making culture intelligible, relies specifically on a peculiar sort of commoditization of culture, its creation and transmission within and along financial, political, and personal networks. His intellectual and business partnership with key sponsors has provided a relative level of financial security and even success in this endeavor. Together these men have a mission to revamp and repopularize *aitys* in Kazakhstan, and to link Kazakh poets not only to each other and to audiences within the country, but to Kazakh-speaking populations outside the country as well. Their success depends upon their ability to maintain the form of *aitys*-as-folklore (i.e. innocuous culture) while simultaneously promoting, to varying degrees, an overtly political (Kazakh nationalist) content in performance.

The "New" Elite?

Zhursin and his sponsors position themselves with regard to *aitys* (and the cultural history of which it is a part) in three ways which transparently mimic previous ethnographic and academic work. First, they rely on their social position and prestige to effect change in the value of "culture" in the current political economy. The second way in which the two maintain academic traditions is that they have not changed the literal performative space of *aitys* from the Soviet model.

Performances are still held in regional theaters, replete with ethnic costumes and backdrops, with an attendant moderator sitting at one side of the stage, and with a jury of cultural “experts” – poets and literary editors as well as local politicians. Zhursin has to work with cultural affairs offices at the local level in order to make this happen, which is not unproblematic.

The offices of cultural affairs work on an annual budget approved by the regional government, with monies channeled from the state level. Generally, there are enough funds to host one or two *aitys* competitions per year, as a part of broader holiday celebrations such as the Kazakh New Year, or in recognition of the anniversary of a famous cultural figure from the region. The head of one regional office with whom I worked in 2005 and 2006 complained that local employees do all the work to prepare for *aitys* (renting the theater, staging, recruiting poets and arranging their accommodation, advertisement) but Zhursin and his sponsors come in at the last minute to rig a jury⁴⁷, arrange flashy expensive prizes, and take all the credit. Other local organizers with whom I worked in different regions of the country agreed about the uneven distribution of work/credit, but recognized that their association with Zhursin ultimately was beneficial. Not only did Zhursin’s presence increase local audience enthusiasm and attendance, but cultural organizers could use their association with him as a way to promote their region’s poets on a national scale.

Ultimately, the goal of the national circuit is to create famous poets, poets whose personae and words will be known and remembered like those of Abai,

⁴⁷ *Aity*s competitions are judged by a jury, a system I explain in chapter two. The jury should ideally be comprised of poets or poetic experts, but many of Zhursin’s juries also include his friends and local politicians.

Suyinbai, or Zhambyl. Thus the third way in which the new generation of culture producers mimic their academic predecessors is by carefully publishing hundreds of *aitys* performances. Publication is a new way of entextualizing the performative tradition, and happens in several ways. All performances are videotaped by regional representatives of a national television network, edited for public consumption, and circulated wherever videos and dvds are sold (in stores, bazaars, etc.) Edited transcripts of performances are made from these recordings and excerpts are regularly published in the Kazakh Literature newspaper issued by the Union of Writers in Almaty.⁴⁸ Zhursin and his sponsors worked together with the newspaper at the time of my research to publish those transcripts in a three volume series *Kazirgi Aitys* (Contemporary *Aitys*).

Just like the records of *aitys* in the archive, in today's newspaper and these volumes, the text is comprised of pages of stanzas with only the poets' names attached. All the affect of live performance (hesitation, mistake, repetition, music, audience, etc.) has been removed entirely. From comparing my own recordings and notes with the transcripts I saw, I know that some overtly political content was removed or not presented in its entirety.⁴⁹ With the support and collusion of Zhursin, elite sponsors, and audiences, poets in the last decades have become a voice of sociopolitical critique (the topic of chapter two). As I argue here, from the standpoint of cultural production, Zhursin and his elite sponsors have acted in many ways to

⁴⁸ This group was once part of a Soviet wide union initiated by the communist party in 1932 as a means of guiding literary production throughout the republics. For more on the establishment, goals, and activity of Soviet writers unions, see Fitzpatrick 1999; Suny 1998. The Union in Kazakhstan is now comprised of ethnic Kazakh writers and literary poets, who publish primarily in their own newspaper. Several of the *aitys* organizers in Almaty belong to this Union, which has its own building in the city.

⁴⁹ I discuss one specific example in the conclusion.

“enshrine” the poets in the canon of oral literature just like their predecessors. They do so in ways which repeat the easily recognizable formulas of the Academy, enclosing contemporary poets in the mantle of “authentic Kazakh culture” which, while limiting in some ways, ultimately serves to evade attention or repercussion from government censors.

“New” contexts of cultural and historical production

One of the most important figures within the sponsoring elite with whom Zhursin works is Murzatai Zhuldosbekov, former Soviet dignitary and personal friend of the president. He is head of a new research center at the Eurasian University in Kazakhstan’s capital city of Astana, which houses the faculties of Kazakh History and Kazakh Languages and Literatures. As the Kazakh SSR came to know its ethnic self due in no small part to the analysis and output of the Academy, now it is in centers like this that the young Kazakh nation comes to know its history, the kind of history not written but ostensibly suppressed under Soviet rule, the kind of history which connects Kazakh ancestors -- and by extension Kazakhstan -- to a broader geographic and cultural world. It is this research center, with its emphasis on Eurasianism, which institutionally has quietly replaced the Academy of Literature and the Arts and its focus on Kazakh nationality.

The Eurasian University was conceived and built by President Nazabayev, Zhuldosbekov explained to me when I went to visit him there, to rapidly address the lack of cultural and intellectual life in the new capital city. There is literally no other building in the former Soviet Union, he impressed upon me, like the new research

center. It is unique. The center and university are part of a city-wide massive construction boom which started when the capital was moved there from Almaty in 1997. This building and this campus are part of a larger cityscape argument in the new capital, one of newness and speed. It represents the literal building of a new shell in which to organize a young nation. The ethos of the building projects is entirely fraught: a widely publicized scandal over the hiring of foreign (Turkish) work crews instead of Kazakh builders, the disappearance of millions of dollars allocated for building, the prioritization of the president's personal projects. But the pace of the building seems to overwhelm these hiccups in progress, and students churn through the new halls of their university.

Researchers Alexander and Buchli (2007) argue that in Astana, “an elite vision of a contemporary Eurasian future is being played out through the creation of a new capital, bright with shimmering buildings designed by foreign architects” (2). This philosophy is a quite conscious one at the university itself, named after historian Lev Gumilev;⁵⁰ their website describes Eurasianism as a claim to inclusion in a world imagined not as former Soviet republics but as an interconnected Europe and Asia.⁵¹ In the concept of Eurasia guiding the building projects, President Nazabayev is trying to combine pre-Soviet “Kazakh authenticity” with a future “potential legitimacy untainted by that same immediate Soviet past” (ibid: 21).

⁵⁰ Lev Gumilev (1912-1992) was a 20th century historian whose controversial theories of ethnogenesis put him at the forefront of the “neo-eurasian” intellectual movement. His theories, recently republished in Russia as *Ritmy Evrazii* (The Rhythms of Eurasia 2003) have become very popular in Kazakhstan over the last decade, and were explicitly picked up by Nazabayev in his ideological modeling of the new capital.

⁵¹ www.emu.kz

Completed in 2001 at a cost of millions, the multi-story research center thoroughly reflects the Eurasian ideal. The top floor, the penthouse, is partitioned for an institute overseen personally by Zhuldosbekov, where graduate students write dissertations on *aitys*, and where established scholars write new histories of Kazakhstan and philosophies of language. Seven “laboratories” are housed on the penthouse, reflecting the most pressing strains of Murzatai’s thought: archeological reconstruction, China, historiography, research resources, Euro-America, *aitys*, and the practice and theory of Eurasianism. The last is the subject of his own two published books. (His first book was about his current passion, the archeology of Kazakh and Mongol graves.) The center also has a publishing house, which printed the glossy editions of the biography *Murzatai Zholdosbekov: Truth and Truth-telling*.⁵² The former ambassador to Iran and Minister of the Ideology Department of the Kazakh SSR, his interests are many and varied. He was originally the president of the Eurasian University, but after a short time retired to the less demanding post of research center director, free to pursue his current passions.

The laboratory of Kazakh history at the Research Center has published 35 books in 3 years about the 6-8th centuries of life on the Kazakh territory. (They claim that they are able to use primary source material because they employ an expert to read petroglyphs.) The three researchers there have an explicit goal: “We want to discover history, with a historiography to replace Soviet Marxism – we need to look at things as they really were, not at production, not through the lens of economics. At the center of this new history will be the person, not any ‘ism.’” Ironically, the text

⁵² Zhuldosbekov’s center in Astana also published a book of Zhursin Zhursin’s poetry in 2005, *Supplicating to God*.

they presented as example and guide in this “new” historiographic process is none other than *Put’ Abaia* (Path of Abai) by Mukhtar Auezov.

“But even Auezov,” one researcher explained, “used only 15,000 of the 150,000 words which exist in the Kazakh language. Language was trapped during the Soviet period – for at least 50 years, the political structure functioned in Russian. But as true understanding emerges for Kazakhs *through* language (or under language, as with jokes – Kazakhs are natural humorists), it is critical to put the individual and language at the center of creation of the new history.”⁵³

The History Lesson

One of the most well known researchers at the Institute is Koshyghary. When I went to interview him in his office, he offered me a succinct self-description: he is the son of a sheperd, and he graduated from KazGU,⁵⁴ where he studied writing and journalism. This brief biography legitimates him both as an intellectual in the academy and as a ‘real’ Kazakh, someone whose immediate ancestor is part of an extensive nomadic history. He spoke to me at length, in the form of an informal lecture, which I reproduce inexactly here. I was writing notes, not recording, at the time, but the sense of his words and descriptions carries through.⁵⁵

In order to research aitys, he explains, you must know history very well. But as regards Kazakh history records have been lost and there are no facts – it’s very difficult to sort through things and figure out what is true. A European conception of history doesn’t work for Kazakhs. Look at any anthropological dictionary! You’ll see there that nomads are defined as tribes without a place to live and without anything to do –just people moving around. But of course nomads have their own territory and tribes, depending on the type of land, and the season. There are four land/season

⁵³ fieldnotes, 4 October 2004

⁵⁴ Kazakh Gosudarstvenii Universitet – Kazakh State University

⁵⁵ fieldnotes, 4 October 2004

'homes': kuikteu, zhailau, kuzeu, and khystau (spring, summer, fall, winter). The Eurasian space is named the Great Steppe.

Here Koishyghary opened a large blank piece of paper on the desk and began drawing, mapping in pencil the steppe, its regions and the people living across them.

A flourish of arrows shows me the movement of Slavic and Baltic tribes across the northern forests, and of the Turkic tribes – both the southern 'sea' tribes and the central steppe nomads.

*Greeks renamed nomads of both the steppe and the sea Gippomoldy. The geographer Strubim called them Galoktofabi. Both these names refer to people using milk products – this is my own discovery. There is a Turkish riddle: what doesn't exist in mountains or on the land, what is it that you don't have and I don't have, even a Kipchak doesn't have? The answer is bird's milk! It is proof that Kipchaks used milk products, they were nomads!*⁵⁶

There are two kinds of people: those who are natural, close to nature, and those who are artificial, connected with civilization and technology. Those who combine the two are the humanitarians. Kazakh ancestors were both – they kept close to nature but were also developers; Kazakh language is therefore highly metaphorical. Nomads have poetic language, oral traditions, and epic works. Why don't other peoples? Even Greek mythology comes from Turkic epics.

Why do we come to aitys? If nomadic tribes fought, before the battle magic shamans would use words to give spirit to batyrlar (warriors), which [enraged/made crazy] them and they fought well: this shows the power of words. Akhyns are descended from these magical shamans, which is why aitys is part of the evolution of people living through time. The etymological antecedent of akhyn is aghyn, flow – as a river flows. Words without interruption are like the melting of ice in springtime.

There is a proverb of the Turkish tribes: people who ride camels speak a song [speak a poem] of four lines. This means that they can improvise. The best ones among us Kazakhs are the poets. Like the duals of 14th and 15th century Europe where they fought with swords – we fight with words. What is the power of words? Today's situation is very difficult; everything depends on money. If a poet is good and speaks true/right, he can even win money, which means that the words must be magical.

When my career began, it was impossible to research Kazakh history because there were supposed to be only Soviet people. So we learned everything about Russian civilization, and not about Kabanbai⁵⁷. We had a short Kazakh history – not about people, but about events. But of course there is no history without people; to

⁵⁶ The "the Kipchaks" refers to other tribes in the Turkic-Mongol Horde occupying the Central Asian steppe over the 13th century (cf. Grousset 2002[1970]).

⁵⁷ Kabanbai is one in the canon of famed *batyrlar* (warriors) in Kazakh history, together with Boganbai, Nauryzbai, Raiymbek, Karasai, and Aghybai.

research history, one has to know oneself and ones' ancestors. If there is no historical consciousness, there can be no other kind of consciousness. If members of a nationality don't know their own history, then they cannot feel pride and they have no aim or unity. Only those with a common interest can fight together.

What I now find striking about this historian's stream of consciousness regarding the relationship of *aitys* to a broader cultural history is its resemblance to the stories told by the guide on the tour to Abai's shrine memorial, above. Both of these narratives move seamlessly among time periods, the natural world, and specific stories or proverbs. They are similar presentations of a romanticized, even nostalgic, Kazakh history. Just as the departments of folklore and Kazakh literature worked in conjunction with correlate departments of history in the Academy of Sciences through the Soviet period to place poetry in a particular history of a Kazakh nationality, in the new research center researchers of *aitys* work together with cultural historians to place poetry in the new history of a nation. That vision is published in volumes of history (as above), but it also informs another type of entextualization: broadcast.

Aitys on Television: a new type of entextualization

Part of the massive project of Zhursin and Zhuldosbekov, over more than a decade and ongoing, was not only to establish and develop a national network of poets actively competing, but also to televise their performances. This was tricky, as Zhursin's poets performed in the genre of *Zhekpe Zhek*, one-on-one, specifically in order to encourage political content of performances. In Kazakhstan's authoritarian climate of heavy censorship, most television stations were not interested in a show

with relatively open political content. Zhursin's group switches stations regularly. Ironically, at the time of my research, *aitys* was programmed on the state channel of the media conglomerate *KXabar* (news) owned and managed by the president's daughter.

This was possible for two reasons: because Zhursin was working on another program there at the time, and could take advantage of social relationships inside to garner support, and because the editor responsible for keeping *aitys* on the air is a misplaced iconoclast of sorts. A quiet and reserved man with red hair, freckles, and cowboy boots, Saghatbek Kaleev is himself a musician and personally engaged in projects of cultural documentary. He is fascinated by music, history, and the medium of television. In one of our interviews, he reminisced about a trip to the United States. I asked him where he had been, what he had done. He replied that he spent the entire two weeks watching TV.

For Saghatbek there are several aspects of programming to think about: aestheticism, meaningfulness, relevance. "TV always wants a big show, something beautiful, and forgets about meaning. Like you," he said to me, "you're here researching, that means you're looking for the meaning of something. Television should also [seek] that kind of meaning."⁵⁸ Saghatbek, like Murzatai Zhuldosbekov, is a dreamer. He also has visions of cultural projects he would like to accomplish, though he does not have the means available to immediately carry through with them, as Zhuldosbekov does.

Saghatbek holds a romantic view of Kazakh cultural history which is very much in harmony with that of the researchers at Zhuldosbekov's center in Astana. In

⁵⁸ fieldnotes, 30 June 2004

our conversations he emphasized to me the ubiquity of musical talent among Kazakhs: “It’s not like in the US, where there can be ‘professional’ musicians – here everyone is a musician, it is in our blood. Kazakh music is genetic, it is the duty of children to carry on these traditions. Everything for nomads is connected with our genes, even research. Nomads research everything, everyone has his own opinion. A shepherd working on the steppe could go to the stage and have a high quality *aitys* [replete with] complicated language and rich metaphors; if he knows seven ancestors, then he knows seven centuries of history.”⁵⁹

Saghatbek had worked as the head of the music department at the state media network. Music, of course, is cultural output, in the ideology of nationality-culture I’ve described in this chapter, as a result of nationalities policies (cf Rouland 2005). It is therefore straight-forward and comprehensible as the scale of social evolutionism (cf Hirsch 2005): it ranges from the symphonies of Russia (excellent) to the folksongs of the steppe (necessary). In this media conglomerate, *aitys* fell within the purview of the music department, and so in that way escaped the censorship directed at journalistic news. Once the programming started, it became extremely popular, and so there is now also by virtue of audience demand a pressure to keep the show going. Zhursin’s daughter now also works at the station, so she can persuade from within, as her father did initially.

Poets as Product

⁵⁹ Being able to name one’s ancestors seven generations deep is often invoked by Kazakhs as a marker of “real” ethnicity, though in practice knowledge of ancestry varies widely (cf Schatz 2004). Ancestral knowledge is directly associated with language and history in the term *ataly suz*, which refers to the words of those seven generations of forebearers. *Aitys* akhyns are among those who are said to use this language.

The final and obvious category of persons deeply implicated in the cultural production of aitys are poets themselves. Many of those with whom Zhursin works regularly at the national level have a very complicated relationship with him. Poets see Zhursin as a father or uncle figure, at once dependent on him for their success and grateful to him for the opportunity. But the environment of the national circuit is incredibly demanding, and poets wrestle to find some degree of autonomy within it. During my first year of research, three poets tried to do this in different ways. Two poets attempted to set up an external sponsorship relationship through the Ministry of Culture, a line of support which would be separate from Zhursin and his elite friends. They were ultimately unsuccessful, and the effort was quickly pushed under the figurative rug. Another poet, who had been successful in finding private sponsors, attempted to move into local politics. She was envied but castigated within the ranks of poets themselves, most of whom do not have the luxury of private sponsorship and who resented her success. A third poet left the national circuit altogether and made poetic and musical recordings on his own and in conjunction with the Academy of Sciences.

The demands of the national circuit are pragmatic and emotional. First, though the circuit does have the negative reputation of a “showbusiness,” poets themselves, despite flashy prizes like cars and bundles of cash, are actually not well-to-do. Whether men or women, they tend to be the single wage-earners for their families, both immediate and often extended. Most have another job as a professor at the university in their region. Between performance and teaching, their schedules are demanding. Because they are famous public figures, their presence is also requested

at myriad social events, often on very short notice. As a *product of cultural production*, in short, poets have to constantly juggle a popular perception of them as “rich stars” with the much busier and impoverished reality. Each poet has to live with a struggle over the figure of “who” they are, and what their significance is: is it as a poet of the people? or as a family member with very real day-to-day concerns? The answer to that question has everything to do with how they will be enshrined – literally, in what kind of mausoleum, and figuratively, in popular memory.

Orazaly

One of the most well-known poets on the national circuit at the time of my research was Orazaly Akhyn, the poet from Almaty. About thirty, quite small, Orazaly alternated between extreme seriousness and ribaldry. He was one of the first poets to sit down and talk with me in interviews, one of the first to ‘declare his love’ for me. (All male poets are supposed to have the character of a Don Juan). Also a professor of Kazakh language and literature at the state university, Orazaly’s experiences of coming to be part of the aitus world were quite typical of most poets.

In 1989, as government acted to mediate rising waves of ‘nationalist’ activity, the Central Education Committee sent an order that aitus was to be included in school curricula countrywide. Orazaly was in fifth grade at the time. He had a reputation as a prankster, and his classmates put him up to participate in the school’s first aitus. He was so nervous about it that he didn’t tell anyone he’d been invited, and on the Sunday of the competition, he ran out to the field to walk with the sheep. One of his classmates came to find him there, frantic: ‘The competition’s starting! You have to

go!!” So Orazaly went to his mother to ask permission, and found out that she’d actually known what was going on the whole time. “If you can improvise,” she told him, “why on earth aren’t you already [at the competition]?!”

Orazaly won that day, and the next aitus, and the next. He went to regionals and did *Khyz ben Zhigit* (girl and boy, flirting) aitus, a new genre for him, and won that, too. His first entry to the national scene was at a republican aitus for the 175th anniversary of the aitus akhyn Suinbai. His win there confirmed his reputation, and he has he’s been performing on the national circuit ever since. His approach to aitus is much like his own personality; he believes a poet should be serious and jovial in equal measure. If a poet jokes all the time, audiences will accuse him or her of saying nothing meaningful. One should talk about politics, about the situation of life for people – but always with a sense of humor. In one competition, he had criticized one of his contemporaries for speaking too directly about the mayor of Almaty. He did so by explaining that, as the mayor was related to the president on his wife’s side, the mayor is the son-in-law of the president, and it is not appropriate to disparage your son-in-law.

Poets talk about politics, but the role of a poet is not like that of a journalist, not to ‘report’ news. Rather, Orazaly feels that poets should gather the goings-on from around the country, and in talking about them in performance they are “expressing an attitude, the people’s attitude about that information.”⁶⁰ At the university Orazaly had also started an aitus program, in which he mentored a group of about ten. He trains them to conceive of knowledge in the form of poetry, quite literally at first by repeating information in the form of rhyme. The second major

⁶⁰ Personal interview, 28 April 2004

skill in aitus is to learn to play in front of an audience, something which you have to learn just by doing it.

Orazaly, who has throngs of ardent fans in Almaty, describes his relationship to his audience as *zhankuier*, soul-friends. “It’s fun,” he said urgently to me at the café where we had our first interview, “your soul is on fire. If people like your words they go crazy, people’s reaction shows if they accept your words. If you’re boring people don’t even clap.” Orazaly, like most of the poets I met, feels a huge responsibility in front of people, not to entertain them or represent them, exactly, but to establish this kind of ‘soul-friendship’ with them.

The knowledge for aitus does come from literature and history, Orazaly thinks, not from universities, but from the people themselves, and particularly from *Ak Sakaldar* (white-beards, elders) around the country. “They’re like a living encyclopedia of language and history! There are certain people who keep the knowledge and poems of the last centuries and pass them to the new generation. One of these was the poet Kolmambet in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, who was famous for singing against the Russian government.” When Orazaly performs, he always refers to himself as “the foal of Kolmambet.”

Also typical of aitus poets, Orazaly believes his talent to be genetic. He has poets in both his mother’s and father’s lines. One of his father’s brothers was a *sure akhyn*, meaning a poet who sings for a long time. That uncle was born in China,⁶¹ and died under mysterious circumstances. “That’s the thing about *sure* poets,”

⁶¹ Tens of thousands of Kazakhs left the territory of the Kazakh SSR for China in the first decades of Soviet rule. The first wave of outmigration were the wealthy who were targeted by Bolsheviks. For 20th century history of Chinese Kazakhs as well as contemporary ethnography, see Benson and Svanberg, 1998.

Orazaly reflected, “they live for the people, they live to be around people, and their lives always end tragically.”

The Enshrinement of a poet

In the cruel and incessant irony of fate, Orazaly himself perished under horrible circumstances. A little over a half a year after I’d met him, just after a long and troubling trip to perform in Moscow (which I describe in the next chapter), Orazaly and his best friend were driving outside Almaty and got into a horrible car accident. The emergency help didn’t come for two hours, and Orazaly died in his friend’s arms writing his last poem. It was well known among the poets that for some months prior to the accident, Orazaly had been upset, wrestling with serious personal problems and, quite unlike himself, drinking heavily. It is unclear whether alcohol was a factor on the night of his death. Friends of his also told me that during that time of darkness, Orazaly had prophesied his own death in a poem.

Orazaly’s family was large but poor, and he had been supporting a large number of people on his combined income from performing and teaching. The family could not afford the lavish funeral befitting a famous *akhyn*, and so the responsibility was taken up by Zhursin Zhursin and the rector of Orazaly’s university. On the day of the funeral, Orazaly’s body was brought to the Writers’ Union in central Almaty, and hundreds of visitors – family, fellow poets, students, and fans – packed into the building to circle the casket and pay their respects. There Zhursin and several other poets read their poem-eulogies for him. They praised him as a poet, as a Kazakh, and they grieved the loss for the people. The obituary in the paper published

by the union read: “Yes, the earth for you will be soft./ Forgive, foal of Kolmambet!/ May you be headed for heaven!”⁶²

Orazaly ultimately died as an *akhyn* of the people. His own mother, at the wake, grieved not for her loss but for the loss of “the people.” Orazaly’s performances are recorded on the videos and dvd’s produced by the national circuit. His words (albeit edited) are published in their books. He is enshrined textually, and unfortunately one of the first poets in this new period of a revitalized *aitys* tradition to be enshrined literally, at his gravesite. There is a firm tradition among poets (both *aitys*, and *zhuraushilar*, epic singers) of pilgrimage: poets travel to the homes of elder poets to pay their respects, and they visit the gravesites of their ancestors, both poetic and kin. Now, together with his family, his students, and his fans, poets travel to pay their respects at Orazaly’s grave.

The effect of contemporary cultural producers’ continued enshrinement practices, specifically within the context of Kazakh nationalism, is to valorize a vision of Kazakh culture rooted to ancestry, to land, and to language. This is a retraditionalized “nation,” invoked and lauded in *aitys* performances. Kazakh language becomes metaphorically important in that context as evidence of the existence of Kazakh culture. As new students begin to participate in *aitys*, typically in schools or universities, they are indoctrinated into this vision of the Kazakh nation; the attributes of Kazakh language as ancestral and rich and *representative* of that nation come to structure poets’ coming-into-being.

⁶² Kazakh Adibieti No.11(27) 5 November 2004

CHAPTER THREE
LEARNING, LEGITIMACY, and LANGUAGE IDEOLOGY

Introduction: Language ideology

Because language serves as a metaphor in state-level politics for differences between Kazakh nationalists and internationalists, in performances in Kazakhstan aitys poets (as shown in the previous chapter) are also able to use language as a metaphorical bridge for talking about the concerns of some broad category of “Kazakhs.” But that license also comes “from below,” from the ways that poets themselves have been indoctrinated and socialized into aitys poetry and into performance. Poets come to be poets through a series of training and mentorship relationships, which themselves are underwritten by particular conceptions of and attitudes toward Kazakh language itself, as traditional, of the ancestors, unique, and difficult to learn structures (at least metaphorically) the ways in which young artists come to be socially legitimated as culture bearers. This legitimation is two fold: poets should not only to have a unique style and mastery of their own “words” in performance, but they should, after time, move into a position to represent their regions and eventually, to claim to “voice the people.”

