

**“Instruments and Identities: Komus, Kil Kiyak and Constructions of Kyrgyzzness”. Part II**



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This is the second in a series of Working Papers, presented to the American University of Central Asia in April 2012 as part of a TSPC Research Fellows Program. The material presented here is based on an ongoing ethnographic field-research project and should not be cited without the author's written permission: [mecpritchard@gmail.com](mailto:mecpritchard@gmail.com).

### Introduction

In a previous working paper<sup>1</sup>, I discussed how the ethnocentric base of Kyrgyzstan's national narrative has resulted the marginalization of other ethnic identities who also claim a home in Kyrgyzstan<sup>2</sup>. I asserted that this process of inclusion or marginalization does not only happen politically and linguistically, it also happens materially- through form and content and the ability or inability to engage in larger processes of signification. The materialization of the ethnonational narrative can be found on many scales. State-sponsored stagings of national culture can be seen on national holidays such as Narus, Kil Kalpak Day and April 7. Such productions are complimented by stagings of international friendship and exchange, such as seen in a night of Kyrgyz and American folk music sponsored by the US embassy. These state sponsored productions are simultaneously complimented and contradicted by the activities of local non-governmental organizations such as Aigine, which propagates a certain view of 'Kyrgyz' spirituality or international organizations, such as the Aga Khan Development Network Music Initiative which promotes the restoration and preservation of traditional Kyrgyz music. Ethnonationalism is also reified through small-scale activities such as the appearance of a local politician at a performance-lecture of Manas in which the epic is upheld as the pinnacle of Kyrgyz culture. Although all of these layers of cultural production have a role to play in this research project, rather than try to discuss all of them at once, this paper will focus on yet another layer, the layer of the individual seen through a particular object: the musical instrument.

### The Musical Instrument

After three months, the kil kiyak was finally complete. Actually, it had been three years in the making. First an apricot tree was cut and dried. After several years, when the process of drying was complete, the wood was hewed into a rough form and slowly carved until it came to resemble a musical instrument. In time, the shape of the instrument was refined and the wood smoothed and finished. The resonating body of this

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<sup>1</sup> Pritchard, Maureen. TSPC Research Fellow, American University of Central Asia, "From International to National: Working Paper February 2012"

<sup>2</sup> Gullette, David. 2010. *The Genealogical Construction of the Kyrgyz Republic: Kinship State and "Tribalism"*. Kent: Global Oriental.

particular kil kiyak displayed beautifully patterned rings created through the apricot tree's years of growth.

This body, which had not yet lost its distinctive scent, had been clad in camel's hide. The hide had been stretched across the wood and left to dry and harden. A long wooden neck was set with metal gears for tuning as well as decorative carved knobs. The bow was light and long. The bow strings were made from a stallion's tail, as were the strings of the instrument.<sup>3</sup> These stallion hairs were set into the shape of a cloven sheep's hoof which marked the bow's tip. When played, each single strand vibrates at its own individual frequency, creating a rich timbre made of many tiny voices caught in the same motion of the bow. When rubbed with juniper, a natural resin found in the forests of Kyrgyzstan, the strings emit a faint fragrance when played.

No element of this instrument is without significance and consideration of these elements helps to demonstrate how this seemingly ordinary object is interwoven into a body of beliefs and associated practices through its mere construction. Although a less common animal, camels are kept by some Kyrgyz and their milk and meat is sold. In explaining how camel's hide was stretched across the instrument, the commented that this technique was once used on men to make them slaves (Aitmatov, 1988).<sup>4</sup> The horses from whence come the strings are a sign of wealth. They provide an important ritual function through slaughter at funerals and weddings; it may be that the Kyrgyz once buried their horses with the dead (Frenkel, 2005)<sup>5</sup>. Mare's milk is fermented to make komuz and- according to the epic Manas- this sour drink which was once used to wash the bones of the dead (Kuchumkulova, 2007)<sup>6</sup>. Sheep too are an important source of livelihood, income and sustenance. Like horses they are ritually slaughtered for small

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<sup>3</sup> Stallion's hair is used because a stallion pees forward whereas a mare pees on herself, and so stallion's hair is perceived to be cleaner than a mare's.