This particular view of Kazakh language as positive and valued is constructed specifically against continued russo-hegemony in the post-Soviet period, whereby Russian stands as the language of progress and future, while Kazakh is characterized as backward and increasingly unnecessary. These attitudes are a continuation of Soviet era social-evolutionism, which dictated an understanding of Kazakh “folk” “lore” against Russian “civilized” “literature” (cf Hirsch 2005) and which also informed ideologies of Kazakh language as local against the internationalism of the *lingua franca*, Russian.⁶³

There are of course other potential vantage points or attitudes toward what ‘Kazakh language’ is or might be. From the standpoint of language history, Kazakh is a Turkic language. Along with Kyrghyz, Uzbek, and Uighur, it is distinct from Indo-Iranian languages spoken in Central Asia like Tajik and Afghan which are more closely related to Persian and which linguistically group those areas together with present-day Iran. From the standpoint of many Kazakhs, Kazakh is a language distinct from and superior to other languages in the region. In point of fact, Kazakh, Kyrghyz, and Uzbek are somewhere are mutually intelligible, to the point that even verbal art competitions can be held between artists.

One of the first competitions I ever saw, in fact, was just this: Kazakh *aitys* poets were matched against Kyrghyz *aitysh*⁶⁴ poets. Because the latter were more

⁶³ It remains the case today that, despite nominal government acclimation of Kazakh as an “official” state language, in reality Kazakh language learning materials and resources, as well as Kazakh language schools, are underfunded and neglected. Without knowledge of Russian, it is not practically possible for most Kazakhs to achieve any kind of upward social mobility in a sphere like politics (cf Dave 2007).

⁶⁴ This incidentally gives an idea of the minimal difference between languages, patterned at the phonemic level. All the Central Asian languages are agglutinative and share a case grammar with Turkish. Among the Central Asian Turkic languages there are there are lexical differences due to

deeply trained in epic poetry as a part of their nationality identity, specifically the story of *Manas*, the legendary Kyrghyz hero-ancestor, Kyrghyz poets tended to sing sections of epic poetry while Kazakh poets tended to sing more contemporary semi-improvised material. Further, as I saw behind the scenes at that competition and at others subsequently, such efforts at ‘international’ cultural performance are motivated by organizers’ and sponsors’ need for collaboration on other matters (as was the case when *aitys* traveled to Moscow, chapter four). These factors notwithstanding, the simple point here is that local ideologies distinctly de-emphasize shared intelligibility and highlight instead linguistic and cultural uniqueness.

That *Manas* is Kyrghyz but *aitys* Kazakh is but one matter: for a majority of Kazakhs, whether involved in the *aitys* community or no, *aitys* is a tradition distinct from every other verbal art in the world. Early on in my attendance of *aitys* performances, everyone I talked to asked, “Do you think there anything like this anywhere else in the world?” I would answer eagerly, “Yes!” I described other verbal art traditions I’d read about, exclaiming over cultural similarities. In one interview for the local literary newspaper, I drew a direct comparison to rap battles in France and the United States. These remarks were received either with silent tolerance or with outright anger, and it was explained to me on any number of occasions why as *Kazakh uniri* (Kazakh art), *aitys* was exceptional.

The language within *aitys*, further, is exceptionally difficult – where ‘difficulty’ is read in cultural metaphor (words or phrases which are comprehensible as words but the symbolic referent of which is not known) and terminology (naming

geography and varying influences over time; greater numbers of, among others, Arabic, Persian, and Russian words.

persons or events relevant to Kazakh history which may not be commonly known, or, as in any literary tradition, using words which are more rare). Such usage is glossed as the *bailykh* (richness) of Kazakh language. In this view, *aitys* performances serve to link contemporary audiences through cultural time and space.

Exceptionalism and richness, the deep connection to cultural history – this is all also part of a conception of Kazakh language as “traditional” (as opposed most immediately not to other Turkic languages but to Russian in a post-Soviet position on a global stage). It is this language ideology, Kazakh language as “traditional,” that structures the *aitys* community. As younger students move through mentorship relationships, initial performances, engagements with sponsors, etc., they are being schooled in becoming “Kazakh” in a pointed way. In order to attain legitimacy as the voice of the people, as well as to attain recognition as individual poets, students develop a *style*, the elements of which are symbolic of an inclusive Kazakhness: instrumentation, tribal symbols, gender and kin roles.

(1) musical style on dombyra:

Ideally, only one living poet at a time should play a particular style or musical theme, which he or she has adopted from a poetic ancestor. However, precisely because the *aitys* community is so circular and well perambulated by its participants – watching each others’ performances, etc. – most young poets tend to imitate the style of another poet, who in turn has imitated someone in his/her generation or above. Another way to conceive of this is as heritage – that there were the few musical lines from the most famous akhyns (Abai, Suinbai, Zhambyl and others) and that these are transmuted but shared down through subsequent generations of poets.

(2) *costume:*

Costumes become more elaborated over time – typically a poet will choose one color palette, such as white, blue, green, or red, and choose their hat and dress, shapan, pants etc. to match. They are all adorned with golden tribal designs (which no longer correlate with their region of origin, but are simply widely recognized as Kazakh, as opposed to Kirghiz or Uzbek). That is so because it is a continuation of Soviet staging of cultural performance, in which recognizable symbols were necessary in costume to differentiate the various ethnic peoples of each of the socialist republics. Just as the *aitys* tradition itself has been variously co-opted and claimed and reclaimed by various interests over the last century, so too has the meaning of cultural symbols. As a result, in addition to being considered beautiful, the designs are generally considered ‘authentic.’ For example, when a colleague of mine, a journalist working for a western press company, decided to have a ‘traditional’ wedding, that was reflected largely in the clothes she chose to wear, which resembled the costume of a female *aitys* akhyn rather than a typical bride in long white dress (see fig 4).

(3) *stage personality:*

Self confidence, to the point of cockiness, is a beloved characteristic of poets – men and women alike, and it might manifest itself in a variety of ways. Women should be coy and cunning – they are oft compared to swans – desirable, beautiful but ultimately not available. A woman should demonstrate that she knows about flirting and about conjugal relations (as evidenced by accepting or rejecting affinal kinship terms), but that she is not sexually experienced. This female personality reflects a

spectrum of types – at one end there is the pious and/or uptight older woman, at that other end is someone who jokes with sexual insinuation. Ideally, a woman should fall somewhere in the middle.



Figure 4: Ait Akhyn and Karima, Shimkent 2006 photo by author

Similarly, men should be confident and proud – respectful but firm with other men, even elders, flirtatious with women their age or younger, in an established familial relationship with older women. Some can play this role well but many male poets, however, are not ‘ideal types,’ and indeed have flaws: Renat has big ears. [X] never got married. [Y] is very short. These features quickly become the topic of nearly every *aitys* they perform in a predictable and humorous way. But by taking the insults in stride, a poet can demonstrate confidence in another way. And affectations some poets have intentionally taken up on stage can backfire and become target for

insult. For example, one senior poet Ait Akhyn moves his shoulders up and down, sometimes his elbows in and out, and for concluding phrases where his pitch drops, he swaggers his head from side to side and laughs. During the *aitys* pictured above (fig.4) his opponent Karima once told him he looked like an electrocuted chicken.

Even the personality characteristics displayed by individual poets are deeply cultural; in *aitys* any performance stems from the adoption of a kinship role, so personal styles (being funny or serious, brazen or coy, tending toward politics or not) are written over appropriate familial contexts. Thus cultural ideals are enacted – spoiled younger boys, cunningly funny women, and venerable elders. When performances are taken together over time, it is clear that *aitys* is representative of some varying, but idealized Kazakh world of relationships. It is interesting that what all these poets and personae ultimately share is a deep knowledge of language and history, such that part of the legitimacy of poets and their performances is precisely cultural authenticity.

The question of *style* in *aitys* is that which makes a poet at once Kazakh, deeply part of a some imagined ancestral community, as well as individually recognizable and potentially successful. Poets begin this process at some point during their schooling. Since 1989, Kazakh language schools have had *aitys* as a part of their arts curriculum, and most universities have at least one *akhyn* teaching who can informally mentor a group of students in music and poetry. To my knowledge, there is only one place in the country where an entire school has been designed around a program of Kazakh cultural arts, and that is in the south, in Shimkent, a more widely Kazakh-speaking city and region.

Learning: teachers, mentors, and first performances

The director of this school for artistically gifted children in Shimkent is Sabit Agha, in his glory days the most successful and famous poet from that region. His protégée Karima (pictured above), herself a well-known professional on the national circuit, teaches the school's *aitys* class where I spent many an afternoon. In addition to *aitys*, there are classes in *dombyra*, *kiu* (instrumental epic), *terme* (epic singing), pop singing, and art (sculpting and painting). Housed in a former daycare center, the school is an *internat*, a boarding school. The students live there during the week, and if there are no special events, most leave on the weekends to visit relatives in the city. A few students are not lucky enough to have family nearby, and thus stay all the time. The *internat* (boarding school) should ideally receive funding from the city *akimat* (municipal government), but Sabit complained bitterly that though he has made the need known, no such money is forthcoming. He said the *akimat* largely ignores the school, until they need performers for their events. Even his substantial reputation is not enough cultural capital to ensure consistent funding.

As a result, the school is relatively poor. Students themselves cannot pay for the school or bring any income, as they come by and large from poor families themselves. The sub-director and art teacher explained that artistically gifted kids typically come from families with many children. Sabit later concurred, arguing that gifted kids always come from rural areas, where traditions are preserved more strongly than in the city.⁶⁵ Another teacher noted that in some instances, the children

⁶⁵ The term 'always' was blatantly untrue, as many of the kids in the *internat* itself were city kids. But it is true that kids in the villages are far more likely to pick up the *dombyra* or poetry than their urban counterparts, simply because they are 'available,' in the sense that older people in villages embody

are not particularly gifted, but do come from large poor rural families who simply cannot support them. She left it up to me to decide what percentage that might be, but noted that though the school should technically be middleschool level, they have kids ranging from ten to sixteen.

Students live communally, dormitory style, in boys' and girls' quarters respectively. They each have a bunk bed, basic bedding, a few changes of clothes, and a handful of personal possessions. They receive three meals daily. One *terme* student described breakfast with a great sense of dramatic tragedy: "We have one cup of tea, one piece of bread, and butter," here he held up a fingernail, "spread so thin! The kasha," he grimaced, "the kasha you can't even eat. It's...dirty."⁶⁶ Then he broke into a smile so broad it could light a theater on its own, and played part of one of his epic poems for me.

All the students have regular lessons in the morning, and then their respective "artistic" lessons in the afternoon.⁶⁷ From the first day I started to sit in on classes, the underfunding was clear. For its eighty students, the school owned four *dombyras* (wooden stringed instruments). There were no *dombyras* in *aitys* class. One day, after the students had practiced oral recitations of 'one-line *aitys*' Karima wanted them to begin to *aitysy*, to challenge each other. "Where are the *dombyras*? Go, take one from the music class!" she exclaimed in frustration. The librarian complained about the lack of books in the library. There were only three texts of poetry (literally

them and have the time to teach. Many children in cities do not live in multigenerational units, and both they and their parents are surrounded with other claims on their time and attention.

⁶⁶ He was explaining this to me in Kazakh, but after a long pause used the Russian word *griaznii*, dirty.

⁶⁷ They are joined by some students from the regular city school #71, which is located right across the street.

three volumes) for the *aitys* class, one the volume *Kazirgi Aitys* donated by Zhursin just the previous year.



Figure 5: Students with textbooks *Coral Word* and *Abai* 2006 photo by author

The sparseness of this environment, the bare cement walls and empty classrooms, was what I saw first. But I soon came to see that while the living situation is arguably not much better in the school than it might be at home, the school affords its students two major things. First, potential: if these kids are able to acquire a skill set and make connections through their teachers, they will ideally be able to pay their own way through university by performing on the side. While certainly many of the *internat* kids dream of stardom, the arrangement can also be seen in quite pragmatic terms.

Second, the school offers emotional support. In this space, kids who at home would not have had much of a future are now developing an identity and a future. In

their time at the internat, children are being remade as public performers. This is of course incredibly demanding in the sense that they are ‘talent-on-call’ for the whole region and are regularly asked to perform on extremely short notice. But it is also incredibly rewarding, as the label ‘artistically gifted’ washes away aspects of these kids’ lives which may have been problematic. Anonymity and the mantle of poverty are gently tugged away, as are behavioral issues, such as being inattentive, hyper, or hotheaded.

One of the most promising students in *aitys* class was young Muratdin – a hooligan, troublemaker, a boy easily bored or frustrated and the first to make his classmates laugh and lose their attention, too. Unlike the parents of many students, his own mother lived in the city, and he saw her regularly. She attended all his performances, which is where she and I met. Watching him with the rowdy group of young poets in the theater, she sighed. “I’m so grateful for this school, she said, “I didn’t know what I was going to do with him, it was terrible. He is an excellent dombyra player – he played dombyra first, the hardest pieces, he learned them right away. And now he is trying *aitys*, and doing well. Before he was a terror, always fighting, so much energy. I was worried sick about him. I still worry, I hope he will be successful.” In fact, I know from watching him day after day that Muratdin did very well at school, for a simple reason: a perhaps inadvertent balance between guidance and freedom. These kids, with no exception I met, are attached to their art forms, and love to engage them. In their prep time, afternoon ‘artistic’ classes, this environment is relatively unstructured, which allows students to approach their voices, instruments, and each other in a low-key way.

Though a timetable of classes hangs on the wall just inside the school's front entryway, classtime is a very flexible concept. Students tend to wander in and out of different lessons, and can move about within the classrooms as they like. Because their teachers are all professionals or 'stars' in their own right, they command a high level of respect and obedience from their pupils. Their praise is sparse and highly sought after. In one class I observed, Karima reprimanded Muratdin for quoting directly from the *aitys* of another poet, chastising him for not finding his own words. Muratdin sat in a sullen huff for the rest of class that day, but came back with renewed vigor and a new *aitys* the next. He was determined to prove himself not only to her, but in front of his peers as well. Indeed, all the students are always learning from their slightly older peers as well as from their teachers, so Muratdin was multiply responsible to put on a strong face.

Learning: first performances

Soon after I arrived in the southern regional capital Shimkent, there was a short cycle of *aitys* competitions: the first organized by Akh Orda, described before, then a youth *aitys*, the winner of which was to perform in the regional *aitys* in celebration of Nauryz, the Kazakh new year. It took young poets in the region approximately a month to prepare, which coincided with the time I began to visit the school. Muratdin, though a bit young, was on track to perform in the upcoming regional youth *aitys*. Karima had chosen him, along with two other older students in the class, to compete, and together they prepared to try out before the regional jury, which included Sabit Agha, the director of the school. The day of tryouts, our three

students assembled at the local cultural affairs office in the second floor children's library. (This was a large room with several long tables and chairs but no books.)

To open the meeting, one jury member, a poet laureate of the region, lectured the visibly nervous young poets: "*Akhyn degen uz* (a poet is oneself). Shimkent is a center of poetry, so do your region proud. *Baghaghy adamdary kettu kerek* (the value of the people should come out)."⁶⁸ The jury then called poets up in pairs to perform on the spot. This was a terribly awkward process for the young contenders, as they were not improvising. They did not know each other, and they were all from the same general place, so some typical guidelines for the content of *aitys* simply did not apply. But more importantly, most were very inexperienced – only those from the school had regular experience in this type of impromptu performance. So they had prepared poems ahead of time – this made *aitys* flat, as it was not a mutual creation but just each poet reciting a few lines, a test of memory under pressure more than anything else.

Some poets stumbled, couldn't remember their poems, or couldn't find themselves, and they were quickly dismissed by the jury. Those who were more successful then passed to a second round, which was telling because it was unexpected and the young poets hadn't prepared anything for this. They couldn't very well repeat themselves, so they had to improvise. This turned out to be quite funny, as several poets had their wits about them and decided to make fun of the situation in which they all found themselves. After a final selection, everyone was told to return to the office the following week to register, and the meeting was abruptly dismissed.

⁶⁸ fieldnotes 15 Feb 06

I walked back with two men: a newly professional *akhyn* of the region who was serving on the jury for youth *aitys*, and Karima's protégé, Nurlan, who would himself be performing at that *aitys*. Now at university, Nurlan had returned to Karima's *aitys* class the previous week, to the students' delight. A handsome and smilingly confident young man, already a notable success on the regional *aitys* scene, he made the girls in class swoon and the boys clamor for his attention. He, in his turn, was absolutely dutiful to Karima, and today, he was similarly dutiful to the professional *akhyn*. As if in turns, one young poet from the school trailed our group, utterly devoted to Nurlan. The cycle that is mentorship in this tradition here presents itself – a series of stages poets will move through in their transition from student to performer. They will always be someone's protégé, but they in turn will garner their own mentees.

At the school, Karima was pleased but not surprised to hear that her three students had all been selected for the regional youth *aitys*. In a continuation of Soviet tradition, *aitys* is often held for the day of some such figure of historical and cultural importance for the Kazakh community. In the case of this youth *aitys*, it was the poet Zhambyl, the events of December 1986, and Kazakhstan's subsequent years of independence. All the young poets were admonished to study and to *elenbei!* (don't daydream!)⁶⁹ Karima gave her students a lecture about Zheltoksan and about the poet Zhambyl the next day – about his life, the region where he lived, his achievements, his poetry, and the poets with whom he had *aitys*. All the students then set about working this information into their own *aitys*, which they wrote and Karima reviewed

⁶⁹ fieldnotes, 15 Feb 2006

critically. She yelled at one student for copying his friend's words rather than coming up with his own.

They had a mock *aitys* within the class a few days later, having had some time to prepare and think about what they might say.⁷⁰ The room was set up to structurally resemble a staged performance: two chairs were moved to the front of the room, the rest of the desks and chairs were arranged for the audience of children who crowded in the room, and Karima had invited her protégé Nurlan back to sit with her at the 'judge's table' to the side. I, ethnographer qua photographer, was stationed in the front of the room. Those who were to perform had even dressed in their performance outfits.

Another week or so later, the poets from Karima's class performed on stage at the regional competition along with other young poets from the Tashkent region. On the jury sat another famous poet, Karima's friend, contemporary, and sometimes co-teacher Marzhan, who is a well known *aitys* akhyn in her own right and whom I discuss at length later in this chapter. The school's students did not perform exceptionally well, and certainly faltered. But that did not deter their huge crowd of friend-supporters from the school among whom I sat from wildly yelling their enthusiastic support. It was an induction into *aitys*, the first performance of many, the beginning of exposure to wider audiences and potential sponsors.

I narrate this succession of events in order to exemplify the cyclical patterns of poets coming-into-being. Not all poets have the luxury of this school, which

⁷⁰ As young poets, the balance is tipped toward preparation rather than improvisation. All of them had either forgotten or didn't know how to include one of the three subjects (poet, uprising, independence) and so their day of *aitys* provided examples.

provides organization and direct access to famous mentors, but all successful poets will move up through the ranks in a similar way, forming connections and relationships as they move from local to regional performances and beyond, until they are recognized for inclusion in the national circuit. The other poets they come to know become part of their own poetic persona in two ways: first, young poets accrue knowledge not from independent study but from conversations and interactions with older poets and mentors. Second, poets are known as successful or not vis a vis the other poets with whom they have had *aitys*. As a poet increases in stature, they will meet more experienced poets, and each has a resume or playlist of their opponents which serves as their own credential. This is also how audiences come to know the poets; their brief biographies in programs include a list of opponents (see fig 2).

Young *aitys* poets imitate the performance schedules of their older successful mentors. This is established in regional networks, all mediated by the local cultural affairs office. If they are affiliated with a school, that group usually takes it upon itself to provide local performances which school members can arrange themselves. One job of any mentor is to push his or her students forward into contexts where they can have practice and meet other poets, cultural affairs personnel, and sponsors. This is what Karima does for her students at the school in Shimkent, as the director of the school did for her and now also does for their older students.

Learning: Representing a Region

Learning to represent a region is an important point for poets strategically, as in performance they *always* represent their regions. The story of another teacher at

the school, Marzhan, herself also a professional *aitys* poet (more about her later in this chapter) exemplifies this. Her recent win was against opponent Nurlan Mysaev, himself from the Mangistau region where the *aitys* took place. Nurlan began with the traditional route of finding something about Marzhan's region, Shimkent, to criticize. He noted that a statue of Ahmet Baitursunov, an author and linguist who, due to his 'Kazakh patriotism' in the Soviet period is now lauded as a cultural hero, stands in the city of Shimkent, but that Shimkent citizens have cut off the statue's legs for the scrap metal. The thought that people would be so badly off and/or so disrespectful as to sabotage a figure of a Kazakh hero is the insult to Marzhan qua Shimkent. Marzhan would traditionally have two possible answers: to show the untruth in Nurlan's claim, or to criticize Mangistau. She did neither.

Because the *aitys* was taking place in Mangistau, it was definitely not in Marzhan's interests to criticize the region in front of that audience and jury. Further, she wanted to establish herself as far stronger than any 'typical' opponent. So she answered:

<p>Usimning yeshbir minim bolmaghan song, Shimkentke syn aitup zorlanasyng, Aulynggyng eeti zhaman dese bireu, Kharaptan kharap toryp khorlanasyng, Bireiuler Maxambetting basyn kesken, ayakh kesse sen nege tang kalasyng, Usinge keler suzdi bilmeising dep, Yertenggi kuni beredi saghan yel baghasyn.</p>	<p>As if [you] don't have any flaws, you're compelled to speak to Shimkent Of course some of the aul's meat is bad, It's not for nothing you fill up this stand No one cut Maxambet's⁷¹ head, if a leg is cut why do you return at daybreak? If you don't know how to say the word coming to you tomorrow the people will give you your worth.</p>
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Marzhan here speaks a bit scornfully to Nurlan, reminding him that every place has its flaws and reminding him that if he can't speak well, 'the people' will

⁷¹ Maxambet Utemisoly, a poet and leader of anticolonial uprisings in the early 19th century. He is supposed to have been murdered.

judge him. As it turned out, Nurlan was judged in first place by the jury, but he decided to give that place along with its prize, one million tenge, to Marzhan, as a way of recognizing her stronger performance.⁷²

Learning: Masters and Apprentices

As poets have known each other and competed with each other, they can pass this information on to their own students or mentees. The mentor-student relationship in the *aitys* world is much like that of a master and apprentice, as it is precisely mastery, or expertise, which is being learned. Expertise is poetic and musical talent, it is character and bravado, and it is the accrual of deep knowledge, over time, of the *aitys* community itself. The world of *aitys* could helpfully be considered a ‘field’ (Bourdieu) in two basic ways: it is a *relational mode of cultural production*, and it is *part of broader systems of exchange* (1994). It is a sphere where one can see the production, circulation, and consumption of ‘symbolic goods’ (poetic expertise), and where success is equivalent to prestige founded on the dialectic of knowledge and recognition – a cultural competence.

The arts school in Shimkent, particularly for *aitys*, houses masters and apprentices in that extended process of the development of cultural competence. My own presence as ethnographer, student, photographer, etc. only served to further bring that relationship into relief. For example, Karima’s interview took place in her

⁷² Based on my experience with juries and behind the scenes at other *aityses* over the years, I would guess that Marzhan’s win, and her opponent’s gracious concession, were orchestrated by the jury and organizers. I would imagine a likely scenario to be that they knew a Mangistau audience would be expecting their poet to win, and so did not want to offend the region’s audience and sponsors by directly awarding the win to someone from another region. Nurlan then was likely compensated somehow behind the scenes – but this is highly speculative on my part.

aitys classroom. We assembled an impromptu set around her otherwise empty teacher's desk, replete with school nurse as interim translator. Most of the class was in attendance that day, and they had been tasked with a written assignment and were trying to look busy while listening intently to Karima's every word. As it goes in the complex dance of the performance of order, Karima knew well that they were paying attention, and talked louder than was necessary given that I was sitting right beside her.

She began her story gesturing at the class: she began to write poetry in school – in the 7th or 8th class. “*Snachalo myna balalar siakhty poeziadan bastadym*”⁷³ (At first I started with poetry, [just] like these kids). She notes that her school was “*myndandai arnaiy spets shkola*⁷⁴ *yemes, kadimgi mektep*” (not a special school like this one, just an ordinary school). This intro served rhetorically to bolster and praise her students: the implicit message here is that she made it, and so too is it possible for her students to ‘make it’ as poets – indeed, they’ve got an even better starting point in this school for the arts than their teacher ever had.

The interview qua lesson continued with a discussion of her mentor, Sabit Abdiraioy, the school's director. Their lessons started in the years after the December events of 1986, Zheltoksan. Karima explained to me (as did Sabit in his own interview) that in subsequent years, while not yet in any way explicitly tolerated, [things] that could be called “national” became desirable as symbolic of some Kazakh

⁷³ I knew and spoke with Karima in a variety of places and context over more than a year, and observed her interact with others (mostly other Kazakh speakers in the *aitys* community). Most Kazakh speakers in Kazakhstan regularly use Russian words and phrases, but I think Karima's use of Russian increased when she was talking to me. She would not consider herself by any means fluent in Russian.

⁷⁴ ‘spets’ is an abbreviation for the Russian *spetsial'nost'* (or *spetsializirobanniye?*) – specialized school, something equivalent to vocational training

identity and even resistance to Soviet authority. So far as the December events represented a clear case of entirely disproportionate [Soviet] government brutality against its own citizens, it became possible after that to lift “Kazakh” away from “Soviet,” and to imagine that Soviet reality would now simply become a period in Kazakh history, rather than the other way around. *Aitys akhyns* frequently reference Zheltoksan, such that performances become a sort of living memory of this tragic event in some ostensibly shared Kazakh history.

This is an important point in understanding the patterns of mentorship which emerged subsequently – *aitys* had been institutionalized, put away in a slot in the school system and the local-regional-national culture flow. Poets like Sabit and several others at once broke away from that slot and used it to their advantage. The message was now different: the slot would be used to discuss politics. At this point in the interview, the nurse-translator reiterated what Karima was describing: “We were in the [Soviet] Union. When we were young, in school we studied. And then they didn’t allow us to [support] national culture. If we studied something national, like *aitys*, that was considered nationalism. Then there wasn’t that kind of possibility. At the time when Karima was studying, it was more or less possible.”

Karima followed her by saying, to her audience of anthropologist and rapt students, that “now it’s the right thing to start out as a poet in school, then in university, and from there to launch onto the mainstage, because then you’ll be ready.” As *aitys* is now explicitly political, what Karima is saying is that the school and university should be understood as an appropriate location for the development of

the necessary political knowledge to compete successfully in public performance. She is claiming the space of the educational sphere to the ends of *aitys*.⁷⁵

She quickly links that space to the mentorship relationship, describing her experience with Sabit Agha: “After he studied with me, taught me, there came results. Then, I began to go along [with him], to perform in *aitys*, in the regions, oblasts, in general I went everywhere with Sabit Agha: he is my teacher, and I his student. We went everywhere together. Then, maybe because I was small – in general you always support the little one, and he supported me – and I always came out before my teacher. If he won third place, I was in second. When he didn’t win a prized place, I took first. But [my] teacher was always happy [for me]. He used to say that if I didn’t win (Russ: *vyidu*), it was enough for him that I tried (Russ: *vyhodila*). And so I always kept trying (Russ: *postoyanna tak hodila*). Kazakhs have a saying, ‘*ostazyndan da osy suzdi kaitalap aityn zhuredi*’ (these words too return to the moustache from whence they are spoken).

Legitimacy: Words Stand in History

That a poet’s words repeat, circulate as an owned ideational object, is a feature both of previous, famous poets, as well as poets whose identity is being formed today. It is one of several ways in which poets, as such, become increasingly more solid over time – like an image washed over by color again and again, becoming more strong, more *there* over time, a process of coming-into-being.

⁷⁵ Indeed, today most *aitys* poets teach in the country’s universities, typically either in the faculty of journalism or of ‘Kazakh literature,’ that edifice of the Soviet construction of knowledge I describe in chapter one. The curriculum of the latter, in terms of writers, has not changed substantially since the Soviet period, but now the anti-Russian strain of their thought is emphasized.

For example, when I'd first arrived at the school, Marzhan (the poet quoted above) had just had her big win in Mangistau, and had won a million tenge (some hundred thousand dollars). The first morning I arrived to interview Sabit Agha, the school's director, in his office, Marzhan came to tell him about the *aitys* and relay the interchanges therein and her winning words. Sabit nodded, smiling proudly as she talked, saying over and over, "*Molodets! Molodets!*"⁷⁶ Later that day, she came to the crowded house of Karima's classroom, which had swollen from its normal size of ten or so to over thirty students to listen to the same speech by Marzhan. Here again she repeated words and phrases not only of her own winning *aitys*, but directly quoted from other poets' performances past and present to demonstrate the correct attitude toward *good words*.

Marzhan functioned as an occasional teacher in the school but also as a semi-celebrity, due both to her performances and to her personality, which was commanding. My own inclination toward her was also absolute deference and mild awe. A physically large and strong woman, with a loud low voice and, despite deep smile lines, a serious demeanor, she expected the quiet reverence with which her words were heard.

She began quite generally, speaking about the genre of *Kyz ben zhigit aitys* (girl/boy) which is a frequent performance genre for young students starting out. They must learn to flirt on stage; ideally boys should be complimentary, infatuated, and self-assured, while women should be seemingly demure but in point of fact sharp and dismissive. Both should be funny. Marzhan reflected to her students that

⁷⁶ *molodets* is Russian, a phrase meaning something normally said to children who do something well, a term of praise and encouragement.

audiences want to see good points of girls' character. "As Zhambyl said to Shyrynbek: 'Girls don't open the window of the yurt at night.'"

She then moves from describing the more general [gendered] comportment of poets, to the words and phrases poets choose to use: "If many poets repeat spoken words, you guys say, 'Oh, they're repeating someone else,' that's what you think." Marzhan is asking her students to position themselves as both poet and audience vis a vis an imagined poet's spoken words in *aitys*, underscoring the mutual relationship there: you must know, be, and understand both perspectives in order to understand how to 'speak' in *aitys*. Her more specific point here though is that while it's fine (and indeed normal) for a poet to repeat his or her *own* words and phrases, it is completely inappropriate for a poet to repeat the words of another poet as his or her own.

The point is proved in the counter example of another female poet who had recently intoned the line, "*Ketem ketem ketem dep ketneiuime bolady*" (I'm going, I'm going, I'm going I say could it be that I would stay?) The line is great! said Marzhan. But unfortunately she'd taken it, to a word, directly from another poet, the famous Khadyra Myrzalieva. That's plagiarism! said Marzhan, who had found the text of that *aitys* and showed it to the offending poet, forcing her to fess up. "But to repeat your *own* words over and over in different *aityses*, that's a different thing."

The subject she's broaching is quite complicated. First, it is certainly an ideal for a poet to have an entirely individual way of speaking, to have his or her own recognizable turns of phrase, as indeed a poet should have a recognizable and if not unique, certainly a differentiated style altogether. However, few poets are really able

to pull this off, as it takes either super talent or years of experience to attain. In reality, all students of *aitys* pore through the poetry of their poet-ancestors in books, which represent fragmented and edited versions of original spoken word. Most students as a matter of course memorize entire passages from ‘the greats’ like Zhambyl – that is part of the broader knowledge set they are responsible for when they themselves have *aitys*. And all students live and learn with their mentors, watching them perform, listening to their conversations and reflections, as with Karima’s interview in front of her students. Most poets inevitably will, at some point or regularly, repeat the words of another poet.

But using another poet’s words, particularly if the other poet is not a mentor, is problematic. In the Semipolatinsk region in the north, two feuding mentors have created different groups for *aitys* students, and loyalties among poets are divided as a result. Accusations of copying, stealing, etc. have flown between the two camps, and nearly always center around *using another poet’s words*. Each of the mentors considers the other crazy, and they do not communicate. Their respective students also for the most part, do not speak with each other. This is tricky, as students of both mentors are recruited for performances within the region and on the national circuit – they see one another regularly. Beyond insulting one another, the two mentors refused to tell me what had happened. After some time in the community, one of their students told me the tale:

After the December events in 1986 and by the time of Kazakhstan’s independence, an *aitys* mentorship group formed in the pedagogical institute at the region’s central university *Shakarim* (named after Shakarim Kudaiberdiev, a

philosopher and poet exiled during the early Soviet years). The harmonious community was short-lived; a newcomer to the school, Saiyazbek, took the director's ideas and tried to start up another school himself. That man quarreled with a poet-mentor at the original school, Dametken – she in turn took a group to the regional cultural affairs office and started up a second small school there funded by the municipal government budget. The woman telling me this sad tale I will call A—, a student of Dametken. A— says that to add insult to injury, Saiyazbek is not actually a poet himself but a man who wishes to make a living off the fame and talent of others. In order to mentor, he steals the words of real poets.

In an interview with me, A— sat together with her own young protégée with whom she had been recently performing. She noted that on at least two occasions, Saiyazbek has stolen *her* words: at her performances he writes down what she says, and then passes it along to one of his poets, who says the same things in her subsequent performance (in both cases the second poet was a younger girl). On both the occasions A— recounted to me, she says that Saiyazbek's students realized what had happened and apologized directly to her; she forgave them but is still angry with their mentor. That a poet's words are correctly attributed is a basic tenet of the tradition.

A—, in her story, echoes the comments of Marzhan (above). There is a fundamental distinction in the ideals of *aitys* poets: their words should be beautiful and strong, their phrases memorable – in a sense, decontextualization is their goal: they *want* audiences to remember and repeat them. But not without their names. Living and working in the *aitys* community, no one ever says, 'oh, it's like that one

poet said.’ Phrases are *always* accompanied by the poet’s name, living or dead. This is a system of honor by way of citation. But the attribution of *words* is quite different from that of a *voice*. In a sense, a voice is the idea that is allowed, and a poet demonstrates talent by presenting that voice in the most satisfying way, with good words. That a particular poet does well is an honor for all Kazakhs, but particularly those from the poets’ region, who can feel vicarious pride in a successful performance.

Language Ideology: Kazakh language, Kazakh knowledge

Like Karima and many other poets, Marzhan works at the regional university teaching Kazakh literature. I interviewed her in her office there. Her schedule is busy bordering on hectic, with this job, three children, a husband, and her in-laws to take care of. She makes the time to participate in *aitys*, however, because she feels that there is a ‘moral crisis’ among the country’s youth, that the younger generations are not respecting Kazakh language and traditions. Marzhan sees *aitys* as a way to influence change in this regard, a forum in which to encourage Kazakhs to speak Kazakh and to be more ‘faithful’ (Muslim). In that way, she thinks, the Kazakh community can become generally more respectful of the Koran, of ‘customs,’ and of their country.

Marzhan’s concern here is clearly indicative of a very real discrepancy in attitudes toward Kazakh language qua culture versus Russian: it is the case today that many Kazakhs, particularly urban youth, see Kazakh language as old, tied deeply to family; the language that grandparents speak at home. Russian, by contrast, is

perspectiv'nii: it is practical to operate in everyday urban spaces, to have a job, and of course, to link to the entire former Soviet Union – a language ideology obviously tied to continued Russian political and economic dominance in the post-Soviet period. A more general perspective might be to say that youth simply do not see a future connected with Kazakh language or with their cultural traditions, *aitys* included, particularly in urban areas where Russian language predominates.

Kazakh itself is a transnational language, in the sense that hundreds of thousands of speakers live outside Kazakhstan itself, but as the vast majority of those people are not well to do, knowing the language is not seen to enable speakers in the way that Russian can. When I asked young urban Kazakhs why they were not interested in *aitys* performances, the overwhelming answer was that *aitys* is too difficult to understand. That answer is multilayered. First, to say that *aitys* itself is somehow inherently “too difficult” displaces the responsibility for comprehension to poets, rather than the admission that, if one does not speak Kazakh, of course the performances will be difficult to understand. Second, it is a backward compliment: people would explain to me that the metaphors poets use are so rich and complicated, so deeply imbued with “special” cultural and historical understanding, that “ordinary people” cannot follow. The attribution of exceptional knowledge to poets is complimentary, but again deflects attention away from the fact that at the heart of the matter is knowledge of Kazakh language.

Poets, in their training, are exposed to knowledge of Kazakh language and literature that most people are not. The very fact that Marzhan and many other active poets also teach Kazakh literature is case in point. Sometimes audience members

shake their heads and say, ‘I didn’t understand all of it!’ or ‘that was complicated!’ to poets’ metaphors. I am far from being a fluent Kazakh speaker; I always attended *aitys* with translators, who were nearly always urban Kazakh youth. I saw how they struggled with metaphors in particular – I got a good deal of literal translation rather than metaphorical. For example, the poet Dauletkere sang the line “*Akhyndaryng akh zharma uleng aityp / aulie babasy na bas orghandai*” to his opponent Sara in 2004. A research assistant, an urban college student fluent in Kazakh, transcribed a recording of the performance. I eventually received the translation: “Poets sing songs, as if they were bowing before their holy ancestors.” The second line works, allowing for some poetic license (*bas orghau* is to beat one’s forehead, a metaphor for prostration). But the first line would be different: “[When] Poets’ white-grain song [is] sung.”

What was missing in the translation was this metaphor, white grain. It is a multivalent reference to growth, purity, and to bread, which is an essential aspect of every Kazakh meal. Further, the word *zharma* can also mean “of two sides,” like a page, a coin – or here, it could mean the cocreation of *aitys* songs by poets. I’m left to guess at this, like many audience members probably also do. That said, however, the vast majority of poet interaction revolves around shared knowledge of Kazakh kinship, current events, and very commonly known historical events and figures. That rural audiences, Kazakh speakers with Russian as a second language, can follow poets is telling, for they are surely “ordinary” in the sense above.

For example, Marzhan described another recent *aitys* in which her opponent complained that there are too many unmarried girls in Kazakhstan. Marzhan

responded by joking that they should become second wives and help to increase the Kazakh population. This was not a ‘funny’ joke so much as a jab at the current administration, who have considered legislation to make polygamy legal, citing the Koran as precedent. Proponents argued that plural marriage would indeed help to “make more Kazakhs,” which is another conscious government goal, to increase the demographic majority over ethnic Russians.⁷⁷ A previous massive project to increase the population by encouraging Kazakh in other countries to move had been a widespread failure, and Marzhan’s joke also calls that to mind. None of this exchange required elite knowledge of culture or history, it is knowledge to which most if not all Kazakhstanis have access through news and family networks.⁷⁸

Learning: A Family of Artists

A few weeks after I began coming to the school, I was excited to be invited along on a special outing. We gathered outside the school one afternoon to caravan to a nearby small town -- some of the most promising (and/or exuberant) students from each section (*aitys*, *terme*, *kyui*, *dombyra*, pop singing, and dancing) squeezed into a van with me, and we followed the director and subdirector in their German car on the road leading out of the city. We drove an hour to one of the region’s orphanages, where we unloaded, and were escorted up to a large theater room on the second floor.

⁷⁷ Their main effort in this regard was the massive ‘Oralman’ project, in which Kazakhstani president Nursultan Nazabayev issued a standing invitation to what he called the ‘Kazakh diaspora’ to ‘return to their homeland.’ Oralmandar, returnees, were offered massive incentives to move – money, homes, and citizenship. When thousands came, mostly from Mongolia and northwest China, they found the government promises empty and instead found themselves with no money, scrapping together homes with the help of relatives, and unable to practically function in Kazakhstan without citizenship or knowledge of Russian language.

⁷⁸ Interestingly, in that particular competition, Marzhan was reprimanded for this joke, because there was an unmarried woman sitting on the jury, and other jury members felt the joke was highly inappropriate.

Things unfolded slowly; the performers went to change into outfits in other classrooms, and children from the orphanage slowly piled into the room in groups with their teachers. There was initially nowhere for the audience to sit, and so a stream of people kept bringing in chairs, arranging and rearranging seating in the space. Eventually, everyone had settled in and the performances began.

Students copied a theater protocol, replete with scripted MC's and acts. Performers sat on a small built-in stage across the room from their audience of energetic kids. I sat next to a small girl from the orphanage who held my hand tightly. Each act was energetically applauded, and the event culminated in the early evening with an improvised disco – speakers burst with pop music and we all danced happily, adults and kids alike. After, our director went to the private office of the orphanage's director, to share some self-congratulatory toasts, and the rest of the adults went on a short tour of the orphanage, which had recently been rebuilt with funds from the regional government. Boys and girls were separated into apartments, where they lived in multi-age groups of 8-10 with two 'parents' (adult caretakers). The school itself, while large, was quite modest, but these new apartments were like any average to well-to-do family apartments one would see in the city, replete with electronic entertainment, appliances, and washer/dryer units. In a word, these apartments were *far* nicer than the barebones dormitories where students lived in the arts school.

On the ride home evening was turning to night. We stopped at a Soviet war monument – a full size air craft which had been brought to this spot and placed in cement. Our group clambered on and around it, we took photographs (see figure 6).

Post-performance, kids from the arts school were radiant, full of energy and smiles. With time, as I came to see this evening as part of a series of similar (and regular) experiences of performance, I realized that the conscious message our students received was that their purpose was to entertain those less fortunate – i.e., that they themselves are fortunate, special, that they have a purpose. It is a form of enacted narrative, one that all culture producers do and tell over and over again.

Language Ideology: The Offices of Cultural Affairs

That poets are specially privileged is a narrative always quietly in jeopardy. That jeopardy is perhaps best or most clearly seen from the perspective of another large section of the ‘culture producer’ community – cultural organizers, those bureaucratically endowed with the mission to make performances happen. The staff of all the offices I worked in was exclusively Kazakh, and they themselves tend to ardently support Kazakh cultural performances. They see themselves quite consciously as cogs in the wheels of making-culture-happen, in forging the connections necessary to keep communities in touch and alive, and for taking care of the actual staging to give Kazakh voices a literal venue. They are state workers and paid little, but work incredibly hard. Their schedule is demanding, with major performances or meetings of some sort at least monthly.

But the local staff fulfill, rather than decide, what the season’s program will be. The program of various performances is decided at the regional level, where money is channeled from the state budget through to local municipal accounts. The request for each performance comes in the former of an *upravlenie* (administrative



Figure 6: Students in Shimkent, 2006 photo by author

order) in Russian language from the mayor of the region, who is always a presidential appointee. The offices of the mayor and of cultural affairs at the regional level have to respond to demands from the national ministry of culture; the latter has the difficult task of balancing a ‘cultural’ identity for the sake of the state’s national face while also supporting programs which either put Kazakhstanis more actively into contact with peers on an international stage⁷⁹ or, as in the largest city of Almaty, which bring popstars and performances from outside the country.

⁷⁹ like the annual ‘Voices of Central Asia’ concert

The priorities for ‘cultural development’ at the state level *do* include a regular *aitys* performance in every region – but it is typically done for *Nauryz*,⁸⁰ the Kazakh New Year, in March, or for the celebration (as earlier in this chapter) for *Zheltoksan*, at least in part because these are both events clearly related to a Kazakh nationalism which could be seen as anti-Soviet rather than anti-Russian, and are thus appropriate Kazakhstani holidays. However, the basic demand for *aitys* (and other poetic and musical) performances around the country exceeds one per year. This demand comes of course from audiences, but also from the nature of the poetry and the poets themselves: it is to *aitysu*, to engage *one another.* There is no way to become proficient in *aitys* without constant exposure to and competition with other peers (and preferably mentors).

A lack of performance opportunities is a real stop-block; this surely contributes to the ‘wellspring’ of poetry waiting to burst forth in poets, to the feeling they will go mad if they cannot sing (as in chapter 2). As one frustrated organizer in Shimkent explained to me, poets come or call to her offices year-round, wondering when the next *aitys* will be, who will be invited, and she has nothing to tell them, nothing to offer them. She knows they suffer as a result and she feels terrible. She does not, however, feel responsible. She knows whom to blame: “those Russiaphiles (*russochniki*) in the regional administration, they know nothing about our traditions, they don’t prioritize or support them, they don’t know what it’s like for [poets].” She notes that poets are great artists, that because of their particular artistic temperaments,

⁸⁰ From the Persian Novroz; today also a holiday to mark the first day of spring in Iran.

they must be nurtured and treated indulgently. It might be frustrating, but the pay-off is great: “It’s for the truth that we let these poets get away with so much.”⁸¹

Conclusion

“The truth” to which this organizer refers is what poets claim to voice. The legitimacy to make that claim comes from a series of relationships built over time: having a mentor, being able to practice with peers, inclusion in regional networks of performers managed by cultural affairs offices – for a poet these are all part of the same development experience. It is in and as a part of these networks that poets will develop the ability to perform with their own “good words,” and ultimately, to claim a part in a broader “voice,” which is “the truth of the people.”

Kazakh language itself belongs to each performer as a member and exemplary representative of that people. Negative ideas circulating among non- and non-fluent Kazakh speakers of Kazakh as “difficult to learn” erase ideologically the reality that resources for the development and learning of Kazakh during and after the Soviet period have been scarce and of poor quality specifically so that Russian could predominate. That negativity is replaced in the sphere of *aitys* by a reclamation of Kazakh as ‘difficult’ simply because it is such a ‘rich’ language, a language replete with culture and history to be mined only by those having attained levels of expertise. For poets, enacting traditionalism is positively valued, not as progress but as perpetuity.

Today the *aitys* tradition, cycles of learning and mentorship as well as performance, is part of a broader political economy. The final category of

⁸¹ K—, personal interview 25 Feb 2006

relationships poets must cultivate, with their mentors and/or through the offices of cultural affairs, are with sponsors. By the time most poets are successful enough to make it to the national circuit, they have almost always established a relationship with one or more local or regional sponsors – local politicians, rectors of universities, or prominent businessmen. On the national level however, sponsorship becomes far more elite, and is mediated by Zhursin Zhursin. While the relationship of poets to Kazakh language in one sense remains the same (i.e. positively valued tradition), the national circuit nonetheless represents a new dynamic, which introduces a threat: that the influence of elite organizer-sponsors will predominate, overshadowing a poet's relationship with his or her audience, as well as with some imagined "Kazakh people." This ultimately undermines a poet's relationship to both *words* and *voice*, and the processes of learning and legitimation which create that relationship: it is as if a poet's language might be for sale.

CHAPTER FOUR
THE POLITICS OF CULTURE IN PERFORMANCE

The politics of performance

In the spring of 2004, early in my first year of research, Zhursin and Zhuldosbekov had arranged an extended cycle of *aitys* performances in Almaty, Kazakhstan's largest city and the former capital, and the place where I was living at the time. In all forms or genres of *aitys*, poets represent the Kazakh people, as well as more specifically their regions and tribes of origin; further, the two poets must establish some sort of fictive kinship relation in order to address each other. Thus when a poet speaks, he or she may speak not as themselves, but as any one of these groups. The format of the 2004 weekly competitions, *Zhekpe Zhek* (one-on-one), differing representational status was meant to spark social and political debate about the conditions for Kazakhs in different areas of the country. It is specifically in this genre that poets are able to collaborate in sociopolitical critique.⁸²

Aitys poets decry continued russo-hegemony in Kazakhstan, the continued predominance of Russian language and the cooperation of the Kazakh and Russian national governments and subsequent lack of support for Kazakh language and

⁸² *Zhetpe zhek* is a specific format of the most common contemporary type of *aitys*: *ture*. *Ture* describes a general genre which merges descriptions of social problems and political criticism with jokes. Other types of *aitys* include *khaiym* (singing in couplets), *uitirik* (lying), *khyz ben zhigit* (girl-boy/flirting), and *zhombakh* (riddling).

culture. More startling, poets tend blame government corruption for the inability to change priorities or to adequately address social ills like unemployment, prostitution, and drug addiction. During *aitys*, poets' performance serves to transfer responsibility for these problems away from either ordinary citizens or from the depths of historical indeterminacy and to pin it directly on the shoulders of an identifiable leadership.

It is not that poets do not face repercussion. They are certainly warned by Zhursin and other organizers about who might be in the live audience, and they are discouraged from being too critical or urged to focus on other topics. At the time of my research (2004-2006) there was gossip among poets that Zhursin had specifically prohibited two topics – post-Soviet privatization in Kazakhstan, and the US war in Iraq⁸³ – and it is true that I never heard poets discuss these things on stage. However, in interviews with me, everyone involved in organizing *aitys*, including sponsors and Saghatbek, the editor from the state television channel, told me how proud they were that poets could say whatever they wanted.

Here I give three examples of performance, the first two of which were a part of the spring 2004 cycle of performances in Almaty, in which poets colluded successfully in sociopolitical critique. Three features of *aitys* serve to “protect” poets when they criticize government leaders: (1) the poetry is emblematic of “authentic culture,” (2) the poetry is dialogic, conflictive, allowing for frame shifts and a diffusion of responsibility for what is said, and (3) an elite level of sponsorship. All of these features, further, are part of a broader nationalist framework which has

⁸³ As the political economic elite in Kazakhstan has risen to power specifically on oil production and on complex holding arrangements resulting from non-transparent privatization agreements (cf Cummings 2005; Olcott 2002), ostensibly these topics would be too risqué for any sponsor, Kazakh nationalist or not.

functioned in Kazakhstan for the last two decades to keep *aitys* politically relevant.

But as *aitys* has become more popular, and as Zhursin and his sponsors become well-known and influential, they seek to push *aitys* onto the global stage of the Kazakh diaspora, both by bringing in international poets to perform, and by taking groups of Kazakhstani poets abroad. The third example I give here comes from a performance in the fall of 2004, when poets traveled to Moscow. I show that the success of the nationalist framework was untenable in the former colonial capital, in large part because elite sponsors within the political and economic elite of the Russian Kazakh diaspora were interested in promoting friendship and camaraderie between the two countries, not in inciting ethnic tension. As a result, poets' freedom of expression was ultimately compromised in Moscow; they performed not in the political genre of *Zhekpe Zhek*, but rather simply joking *aitys*.

Placing Performance

Aitys competitions were staged at the Republic Palace, (Russ: *Dvoretz Respublikii*) in center of town, where the statue of Abai stands outside (see fig. 1, chapter 1). The scale of the Republic Palace is mammoth, occupying an entire city block, and positioned such that it imposes over the large city's main avenue and all its traffic, and is framed by the mountain range south of the city. I never learned not to be intimidated by this building. The palace is so enormous that, if I stand close to it, I have vertigo.

This theatre hosts a wide variety of cultural events – I attended the premiere of *Nomad*, a film produced in conjunction with studios in Hollywood and Russia, the

performance of the Boris Eifman Ballet Company from St. Petersburg, pop music concerts including that of Russian superstar Anna Pugachova and Turkish superstar Tarkan, and the national awards ceremony for the Kazakhstan chapter of Mary Kay. The theater's goings-on possess a certain realness, to me a feeling that they are very much of this time and place – “this” time, a tumultuous present, “this” place, a hopeful cosmopolitan urban space, a Kazakhstan in dialogue with the world.

Evaluating performance

In this cavernous, well-worn theater, the ‘stars’ of Kazakh improvisational poetry assembled regularly for some eighteen weeks, together with their teachers and mentors, professional cultural event organizing teams, event sponsors, and various audiences. Audiences were comprised of prominent figures in the local literary community, journalists from local papers, local academics, politicians, and businessmen, distinguished senior citizens and veterans, a sea of Kazakh-speaking persons of all ages from the city who had purchased tickets for 500 tenge (roughly 5 USD). Many audience members came as part of a multi-generational family group. There were between three and five hundred persons in attendance at each *aitys* competition.

Traditionally, *aitys* poets would battle each other in a struggle of word and wit until one poet triumphed – that is, left his or her opponent with no way to respond, with no audible voice (either because the poet can’t think of anything to say or because the audience is cheering so loudly that the poet’s attempts to speak are drowned out.) Once a poet recognizes defeat, he or she simply concedes and the *aitys*

comes to an end (cf Zharmokhamedoly, 2001). However, in this contemporary venue there were two factors which made that impossible. First, the *aitys* was following a particular performance format: several pairs of poets would perform for a short amount of time, rather than two performing for several hours. Each pair was limited to twenty or thirty minutes, and thus none of the *aityses* reached any sort of traditional conclusion. Second, the entire *aitys* each week was televised on the country's main national channel, with its own set schedule and timing of commercial breaks. Thus the format precluded "traditional" resolution between poets.

Organizers were always struggling to come up with an alternative way to effectively judge performances, because the contemporary situation demanded not only one winner, but several runners up. Places (first, second, third, etc.) were required because different sponsors could award special prizes to various winners in this way. At the end of each show, sponsors could come to the stage and personally hand their chosen poet a special gift (ranging from flowers to cars to televisions sets) and say a few words of their own. Thus, the quality of *aityses* had to be judged comparatively and relatively, and it was important in this context that winners of *aitys* be, if not fairly, then at least correctly chosen, as organizers had a variety of demands to satisfy.

Over the course of the spring, organizers tried several different methods of judging competitions. In the beginning, two large glass boxes stood on either side of the stage. After each competition, audience members could put a piece of paper in the box to vote for a particular poet. The papers were then counted by organizers, determining the winner of each competition and the relative order. This created a

great deal of confusion and near pandemonium in the theater, and the results were often unsatisfactory to organizers. Audience votes would sometimes be ‘overruled’ by organizers, creating a buzz of bad feeling in the auditorium.