<sup>4</sup> The *mankurt* was a man who had been captured and enslaved. His captors shaved his head and put a sheep's bladder put over it. The bladder hardened and became a part of his body. As his hair grew back the presence of the sheep's bladder forced the follicles to grow inward. This painful process caused the man to lose all his memory to the extent that he could not recognize his own mother and killed her. The cemetery where she was buried became a sacred space (Aitmatov, Chingiz. *The Day Lasts More than a Hundred Years*. Translated by Katarina Clark. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

<sup>5</sup> Frenkel, Yehoshua. "The Turks of the Eurasian Steppes" in *Mongols, Turks and Others*, edited by BiranMichael Biran and Amitai Ruven, 201-244. Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Kuchumkulova, Elmira M. "Kyrgyz Nomadic Customs and the Impact of Re-Islamization after Independence". Ph.D. diss., University of Washington, 2007.

celebrations, especially Muslim holidays. Not only are the ‘knee’ bones of sheep used in games similar to marbles, but they are also dyed and tucked in the cradle of a newborn child. In the legend of Kojojash<sup>7</sup>, a hunter is cursed by a mountain sheep after slaughtering her husband and child for meat, suggesting that these animals were once associated with powerful spirits. Likewise, most Kyrgyz people believe that the scent of juniper has a special purifying property. Some explain this property in scientific terms, as an anti-bacterial. Others explain it in terms of belief: burning juniper enables that which is good to be retained and that which is harmful to be dispelled, and that which is good and bad may often take the form of spirits. When considering the use and representation elements of both animal and plant and the larger associations of these elements, the kil kiyak become much more than just an instrument: it is an object upon which beliefs and practices settle. In the following pages I will examine the different ways in which such beliefs and practices settle upon an instrument and what this has to say, not only about the individual speaker but also about the collective in whom that individual participant.

### The Magical Object

In 2008<sup>8</sup>, I met an elderly komus player, whose autobiographical narrative, set in the historical reality of the Soviet Union, took the form of almost magical tale, which the speaker performed while telling. The transformation of interview to performance was not unexpected- after all, musicians are highly skilled in transforming context, narrative and space in collusion with an audience. The story is not fictive; it is simply well told, displaying many elements of a tale, including the motif of a magical object. Acknowledging these more formulaic narrative elements is useful for understanding how the speaker positions himself- as a musician- in relationship to more common experiences and beliefs about music.

When Tazibek was a very young boy, before the Second World War began, some musicians came to his village. The musicians were involved in *Agitprop* [Russian: Agitation and propaganda] and were traveling from village to village. According to

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<sup>7</sup> <http://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/culture/epic/kojojash/kojojash.html>

<sup>8</sup> Pritchard, Maureen. 2009. “Legends Borne by Life: Myth, Grieving and the Circulation of Knowledge within Kyrgyz Contexts”, Master’s thesis, The Ohio State University.

Tazibek 'that is what musicians used to do back then'. When the musicians arrived in Tazibek's village, they were greeted as honored guests and invited to stay in Tazibek's home. An enormous feast was held in their honor and everyone in the village crowded into the house to hear them play.

In setting up the background for his story, Tazibek reveals the service that musicians provided for the Soviet state in the spread of mass information, as well as their welcomed and honored status in society. Tazibek continued, describing how the musicians captivated their audience, playing all night long. Even though he 'didn't understand much about music back then', Tazibek had no desire to sleep. He sat with the others listening throughout the night.

The young boy was particularly enthralled by the komus, played by the leader of the troupe. As the wee hours of the morning approached, both musicians and guests became tired. One by one performers and audience members went to sleep. Finally, everyone had fallen asleep except for one small child. That child was Tazibek. He could not stop thinking about the komus. As the musicians slept, Tazibek crept over and took the komus from the leader. He stashed it in the hay-filled roof of the house.

When the musicians awoke they were horrified to find the instrument missing. A village meeting was called in which Tazibek's father threatened and cursed the anonymous thief. This terrified his son so much that he decided it was best not to confess. Everyone in the village felt ashamed that such a thing happened in their village, but Tazibek's father was even more ashamed since it had happened in his house to his guests. Despite the fact that their instrument was not yet found, the musicians had to continue. Tazibek's father promised to find and send it to them.

The instrument itself is central to this turn of the plot. The fact that Tazibek took the main instrument played by the leader of troupe not only increases the scandal of the act- the shame he brought on his father- but it also increases the power of the instrument, as it was not just a komus, but the komus belonging to the best musician. In his telling, Tazibek became more animated, acting out the role of each character as they appeared in the tale:

“I was a little boy and so [after a few days] I didn’t think about it any more. I went up into the roof. I picked up the komus and I played. I didn’t know how to play but I played something.”

As he said this Tazibek squeezed his eyes shut and, making himself seem like a small child with a large instrument, demonstrated fast and unlearned strumming. “And you know- my playing wasn’t so bad.... Oh, but my parents heard me.” They heard a komus coming from the roof of the house. My father called me. “Tazibek! Come down here and bring the komus with you! Did you steal this komus?”

“Yes,” Tazibek said, bowing his head.

“Does a good child steal the belongings of a guest?”

“No.”

“Oh he beat me for that!” Tazibek said, laughing and imitating his father who had pulled off his belt and whipped his son.

“Are you going to steal again?”

“No.”

“Are you going to steal again?”