That first method obviously also overlooked the vast majority of ‘audience’ for any given performance, as thousands of others were watching on television. Organizers decided that perhaps it would be more democratic if those at home were also allowed to vote, and made arrangements with a local cell phone company to allow people to text in votes. An up-to-the-minute record of votes showed at the bottom of the screen during the course of each performance. This method was short lived, as wealthier fans simply corrupted the system and started purchasing large blocks of votes from the cell phone company. After a month of various voting debacles, organizers finally announced that the audience(s) would no longer be able to decide because they were not judging the quality or effectiveness of the poetry itself, but rather simply voting for the poet from their own region, or from their own tribe. Instead, a jury of *aitys* experts would be instated.

For all the poets with whom I spoke, a sense of camaraderie, care, and mutual support with live audience members is an absolutely essential aspect of an inspired, successful performance. As a poet sings his or her thoughts, the audience responds in real time by yelling, clapping, laughing – generally urging the poet on. If a poet’s words are boring or uninspirational, it is immediately obvious because the audience sits quietly or even begins grumbling. Audience reaction can make or break a poet’s *aitys*. This relationship is disrupted somewhat by the presence of the jury. Poets try to entertain an audience, to collude with them to create a satisfactory experience. A

jury complicates that goal, as they are looking for formal aspects of performance, criteria, rather than or in addition to simply enjoyment.

The jury represents an opportunity for organizers to recognize and reward select members of the community, and for those members to judge which version of culture is somehow “best” – in the context of *aitys*, “best” by jury standards could mean many things: how well a poet dressed and presented him or herself, whether or not the poet addressed a previously chosen theme, whether the poet was funny, or responded well to his/her opponent, whether the poet voiced some ideas and opinions with which the jury concurred. Juries were made up of individuals upon whose support the *aitys* organizers relied to keep the cycle of performances going – respected elder poets and writers, the editor of the literary newspaper covering all these events, local politicians, and sponsors.

Paying for Performance

A person was considered to ‘sponsor’ *aitys* if they provided material support for any of the following: theater rental, travel, costumes and instruments, accommodation, or awards and gifts for poets. There were two primary sponsors through the spring cycle, and many minor sponsors who came and went. Because *aitys* was held in the city’s largest theater, because it was televised live on one of only three channels to reach all of the country’s television sets, and because *aitys* is considered to be “authentic Kazakh culture,” sponsors benefited greatly from associating their names and agendas to the competitions.

Sponsors have two notable characteristics: they are very wealthy, and they are male. Sponsorship does not come cheaply. Prizes alone range in the thousands of dollars. The winning poet is nearly always awarded a car. (In times past successful poets would receive horses from their hosts.) In one competition in 2006, the winning poet took home one million tenge, approximately 100,000 USD. There are not excessive numbers of people in Kazakhstan in a position to patronize at this level. However, it is culturally appropriate (i.e. expected) that a person with wealth will give generously to the less fortunate, and there are well-trod paths of social sponsorship including donating to orphanages, building mosques, and supporting cultural projects. Many Kazakhs see this as an aspect of Sharia, Islamic law.⁸⁴ While working women far outnumber working men and there are certainly plenty of wealthy women in Kazakhstan, men continue to fill the upper echelons of nearly every sphere of employment. Social charity is the duty (or opportunity) of that upper echelon.

In the spring of 2004, *aitys* was sponsored by two men in particular: Amangeldi Ermegeyev was president of one of the country's largest holding companies and one of the leaders of Kazakhstan President Nursultan Nazarbayev's political party, OTAN (fatherland). The second sponsor, Nurtai Sabilianov, was an entrepreneur and OTAN candidate for parliament. Each has a personal friendship with Zhursin, the principal organizer.

At the time of my research, one of the construction companies in Ermegeyev's holding had been accused of fraud, and the story had made a number

⁸⁴ Many Kazakhs consider themselves Muslim, though it is important to note that in Kazakhstan any strict interpretation of the Koran does not dictate religious or spiritual practice. In the region sufi'ism has wedded with animism and ancestor worship, and Soviet agnosticism or atheism, and Russian orthodoxy certainly inform any sense of religious belief and practice.

of newspapers, which means that those in a position to censor this information let it pass (i.e. it was in their interests to attack him). Given that privatization in Almaty and elsewhere has been highly corrupt, and that many Kazakh families have been displaced without compensation as construction companies repurchase their property from the city *akimat* (municipal center), such a news frenzy could have been highly damaging to Ermegeayev. It was not, in the end, however, in part because he remained such a widely known and well-respected sponsor. His ongoing sponsorship is one aspect of maintaining his powerful status. As one audience member told me, it is a bit easier to forgive the zealotry of his business ventures when he turns a sizeable portion of the profit to support Kazakh culture.

Nurtai Sabilianov, rather than protecting his reputation, was trying to build it. Nurtai had attempted a campaign for the senate on three previous occasions, and failed. In this, his fourth year, he had made two major changes. He switched his party affiliation to the president's party, and he became a major *aitys* sponsor. He subsequently won a seat in the 2004 fall parliamentary elections. Both Zhursin and Nurtai, in independent interviews, credited *aitys* with increasing Nurtai's popularity and getting his name well-known in rural areas. Given that elections in Kazakhstan are far from truly democratic, it is unlikely that this alone won Nurtai a senate seat. His switch of party doubtless played a major role. However, it is significant that he did not cease to support *aitys* after his win; rather, despite his new hectic schedule, he maintained an active connection with the group and continued to fund them.

Aitys audiences in Almaty, as well as anyone who watched the television broadcast, became well acquainted with Nurtai Sabilianov and with Amangeldi

Ermegeayev over the spring of 2004; they attended nearly every competition, their names were mentioned regularly by poets and by Zhursin, who plays the role of moderator and MC for the performances. Their presence, as well as the large presidential party banners hanging in the theater, create a context in which *aitys* is part of some official ‘national’ self-representation. It is precisely the ideology of culture described in the previous chapter, which refers to the social and historical aspects of a people and which is separate from politics, which allows Kazakh culture to become the national face of the state.

Protecting Performance

This retraditionalization of history-as-cultural- authenticity was consistently invoked by poets and local scholars to explain why poets ‘get away with’ political criticism. In this, the mythic ontology of *aitys*, legendary *akyndar* (poets) traveled extensively through the lands of a khanate, entertaining and gathering news. The poets would return to the khan and report the condition of the people and receive the patronage of the khan. The poets were the only ones in the court allowed to criticize the khan, because they did not speak for themselves, but for the khan’s people.⁸⁵ Contemporary poets very consciously saw themselves in the same light. All the poets with whom I spoke believe it is their obligation and duty to speak “the people’s

⁸⁵ This general theme is echoed in a popular children’s fairytale: the son of the khan went off to hunt and never returned. After time it became clear that his son would not return, but the khan in his grief and rage swore to kill anyone who told him his son was dead. An *akyn* (poet and musician) finally came, sat down before the khan, and played a *kyui* (instrumental epic) and the khan was devastated because he knew for certain, listening to this song, that his son was dead. He stood in a rage to kill the musician, but then realized he could not – the musician had not said a word, his *dombra* (wooden two-stringed instrument upon which all *akyndar* play) had told the story.

truth,” but they have many different ways of accomplishing that goal, and most rely on mutual collusion in the course of an *aitys* to allow criticism to emerge.

Sponsors’ elite status and *aitys*’ status as authentic-but-innocuous Kazakh culture serve to protect the tradition when performances get political. But critically, it is also the very form of the poetry itself which serves to safeguard poets. Here I show that the pointed critique which emerged over the course of these performances was successful because it took the form of a dialogue between Kazakh nationalists and Soviet Russia, their former colonizer; poets embedded sharp criticism of Kazakhstan’s current national government for continued russo-hegemony and corruption in a broader argument about cultural and political nationhood.

Aibek and Mels, 9 March 2004

In the first example I give here, poets Aibek from Astana and Mels from Almaty colluded to create particular frames in performance which allowed criticism to emerge in a way that is indirect. Aibek directly addressed the president in the form of a *dat*, a three-part advisory speech given to the Khan, a form of cultural permission to speak openly. He announced the shift to the *dat* frame in this way:

Ush auyz hangha aitatin datymyz bar	Three of our dats are spoken to the Khan
Allanyng da auyzynda zangyngnyng da	In the mouth of God and law
Ush auyz dat aiuygha haghymyz bar Zamadyng zarly unin hangha aitugha Khan;	It is our God-given right to speak this dat, to voice the suffering of our times to the
Akhukatyn ashatyn datimiz bar	there is a truth opened by our strength.
Datymyz shekpendige onamasa Mine bas asyngyzdaar atyngyzdar.	If our traditional dat is not liked, Here is a head: blame it, shoot it. ⁸⁶

⁸⁶ It is important that Aibek is from Astana, the current seat of the national government; each poet represents his or her region of origin, and bears a responsibility to address issues particular to that region. It would far less likely for a poet from another city or region to use this particular *dat* form.

About Aibek’s performance another poet from Astana, Balghynbek, joked wryly that “today we do not have a khan, we have an ostensibly democratically elected president.” But Aibek’s dat stood unchallenged. (He did receive a threat on his life from an anonymous caller the following week when he returned to Astana, but when I spoke to him at that time he was unfazed.) The three basic points of his dat, which I excerpt here, were that the president should (1) support the language and the religion (i.e. Islam) of Kazakhs, (2) stop selling land and resources to foreigners while Kazakhs themselves cannot afford to buy them, and (3) take care of people in rural villages (*aul*), who without work and support turn to addiction.⁸⁷

Zhastarymyz narkoman shobyryndy⁸⁸
 Alkha kul solama bop, zhyng khuyp zhur.
 Tas khodaigha tabylghan shokhyndylar,
 Islamnyng dinggegin syndyryp zhur.
 Monai, temir paidaly khazbalardyng,
 Khaida ketip zhatkhanyn kim bilip zhur?
 Zherimning astyn satyp ustyn satyp,
 Ukimet zhiregimdi khom khylyp zhur.
 Aty barda zaty zhokh khazakh tili,
 Orys tilding kholyna su khoiyp zhur.

Our youth’s [disordered] drug movement,
 Alcohol out in the open, a bad spirit is burning
 Christened and worshipping a stone god,
 Breaking the pillar of Islam.
 Oil and iron have been used up,
 Where they’ve gone no one knows.
 They sell what is on the land, under the land,
 Government stops up my heart with sand.
 Kazakh language has a name but doesn’t exist,
 [they] pour water over the hands of Russian.

Of particular interest is the last line, ‘they pour water over the hands of Russian.’ (He is referring specifically to language here). It is a custom that when guests arrive at the home of Kazakhs to eat, younger children in the family will pour water over the guests’ hands in a basin to wash them before everyone sits down to the meal. It is a literal cleaning but also a deep sign of hospitality. In addition to the

⁸⁷ Like most poets, Aibek himself was raised in a rural village, and he is personally invested in championing that cause. There is a great disparity in wealth and resources between urban and rural communities throughout Central Asia. Many rural inhabitants receive so little in the way of payment or subsidy from the government that they are functionally off a cash economy, engaged instead in subsistence farming and herding. At the time of my research, there were still communities throughout the country without basic amenities like electricity, gas, or water.

⁸⁸ A play on *akhtaban shobyryndy*, the historical period (16th century) when Kazakhs were uprooted from their lands by invading Kalmyks.

direct criticism of language politics, as an oblique metaphor here Aibek is criticizing Kazakhstanis leaders generally for being so generous and welcoming to Russia in political and economic affairs.

This *dat* came as a culmination of Aibek's fiery tirade about *lepirip* (pompous) rich officials, bureaucrats who got their jobs through nepotism, who never consider the real everyday problems of Kazakhs. He uses metaphors for state senators like being made of stone, wearing concrete make-up, wearing a hole sitting in their armchairs, and thinking only about their own stomach[s]. Aibek is likening them to an artificial edifice of power, calling them impassive and greedy. He also directly calls them false democrats, and warns that following such leadership will lead to a country of *mankurttar* – those who have forgotten (or forsaken) their culture and history and therefore do not fight against unjust power. He contrasts such figures with “real heroes,” (i.e. opposition leaders) who are suffering in prison.

There are many aspects of the performance that lend it legitimacy and serve to safeguard Aibek's words, not least among them the ambiguity of voice in his presentation. When he began his *dat*, Aibek no longer used the first person, but more vague pronominal referents such as “we,” “you” (pl) as well as making statements about the world in the deceptively simple frame of “it is so” (past perfect verb tense - *yp zhur*). Further, Aibek spoke not as a citizen of a nation but as an *akhyn* to a “*khan*.” He spoke as the student of the person who taught him the *dat* form. He spoke in front of and ostensibly both to and for the people there in the live audience. He spoke in a televised format which naturally includes everyone watching, and which runs in realtime such that it cannot be edited or changed. He spoke as a

younger brother to his opponent Mels, which is significant because young boys in many Kazakh families are very spoiled by their relatives, and allowed to ‘get away’ with behavior that older siblings are not.

It is this last that allows Mels to become involved. Mels’ cooperation however is necessary to ensure the felicity of the speech event, but here cooperation takes the form of argument, a second frame different from that of the previous *dat*. Now Mels, in his next turn in the role of older brother (a tolerant advising position), scolds Aibek for misusing his *aitys* performance, telling him that this is not an appropriate place for criticism. Aibek responds by criticizing his opponent’s name (Mels is a Soviet-era acronym for Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin): “I name you Makhambet/ Because I don’t want to say your name.” After Mels objects, Aibek explains himself:

Atyngyz oghash yeken Mels degen.
 Oltynnyng oghymymen kelispegen
 Atangyzdyng yes khandai shatysy zhokh,
 orys, yevrei, gruzin, nemispenene
 Az basynga onanda almaisyng ba?
 Adaidy yesim khylym Berishpenen.
 Tuirt kapirding bas arpin arkhalatyp,
 atyndy khoighan yeken teris neden?
 Olaryng Mels agha kazakhpenen,
 Baikasakh yeshtenge alyp berispegen.
 Songhy yekeui kazakhty khoisha khyryp
 babalardyng molasyn tefistegen.

It seems your name Mels is strange,
 Your ancestors didn’t knowingly agree,
 your grandfather had no kind of connection,
 not with Russians, Jews, Georgians, or Germans.
 Why didn’t you take [your name] from a wise head,
 why not from Adai or Berish?⁸⁹
 You carry four nonbelievers’ heads –
 where did they steal that name from?
 Not from Kazakhs, Mels older brother.
 Together, let us not concede!
 The last two killed Kazakhs like sheep,
 and razed our ancestors’ graves.

This *aitys* serves to invoke another conversation between historical figures, here between Kazakh ancestors and members of other nationalities; but it is specifically Soviet leaders who are specifically the object of Aibek’s criticism. Mels, because he has not changed his name, ostensibly supports those leaders and their

⁸⁹ Kazakh tribes of the *Kishi Zhuz* (minor horde)

policies. Aibek thus positions his opponent Mels as a murderer, a clearly despised ‘other,’ and berates him. Aibek himself appears as a brave and loyal Kazakh, rallying against a cultural traitor. Mels quickly concedes:

Aibekter uleng aitsa unirgendei
Suzine khalyng yeldi sendirgendei
Khaitein atam khoighan atymyzdy
aitysta talai meni zhengdirgendei

The songs of poets like Aibek grow tall,
in the words the richness of our country is affirmed.
You return the name that was taken from my father,
In this way I’ve been beaten many times in aitys.

This concession, coming at the end of two turn cycles between the poets, is the way in which Mels moves from scolding Aibek for his *dat*, to supporting it as a part of the stronger overall poetry in that particular pair’s competition.

Aibek was able to criticize the president (the figurative khan) and his government with the collaboration of his opponent. The competition in which he performed was paid for by Ermegeayev and Sabilianov, the aforementioned primary sponsors. What these two men have in common with *aitys* poets and organizers is that they are strong proponents of Kazakh language: they are not at all happy with the continued predominance of Russian language in Kazakhstan. However, given the current political climate, direct dissent from the president’s agenda is impossible. In private conversations, they explained to me that they want to attach their own names as well as the president’s political party OTAN clearly to this “authentic culture,” to this tradition whereby knowledge of Kazakh language is lauded.⁹⁰

By contrast, the predominant internationalist view, what is important now for Kazakhstan is a reconciliation with the past and the project of economic and political

⁹⁰ In a personal interview with me, prominent nationalist Beibit Koishybayev, director of the state-sponsored newspaper *Ana Tili* (mother tongue), explained that from a nationalist perspective, without the compulsory usage of Kazakh alone as a government language, Kazakhs cannot *oizimmen oizim bolugha* (be in their own place) – the period of “independence” is simply a version of neocolonialism.

modernization: to proudly and firmly plant Kazakhstan on a global stage.⁹¹ The lines between *Kazakh* nationalism and *Kazakhstani* internationalism can sometimes be quite blurry in practice, as the national government continues to routinely adopt “authentic Kazakh culture” as its political face. For example, in the summer of 2008, there were massive and excited efforts underway to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the new capital city, a date which happens to coincide with the president’s birthday. One major event was a two-day long live *aitys* competition, in which poets largely lauded the city and the president. There is the obvious possibility the *aitys* tradition today will be so publicized, coming more and more under the grip of centralized power, as to render it impotent.

If *aitys* becomes nothing more than paid public praise, poets would no longer represent the concerns of the country’s average citizens. Those citizens – those without access to basic resources let alone the dazzling future of the newly wealthy – would be left entirely behind. In the second example I present here poets also use the frame of an argument between an ostensible “Soviet-supporter,” and a Kazakh nationalist both to criticize Kazakhstani leaders. Leaders’ inattention to the basic needs of their constituencies is ultimately characterized as leaders’ inability to shake off the shackles of Soviet rule and to lead the nation in a new direction.

Renat and Balghynbek

⁹¹ Kazakhstan’s rich oil and gas production and pipeline potential, as well as its strategic location make the country a target of heavy interest not only for Russia, but for China, the United States, and the European Union, all of whom are hoping to influence (or dictate) the political ideology underlying Kazakhstan’s ongoing economic expansion.

In the spring *aitys* of 2004, the same cycle in which Aibek performed with Mels, another poet from Astana, Balghynbek, had *aitys* with a poet from Semipolatinsk, young Renat. In 2004 Renat was something of a phenomenon, an inspiration, an audience favorite. While all *aitys* is supposed to be improvised on the spot, many poets prepare sections ahead of time. Both Balghynbek and Renat are very quick on their feet and do have the ability to generate *aitys* in the moment. In a remarkable improvisatory performance they condemned Russian language and Soviet colonialism, but they also berated the current national government for its impotence and failure to be truly independent.

Renat brings up the topic, lamenting that though the national government made promises to prioritize Kazakh language use, nothing has been done about it.

Balghynbek responds:

Renat shyndykhty aittyng khasha almaityng,
Mugedek bolykh algha basa almaityn.
Keshegi Az Taykening zamandynda,
shalaghai shala zangdar zhasalmaityn.
Zhalpygha ‘Zheti Zharghy’ zhetip zhatyr,
manggilik khartaimaityn zhasarmaityn.
Al bizde zhetpis zheti deputat bar,
zang toly khaghasdardan bas almaityn.
Zheti zhus zhetpis zheti zangymyz bar,
khoghamgha yesh uzgeris khosa almaityn.
Memlekettik til bolyp zhazylsa da,
Khazakh til tamyr zhaip use almaityn.
Aitpese ne bolypty on bes zhylda,
tilden usine kushe almaityng.

Renat, you cannot avoid the truth you tell,
invalids cannot begin moving ahead.
In the era of the wise Tauke,⁹²
laws like half-finished fires are not made.
The Seven Statutes are enough,⁹³
eternity neither ages nor gets younger.
But today we have seventy seven deputies⁹⁴
who can’t break out of their paperwork.
We have seven hundred seventy seven laws,
that cannot effect any change in our society.
Though Kazakh has become a government language,
it cannot mature and spread.
Otherwise how could it be that in fifteen years⁹⁵ uzge
we still can’t use our own language in the street?

⁹² Tauke was the Kazakh Khan of the Middle Horde (1680-1718), who instated a system of normative judicial codes called *Zheti Zharghy* (Seven Statutes) used widely across the steppe (Khodarkovsky 2002; Martin 2000; Soucek 2000). Today Tauke Khan is one of the many Kazakh cultural historical figures who is widely revered and romanticized; he is buried at Turkestan, Kazakhstan’s most holy site (Privratsky 2001).

⁹³ Seven Statutes has come to mean, in colloquial usage, ‘the rights of Kazakhs,’ as opposed to the laws imposed under Russian rule.

⁹⁴ Kazakhstan’s parliament is formed of an upper house, the Senate, and a lower house, the Mazhillis. Members of both are referred to as *deputattar* (deputies), which has a negative valence. At the time of this performance, there were 77 deputies seated, today that number has been increased to 107.

⁹⁵ At that time, since formal independence was declared in 1991.

Unsiz deputattar bar parlamentte,
uzdan baskha yesh narse sheshe almaityn.

In the parliament senators are voiceless,
they can't solve anything except their own affairs.

In this turn, Balghynbek is recalling a somewhat mythic past, one which predates Russian and Soviet rule, in which some 'Kazakh people' was ostensibly free to rule themselves.⁹⁶ Tauke was the Kazakh Khan of the Middle Horde (1680-1718), who instated a system of normative judicial codes called *Zheti Zharghy* (Seven Statutes) widely used across the steppe. (Khodarkovsky 2002:148; Martin 2000:145; Soucek 2000:172). Today Tauke Khan is one of the many Kazah cultural historical figures who is widely revered and romanticized; he is buried at Turkestan, Kazakhstan's most holy site (Privratsky 2001:51). The term *Zheti Zharghy* has come to mean, in colloquial usage, "the rights of Kazakhs," as opposed to the laws imposed under Russian and Soviet rule.

In his direct comparison of Tauke Khan's times and the present, Balghynbek does precisely this: he sets up a contrast between an historical era in which Kazakhs were sovereign and lawful, and a modern era in which Kazakhs are again independent, but government is failing due to nepotism, self-interest, and bureaucracy. Elided here are the facts that it is not 'Kazakhs' per se but the republic of *Kazakhstan* which is independent, and that lack of support for Kazakh language is likely not the only major outcome of government members' shortcomings. Nevertheless Balghynbek exploits a blurriness between Kazakh and Kazakhstani nationalism to argue that 'we' do not have 'our' language in the country, as it certainly should be if 'we' are truly independent.

⁹⁶ The situation is complicated, of course, by ongoing wars between various imperial powers and local khannates throughout the centuries of Central Asian history.

This type of elision between nation and state is described aptly by theorist John Breuilly, who argues that that nationalism is a desirable “pseudo-solution” to the perpetual problem of the relationship between state and society, as “the identity of the nation is provided in arbitrary ways. The leap from culture to politics is made by portraying the nation at one moment as a cultural community and at another as a political community whilst insisting that in an ideal state the national community will not be ‘split’ into cultural and political spheres. The nationalist can exploit this perpetual ambiguity” (1982: 349). Specifically, the nationalist actor can “take a wide variety of practices and sentiments prevailing among the population of a particular territory and turn them into political justifications” (ibid.) In the next set of turns, Renat makes his own transition from culture to politics.

Balghynbek has agreed with Renat’s argument about Kazakh language, but then makes an odd turn: he begins to sing ‘The Song of 16 Girls,’ an old and widely known Kazakh folksong naming sixteen young girls, one name Russian. The song plays on the assimilationist reality of the Soviet era, making it seem light-hearted and even funny. This suits the character of Balghynbek, who is most famous for his quick sense of humor. As he sings he rephrases the song to fit the current context of the ongoing *aitys* competitions, replacing the girls’ names with poets, and adds not just one but *many* Russian words and phrases, which I’ve denoted in bold here:

Aityskha on alty akhyn **dorogoiyng**,
 ishinde Renat edi **molodaiyng**.
 Bastady zhekpe-zheging **odin-odin**
 kuirindingder **bez pravel super boiyn**.
 Kharlyghash, Saram-ai, Seriktei agham-ai,
 Amanzhol, Melspen, Shyrynbek, Ryctem
 Moxtar-ai, Yermek-ai, Aibek-ai, Arman-ai
 Dauletkerei dauylpaz, Orazaly Orteke
 Abilkhaiyr arghymakh, Balghynbek bar

To *aitys* come sixteen poets who are **dear**,
 among them Renat is the **youngest**.
 A **one on one** battle begins,
 did you see it is a **super fight without rules?**
 Kharlyghash, my Sara, Serik my older brother,
 Amanzhol, with Mels, Shyrynbek, Rustem,
 Moxtar, Yermek, Ibek, Arman,
 Dauletkerei the drum, Orazali the goat,
 Abilkhaiyr the noble horse, Balghynbek

Imash-ai
Shamang zhetse syilax-ai,
A ia tebia ubiu Renat-ai.

Kharaghyim ainalaiyn **chornii** kuizim,
aman ba Semeimenen Ayakuizing?
Men yedim akhyndarda **tiazhele ves**,
taiakhty zheising bygin zhalghy uizing.
Kharlyghash, Saram-ai, Serikteï agham-ai.
Amanzhol, Mels, Shyrynbek, Rustem
Moxtar, Yermek, Ibek, Arman
Dauletkerei khimas-ai, Orazaly syilas-ai
Abilkhaiyr, Renat-ai, Balghynbek bar
Imash-ai
Bsio ravno tebia liubliu, Renat-ai.

the believer is here.⁹⁷
Respect each other as you are able,
but **I will kill you**, Renat!

My dear, my sweet **black**-eyed one,
are your Semei and your Ayakuz well?⁹⁸
It turns out that I am the **heavy weight** of the poets;
today you alone will be beaten.
Kharlyghash, my Sara, Serik my older brother,
Amanzhol, Mels, Shyrynbek, Rustem,
Moxtar, Yermek, Ibek, Arman,
Dauletkerei best friend, Orazali whom I respect,
Abilkhaiyr, Renat, Balghynbek
the believer is here
All the same I love you, Renat!

As the vast majority of people in the Almaty audience at this performance knew this song well, this joke was a hit, and everyone was laughing and clapping along. The humor was compounded by Balghynbek's self-reference as a 'heavy-weight,' as he is both a very strong poet and a large, plump young man. The final 'success' of the joke was the complete synchrony of the last lines of the verses, as the Russian 'I will kill you' and 'I love you' rhyme. Renat, though he smiles in acknowledgement of Balghynbek's wit, in his next turn quickly becomes very serious. Saying that he has been hurt by this use of Russian, he states that he should criticize his *zhezde* (husband of his older sister) Balghynbek. What followed was the singlemost impassioned *aitys* performance I ever witnessed in my years of research:

Shygharsyng zhuregimnen bir yrghakh zhyr
bolsa yeger yel degendei unimde nur.
Tilim dep Hurtai menen Amangeldi

aghalar aitys zhasap zyryldai zhur
Bilmeimin bol alashtyng akhynyn
auryzyn kimder bugin tyghyndap zhur?
Yel aman zhort tynyshta aityskha kep,
zhamandy bol Balghynbek yrymdap zhur

From my heart a poem with rhythm emerges --
What if the country was a ray of light in my voice?
My uncles Nurtai and Amangeldi are working
tirelessly
to keep my language in aitys.
I don't know this poet from Alash,⁹⁹
who can stop up his mouth today?
We come to aitys in a peaceful time,
[but] Balghynbek foretells only bad.

⁹⁷ A list of the poets competing in this particular series of *aitys*, a weekly competition which took place over some 5 months (February – June, 2004).

⁹⁸ Renat's town and region of origin

⁹⁹ This term here refers to 'the Kazakh people' generally, though it is also the name of an early 20th century Kazakh nationalist movement.

Biz bugin suz aitaiykh yesti yesti,
 khoskhymyz kelse yeger kushke ulesti
 Bas iyypalghys aittym azattykhkha,
 bizding yel yerkindik dep kup kuresti
 Birakh ta buginine bir kharasang
 kumilip kunelering yesking ushti.
 Sebebi bizge khodai kesh kuni,
 amaly kup ailaiy dosty khosty.
 Al olar kep atyna atamyzdyng
 khaidaghy ‘ev’ men ‘ov’ty khosty
 Ilesip moldalargha top kresti

songyna turt tulikting shoshkha ilesti
 Onan song kholymyzgha stakhan berip
 densaulykh ushin degen tosty khosty
 Bildirmei colghylamnyng zhurisimen
 Zhaulady olar bizdi ustip ustip
 Sanangnan tazarsa yeken arda Khazakh,
 baskhalar tugip ketken ocy khokhsykh.

Today we will speak wise words,
 If we want to carry this load in our caravan.
 I bow down and thank my God,
 our country fought hard for our land.
 However if you look at today,
 all that past is buried, forgotten
 because our God gave us this late fate:
 he gave us a cunning friend.
 They arrogantly added meaningless ‘ev’ and ‘ov’¹⁰⁰
 to our father’s names.
 A bunch of cross-bearers followed after our
 Mullahs,¹⁰¹
 Swine followed our livestock.¹⁰²
 And after that they put a glass in our hand,
 and together we toasted our health.
 With the small movement of a driven stake,
 they conquered us unaware, little by little.
 Can you purify your mind, strong Kazakh,
 from the garbage others left behind?

One of the first things I learned about *aitys* was that poets accompany their song with music from the *dombyra* (two-stringed wooden instrument) because oral poetry is inherently imperfect. Unlike written poetry, say poets, where the author has plenty of time to think carefully and choose precisely the right words and phrasing, oral poetry is composed on the fly and is therefore inherently imperfect; the music of the *dombyra* makes the song whole. When Renat sang this last turn, above, he was so impassioned that he stopped playing his *dombyra* altogether and half stood out of his seat. The audience was in an uproar, cheering. What makes this a particularly cunning win is that Renat has ‘caught’ Balghynbek. What might otherwise be a

¹⁰⁰ Russian patronymic system. Previously, a Kazakh man would take as his last name, “[father’s last name] son of” ; under Russian rule a Russian system of patronymics was instated: ‘son of’ (ұлы) was removed completely and replaced by the suffix –ev or –ov added to the father’s name. In the years since independence many Kazakhs are changing their names back to the Kazakh patronymic system. For some it is a form of pride and for others a form of protest.

¹⁰¹ someone who can recite the Koran, generally an older man in a community, who is called upon as a spiritual leader or guide

¹⁰² The four types of traditional domestic livestock among Kazakhs are traditionally the horse, the camel, the cow, and goat or sheep; Kazakhs, like other Muslims, do not eat the meat of pigs, but it is very common for Russians.

funny parody of a folksong and a sort of metacommentary on Kazakh-Russian integration does not work in this context which Balghynbek himself co-constructed.

The two together had just been bemoaning the ineffectiveness of contemporary leaders, contrasting them with great Kazakh leaders of the past, of the law of the steppe, and most importantly, the need for Kazakh language to flourish. In the first part of Balghynbek's performance, he matches Renat in position (that is, he speaks from a beleaguered 'we' at odds with its own government). However, when Balghynbek makes a move to sing a well known song, to joke by using Russian words, to reestablish the context as a "super fight without rules," he changes his positional voice: to that of a more lighthearted reconciler, one who thinks perhaps language isn't that big a deal (i.e., that of an internationalist). Renat seizes upon this switch of voice, noting that, far from funny, the use of Russian is actually "hurtful" and reminds his opponent and the audience of the heavy history from whence knowledge of Russian language came. Though Balghynbek would in large part agree with Renat's convictions, in this particular performance context he has clearly lost. In this context, the use of Russian even as a joke is easily condemned by Renat qua young nationalist.

Renat is then wildly supported by the audience in his ensuing condemnation of Russian colonial rule, and its debilitating effects on contemporary forms of family, religion, health, and politics. In this *aitys* he calls to mind issues with which thousands of Kazakhs wrestle: whether or not to change their names back to a Kazakh patronymic system, how to understand themselves as Muslim day to day, and the insidious ways in which ostensibly celebratory alcohol consumption has rooted

itself pathologically as disease. What is even more powerful is Renat's insight on the "garbage" of Russian colonial rule writ broadly, the semi-successful assimilation of Kazakhs into a system wherein Kazakh cultural forms and language were heavily devalued, and the resultant mental, emotional, and practical baggage which renders contemporary leaders and citizens alike passive.

Renat furthermore is criticizing not just Balghynbek, but all officials who do not make Kazakh language a real priority in government; he does so by equating them with people who cannot shake off the mantle of colonialism. Renat comes across utterly as a hero in this scenario, a leader: he is speaking at once *to* and *for* his audience. The primary sponsors Amangeldi Ermegeyev and Nurtai Sabilianov, described above, were here directly invoked in what was a highly successful and satisfying performance, in a way that aligned them structurally with the figure of the young Kazakh nationalist, the anti-Russian, the poet with a 'lean' mind and voice. In his description of their work, Renat conveys the sense that the fight is an uphill battle but that they will never give up.

For Renat and Balghynbek, like Aibek and Mels previously, poets' collaboration toward strong Kazakh nationalist sentiment proved a winning strategy in competition. That nationalism took a specifically anti-Soviet form, where Russian language (name, songs) served as a metaphor for a deeper complicity with Soviet rule. In the last example I give here, *aitys* was performed in Moscow. For me, this represented a rare and fascinating opportunity to see what "culture," predicated in part on anti-Russian sentiment, would look like in performance in Russia. I was well aware that this event falls within the long historical context of performances of

“friendship of the peoples” in Moscow – cultural shows from the various ethnic groups comprising the former Soviet Union in their capital city and symbolic center. What I saw in 2004 was that poets were not free to criticize openly. There was some political content to performance, but in the format of joking *aitys* their primary goal was to entertain their audience and make them laugh, which they accomplished with hyper-generalized shared topics like being Muslim and flirting.

Postcolony

As the regular season of *aitys* performances in the first half of 2004 in Almaty drew to a close over the summer, there was a lot of demand from audiences around the country to start the competition up again for another round in the fall. Organizers decided against this – many people, including journalists who’d followed *aitys* all year, believed this decision was due to the parliamentary elections – *aitys* was too volatile, too much of a liability. Instead, organizers focused on a more grand plan – to take *aitys* to Moscow, in celebration of the fact that 2004 happened to be “The Year of Russia” in Kazakhstan.

Zhursin and Zhuldosbekov, together with sponsors Ermegeayev and Sabilianov in Almaty, spent the summer organizing the Moscow trip. (They also found time to attend the Olympics in Greece.) During the months of this intense attention, I was not allowed to see them at all. In the last week or two, though, things came together quickly and we all set off together on the train: Zhursin and his wife, twelve poets handpicked by Zhursin (those who’d done well over the last competitions), journalists from Kazakh language media, a television crew, and myself

and my translator. We had our own train car for the three day trip, which a subsequent newspaper article exclaimed was given as a present personally by the head of the *Aksionernoe Obshestvo “Zheleznaiia Doroga Kazakhstana”* (the private company which controls the nation’s railway system) in celebration of the 100th anniversary of the railroad. When we boarded, the wagon was a wreck; the train attendants explained that this was the wagon’s last trip, and after we returned it would be taken off the rail lines permanently.

On the trip, poets were getting increasingly nervous and excited. The group as a whole was vocally worried about social dynamics in Moscow, and speculated about how they would be received given increasing racism in that city. Particularly bothersome to poets was a recent series of attacks on “Asian” looking persons, linked to ongoing tensions with Chechnya — one poet shaved off his beard, afraid of being mistaken for a Chechen. Organizers cautioned that no one should walk around alone, that they should remain as a group. Talk turned increasingly to Kazakh national pride — of a cultural and pointedly linguistic nature. “Speak only Kazakh!” they shouted to each other and to me.¹⁰³

Our group was hosted by the ambassador of Kazakhstan to Russia at the embassy hotel, a thoroughly lavish affair. We were given fine rooms, and it was clear that we were to be dressed up at all times. (Most poets had purchased new clothes to wear specifically for this trip.) The first evening, after we’d settled in, we got dressed and went to the ambassador’s reception. After a speech in which the ambassador congratulated Kazakhstan and Russia on their friendship and the greatness of their

¹⁰³ Of this group, a good half actually don’t speak Russian, one because he is a Mongolian Kazakh, and others because they’d grown up in a rural area. Another quarter speak very poor Russian, and a few could speak perfectly good Russian but don’t generally for ideological reasons.

political and economic interdependence, we went to dinner. All our meals were given in the form of banquets; we would stand around a table set for fifty and nibble while prominent persons at the table had a “conversation” for the rest of us to hear.

That first night, Zhursin addressed the ambassador Khyrymbek Kosherbayev, who was standing across the table from him in the center of the banquet table:

I found myself talking to a Russian big-wig [and said to him], “We have aityys, but you could never have it.” He asked why. I said, “You went through serfdom, [while] we had rich and poor. If a poor person quarreled with a rich man, he just brought his herd and said, ‘Fuck you, take your herd, I’m going!’ and left. We have a great deal of internal freedom, but a person who’s been through serfdom could never [start] aityys. Now it’s not allowed to talk about this. But that’s the reason you don’t have aityys,” I said.

The work done in this particular segment was two-fold. Zhursin invoked *aityys* as evidence of the nature of Kazakh people specifically in the face of and opposed to Russian people; Kazakhs by virtue of their history are “free” while Russians are “enslaved.” This story inverted the actual colonial relationship between the two groups. As the addressee was the representative of Kazakhstan to Russia, there was an elision of cultural nation and political nation much like that in Balgymbek’s poetry (discussed above). Zhursin then abruptly dropped that story and began to announce the names of individual sponsors, those from Kazakhstan as well as several gathered there around the banquet table. The latter were muscovite Kazakh businesspeople from two cultural networking societies called *Kazakh Tili* (Kazakh Language) and *Morager* (Descendant). Members of these two sponsoring groups, together with their families and friends, made up the majority of the *aityys* audience. Another prominent sponsor was Umirzak Sarsenov, Chairman of the People's Cooperative Party of

Kazakhstan (a minor political party better understood as a pressure group), who continued to work with Zhursin after the Moscow trip (see chapter six).

In his story, Zhursin described the rich man – poor man dynamic as constitutive of Kazakh culture and the proliferation of *aitys*, which allows an immediate transition to the topic of sponsorship. In this way, Zhursin was doing the context-appropriate work of praising those sponsors and mentioning their names so that everyone will be aware of their patronage and good works. But he is also likened them to the *bailar* (rich men) specific to Kazakh history, intimating that such sponsorship is fundamental to the creation of culture, of *aitys*, itself. In other words, Zhursin found a way to laud contemporary sponsors as Kazakh-nationalist heroes and “true” Kazakhs. This was possible because we were all assembled as a group creating and supporting *aitys*.

But it was quite obvious to all involved that the real story of what-was-going-on was not quite so simple. This was an opportunity for Kazakhstani sponsors to interact and mingle with Russian sponsors, to strengthen their associations and business ties. Just as in Kazakhstan, where the jury in individual performances provides local businessmen and politicians an opportunity to network publicly, so did this particular trip to Moscow provide the same opportunity on an international scale. And it is precisely the political and economic ties between the two countries which the ambassador is presumably acting to further. In his own speech he had heartily emphasized the need to nurture Kazakhstani-Russian cooperation. *Aitys*, as “authentic culture,” ostensibly something Kazakhs share no matter what country they live in, provided the necessary common ground for dialogue.

It was thus in no sponsor's interest for poets to come onstage in Moscow and criticize Russia as they would in Kazakhstan. At several points, both on the trainride and at the embassy, Zhursin warned his poets outright to back off criticism. Despite strong nationalist talk on the trainride, and Zhursin's strongman speech at the banquet, what was ultimately most telling was the poetry itself. When the competition got underway, instead of the *zhekpe zhek* genre used in the performances in Almaty earlier that year, most poets chose to perform joking *aitys*, in which the primary goal is simply to make the audience laugh. Any comment on Kazakh-Russian relations was couched, then, in a humorous vein rather than in an overtly political one.

Joking in Moscow

Aitys in Moscow was held at the newly refurbished Pavel Slobodkin Center, a musical theater on the city's famed walkthrough *Starii Arbat*. One of the most successful poets that night was the poet Arman from the northern Kazakhstani region Kokshitau, whose opponent was Balghynbek. Arman broached the topic of language immediately in his opening welcome:

<p><Assalaumaghaleikum> – salem berdim, <Zradstvuite> kunde yestitin khandastargha</p>	<p>[Kazakh hello] is how I greeted you for relatives, who hear [Russian hello] daily</p>
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It soon becomes clear that the topic will not be a serious avenue for discussion of interethnic tension and politics, but rather quite the opposite: Arman begins joking at length about Russian and Kazakh language and culture:

<p>Maskeuding shykhkhannan song turine biz, aitaiykh alkhaly yelge zhundi lebiz. Aitystyng osy yelde boluyna, dostyghy orys-kazakh boldy negiz.</p>	<p>In the honored place of Moscow let's wish the people well. Because this people came to aitys, this is Russian-Kazakh friendship.</p>
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Orys-Kazakh ezhelden tamyр bolghan,
 ol zhaily derekterdi mol bilemiz.
 Orysty syilaghandykj osy yemes pe,
 Putinning portretin turge ilemiz.
 Kazakhstandykh kazakhtar bizder ushin,
 Orys-Kazakh tilderi boldy yegiz.
 Oryssha shyldirlesip uzimizshe,
 shabymyz shart ketkenshe sugilemiz.
 Kazakghsha tusinbeitin Kazakh khyzyn,
 Oryssha areng-areng kundiremiz.

A Russian-Kazakh root [began] long ago,
 we know many favorable facts about it.
 We respect Russians,
 Putin's¹⁰⁴ portrait is hung in an honored place.
 For us Kazakhstani Kazakhs,
 Russian and Kazakh languages are twins.
 We speak Russian all the time,
 It's as if we've made a contract,
 If a Kazakh girl doesn't know Kazakh,
 We chat her up in Russian.

Here Arman glides from a greeting to Kazakhs living in Russia to all Russians, calling this *aitys* evidence of a friendship between the nationalities. Far from the anti-Russian sentiments expressed in a nationalist performance in Kazakhstan, Arman's rhetoric is the trope of "friendship of the peoples" characteristic of Soviet era internationalist propaganda as well as contemporary internationalist politics.

Arman's approach is also pointedly humorous, he is quick to switch to the subject of flirting, a fertile ground for jokes because male poets are supposed to encourage a reputation as a charmer. It also gave his opponent Balghynbek the grounds to give him a hard time for being cocky, grounds for further lighthearted jousting. Arman responds to Balghynbek's "criticism":

Songymnan khyzdar mening ilesse yeger,
 men yemes batyp zhurer mol khaighygha,
 zharym cuigen betimnen aru suise
 balgha baldy khoskhandai bolmaidy ma?

If girls are going to follow me around,
 I'm not the type to become proud.
 If they kiss the cheek that my wife shaves,
 wouldn't that be like giving a bear honey?

Here he uses the common metaphor "bear" for Russia – bear is often invoked by poets in performances in Kazakhstan, but usually as a threatening figure, an invader from the north. But here the bear is obviously innocuous, and the joke is that the poet himself is like honey.

¹⁰⁴ Vladimir Putin, then President of the Russian Federation.

Poets had obviously never encountered this audience before (for most it was actually their first trip to Moscow), and on the trainride here they had worried about the nature of the performance. Several noted to me that while they know what to expect from audiences throughout Kazakhstan, in Moscow they had no idea. This was troubling, as poets' relationship with their audience is, from their perspective, such a fundamental aspect of performance. On the three day trip, as poets tried to prepare, much conversation turned to potential topics, common ground with an unknown audience. Joking is one such safe space.

Some jokes had more serious sociopolitical undertones, such as those having to do with Muslim identity. This was also a sphere poets felt their audiences would be able to relate to – specifically in a climate of anti-Muslim, anti-“Asian” feeling among a growing number of Russians in Moscow at the time, poets could guess that at least the topic would be salient. Arman was the poet who had shaved off his own beard so as not to be mistaken for a Muslim terrorist in Moscow, so there was an unspoken irony when he subsequently sang to his opponent Balghynbek:

Men agha ang-tang bolyp kharap tormyn,
betingdegi borynghy mengingizge
Bir kesde var edi sizde khalyng sakhal
Allanyng var yekenin kuirdingiz be?
Sodan song sakhalyngyzdy alyp tastap
baskha bir tylsym kyshke sendingiz be?
Zhokh alde Dauletkerei dosynyzgha
yeki-ush zhylgha prokatkha berdingiz be?

I look with surprise, older brother,
at the old homeland on your face.
At some point you had a fine thick beard,
Did you see, that God (Allah) exists?
And then you shaved it,
Did you believe in a different power?
Or maybe you hired your friend Dauletkere
to wear the beard for a few years?

Arman's reference to a “thick beard” is a recognizable metaphor for Muslim identity, which has been a source of persecution by state governments in some parts of Central Asia in efforts to thwart growing Islamic movements throughout the

region, and a beard would also be a religious marker in the context of Moscow.¹⁰⁵

That a beard is the topic of jokes or discussion serves to remind Kazakhs sitting in the audience of their connection not just with Kazakhs in Kazakhstan but with a broader Muslim identity – it is this sense of unification or camaraderie more than any kind of overtly anti-Russian sentiment that is evinced in Arman’s words.

Conclusion: evaluating aitys

The jury that night was composed of organizer Zhuldosbekov, sponsors Sarsenov and Sabilianov, the ambassador, and the Moscow based sponsors and organizers. There was not a single poet among them. Rather, the jury unblinkingly reflected the need to publicly recognize certain individuals and their connection to one another, both extant and future. After the competition ambassador Kosherbaev told the audience that *aitys* in Moscow should become an annual event. They chose as the winner the youngest poet in the group, Nurlan Musaev, from Mangistau, also one of the evening’s funniest. The Kazakh language literary newspaper, whose editor and two staff journalists had been in our group, in their published report about the trip to Moscow, characterized performances as *zharasymdy* (appropriate) and *adepti* (tactful), noting that everyone seemed happy and satisfied, even those of different nationalities.¹⁰⁶ The author of the article concluded by saying that contemporary

¹⁰⁵ Central Asian governments have capitalized in recent years upon a global politics of anti-terrorism to crack down on what they refer to as “Islamic insurgents” in the region. Thousands of people, particularly young men, have been harassed and jailed for “muslim” activity ranging from wearing a beard to assembling for Friday prayer. Religious and community leaders have been particularly targeted (cf Khalid 2007; McGlinchey 2007; Rashid 2002).

¹⁰⁶ Kazakh Adibieti, Khosymshasy No. 8

poets were on a level with those who had *aitys* in Moscow in 1936, a group which included Zhambyl.

And so in Moscow, Kazakh organizers and sponsors treated *aitys* as folklore – something quaint and traditional, something to be viewed for its aesthetics rather than to be taken as serious social or political activity. Though *aitys* participants actively fight against this paternalistic attitude within Kazakhstan, they colluded with it in Russia. These examples serve to exemplify that *aitys* is a form of culture largely defined by and against Soviet rule. There are two implications for this: first, that *aitys*, like Kazakh culture itself, is both “authentic” and innocuous. Second, a reappropriation of that cultural form by culture producers within Kazakhstan resulted in outspoken critique of government that was quite radical, given the political climate of repression and censorship. But due to the particular elite networks of sponsorship necessary to bring *aitys* to Moscow, it was necessary again to bracket *aitys* as “culture” which is, by definition, apolitical.

CHAPTER FIVE
THE THREAT OF SPONSORSHIP

Introduction

This chapter concerns the relationship between poets and the individuals and organizations responsible for financing them. Successful *aitys* performances, those which are satisfying for those involved, depend on a successful collaboration between wealthy sponsors, poets, and multigenerational audiences of largely modest income.¹⁰⁷ That collaboration presupposes and in fact emphasizes an economic disparity between sponsors and “the people,” but as long as sponsors are using wealth to support others less fortunate, this is seen as an appropriate and desirable social paradigm. In the first examples I give here, for the region of Kyzylorda, there is a healthy climate of cultural sponsorship, in that it is a priority for local and regional leaders alike, and that sponsors do not attempt to control or monitor the voices of *aitys* poets. Kazakh audiences therefore feel fulfilled and proud in their dialogic role as ‘the people’ for whom poets speak.

¹⁰⁷ Reynolds (1995) similarly isolates particular performance contexts in order to explicate the sponsorship roles which inhere in the Bedouin epic tradition *Sirat Bani Hilal*; he particularly notes a discrepancy between celebratory and private contexts. While the vast majority of *aitys* performances are performed in public theater, *akhyns* themselves are often contracted for weddings and other celebrations in the role of *tamada*, the individual who, in song and verse, leads the guests through their roles in the event.

That type of successful collaboration is a fine balance, however, and constantly in jeopardy. Poets and audience members alike vocally worry about the threat that poets' ideally unhampered expression could be compromised by sponsors who want to control what gets said. Some degree of influence is normal and even accepted. For example, when Nurtai Sabilianov sponsored *aitys* the year he was elected to parliament, poets often mentioned him as an example of a 'good leader' even as they criticized others. But as Nurtai was a Kazakh nationalist and a subdued personality, poets and audiences tended to like him and tolerate a bit of self-advertisement. However, because *aitys* as "authentic culture" has become a required element of any number of national events, as well as a site of political and economic networking, elite sponsors and poets can find themselves at cross purposes. Heightened attention to sponsors ruins what is ideally the focus of *aitys*: the dialogic relationship between poets and their audience(s).

The second set of examples I present here comes from the northern region of Semei, where private sponsors foreground their own ambition in a way that is not currently altering the content of *aitys*, but which does not fall entirely in line with the idea that wealthy individuals should give generously to the less fortunate. In the case of the two sponsors I describe here, it seems that self-interest more than social duty or philanthropy is the real guiding motivation for sponsorship. Interestingly, both are individuals whose business involves developing the major resources of the country (railways and oil). That Kazakhstan's government is selling off the country's resources to foreign interests in ways that do not benefit average Kazakhstanis is a constant theme in *aitys* (I gave the example of Aibek akhyn's *dat* in chapter four).

Therefore to have self-interested sponsors whose very business *is* that selling out (at least in the eyes of worried audiences) presents a particular kind of threat: that *aitys* itself is for sale.

Poets and audiences alike are very vocal about the fear that *aitys* will simply sell-out, or cave to sponsors' interests. Indeed, this is a major criticism already launched at the national performance network by its detractors: *aitys* on television is not meaningful but simply a big show business. In the third example I give here, I describe at length a cycle of sponsorship in the southern region of Shimkent where the religious interests of the sponsoring organization overwhelmed poets' performances, and audiences and poets alike became frustrated. I describe how one poet from the region, Karima, exploited the dialogic conditions of a subsequent *aitys* performance to fight back against the selling out by bringing the issue out in the open in her poetry.

Case One: Successful sponsorship in Turetam

In 2006, the last summer of my fieldwork, *aitys* was held in the region of Baikonur, the former Soviet missile launching site. It is a region shrouded in tension and mystery, as a legacy of the USSR and its dissolution. During the Cold War, the site was used for both exploration (including the launch of the famed Yuri Gagarin, the first human astronaut to orbit the earth) and ballistics testing. After the breakup of the USSR, there was some controversy about who would take up political ownership of the lands around Baikonur. In a decision which embittered many Kazakhs (and doubtless disappointed many other foreign interests), Kazakhstan's government

agreed to lease the area to Russia until 2050 for \$17 million per year. The site remains active in space exploration – the manned rocket Soyuz was launched to the International Space Station on 26 March 2009. This flight carried one of the world's only six space tourists to date, and as such, this global event was a source of pride for Russia and Kazakhstan alike.

But pride on a global scale translates awkwardly to the local inhabitation of a place where one bit of a country is housed inside another. Day to day relations in the area amongst a variety of inhabitants are palpably tense; the literal meeting of nations serves as a metaphor for the nature of power relations between the two countries more broadly. The launchsite workers are nearly all Russian, and the surrounding service community which supports them largely Kazakh. For this ethnographer, this created an unusual visual effect; I had been entirely accustomed to seeing precisely the opposite in many areas of the country, where the wealthiest individuals are Kazakh and where Russians work in the service sector, or where there is no clear economic distinction between these ethnicities at all. The small town itself, while in many ways like every other Soviet town comprised of drab apartment blocks, also has a Mickey Mouse-like quality, a too-planned, too-clean, too-orderly feel which reminded me altogether of the United States nuclear town of Los Alamos, New Mexico, near where I grew up as a child.¹⁰⁸

Kazakhs call the area or town there *Turetam*, also the name of the train station there, a stop on the Moscow-Tashkent line. *Ture* is a generic term for a person in the lineage of a Khan – something akin to having royal ancestry, and commonly

¹⁰⁸ See Kate Brown (2004), *A biography of no place: from ethnic borderland to Soviet heartland*, for discussion of this character of nuclear towns.

understood to mean a descendant or relative of the great Chingis Khan himself, as it was his male relatives who pushed the Mongol empire west across the steppe, eventually blending in lineage with the lines of the khanates extant on those lands. The president of Kazakhstan has suggested more than once that he, too, is *ture*; it is a way of staking and/or legitimating political authority which pointedly far precedes Russian rule; further, in the mythic ancestral history of the Mongols told in Kazakhstan, Mongol strength and power vastly exceeds that of Russia, to the point where the latter is entirely irrelevant.¹⁰⁹

That *aitys* is performed here is therefore significant in a way it is not in other areas in a metaphorical sense: here, in an area controlled by the Russian Federation, *aitys* was performed in Turetam, the home of Ture, the place of the Kazakh ancestor. In a more literal sense, a gathering of Kazakhs the size of an *aitys* audience is extremely noticeable here. This *aitys*, very unusually, was to be held in the central square outside. By early evening, nearly 800 people had assembled; benches and chairs were found for community elders in the front ‘rows’ nearest the stage, adults found standing room behind them, and kids played around, in, and through the crowd. Typically a smaller regional *aitys* competition lasts two or three hours; this night’s *aitys* went on for eight, and the crowd remained for its entirety.

Aitys had been coming here for the past five years, for a simple practical reason. A former employee of the regional cultural affairs office in the city of Kyzylorda had become head of the cultural administration for the Baikonur region, and she maintained close ties with her former office. She came to meet our group

¹⁰⁹ A recent and obvious example is the film *Mongol*, ironically made by famed Russian director Sergei Bodrov, who also also directed the 2005 film *Nomad*, about the unification of the three hordes.

when we arrived, like so many arrivals in Kazakhstan, seemingly in the middle of nowhere on the steppe, after a five hour bus ride. One of the first things she joked about was her work load, “Here we have to celebrate all the holidays – Russian holidays, Kazakh holidays, there’s a holiday every time you turn around! But we have to fulfill them all equally.” She came with the akim (mayor) of town, who was single-handedly sponsoring this event as a part of his political self-legitimization – he had just become mayor the previous year. They came with a small caravan of black SUV’s, into which we clambered for the short sojourn to the territorial border.

I had been invited on this trip just over a week earlier, and there had been a frenzy in the cultural affairs office to get paperwork ready for all our group, because Baikonur, beyond being another country, is also a restricted zone for security reasons. However, when we drove through in our shiny cavalcade we were not even asked for our documents. Just as would be the case the following year when *aitys* poets traveled through Russia to Mongolia to perform, an initial anxiety by group organizers over having paperwork in proper order tends to diffuse once the group is moving through territory and borders mediated by interpersonal relationships, whether official or unofficial.¹¹⁰

In the classic fashion of Kazakh hospitality, we had just dropped our bags in our hotel when we took off again to the home of a former *akhyn*, Turoly, who now works as a *tamada* (improvisational host of major events like weddings). He was to serve as MC at the following night’s *aitys*. Having also been there to greet us in the steppe, he now received us in his home, a modest three room apartment in a local block. His wife, her sister, and three female neighbors were cooking for this night.

¹¹⁰ See Reeves (2007) for a discussion of the subjective porosity of borders in Central Asia.

As is typical in this type of more formal or official host-guest situations, we would not interact with these women other than to say hello and goodbye, and to thank them briefly when they came in to serve tea after the meal. When we finally left it was nearly midnight; we had been traveling and working for over half the day.

It was consistently remarkable to me the sacrifices that poets regularly make of their time and energy to perform, often on short notice, in competitions throughout the country and beyond. Though everyone had spent the previous days traveling, the night before the *aitys* at Turetam, our entire group worked into the night, some until two or four in the morning practicing verses in pairs, or singing alone. The cultural organizers were busy refining the schedule, writing the script of introductions, making name cards, etc. (And to arrange a special last-minute citypass for some poets who wanted to go into Baikonur to play billiards.)

A majority of the performing poets were from the Kyzylorda region, but three contingents had come from far away: those who had, like myself, traveled approximately 24 hours from Almaty a day early, those who had come twelve hours on the train from Shimkent the same day, and one poet who had come from Russia with his mother – Ayan. His presence was particularly important to the event for two reasons: first, because he served as a token representative of an international Russian-Kazakhstani working friendship, and because he as a poet was exceptional. While most poets follow the trajectory described in chapter three, developing their talents within a community of peers and mentors over years, this boy of just fifteen had reached a national performance level in less than one year. His mother, who had

accompanied him to Turetam in the capacity of manager and chief worrier, told me the story:

Mother, son, daughter, and grandmother shared a small home. One night in the late autumn of 2004, her tall, handsome, but shy son, then fourteen years old, went to sleep in the same room as his grandmother. Mother was gone that night, working the nightshift at her second job (she is the family's sole supporter). It was the night of Eid, the last night of Ramazan, a night of celebration.¹¹¹

Ayan fell asleep quickly, but his grandmother was restless; soon after he fell asleep his grandmother watched, half in horror and half in amazement, as a spirit, a white swirling light, entered the room through a window, traveled directly to her grandson's bed, where it circled his head five times and then left through the same window. Ecstatic but scared, the older woman leapt out of bed to call her daughter at work: "The spirit of Eid has visited your son!"

She laughed as she remembered how irritated she had been that night at her mother's phonecall, how she had stormed home thinking that she couldn't afford to leave work like this! She went to bed that night angry at her mother, certain that this was a hallucination or fabrication. But the next day, with no precedent, her son began to create poems. She grew teary as she talked to me: 'I'm just a poor woman, nobody – I never thought I'd be so fortunate as to have an akhyn in my family.'

The night of the performance, I chose to believe in the magic of Ayan's gift. His presence had somewhat unsettled our group of poets and organizers – for his youth, for his touted talent, for his mother's nervous omnipresence. She was clearly heavily invested in his success, visibly more anxious than the rest of us. When his turn finally came to perform, night had fallen. Bright lights hit the front of the stage from above. Ayan was dressed in white and gold, colors which for Kazakhs symbolize following in cultural tradition (white), and the richness of the steppe (gold, see figure 7). It was easy to imagine the spirit of Eid singing in and through him.

When the *aitys* finally drew to a close in the wee hours of the morning, most of the group headed back out for another dastarkhan at a local restaurant. This

¹¹¹ Arabic: Id-ul-Fitr. This day also marks the first day of the tenth month of the Islamic calendar, Shawwal; in Central Asia it is most commonly and primarily known as a day of celebration and breaking the fast.

tuckered ethnographer took a bus home with the town’s vice-mayor, a small ebullient woman in her mid-fifties. I asked her what she thought, remarking how amazed I was that everyone stayed so long, even though they had to stand outside. She laughed, “They’re still enthusiastic! Tonight they forgot about eating dinner, forgot about washing the floor. It was remarkable! Something like this has not happened here before.” She seemed to echo the poet Marzhan from Shimkent, who when we arrived and saw the amassed crowd, said, “A free *aitys* is a huge gift for the people.”



Figure 7: Ayan in Turetam/Baikonur, 2006 photo by author

The man responsible for this ‘free gift,’ mayor Kenzhibek, remained behind the scenes the entire time. He was present at our dastarkhans but didn’t take a seat of honor. His sponsorship was mentioned in passing during the course of the night by

the MC Turoly, but no one made much of it. This was highly unusual, given how generous he had been, that he had funded the entire night by himself, and that he'd done so specifically in order to legitimate himself in front of the community. It was a risk for him, to host what could be perceived a Kazakh nationalist event in the immediate eye of Russia; that he did so was much appreciated by his constituents. (As it turned out, there was no overt criticism of Russia that night, but Kazakh-Russian relations were a theme. For example Marzhan akhyn joked that it is fine for Kazakhs to read Pushkin, if Russians read Abai.)



Figure 8: The audience at Turetam/Baikonur, 2006 photo by author

The Turetam *aitys* was a great success for many reasons. First, because it was unusual – being outdoors in the night, lasting for so many hours, the audience of

hundreds and hundreds staying together despite having to stand (see figure 8). Second, in the magic of the performance night, Turetam qua Kazakh ancestral land triumphed over Baikonur qua Russian political domination continuing in the post-Soviet period. But third and most importantly, because the conditions of sponsorship were ideal. The mayor's generosity and enacted modesty allowed the primary focus of the event to be on the relationship between poets and their audience, rather than on political pageantry. It is also true that sponsorship conditions throughout the broader region of Kyzylorda are highly favorable in this regard, that at multiple levels leaders, from poets to the regional mayor, are acting to support culture, which I describe here.

Sponsorship in Kyzylorda

Because of the informal atmosphere of the outdoor stage, the night in Turetam was also an opportunity for people to meet and greet beloved poets – children clamored for autographs, adults came to shake hands and extend their congratulations. A great deal of attention was directed toward one poet in particular: Kenzhibai akhyn (see figure 9). Having performed in the region for several decades, he is well known and respected. At this point in his career, he serves as a mentor and leader in the *aitys* community and beyond. He is self-contained, dignified, and handsome, with one brown eye and one light green. He wears a lucky baseball cap much of the time, but hates to be photographed in it (which I learned by making just that mistake!) He explained that if a poet is in his or her Kazakh dress for performance, then that is how they must be respectfully portrayed.



Figure 9: Poets Anar and Marzhan (Shimkent) and Kenzhibai (Kyzylorda) at Baikonur photo by author

Kenzhibai himself, despite a relatively modest income, also helps to sponsor *aitys* performances in the region when he can. He is deeply committed to carrying through a sense of Kazakh history and culture in the area. Kenzhibai and other performers, like the famed epic singer Almas Almatov, are particularly fortunate in the oblast' of Kyzylorda, because the region's *akim* (mayor) has specifically dedicated himself to efforts to transform Kyzylorda into 'the center of Kazakh culture,' and has dedicated a great deal of time, workforce, and funds to this effort. This is his prerogative; the region's income comes primarily from foreign industrial investment.

Kenzhibai and his family live in the small town of Shiele; he and a driver had come to pick me up from the central town of Kyzylorda, and on the ride back we stopped to pray at the grave of Assan Khai Ghyly, who Kenzhibai explained was one

of seven holy men buried near Shiele. There is a legend about these burials: the railroad company came from Moscow to build a railroad here. Locals warned them that they couldn't, because of the holy burials. The Russians ignored Kazakhs' warnings, and went ahead and laid materials – iron rails and wood. But by the next morning they were all inexplicably tied in knots and the Russian engineers threw up their hands in defeat.¹¹²

Kenzhibai himself also has sponsors, including his region's akim and others who he does not personally know. The night of the Turetam *aitys*, a private individual gave him a special prize of 150,000T (approx \$1,500 US). A similar thing happened after a recent *aitys* in Almaty in celebration of Rayunbek Batyr, the Kazakh hero credited with freeing Kazakhs from Dzungar rule in the mid eighteenth century. After his performance, Kenzhibai told how one of his [four] daughters called to congratulate him on his new car. The individual who had given the prize turned out to be someone very well known, a personal friend of the president. Kenzhibai explained the perceived relationship between his sponsor and the country's president like this: [The sponsor] addresses [Kazakhstan's] president as '*sen, Nursultan*' – an address form which uses both the informal you, *sen* (as opposed to *cyz*, formal you)

¹¹² Our tour of the local landscape also included *RU Shest'* (Rudoupravlenie No. 6), the local uranium plant. There is an eerie mapping of Soviet Cold War and nuclear history all across this area; uranium mining in Kyzylorda and its effects stand as a consequence of the Cold War and nuclear proliferation, as in Baikonur, the missile launch site, or Semipolatinsk, where nuclear weapons were tested. And in all those areas, people are now paying the ecological and health cost. In Kyzylorda, uranium processing is poisoning the earth. In Kazakhstan, as increasingly in the United States, uranium is extracted by *in situ leaching*, a method which releases radon into the surrounding ground and contamination of groundwater by leaching liquid. When Kenzhibai told me the name of the plant, I misheard it as *ru shest*, an odd combination of Kazakh and Russian. *Ru* is a Kazakh kinship grouping, equivalent to clan. *Shest* in Russian means pole. The name invoked a strange mental image for me, something like a Russian spear flung through a Kazakh heart, or like a Russian flag raised over Kazakh territory.

and the president's first name, which implies both closeness or equal footing. When Kenzhibai told me this story, he quickly followed it with that of *Bukhar Zhirau*, the poet of *Abylai Khan*, the 17th century ruler. "If anybody wanted to know what was going on in the region," Kenzhibai explained, "they knew they could ask Bukhar and he would tell the truth." Kenzhibai hopes that one day the president will call all the poets to him saying, "you can come to me and tell me all the truth about all the regions."

Kenzhibai considers himself a *zhiraushy*, which generally means epic singer, but which people in the Kyzylorda region sometimes use as an umbrella term for one skilled in oral tradition. That emphasis is largely related to the fact that the *zhiraushy* Almas Almatov is here, because he is so well-known and so active, and because he is so directly involved in cultural development on every political level in the region. The efforts of individual artists and mentors like Almas and Kenzhibai, in conjunction with the resources of the region's cultural affairs offices, were distinctly successful at the time of my fieldwork there (2005-2006). They were part of a larger effort by the regional *akim* (appointed by the president) to remake Kyzylorda into a center of "Cultural Heritage," to bring to light its position at the center of a Kazakh history in the valley of the Syr Darya River. A government flyer about the three-year program announced:

A new regional program, "Cultural Heritage," plans activities to preserve and restore the region's historical and cultural heritage during the next three years. According to Shaitursyn Abdibayev, Director of the Region's State Department to Protect Historical and Cultural Monuments, the national budget will fund the reconstruction of Aikhozha, Aktas, and Asan-Ata mausoleums built in the 16th-19th centuries, the Syrly-tam mausoleum (13th century) and the Saraman-Khosa tower (11th century).

The regional budget will restore the house and mosque of Gani-bai in the Kazali district, the Begim-ana tower, the Basybek and Bektai mausoleums in the Aral district, the Khamakhshy-ata in the Kharmakhshy district, the Khalzhana-akhyn medressah in the Syrdarya district, and the Khorosan-ata mausoleum in the Zhanakhorgan district. There is also a plan to create a museum, Khorkhyt-Ata, in the Karmakhshy district, and an historical and cultural center, Okhshy-Ata, in the Shieli district.

These plans came together with extensive proposed archeological excavation to uncover a record of 10-14th century Kazakh khanates. Government efforts to establish a program of cultural heritage simultaneously frame and echo the activities of a wide variety of Kazakh pilgrims. In this case, government monies will be used to reconstruct a series of holy sites named for Kazakh ancestors (*ata* is grandfather, *bai* is Kazakh rich man, *ana* grandmother, and *akhyn* of course – poet). As my own ethnographic experience in the region showed, once these projects were completed they quickly became fundamental pilgrimage sites for a wide variety of primarily local persons.

What I wish to highlight here is that in the region of Kyzylorda, the types of landscape inscription I describe in the previous chapter – the naming of sites, the telling of stories about sites, the reclamation of space and history as specifically Kazakh (i.e. not Russian) – have become quite consciously the project of the regional government and local cultural and political leaders. This means that the general climate of sponsorship for traditions like *aitys* is extremely positive, in that there is an ethos of incentive to support language and culture as a part of history re-making.

Case Two: The Threat of Sponsorship in Semei

In other regions of the country, individuals with means take on the responsibility for the perpetuation of cultural forms, be they shrines or performances. In the northern region of Semei, I met with several private businessmen who have merged an interest in cultural heritage with their own sense of philanthropy, *shariat*, and/or political goals. In that sense, their motivation for sponsorship is like that of Amangeldi Ermegeayev and Nurtai Sabilianov (chapter four); they are in a socio-economic position powerful enough to afford a point of view, but it is political suicide to openly disagree with the president's policies. As sponsors, particularly of *aitys* with its richly varied and ambiguous voice, they can enact their priorities at some distance or remove.

The complaints of sponsors I met in Semei were familiar: the president's administration is not sufficiently bolstering Kazakh language and cultural resources, instead favoring of Russia-friendly policies and development. Semei is a northernmost province on the border with Russia, where Russian language is predominant, and perhaps more significantly, where the local population, Kazakh and Russian alike, have extended friend and family networks and obligations crossing that border.¹¹³ Ultimately though, I argue here that the driving force of their sponsorship is not a general sense of 'social good,' but rather blatant self-interest. The self-interest of a sponsor is threatening vis a vis *aitys*, because it breaks down the ideal collaboration of elite with poets and people I describe at the beginning of this chapter.

¹¹³ This common understanding of Semei as a more "Russia-friendly" region (cf Cummings 2005; Dave 2007) is counterposed to another discursive trope of Semei as a hotbed of opposition, voiced by a variety of my colleagues there, including poets and cultural organizers. As evidence, people would note that Semei is the birthregion the poet Abai and the author Auezov (see chapter two), and the opposition politician Zhakianov, who was jailed by Nazabayev for years (see chapter one).

The threat is compounded by the fact that these sponsors make a living developing (and selling) Kazakhstan's resources to countries like China and the United States.

I have chosen two men as indicative of this kind of sponsorship interest. The first is a young man named Talgat, who heads his own explosives company. He is confident but informal in his modest offices, which I visited with the poet Renat (chapter four) and his mentor. Talgat was friends with Renat's mentor, and had been privately sponsoring Renat for three years, during which time the young poet had become quite famous. Talgat likes Renat's bucking of convention and authority, his brazen politics, his feisty personality. Renat's success reflects directly on Talgat, who has used this sponsorship experience to increase and advance his business contacts.

Talgat's company does the dynamiting for resource exploration and extraction. He partners with the likes of DANK, one of the country's major geophysical services providers, responsible for "seismic and topographic surveying, reservoir modeling and data processing for the oil service industry in Kazakhstan" (BusinessWire, 8/14/2006). For Talgat, increased association with firms like these was of critical importance at the time. Earlier that year, in February, American conglomerate CRSI had acquired the rights to DANK along with two other leading companies in oil and gas, one of which, KhorTazh, was "in the beginning stage of the exploitation and development of a twenty-year production license, which it acquired in August 2004, for the 22 square kilometer Northwest *Zhetybai* field located in western Kazakhstan near the Caspian Sea" (ibid.)

Talgat's company could stand to boom as a result of such a contract. However, at the elite level of oil business in Kazakhstan, as an independent businessperson with his own relatively small firm, he needs to increase his reputation. Sponsoring one of the most famous poets in Kazakhstan is one of the many avenues he has to do that; via Renat he might be able to meet and greet with an elite company of government and development leaders at *aitys* performances. Thus it is for his career as well as out of a sense of cultural duty or political dissent that Talgat is involved in the *aitys* community.

The second sponsor I've chosen to describe is Ghabbas, an older man who owns a factory which repairs trains from the countrywide system of railways. He has also served as a regional representative in the *maslihat* (parliament). His cultural sponsorship is done largely to maintain a particular image in the community. He describes himself as a soulful person, who feels a responsibility to help [with culture] because he comes from the land of Abai, a region with a rich poetic history. I was not allowed to meet one-on-one with him, but was introduced and accompanied by a series of intermediaries, all present at our interview. His presentation to me was a further, if minor, extension of his self-presentation to his constituency. He noted early on in our interview that for the 150th anniversary of the poet Abai a decade earlier (1995), he had helped to sponsor an international *aitys* which brought poets from all the Central Asian former Soviet republics and from Mongolia.

Thoroughly shaded by my own cultural background, I asked him whether the funds to support various cultural projects come from his own pocket or are financed by his company. He laughed: "There is no difference!" He and/or his company have

financed over half a million tenge (roughly \$50,000US) in recent years to build a mosque and a stadium in the region, as well as an estimated 14,000,000 tenge (roughly \$1.4 million) to finance orphanages, *aitys* competitions, and various sporting events. He has also helped to create musical centers in seven different schools (and has donated Xerox machines).

While he does describe himself as a religious person (*musulman*), Ghabbas explained that his calling to sponsor is not, in his case, shariat or a religious calling, but rather more a general moral principle. He noted that from what he has seen, the regional budget allocates minimally to cultural projects, and what money there is evaporates as it transitions from the national to regional to city levels. He likens this process to taking money directly from needy children. On the wall of his office is a picture of his own son, of whom he is most proud. The son stands in hunting camouflage in deep snow, smiling broadly with a rifle and his hunting victory: a wolf. Grey wolves (and some white) have long populated Eurasia, but now the entire species is endangered.

The grey wolf is also the mythic ancestor of all the Turkic tribes. There is a certain irony in this benefactor's position and setting. I was uncomfortable in the environs of his plush offices, on the grounds of his factory compound where workers are forced to live, where a shiny new black landcruiser awaits him in the midst of all his workers' bicycles. He is supporting the fluorescence of culture, the major symbol of which his son has helped to become permanently extinct. From the sixth century the wolf has been a potent symbol on the steppe (cf Grousset 2002[1970]). There is a Kazakh saying: "*Khaskhyrды sorlyghы ushin yemes, orlyghы ushin orady*" (You don't

beat a wolf because he's grey, but because he has stolen). The reason wolves face extinction in the region is largely because they are such a fundamental enemy to pastoral nomads and herders, who go out of their way to kill wolves in order to protect their flocks. But there is a certain honor in that type of killing – not in killing for sport, like the son of Ghabbas.

For the majority of people with whom I lived and worked, Ghabbas is precisely the sort of man who is outwardly respected but the object of gossip and criticism behind closed doors. In the strange and fateful way of fieldwork, it so happened that I was having tea less than a week later with the mother of one of Ghabbas' former employees, who had left the company complaining of shady accounting practices and the selling of valuable metals from railway components to a Chinese firm. When I told the mother how Ghabbas had described himself as a muslim, she scoffed: Ha! That man is a drunk and his wife has complained many times because of it. Whether or not this particular story is true, the very existence of gossip about him suggests that he must continually engage in the project of self-legitimization, in cleansing his image by supporting culture.

That there are rich people among Kazakhs in and of itself is not problematic. Indeed, there have always been *bailar*, the wealthy, who are reputed to lead and help their neighbors, greatly respected. (To be a bai or rich man became a peril in the early Soviet period, of course, and many of these men and their families fled to northwest China). But today's newly wealthy seem far more disconnected from their kin and clan networks; they seem to associate primarily with one another rather than

with their own families let alone a cross section of Kazakh society. In every gathering, there is a visible distinction between those with means and those without.

The division became particularly visible to me on one trip to the sponsor Nurtai Sabilinov's hometown of Ayaguz. The whole community had come to the train station early in the morning to welcome our disheveled crew of poets, organizers, sponsors, and notetakers (myself and one journalist). Children sang for us, the local mayor came to shake our hands, older women in traditional dress threw candy over our heads as they would for a celebration. We stayed in the community's only hotel, a ramshackle place which clearly hadn't seen remodeling in decades – it was a place a bit below the standards of the wealthy in our contingent. In the dining room for both lunch and dinner, our entire group would gather with local staff and helpers. There was a clear division between the tables: at one would sit the wealthy, along with favored poets, at a second would sit the majority of poets, and at a third far away would sit all the local staff. No one spoke except those at the head table.

I recounted this vision to a Kazakh friend of mine when I returned to Almaty a few days later. He grew visibly irritated. "It's always like that," he said. "There are always different tables. That's just how it is – those groups of people hate each other, but they need each other, they depend on each other." Since that conversation this "different tables" idea has persisted in my view as the best way to metaphorically describe the relationship between *aitys* audiences, poets, and a majority of their sponsors.

In a status-based society, individual sponsors cannot operate legitimately without the recognition of the community, but cultural sponsorship is one clear

(nearly determinate) way to achieve that type of legitimacy. Poets and other artists depend on sponsors' support in the face of limited government funds. The community depends on poets as a source of pride and satisfaction. It is a circle of favor and need which itself is constantly in danger – there is always the threat that one thread of the chain will be broken. Will audiences lose interest? Will poets sell out to sponsors' interests? *Aitys* is, like so many 'Kazakh' resources ranging from the wolf to natural resources like oil, endangered, due precisely to the nature of the relationships necessary to sustain it. In the third example I describe at length here, a particular sponsorship organization coopted *aitys* for a time, resulting in the outright dissatisfaction and vocal frustration of poets and audiences.

Case Three: Selling Out in Shimkent

In the last year of my fieldwork, 2006, *aitys* went through some changes. The presidential administration had raised its level of objection to *aitys* around the time of the elections the previous fall, and performances became fewer and far between. The national television station *KXabar* refused to carry the program any longer, and Zhursin and his sponsor Amangeldi Yermegayev went on vacation for most of the late summer in Greece. Local organizers, however, officials in regional cultural affairs offices, were anxious to keep *aitys* alive, to give opportunities to bring new young poets into the fold, and to satisfy the demand of local audiences for *aitys* and other "traditional" cultural shows. Their annual budget from the ministry of culture, however, made this difficult to do – there was only enough money for one *aitys*.

So when Zhursin Zhursin, the primary organizer of *aitys* for the entire country, came forward with a new sponsor, it came as a pleasant surprise. It was to be *Akh Orda* (White Way), a burgeoning pan-Islamic movement headed by the president's nephew Kairat Satypaldy. When Zhursin and Satypaldy met initially to discuss this financial backing, Satypaldy explained that he was opening offices of *Akh Orda* in every region of the country, and that he needed help spreading the message of the movement. *Aitys* poets were to be enlisted in that project: in performance they were supposed to discuss and share the tenets of the movement, primarily *imanshylyk* (piety). *Akh Orda* would host a two-day *aitys* competition in every region over the course of the year. I was working in the southern city of Shimkent when they came.

Suddenly *Akh Orda* was everywhere. Together with the local cultural affairs office, they advertised widely before the two-day competition in Shimkent, in local newspapers and on television – a competition that was to be free and open to the public. Tickets for most of the regional and national competitions cost range between 500 and 1000 tenge (roughly 5 to 10 dollars), and families tend to go together as a multigenerational group – to get tickets for the whole family ends up costing between US\$20 and \$50, a sizeable percentage of a typical monthly household income. Therefore for a free *aitys*, despite a completely anomalous blizzard that week which brought literally meters of snow to this southern area unequipped to deal with it, nearly a thousand persons showed up to wait outside the regional theater two hours before show time.

When I arrived with a translator and a friend, the crowd was already beginning to gather and press more insistently against and toward the building. The

ground was covered with ice. Police had come to guard the theater entrance, and opened only a single door, through which people started pushing and shoving. Soon the crowd was a single body, pushing toward the small door, pressed closer and closer together until people (including this ethnographer) could literally pick up their feet and be carried along. That was easier than trying to keep balance on the ice. People in the crowd was simply worried that, because the event was free, there would not be enough places for everyone in the theater.

Typically, audience members would buy tickets for assigned seats, and then once in the theater, shuffle around to get themselves into the appropriate order: the theater itself actually transforms into a microcosm of a Kazakh ethos of respect and hierarchy. The first three rows are occupied by the elderly, which means that most of their heads will be covered out of respect for God and/or simply out of modesty, and so the front section looks like a small sea of bobbing whiteness. The elderly (pensioners and veterans) are still venerated broadly throughout this former Soviet space. For example, on public transportation you are certainly expected to give your seat up for older persons. In the Kazakh cultural realm of *aitys*, further, older persons are venerated as carriers of knowledge and tradition.¹¹⁴ Behind them sit the local wealthy: politicians, businessmen, rectors of the local university, and their spouses and associates. Then the rest of the rows up until the first section break have seats for which people fight. The back section and the balcony, if there is one, are filled with younger people and those not invested in a status claim. They tend to be the rowdy

¹¹⁴ Groups of older men called Ak Sakaldar (white beards) regularly gather to discuss community affairs and to make informal decisions, sometimes even working together with local politicians. In some cases, as in northern Kyrgyzstan, in the absence of the effective power of the state apparatus, there has been a reemergence of Ak Sakal courts, where legal issues are settled in the community by elders (cf Beyer 2004).

sections of the audience, yelling and laughing and clapping. (I always far preferred to sit in these sections, but the view was difficult and as I was usually trying to videotape it wasn't feasible.)



Figure 10: Aitys audience in Shimkent, 2006 photo by author

But on the first day of this two day competition, the theater was standing room only, literally crammed with people standing and sitting in every available space. A few hundred were still turned away. To reduce the craziness on the second day of competition (where the first day winners faced off anew against one another), the organizers decided to sell tickets. The crowd, angry at suddenly being asked to pay for a performance they thought was free, turned into a bit more of a mob, and clashed with police reinforcements who'd been brought in to deal with the situation. Several hundred were turned away the second day, as tickets had been "sold out" before the theater cashier's office had even opened for the day. When I went to confront the

cashier, I was sold a “ticket without place” (meaning unassigned seating), which actually turned out quite well for me because once I fought my way through the cops and crowd (see fig. 10), through the doors and inside, I continued to push my way down to the front of the theater and ended up with an excellent seat right in front of Maria Apai.

Maria Apai was a giant Kazakh grandmother with strong arms and rough hands belying a life of labor, and with a beatific smile set deep into her plump face. Her husband beside her was but utterly silent, perhaps used to his exuberant and chatty wife. She told me stories and fed me candies throughout the day (*aitys* competitions last anywhere from 3 to 6 hours). She and her husband, she said, lived in an *aul* (rural village) three hours outside the city of Shimkent. For two months they had been putting aside extra money from selling kymyz (fermented horse’s milk) on the street in order to buy bus tickets and come into town for *aitys*. Once in town they stay with relatives, which is not really “free” in the sense that they must bring gifts of food as well. The trip for this old couple is a bit of an undertaking, and they were distraught to learn about the second day’s ticket sales. Maria Apai explained that her relatives in town had been able to give them the money, but she hoped to God that all the other people had been able to find enough money to see the *aitys* final, as well. At the end of the day, she seemed deflated. I asked her what she’d thought. “I don’t know,” she said, “of course it’s nice to see our culture and our tradition, but these ... all they did was sing about piety. It wasn’t a real *aitys*.”

Why Things Had Gone Wrong

In the months prior to this *aitys*, leaders of *Akh Orda* had established a regional office, and, in an initial meeting with local religious leaders, had firmly established its own presence and agenda regarding the upcoming *aitys* performance: poets who were to perform were clearly instructed to propagandize the goals, activities, and underlying principles of *Akh Orda*. The performances were judged by *Akh Orda* leaders and their friends in the community. *Akh Orda* had also done the great honor of sponsoring a *Hadj* (pilgrimage to Mecca) for the head of *aitys*, Zhursin Zhursin, six poets from around the country, and the elderly parents of Bakhytzhan Ospanov, head of *Akh Orda*'s regional chapter in Shimkent.

Bakhytzhan Ospanov wears many hats, and has established himself as a leader in the region in several different important ways, all of which make him an excellent candidate for *Akh Orda* leadership. A building engineer, he is the president of the SMP 18, an umbrella firm for three major construction companies. Ospanov's second hat is that of politician; he served for four years representing Shimkent in the lower house of *mazhilis* (national parliament). His third hat is that of a sports supporter: he is the president of the soccer association of southern Kazakhstan.

Ospanov's fourth and newest hat was that of regional representative of *Akh Orda*. That representation was a task he referred to as *politiki* (politics). The religious movement was quite transparently laying the groundwork to become a political party in the next few years, in order to prop up Satypaldy's possible ascension to the presidency after the end of Nazabayev's last term.¹¹⁵ As Nazabayev

¹¹⁵ The same process occurred in 2004 when Nazabayev's daughter Dariga (also the head of the country's media conglomerate *KXabar*) began a movement seemingly from thin air called ASAR (help for all) which rapidly became a political party claiming seats in the parliamentary elections that year.

has since amended the constitution to allow himself the position of president-for-life, *Akh Orda*'s original mission is now somewhat moot and the movement has fizzled. In fieldwork in the summer of 2008, informants had only hazy recollections of the party and its purpose.

At the time, however, *Akh Orda* was actively pushing its philanthropy and piety message across the country, seeking to insinuate itself firmly in Kazakh life. Their three main areas of focus were religion, traditional culture, and sport. In addition to *aitys*, the Shimkent chapter of *Akh Orda* was also funding competitions of baigay (horse races) for boys, and held a "Miss Shimkent" competition where girls were judged on dress, cooking skill, and musical talent. Ospanov explained that the organization's primary goal was to bring back forms of traditional culture for Kazakh youth, who were getting swallowed up in MTV. Why should we care about songs on MTV? he asked me rhetorically during an interview. There's no special talent there, all the songs and words are already written down – nothing like *aitys*, where poets improvise – now that's truly impressive!¹¹⁶

The implicit message in *Akh Orda*'s campaign was that the current regime under Nazarbayev is not Kazakh nationalist, that the current government props up Kazakh language and culture as its national face, but they do nothing to pragmatically undergird that political promise. Different sponsors link to different aspects of what it means to be truly Kazakh, and use *aitys* poets to pass along that message. In some cases this results in really fortuitous connections among sponsors, poets, and audiences, as in the first two years of my research when the focus of *aitys* fell to

However, after a spate of fighting between father and daughter, ASAR was quietly subsumed into OTAN and was no longer a separate party by the time of the presidential election one year later.

¹¹⁶ Interview 28 May 2006

language (see chapter 2), but in Shimkent *Akh Orda*'s focus was religion, which backfired. The *Akh Orda aityses* became, as Maria Apai complained, very preachy and less political.

Poets in the region were conflicted about the role of *Akh Orda* and the type of sponsorship it represented. Karima (chapter three) talked to me at length about the fraught situation in which contemporary poets find themselves. I asked her to compare what goes on today with the atmosphere when she first started, in the late 1980's. Answering me, she was clearly frustrated:

*In those times aityses weren't bad, they were good. Then in the best people's aitys performances there were poets like Aselhan and Taushen. They have their own beautiful words, which people still remember. They were stars of their time. In those times, what I really liked was that there wasn't any kind of bartering or unfairness – whoever had the fastest horse in the race won. But today this Zhursin has put up cars, they say that you can't stand your ground in the face of wealth, and so like that they're not shy of their elders, they don't give you the road. As if winning that car was the meaning for them. As if it all ends in this life. They do everything for the car. And here's how they're forgetting about art, forgetting why they came. This isn't aitys but some kind of barter/bargaining. In those times it wasn't like this. In those times prizes were like tea services, rugs. The most expensive prize was a TV. Now even students wouldn't take a TV. And then they gave us certificates. We're up to here in that kind of thing! Property has ruined aitys.*¹¹⁷

The reason that the prize issue is such a sticking point for Karima and other poets is that they are provided by sponsors – prizes and sponsors come hand in hand. But as was the case with the *Akh Orda aitys* I saw, sponsors and their important colleagues and friends are usually also the ones who sit on the jury to judge *aitys* competitions, so obviously those poets who best represent sponsors' goals will win sponsors' cars, money, and other prizes. Karima noted that sometimes a private sponsorship relationship develops, and it does happen that one sponsor can buy off an

¹¹⁷ Personal interview 3 March 2006. I thank Akbota Anuhanova for help with this translation.

entire competition such that his or her poet will win. However, toward the end of the interview she gave a contradictory point of view, reflecting that perhaps, just because *Akh Orda* spends big money on prizes, even if all that money is called in from higher ups in the president's administration (*Nazarbayevting khozghalysy*) it's not inherently bad. As long as each poet considers equally his or her financial situation and "moral jaw" (*moraldykh zhaghy*), she can support them. ¹¹⁸

Case Four: fighting back against selling out

Karima's frustration came out not just in her reflections on the situation, but in her next *aitys* performance, as well. It so happened that a little over a month after the two day fiasco sponsored by *Akh Orda*, the city government threw the regularly scheduled *aitys* in honor of the Kazakh New Year, *Naughyz*. That is, the *aitys* took place under normal conditions of sponsorship, where the bulk of the cost came out of the regional budget. Zhursin Zhursin and his elite cadre of sponsors did not participate in this *aitys*, which meant that the only extra prizes were small in nature and given to poets personally by local community leaders. In that *aitys*, Karima met her friend and colleague Marzhan (chapter three). Marzhan's priority as a poet is to support and promote respect for Kazakh language and traditions, such as piety and respect for elders. ¹¹⁹

Marzhan had recently returned from an *Akh Orda* sponsored *aitys* in the far southwestern city of Aktau, Mangystau oblast' (region). While she certainly considers herself to be religious, Marzhan noted that she was not *hadjy* (someone who

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Personal interview, 23 March 2006.

has taken the pilgrimage to Mecca) like most of her opponents, and so she prepared for the *aitys* by reading and memorizing passages from the Koran. The strategy apparently worked, as Marzhan took first place in the competition and returned home with one million Kazakh tenge (roughly US\$100,000).

The New Year's *aitys* between Marzhan and Karima was largely cordial, until the last turn, which was Karima's (the pair ran out of time in the competition and the organizer stopped them).

*Saidalap bittik zherdi de,
saudalap bittik turdi de
Akhyndykhty endi saudalap
bolyp khalmaiikh sorga end.
Unerding zholy tar bolmai,
tonyghymyz lailanbai
Akhikhat bolsyn aitysta
tarazygha teng saghandai.
Laghnneten aulakh bolaiykh,
adiletten syidy alghandai
Arynyz taza bop khalsyn
bes kyndik myna zhalghandai
Arzan suzge barmaityn Marzhan dese
Marzhansyn
baskhany bilmeimin
men ushin baghasy biik zanggharsyn
arkhasynda aitystyng batys
shyghys barghan song
Ongtustikke de barghansyng
on segiz zhyl degende milliondy da alghansyn
Sol millionnyng endi sen tym bolmasa
zhartysyn
Aluyn bizge khamdarsyn
Yrysty bolsyn singlinge
Zhoghysty bolsyn singlinge

Isgilik senen zholgha alsyn
Engbegindi baghalap
zholdasyn deimin angharsyn
ongtustikting osyndai
Akhkhydai khos khyzday
Tanti etip yel zhortty
Haykhty bugin tang khaldyrsyn
Zhuldyzmyzdyng saulesi ol khyzmyzgha
zhalghansyn
Halykhtan bolyp khoshemet
Zholymyz bizding ong bolsyn.*

*The riches of the land are being appraised,
the riches of the tur120 are being appraised.
So then poet-ness is being appraised
let's stop this grief!
The path of art will not be narrow,
our clarity will not be muddied.
Let there be truth, like authority
hidden in aitys.
Let's be cursed further,
confusion just takes away from fairness.
Keep our honor clean,
this kind of unity, five times a day
Let Marzhan not go to cheap words.
You, Marzhan,
I don't know another one;
for me you are tall, seeped in value.
You went supported to the eastern and
western ends of aitys.
And to the south you also came.
Your wish for seventeen years, you took a million.
But it is not to be entirely your million –
you are only half.
Dfferent to us you are prepared,
May you be happy within yourself.
May you become close quickly with your younger
sister.
Take a sacred path, [where]
Your work is worth something.
You are a friend, I say, a ravine --
Your south is like that.
girls like swans, like sown fields
Satisfy the people's country.
It's the people you are making blossom today.
you join our boys and girls to the light of our stars

May there be respect from the people,
May our road be the right one. 121*

¹²⁰ The same term as in Turetam, above

Marzhan was unable to answer Karima, but the organizer, who was providing witty commentary in between pairs of poets, could. And the organizer, who sits on stage with the performers, on this day was Sabit, Karima's teacher-mentor and the director of the school in which she teaches. As Karima finished singing, she was looking not at Marzhan or at the audience, but directly at him. Sabit picked up the cue, and, after the audience finished wildly applauding, affirmed that Karima's words were right, that "we" should never bargain for our art. Their collusion trumped Marzhan, and in fact Karima did win.

Karima's *aitys* is multilayered. At broad strokes she is describing the meaning of what *aitys* does for "the people." She uses several different terms to name the latter – *yel* (country), *zhort* (public), *halykh* (people and/or nationality), and *biz* (us). Marzhan is carefully excluded from these groupings; in fact, Karima calls her the opposite, "you," over fifteen times in what is really just a few minutes of song. She even goes so far as to say, "and to the south you also came," a typical statement addressed to guests from other regions. But Marzhan is from the south! And thus this statement, here ironic and a bit mean, serves to further alienate her from some "we the nation" which Karima is describing. Karima names the elements of this world that belong in this nation: land, poetry, cleanliness, respect, fairness, honor, and unity. The insinuation is that "we" (the audience of *aitys* that day and Kazakhs more broadly) cannot assume Marzhan to embody the same characteristics. Further, as Karima is continuously characterizing and recharacterizing her opponent Marzhan, she makes several statements which seem contradictory, and which really poses a direct challenge to Marzhan: are you worthy to join our world?

¹²¹ Karima Akyn, Shimkent Regional New Year's *Aitys*, 18 March 2006.

One of the elements Karima plays around with in her poem is the idea of *baghy* (value). She uses the term to appraise land (*tur*) and poet-ness (*akhyndykh*). Both these standard bearers of Kazakhness have great value, but now there is a price tag being attached. *Tur* in particular expresses the indignity or inappropriateness of invasion; not only is this *ture* (as above, ancestral land), but *tur* is also the spot within a Kazakh home of highest value, the spot farthest within, farthest away from the door, given to guests as a deep sign of hospitality. Keeping them away from the door demonstrates the host family's willingness to feed and shelter their guest, no matter what the period of time might be. Land, poetry, *tur* – these are all aspects of a Kazakh world to which it is impossible, by cultural and historical standards, to attach a pricetag. But yet it is happening, and Karima worries on behalf of some general “we” whether Marzhan might actually be helping that happen.

Karima calls Marzhan “valuable,” a statement which could be a compliment but here is not, quite – Karima is lauding Marzhan's achievement as a poet, including her participation in *aitys* in many different places, but she quickly switches to a literal sense of “worth money” when she reminds the audience that Marzhan has recently won one million tenge in an *Akh Orda aitys* in Aktau, Mangistau. And she denounces the prize: it is not entirely Marzhan's, half of it rightly belongs to the people. If Marzhan does not share, or rightly recognize that *aitys* is a cocreation of poet together with his/her “people,” then she becomes confusing, muddied, dishonorable, and breaks the unity of this tradition. Karima has even characterized Kazakh unity in spiritual terms: let us keep our honor clean, this kind of unity, five times a day. Here she refers to the practice of reading *namas*, muslim prayers. She exhorts Marzhan to

“take a sacred path [to where] your work is worth something” and here she means a place clearly of cultural, rather than strictly monetary, value.

The metaphor of a pathway is a very common one in *aitys*; *Akh Zhol* (the white way) means a path to religious clarity and goodness in a broad Islamic context, but in Central Asia it also means, more colloquially, the virtuous path, which could be characterized in many ways, but which has at its core themes of ancestry, respect, and obligation. That is, it is a path “we” take together. The fear expressed in Karima’s *aitys* and the very real threat that exists continually in cycles of sponsorship and performance is that the tradition itself could become, literally and figuratively, a “sell-out.” That is, poets would cease to voice “the people,” and become well-paid soundboxes for special interest groups instead. To commoditize this verbal art is to render it impotent, and in a grander sense, it is to remove part of ‘our’ path.

Any sense of fracturing, breaking off, selling out – this represents a sense of rupture, of instability, of breaking apart. Kazakh territory (already wrongfully delimited during the Soviet era) can be further broken apart. Kazakh families can be separated by commercial pursuits; people chasing money can abandon their duties to ancestors and kin, which would mean in turn that everyday economic networks begin to collapse, and celebrations which unite and reaffirm Kazakh identity, such as weddings and funerals, would be threatened. Resources of the land like oil and coal and diamonds can be sold, and that serves as a metaphor for other resources among the Kazakh people which might be sold – particularly reproductive rights and children.

The break up of structures and the loss of a moral compass, the disappearance of non-renewable resources, this all threatens a sense of wholeness, integrity, security, and hope which I think many Kazakhs can find in cultural practices like *aitys*. And that is ultimately why the idea that *aitys* might be sold, or that its poets might sell out is so threatening; the metaphor of “sale” in this context represents a direct break in the whole that the cultural world of *aitys* represents. And it is potentially unrecoverable, just as is the sale of non-renewable resources to foreign interests.

CHAPTER SIX
VOICE AND VOICELESSNESS

*I wait
in a blue hour and faraway noise of hammering,
and on a stage¹²² a poem begun, something
about to be dispersed,
something about to come into being.*

*Li-Young Lee, from "Furious Versions"
the city in which i love you*

Aitys in Russian

In the spring of 2009, I was preparing for a presentation on my research, and was searching for *aitys* competitions on youtube. My laptop with Kazakh script had failed and I was using the computer in my office, so I could not search in cyrillic. I went to youtube and typed, "*aitys*" and found, to my great surprise, one entry there: *Aitys in Russian*.¹²³ I watched with a dropped jaw two poets well known to me, Renat and Balghynbek whose transcripts are in chapter four, perform in Russian. That competition I could see in the video was organized by Zhursyn Zhursin, and sponsored by two men: Yermegeayev and Sarsenov, major sponsors of the Moscow trip described in that chapter.¹²⁴

¹²² Lee's original word was "page," I've taken a minor liberty in the spirit of *aitys*.

¹²³ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=607eZAQECAA>

¹²⁴ The three men were seated in the front row, the place always given to sponsors. Not having been in the field in a year, I cannot adequately contextualize this performance; from correspondence with friends in the field it seems that this competition (in Russian) was a singular event, but I am not certain. This will certainly be a topic of inquiry when I am next in the field.

These men, together with Murzatai Zhuldosbekov, head up the national circuit of poets; they are members of a powerful elite in Kazakhstan. The relationship of that elite to poets and ‘the arts’ more broadly is the topic of this *aitys*; the two poets lament that more of the elite have not stepped forward to participate in the collaborative relationship upon which *aitys* is predicated. Balghynbek first locates that lack in terms of language: because sponsors don’t speak Kazakh, they’re not interested in spending their money on things like *aitys*:

Da Renat ia smotru tipa ushli
left.¹²⁵
aramatym on poet tipa riisnii
medsenaty ne znaiut rodnoi iazyk
ia vam voobshe-to chelovek ninaviisnii
ruskii-iazichnii kazakhie nas ne znaiut
dombristi my zhe, ne gitaristi
no pust’ oni ne dumaiut *anau-menau*
sostizatsia my mozhem i po ruskii
prezident skazal zhe kazakhski rooskii
angliskii tri podruzhki
v proshlym veke akhyni zabivali
astamym kim atym ken atyshka

Yes Renat, I’m looking – it’s as if they already
left.
My *aramat*¹²⁶ he’s singing kinda [riisnii?].
Sponsors don’t know their birth language,
to you i’m just some kind of hated person.
Russian-speaking Kazakhs don’t know us –
we’re dombrists, not guitarists!
But don’t let them think *this and that*¹²⁷
We can also compete in Russian.
The president said that Kazakh, Russian
and English are three girlfriends.
In the previous century poets forgot
who was more worldly [...]

Balghynbek here refers to the language policy of the president’s administration, which officially encourages multilingualism for Kazakhstanis – a multilingualism which reflects in turn the country’s orientation-in-the-world on a global political, economic, and cultural stage. Balghynbek’s next turn is more pointedly critical, he suggests that sponsors prioritize personal interest over Kazakh culture:

Gde nashi medsenaty, oligarki
igraut li oni v kasino a ni karti
ne xotiat sponsirovat’ isgustvovo
razvi shto drug drugu dali bartvi
Pugachova priglasiv’

Where are our sponsors, oligarchs?
Are they playing in the casino, or at cards?
They don’t want to sponsor the arts
Really it’s that they gave each other [bartvi?]
Having invited Pugachova,

¹²⁵ Here it’s unclear if he’s speaking about the audience or sponsors or both, but “left” here undoubtedly means that “they” already speak Russian.

¹²⁶ From the Kazakh *aram* meaning unclean, ungodly.

¹²⁷ Here he used the Kazakh term *anau menau* (this and that).

budete brat' an kazakhskix artistov
obezhal ty.
ia ne znaiu, vso mozhno dlya Galkina
a ol chasu poderzhat' moni zhalki?

Bogotiye koroble pokupaiut
to li deneg dax arenda to li banti

if you'll(formal/pl) take her, you(sg, informal
offended Kazakh artists.
I don't know, anything's possible for Galkin,¹²⁸
but to support one hour [of *aitys*] you can't spare the
money?
The rich are buying boats,
some money goes for rent, some for hair-ribbons...

The word Balghynbek uses for “sponsor” is not the simple form used ubiquitously to describe a variety of situations, but instead the Russian *medsenat*, a formal term with a slightly negative valance. A direct correlation is to the term *deputat* (deputy) is used to describe any member of parliament, but with a negative connotation, implying some distance between the conditions of the speaker and the individual being talked about. As a *deputat'* has political power unavailable to most, a *medsenat* connotes a member of the elite whose wealth buys them influence. Balghynbek then offers a synonym, oligarch, a word most prevalent not in Kazakhstan but in Russia to describe individuals who control massive local networks of wealth and who as a result are highly influential in politics.

Balghynbek's characterization of the spending habits of the rich paints the latter as capricious. Buying a boat in the middle of the desert steppe is ludicrous, extravagant. (And if the buyer has actually need of the boat it locates that individual either on the oil-rich west coast or outside Kazakhstan altogether.) “Some money goes for rent, some for hair-ribbons.” Here Balghynbek is not just saying that the rich spend money for trifles in addition to necessities. This comments scratches the surface at a complicated pattern of spending among the wealthy elite in Kazakhstan,

¹²⁸ Maxim Galkin, Pugachova's protégée.

the *novie kazakhi* (new Kazakhs).¹²⁹ There are many stereotypes, as there are in all parts of the world, about the newly wealthy. It is hard to ignore the shiny Lexus SUV's, expensive clothes, and restaurants no one else could dream of affording in urban areas of the country. (There is a Baby Dior shop in Almaty.) There is an urban myth that wealthy men leave the tags on their suits so everyone can see how much they cost. "Paying rent," in this context, points not to a necessity, but to an extravagance of living costs. In the last decade, the wealthy are buying additional luxury condominiums in new developments.¹³⁰ It is to this Balghynbek's comment alludes, but ultimately his comment serves to strike a comparison between Kazakh and Russian elite.

He reemphasizes the connection in his mention of Russian popstar Alla Pugachova, who as I've mentioned comes to Almaty as part of her tour. Saying that Kazakh elites would readily pay for her, but be tightfisted when it comes to Kazakh artists is another way of hinting that the former identify more with Russian culture than Kazakh, that they are not only Russian-speaking Kazakhs but simply pseudo-Russians who look down upon Kazakhs: "Sponsors don't know their birth language/ to you I'm just some kind of hated person." Renat reemphasizes this theme, but colludes by telling him ironically not to worry, that their sponsors, and here he singles out Sarsenov, are powerful enough to turn the situation around:

Ia ix ne ponimali ne ponimaiu
Ia bedniax, tolko dengi zanimaiu
Oligarkov netu deneg dlya *aitys*ov no

I weren't understanding them I don't understand
I'm a poor man, concerned only with money.
Sponsors don't have money for *aitys*, but

¹²⁹ This term is a direct calque from *Novie Russkie* (new Russians), a term describing those who acquired a large amount of wealth in a short time after the Soviet Union collapsed and who stereotypically flaunt it.

¹³⁰ One of my close friends in 2005 worked as a secretary at one of the foreign construction firms tasked with springing up these highrises – all the luxury condos were spoken for before building ever began, at \$1000US per square meter.

Pugachova paiot im “baiu baiu”
Molotsi Sarsenov I Yermegeyev
Dolgix dolgix let’ zhizni im ia zhelaiu
tolko dlya nix na dombra poigraiu
ostalnix medsenatov ia ne znaiu

Pugachova sings to them a lullaby
Well done, Sarsenov and Yermegeyev!
I wish them a long, long life
It’s only for them I play on the dombra,
the other sponsors – I don’t know them.

Bake brat’ za iazik ne perezhivai
Ia po russkii znaiu vosem slova
Ty zhe znaesh Khrapunova nakazali
I ostalnix nakazhem ochen strogo

Bake,¹³¹ brother, don’t worry about language
I know eight words in Russian
You know they punished Khrapunov,¹³²
and the others we’ll seriously show them.

Dan ash iazik xranaet ne na dolgo
on eschew bsex oboidiot mimo goroda
Bot uvidesh zapaiot na kazakhskom
dazhe sama rosiskaia primadona
Nu esli zahochet nash Sarsenov,
Uakhanaze budet pet’, i Madonna.

Yes, we didn’t keep up our language very long,
it’s still going around everyone outside of the city.
There, you’ll see they’ll sing in Kazakh
even the Russian primadonna herself.
But if our Sarsenov wants,
O, the khan will sing, and Madonna.

Couching the subject as one of language, Renat brings up Victor Khrapunov, a former member of the president’s administration who held the highly coveted position of Almaty mayor between 1997 and 2004, the period of a major construction boom in that city during which housing prices skyrocketed. During his tenure as mayor and recently in government proceedings in 2008, he was accused of receiving kickbacks on construction contracts, the illegal expulsion of people from their homes, and selling city land illegally. He was found guilty in 2008 and fled to Switzerland.¹³³ Renat’s *aitys* positions Khrapunov as an example of a bad sort of *medsenat*, saying that “we” will punish others like him. Renat’s mention of him in this context is a joke, because Khrapunov is an ethnic Russian and may not speak Kazakh, but of course that was not the reason why the president’s administration “punished” him. The camera pans to Sarsenov at this point, who is wiping the tears from his eyes from laughing.

¹³¹ Bake is a familiar nickname for Balghynbek, it implies close friendship.

¹³² Victor Khrapunov is a member of the president’s administration, formerly the mayor of Almaty. He was indicted in a corruption scandal in 2008 and left the country.

¹³³ I thank Bagila Bukharbayeva, then head of the Associated Press Central Asia Bureau, for this information.

There were several features of this performance, as I saw it in the limited youtube version, which were strikingly different from myriad performances I saw in the past. First, the head organizer of *aitys*, Zhursin Zhursin, was not sitting on stage as MC as he normally does, but rather in the audience with his wife. Second, there was no jury. Third, Renat was wearing a suit, rather than a Kazakh costume. Fourth, the *aitys* lasted approximately nine minutes, less than half the time most performances between professional akhyns typically do. These structural changes suggest to me that this *aitys* was considered more of a joke than a “real” competition. And then there is the singlemost obvious difference, language. I know both poets, and know they are fluently bilingual. However in this *aitys* they performed a certain kind of disfluency, it seemed to me that they were intentionally misspeaking both lexically and grammatically, and minimally scattering in Kazakh phrases (which I footnoted above).

This was to great comic effect for the audience, who laughed heartily at these ‘mistakes.’ Both poets tended to smile as or after they “misspoke,” a way of self-referencing the supposed error. For example, in the beginning of one turn, Balghynbek began singing one word, “probably” (Russ: *navierno*), which he pronounced *na-ver-na* (unpalatitized second syllable), a Kazakhified pronunciation, eliciting a huge laugh from the audience through which he smiled and stopped singing. In another turn, Renat says, “I [they didn’t understand]¹³⁴ them, and don’t understand (*ia ne ponimali i ne ponimaiu*), intentionally and obviously incorrect grammar which also elicited a laugh. Many of the “mistakes” I also see as simply

¹³⁴ Here Renat deliberately speaks ungrammatically in his verb tense, <they didn’t understand> in place of the correct <i didn’t understand>.

poetic license – the need to fit rhyme and meter. For example, Balghynbek sings: *al chasu poderzhat’ mani zhalkii?* (*but to support an hour [of *aitys*] you can’t spare the money?* Spoken grammatically, the phrase “you can’t spare the money?” in Russian would be *vam deneg zhalko?* but Balghynbek uses the term *mani* (money) borrowed directly from English, and the adjective *zhalkii* is used incorrectly here as an adjective in the place of what should be an adverb.¹³⁵

I think there are two basic reasons for this “misspeaking.” First, it is funny because it replicates the speech patterns of many Kazakh speakers of Russian, who do tend to consistently mix Russian and Kazakh lexicons and grammatical forms. I also found this funny, as it reminded me of my early days in the field still learning Kazakh, when I would mix Kazakh and Russian regularly; my Kazakh friends laughingly characterized my speech as “real Kazakh” (*naghyz Kazakhsha*). The poets’ *aitys* serves as a sort of metacommentary or question: what is “Russian” in Kazakhstan, anyway? I think that poets’ refusal to speak “proper” Russian is also an ideological refusal, at some level, a snubbing of the language. But more importantly, they *cannot* use more eloquent or elevated Russian, because the entire tenet of *aitys* as uniquely Kazakh, which I discuss in chapter three, would be undone. By that logic, of course it should be impossible to truly perform *aitys* in any other language.¹³⁶

¹³⁵ See Lemon 2002, “Form and Function in Soviet Stage Romani” for a discussion of the way that Russian speakers in Moscow attributed such grammatical disfluency as a way to make fun of non-Russian nationalities (in that case from the Caucasus).

¹³⁶ The poet Arman, who performed in the Moscow *aitys* described in chapter two, noted specifically in an previous interview with me (18 October 2004) that the meaning of *aitys* lies specifically in the beauty of words, which is something that cannot be transferred into Russian.

So instead Renat and Balghynbek used simple and largely informal Russian, which stands in stark contrast to the type of Kazakh characteristic of *aitys*. In chapter three I noted that the “rich” or “difficult” nature of language in *aitys* is due largely to the extensive use of cultural and historical metaphor together with more rare turns of phrase – in other words, in a typical *aitys* the words are comprehensible (even I, certainly a nonfluent speaker of Kazakh, could understand at least half of what was said), but the meaning is often multilayered and inaccessible to those who do not know the metaphors. The poets addressed each other always using Kazakh forms implying a close friendship. Renat calls his opponent “Bake,” a familiar nickname, and Balghynbek in turn says “Renat-soul,” an intimate form of address. I see this as a form of boundary-keeping, the subtle recognition that though they are performing “in Russian,” they, and their friendship, are still somehow Kazakh. Moreover, in his last turn Balghynbek code-switches to Kazakh, saying:

If the meaningfulness of Kazakh language were not
driven out,
If it were a shame not to respect your mothertongue,
If “incomplete” Kazakhs listened to *aitys*,
I would not twist my tongue, there would not be
a difficult diamond in my soul.
They don’t understand Kazakh, what can I do?
Eighteen years of talking – you already miss it?
I would not ache “language, language, language”
if I saw a bright end my jaw would relax.
But Kazakh language will be ironed smooth,
if it remains poets’ beloved.
Renat-soul, be well and live long
If God writes it, in London we’ll have *aitys* in English.

I am born from the land and waters of *Zhetisu* –
I drink from its pure streams, and breathe its pure air.
Be healthy, Kazakh people, Kazakh earth;
May you walk with art in the small of your back.
If Renat and I go to London,
we would not find a land like this one.
Yes, I’m saying we’ll compete in English –
by the way, *do you speak English?*

Kazakh til basta manggi baghyng torsa
bette (oyat aryng) ana tiling-aryng torsa
Shala-kazakh *aitysty* kurse shirkin
til borap khihalmas yedi zhanym monsha

Kazakhsha tusinbeidi – kaitem yendi?
On segiz zhyl aita-aita syghymsynsa
<Tilim, tilim, tilim> dep khakhsamas yem
Kurer zharykh tausylyp, zaghytynsa
Kazakh tili zhetedi khiametke
akhyndargha zhar bolyp Tangir torsa
Rinatnghan, sende aman bol
Alla zhazsa, Londonda *aitysamyz*
aghylshynsha, ei-ei
Zhetisu topyraghynan men bir uryz
Zhotamyn zholar aua, muldir iis
aman bol, kazakh yeli, kazakh zheri
umir bakhi uzinde bel shireiinshi
Londongha Rinatpen barsakh daghy
uzindei tabalmaspys zherdi-peiish
aghylshynsha *aitysamyz* dep khoiamyn,
aitnakhshy, Do you speak English? ai-ei-ei

At “by the way,” Balghynbek stops playing and turns to face Renat, and asks him in English. The ultimate joke, about having *aitys* in English, follows Balghynbek’s previous joke about English being girlfriends with Russian and Kazakh, as per the administration’s language policy. But in this passage presents a mournful contradiction: Balghynbek claims Kazakh for poets, and relates language directly to Kazakh land. The geographic place Balghynbek names to that end, *Zhetisu* [seven waters] (which houses a a well-known archeological site and which is a destination for nature tourists), is mythologized as essential to Kazakh culture, its political history is more complicated. The Zhetisu territory stretches from Lake Baikal, Kazakhstan in the north to Lake Issykul, Kyrghyzstan in the south, where the Kazakh Great Horde shared power with the southern Russian empire in the nineteenth century. But Balghynbek claims this land as “Kazakh people, Kazakh earth,” he is not referencing any kind of shared history.¹³⁷

Renat’s response is the final stanza which concludes the performance. Though he follows when Balghynbek’s code-switch and continues in Kazakh, he does not collude with Balghynbek’s connection between language and land. Rather, his response is vague and he says he needs to think about it more before he answers. He then quickly turns back to the idea of having an English in *aitys*: “Eh, Balghynbek, *yes I speak English/* that and “Bye-bye, baby!” and “I love you!”

Representation and disfluency

¹³⁷ The water flowing in the region’s main river, the *Ili*, comes from the Tien Shan mountains in a Kazakh region in China’s Xianjiang province.

This Russian *Aitys* on youtube, in that it was not in Kazakh, minimally dialogic, and followed a highly abbreviated format, might not have been an *aitys* at all. But thinking about what *was* accomplished, and why this faux-*aitys* format was chosen, sheds light in a complicated and interesting way on what *aitys is*, and how and where that poetic genre fits in Kazakhstan's cultural and political worlds today. All together, this *aitys* is an interesting indictment of the elite class responsible for sponsoring *aitys*, showily paid for by members of that class. One function of the performance was certainly to goad other members of the elite into this form of cultural sponsorship, playing to their Kazakh nationalist tendencies via language, or simply shaming them for being greedy and not supporting culture. That message was kept light, however, by the humorous nature of Russian language in this format – no matter what was said, it was funny simply because it is Russian and *aitys* has been for the last twenty years distinctly anti-Russian.

I thought about whether some among my colleagues through the years of ethnography might have another view, that this performance wasn't actually funny at all because it was the ultimate sell-out of the tradition, proof in the pudding that contemporary *aitys* isn't authentic. "Selling out," as I've tried to show in this dissertation, does mean exchanging something for money. But it also has a broader implication – the giving away of not only of a cultural form but the words of poets and the total "voice" allowed and facilitated by a performance tradition, whose value lies in its ostensible principal: "the people." The relationship between poets and audiences, as I have tried to show throughout this dissertation, can be put into jeopardy in contexts of sponsorship where sponsors' interests predominate. Watching

this video clip, which alternates between shots of the poets, Zhursin and the sponsors, and the audience, I was struck anew at this mediation of a two-tiered world: elite and people, and the poets who speak in between.

If *aitys* poets are supposed voice “the truth of the people,” was that accomplished here? What kind of voice emerged in the course of this performance? In their words and terms of address, particularly those of Balghynbek, they were voicing the community of *aitys* poets (described in chapter three), and speaking largely to the russophone elite. Consider Balghynbek’s switched pronoun:

Pugachova priglasiv’
budete brat’ an kazakhskix artistov
obezhal ty

Having invited Pugachova,
if you’ll(formal/pl) take her, you(sg, informal)
offended Kazakh artists

Here he says if you (all) invite the Russian artist Pugachova, you (singular) offended Kazakh artists; the second pronoun is more direct but could apply to any single member of the group “you all.” As in the case of the unsuccessful Akh Orda *aitys* given in chapter five, the emphasis then becomes the relationship between poets and their sponsors, rather than that between poets and their audience(s). There is an extremely uncomfortable irony in the fact that, in order to garner future sponsor support, poets had to perform in a way which undoes the fundamental anti-Russian, or post-Russian basis hitherto defining the tradition itself. That the poets joked about going to London and performing in English serves to further underscore the point.

And here I think “disfluency” is helpfully read as a larger metaphor. The ideology of Kazakh language represented specifically by poets represent turns the real history of language politics in the former Soviet republic on its head. Taking the description of Kazakh language typically given as evidence of its inferiority or obsolescence (ancestral, historical, difficult, etc., as opposed to Russian), *aitys* poets

revalorize those terms. That reconception of language, further, is part of the broader retraditionalization of culture championed by Kazakh nationalists at the state level of government. In the sphere of nationalist politics, of which *aitys* is a part, “speaking Kazakh” has become a metaphor for “caring about Kazakh people.” Not speaking Kazakh in turn is a metaphor for inattention or uncaring.

Voiceless

One of the most loaded insults *aitys* poets throw at incompetent leaders is that the latter are *unsiz* (without voice). The insult is loaded because poets throw it from the relatively powerful position of inhabiting “the voice of the people,” weighted with the authority of the ancestors like poets, khans, and warriors (see Orazaly’s *aitys* p.18) as well as the various figures assembled at performances. To call leaders “voiceless” is to call them losers – weak, and powerless – individuals who cannot effect any real change. It is a move which radically inverts the actual structure of power in Kazakhstan: poets are speaking as and/or on behalf of those who are more literally “voiceless” or powerless, and condemning leaders who wield wealth and authority day-to-day. In the light of a broader political context of media unfreedom, though, there is another meaning to “voiceless,” and that is silenced, as illustrated by the following story.

Two former members of the president’s administration shifted to opposition politics during my time in the field, and were dead by the time I left. One of these was Altynbek Sarsenbayev, who at the time I arrived in the field was serving as Minister of Communication in the government, and making broad strokes toward

breaking up the government monopoly and censorship of the media. Indeed, when I met him the first time, it was at the taping of a debate on freedom of the press, to be aired on national television. But his reform policies did not make much headway, and in 2005 he left the administration in frustration to become co-chair of the country's largest opposition party, Naghyz Ak Zhol (the true white way).

That party put up a viable candidate in the presidential election that year, who actually won the vote in Almaty. Less than a year later, in February 2006, Sarsenbayev was found murdered in the mountains outside the city, along with his driver and bodyguard. All three men were found with their arms tied behind their backs, shot in the back of the head. The United States FBI was in the midst of organizing and sending an investigation team when their Kazakhstani counterparts suddenly 'found' the killers, five men in the ranks of their own secret service. These men had all allegedly been paid thousands of dollars to participate in the assassination. The party who hired them was never clearly identified, and these murders set off a harsh and ongoing volley of accusations among the highest levels of government, including President Nazabayev's daughter, son-in-law, and nephew. These accusations have become part of an ongoing jockeying for power in anticipation of the 2012 presidential elections when Nazabayev will likely finally be replaced.¹³⁸

A few months later, in the early summer, Naghyz Ak Zhol organized a large protest rally in Almaty. Some 1500 persons assembled in front of the Academy of Literature and the Arts, in the center of the city, to mourn his death and to demand

¹³⁸ On the complicated fallout of the Sarsenbayev killings, see Kimmage 2006, "Kazakhstan: A Shaken System."

accountability on the part of the president's administration. Midway through the protest, crews began to set up large speakers on one side of the crowd, claiming that there was to be some kind of event (*sobitiye*) there that day. The speakers began to blare pop music, which drowned out the opposition speakers, and destroyed the call to silence in honor of the dead. As the rally finally began to disperse, the speakers were taken down, but the event of which they were supposed to be a part had never happened. A friend who attended the rally was disgusted, because just like the murder of Sarsenbayev himself, this was so transparently an act of government, and it was insulting in its simplicity.

Sarsenbayev and the media reforms and opposition politics he represented were actively silenced, in this example, ultimately washed up in the complicated antagonisms between dominant members of the elite. Poets are not in such a conspicuous position as he was, nor are they demanding the degree of change that Sarsenbayev was. Poets are not seeking democratic revolution, but rather simply accountability and attention from government. Their position is nicely summed up in the phrase of Koishyghary, the historian I interviewed at the Eurasian University of Astana (chapter 2): "politics are not forever, but the people's interests are." It is far easier to silence a dissenting politician than a dissenting citizenry.

Silencing and shadows

Returning to poets' claim "to voice the truth of the people," I turn to the things that voice is seen to accomplish: cultural unity and sociopolitical critique. What is enabled by this voice is ultimately a demand by "the people" for accountability on the

part of government leaders. It is a way to participate, however minimally,¹³⁹ on a national political stage. Given the centralized and authoritarian nature of power and ensuing censorship of dissent, the majority of Kazakhstanis (of any ethnicity) disenfranchised from the elite networks of government and business, do not have much opportunity to have a “voice,” in the sense of having a say, in the forces which exercise control over their lives and well-being. While less obvious and immediate than the murder of an opposition leader, if *aitys* is compromised (as by sponsors’ interests), this can also be seen as a complicated silencing.

Every *aitys* performance exists as dialogic potential, as the participant frameworks of any one competition are continually shifting. But the *aitys* tradition itself exists as a figure in its own right, with a “voice,” as another kind of potential. The silencing of this voice represents the loss of a figure, a Goffmanian principal, “someone whose position is established by the words that are spoken, someone whose beliefs have been told, someone who is committed to what the words say” (1981: 144). The principal cannot be reduced to any one set of participants in the tradition (ancestors, poets, audiences, cultural organizers, sponsors); rather all these together contribute continually toward the figure. The principal is someone who is always *coming into being*. Over time, the principal of *aitys* is engaged in with government officials as an “addressed recipient” (ibid. 133), in a conversation that thousands of people are ratified to hear, a conversation which has a thousand “shadows” (cf Crapanzano 1988; Irvine 1996).

¹³⁹ One recent article exclaimed, “Kazakh Folk Poetry Slams Corrupt Establishment!” <http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/4465>

As Goffman notes, all “participant frameworks are subject to transformation” (1981: 153) – as many relationships as we can imagine, so too can we have in conversation. If we are to consider the effect of “silencing” of the tradition, it becomes necessary to step outside the performances altogether, and into conversations *about* those performances and what they are seen to represent, because those conversations are also *stories* in which the principal of *aitys* is a figure toward which the narrator can assume a moral stance (cf Hill 1995; Irvine and Hill 1992). In the course of my fieldwork I had countless conversations about *aitys*, but there were two in particular, one early on in the research and one toward the end, in two different regions of the country, which not only framed my own time and perspective in the field, but which best characterize *the potential* of *aitys*’ voice.

I recount these conversations out of chronological order here for clarity of theme. In the early summer of 2006, at my “home” in Semei, my Kazakh grandma and I (I never knew her real name, she said she was too old for names) used to sit in the kitchen in the evenings after dinner, where she would tell me stories. One evening she told me the story of a young man named Mustafa.

His family was from Turkey, where the boy had grown up after Kazakh land confiscations by the Soviet authorities. His family was badly off in Turkey, and his father passed away when Mustafa was just fourteen. The young boy told his mother that he would take his father’s body to be buried in Kazakhstan, and while he was there, he would seek his fortune, and come back to help her. Grandma said Mustafa was gifted at Taikwando, and indeed after some years he had become known as an expert in Semipolatinsk and planned to open a center. But he never did. He died of

food poisoning in Almaty, after a meal with a large group of people (none of the others got ill). The lore is that someone was paid off to poison Mustafa's food. "Many people assume Daulet Turlykhanov did it out of jealousy," Grandma explained, "Mustafa was very simple, he read *namas* and didn't drink."

Here she compares the appropriately devout and family-oriented Mustafa with another well-known athlete in the region. Daulet "Danil" Turlykhanov is a wrestler, who won silver and bronze medals in two separate Olympic games in 1988 and 1992. He represented Kazakhstan at the 1996 games but did not medal. He was subsequently assumed into the rankings of Nazabayev's inner cadre; at the time of my research he was Minister of Tourism and Sport. Daulet's brother, Kairat, was also enfolded in the extended Nazabayev network as the mayor of Semei. According to Apa, Kairat once invited a delegation of foreign sponsors to the city to ask for funding for municipal projects. They laughed at him: "How are you claiming poverty when all your people drive these \$70,000 cars?!" (This was a reference to the fact that many of the rich elite drive landcruisers and other luxury SUV's.) Kairat threw the foreigners out of his offices, and was later fired by Nazabayev.

What is critical to me about this story is not veracity. When Grandma says many people blame Daulet for Mustafa's death, this is a generalized structural complaint: Daulet is rich and well-connected, Mustafa was poor and making his own way. That the rich man, who was successful in his own right already, would go out of his way to "kill" a minor competitor is a commentary by Grandma (and other individuals she claims believe the same thing) on the seeming injustice and caprice of the ruling elite. Another friend of mine in Almaty years earlier, a young working

Russian woman struggling against the poverty line, said something similar: the government has everything, we have nothing – it's like they're just laughing and laughing at us. The lives of the poor are ignorable, even expendable.

This was not the first I'd heard of Mustafa. Many people talk about him, especially in Semei, the region where he is from. I had heard different things about him. Sometimes I heard that he was a boxer, sometimes that he had been a wrestler. But in either case, as a result of fame achieved in the sports world, he had been recruited as a bodyguard for a wealthy politician, and gotten involved in nefarious dealings, and that was why he had been killed. While I was living in the region I went with friends to visit his roadside shrine outside of the city.

Listening to Grandma, I recalled another conversation about Mustafa, from years before. In the spring 2004 cycle of performances in Almaty, the poet Renat from Semei, in his traditional opening welcome, noted that Mustafa's mother was there in the seated audience that day. It was a controversial moment – I noticed a stir in the theater. My research assistant at the time was Zaire Batayeva, an urban Kazakh woman who held a degree in literature. Some weeks after that, we were going through transcripts of performances prepared by the local Kazakh literature newspaper, and we had a second, brief, conversation: she noticed that Renat's welcome had been omitted from the written text and speculated that the moment was considered too political.

The last thing Grandma told me in her Mustafa story two years later finally explained why. Grandma said that once Mustafa's mother, in a speech onstage at an

aitys, refused President Nursultan Nazabayev's offer to bury her son, saying, "No, you killed him!"

What I think the conversations about Mustafa presented here demonstrate well is that *aitys* is a format associated with speaking back to power. Central to this point is not any "truth-claim" Grandma may or may not make in her story, but rather her role as a narrator, and her alignment with *aitys* as a figure in her story. Regardless of the details or veracity of what she said about Mustafa, there is no question that *aitys* itself was presented as a context in which it was possible for a person structurally similar to herself to stand up to the president. This is the potential of *aitys*: that Grandma believes this to be the case, that my research assistant and many others in the audience that day saw Renat's greeting to Mustafa's mother as something controversial, and that a poet consciously chose to address those beliefs in his own presentation, in his own "words." The potential is addressed in stories and other conversations around and about the oral tradition, the "shadows" of the ongoing dialogue between the principal of *aitys* and those in power.

Culture and Nation

In Kazakhstan today culture producers, working largely within the rubric of Kazakh nationalism, bracket *aitys* as "authentic Kazakh culture." This provides a particular frame, a ready and recognizable trope, in which the content of performance can be heard or understood by observers. In that classically Andersonian nationalist trope, "it is an imaginative sense of Bakhtinian 'we-voicing' that pragmatically frames whatever is narrative in its presupposition of unity of outlook" (Silverstein

2000: 115). The nationalist first person plural works across the frame of the immediate speech event, joining it to the frame of “the real” world-out-there, such that “the narrated-about characters, even the fictive characters, might as well be the folks next door, or even ourselves” (ibid.: 118).

Aitys akhyns are socialized in accordance with an ideology of Kazakh language as rich in metaphor, deeply historical, directly linked to ancestors, and difficult to command, whereby their own usage is seen as exemplary. Poets’ use of Kazakh is the imagined “standard” that “becomes the very emblem of the existence of” Kazakh culture (ibid. 122). Poets are particularly legitimated to the Bakhtinian we-voice. The opaqueness of the *aitys* tradition’s “principle” as described here can be read in this nationalist vein, as a search for cultural unity.

But in Kazakhstan, Kazakh nationalism is at best representative of less than half the population – it is a nationalism neither with nor without, but simply within, a state. Further, the Goffmanian principal I describe here, “the voice of the truth of the people,” has a second primary purpose, and that is to voice sociopolitical critique in an authoritarian environment. This is where this example departs from the traditional Andersonian (Whorfian) model described for example by Silverstein: the question becomes not why or how other “we’s” are silenced by imagined nationalist unity (2000: 123), but rather *how this principle voice can remain active in the context of a silencing regime*. There I argue it becomes necessary to step back and look at tradition itself as a conversation, a part of thousands of shadow conversations; the voice of the tradition as a whole is necessarily opaque so as to deflect responsibility for what is said away from any one author or animator.

Put in the position of animator and author, as well as contributing toward the principal of *aitys*' voice themselves, poets are always mediating any number of shifting dialogic relationships among Kazakh ancestors, mentors and students, audiences live and televisual, cultural organizers, and of course sponsors. These mediations occur in performance and in real life, as well. The complexities of relationships which inhere in the processes of folklorization and retraditionalization in Kazakhstan mean that definitions of culture are spaces of negotiation and contestation. As "Kazakh culture" is ultimately to be the face of the nation, there are many competing interests in what the content of that culture should be. Whether sociopolitical critique should be a fundamental part of this "culture" or not is a question always on the table for those who control its production: at the television stations which air the competitions, in cultural affairs offices, and between Kazakh nationalist sponsors and the internationalist contingent of the ruling elite against whom they ideologically battle. Due to the complexities of cultural production in a fractured political environment, and contestation over the form of the "nation" that should be the face of the Kazakhstani state, the "voice of the people" in *aitys* exists in perpetual jeopardy.

APPENDIX

A NOTE ON TRANSLATION

Translation

For all the poem excerpts presented in this dissertation, in my translation I have not provided a direct grammatical translation (one first stage of my own process) because I linguistic analysis is not my aim. Rather, I have aimed to convey the *sense* of each phrase. Many phrases are metaphorical, and their sense-meaning does not correspond lexically. As a non-fluent speaker of Kazakh, I have relied on conversations with native speakers, research assistants and consultants to clarify sense-meaning. However, in the end, any errors reflect only my own inadequacies, and I take full responsibility for them. There is also a fundamental uneasiness for me in writing down poetry which is supposed to be oral, let alone excerpting from performances or attempting to translate them. I hope poets will feel that I have done their words and sentiments some justice.

Transliteration

For both Russian and Kazakh I have adapted the transliteration system on the next page, following Indiana University and Princeton University's example. Both Kazakh and Russian languages are currently Cyrillic font (Kazakh has extra letters which are denoted with an arrow below). I have chosen to use the Latin alphabet, however, as Kazakh language will soon transfer from Cyrillic to Latin. I chose to also represent Russian in Latin script for the sake of consistency. For ease of reading, I do not use diacritics. My own usage differs from the system for four letters. For the Kazakh K, instead of "q" I use "kh" because it better represents the actual sound of this velar consonant. The only exception I make is when Kazakh K is the first letter in a proper name, specifically here in the names Kazakhstan and Karima (poet). To differentiate, instead of "kh" for Kazakh "x" (as below) I substitute "h." One exception is the well-known name of the media conglomerate Xabar, where I keep the X. (For Kazakh "h" (typically only seen in Persian loan words) I also use "h" as below.) For the sake of conveying Kazakh pronunciation to English speakers, I have switched the transliteration of two vowels, the 21st and 27th letters in the charts next page (o and u).

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