“No.” In recounting, Tazibek laughed so hard that he had to wipe the tears from his eyes.

As he continued he made a point to address- and dismiss- a well-know belief that musical abilities are transmitted through spiritual and ancestral connections usually manifested in dreams:

“After that I still had a strong desire to play, but my parents didn’t really support me. The komus players appeared to me in my dreams. I told my mother about it but she said it didn’t have any meaning...”

As often is the case in tales, the narrator slipped through time, so that suddenly a young child had already graduated from high school:

“After my father died, we had nothing. It was the war. My mother gave me a little bit of money and sent me off to Bishkek, saying, “Tazibek, go find your fortune.” One day, I was walking around and I was hungry. And I saw an advertisement that the music conservatory was holding exams. Anyone who was accepted as a student would receive a

place to live and meals for free. I thought to myself, “Tazibek, you have to go there. You won’t be hungry.”

It is interesting to note that Tazibek places his entry into the music conservatory not as a matter of desire, but as a matter of necessity.

“They [the conservatory staff] asked me to play the komus and I played it, and the guitar, so I played it, and the balilanka,” Tazibek said, uttering the word ‘balilanka’ dismissively. Through his dismissal of a Russian folk instrument, Tazibek is speaking back to the dismissal of Kyrgyz folk instruments.

“Then it came time for the exams. I did okay in math, but there was this Russian woman for history. I couldn’t understand her questions and so I said *ya ne gavarish po ryski!*” In this moment Tazibek had intended to say “I don’t speak Russian” but due to a mistake in conjugation, it seemed to his examiner that he said “You don’t speak Russian”. “Oh that Russian woman got really mad. She almost kicked me out of the exam, but finally she realized I didn’t speak Russian... I was accepted into the conservatory...”

In this part of his narration Tazibek places himself both within the Soviet educational system and at odds with it. Through this well-told and humorous narration Tazibek suggests that his musical career started with the arrival of these State-sponsored musicians, and that the rest, was destiny. The fact that he knew neither music nor language, Tazibek was successful in every way, as though a hidden ability was unlocked in that first moment that he held the komus in his hands.

### A Magician

It was a Friday afternoon. I walked against a wave of men exiting a large and beautiful mosque, having finished afternoon prayers. I had taken an interview from him the night before, and was returning for the purpose of instrument repair as I had managed to break the bridge of my instrument through over-forceful tuning.

The day before, I had called Marat from the gas station across the street from the mosque in order to request directions to his house. It turned out that Marat was on his way to pick up a komus in need of repair and so he picked me up on his way. As we drove through the streets of Bishkek, he told me about himself:

Marat had graduated from the art college in Bishkek. He had specialized in carving chess pieces out of stone and bone. He had fulfilled his mandatory military service in a Soviet “builder’s brigade” located in the Ural Mountains. There had been a large number of artists in this brigade, mostly illustrators and painters. Marat had been the only sculptor and so he had been assigned to carve marble and alabaster signets for the various Soviet Republics. Marat’s eldest son was also in the military, serving as a mechanic. Marat said he had forced his son to join because he was not coming home at night and his father had started losing sleep worrying about him.

After picking up the komus, Marat headed back to his home, where his workshop was also located. As we pulled into the driveway, he pointed out his children. Marat’s second son was a student, his third a school boy, and his daughter- the youngest- not yet old enough for pre-school. Marat already had plans for his children to carry on his art: his second son had been trained to play the *kil kiyak*, not for the sake of performance but for gaining a better understanding of the instrument. His third son was studying the violin for the same reason. When I asked him about whether or not his daughter might also become a Master, Marat replied “Maybe, if she has an interest- but she’s still little.” In having his children trained in music, Marat was trying to provide them with the knowledge that he lacked the knowledge of how to tune and play an instrument.

When Marat had first told me that he ‘saw spirits’ I had wondered if this statement was just a means of legitimizing his craftsmanship. Further conversation revealed that although Marat’s encounters with spirits did further the legitimacy of his work, seeing spirits was also very real and tangible experience. In the previous narrative, Tazibek was visited by his ancestors in dreams and yet he dismissed these dream-experiences as meaningless; like many Soviet citizens, Tazibek seemed to have embraced the communist ideal of a material (physical) reality. In contrast, Marat embraces a view that includes close engagement with a world of spirits who, although seen are not material in the same way that people, animals and objects are commonly perceived to be.

As Marat showed me an article about his spiritual gift published in a Kyrgyz language newspaper, I asked him exactly what he meant when he says that he sees spirits. “I see them”, he said.



“It’s not certain whether he sees them in his head or before his eyes,” his wife interjected.

Marat’s wife was a pretty, middle aged woman who had been teaching the Kyrgyz language at a local school for ten years. Unlike her husband, she spoke Russian with ease and fluidity and her language skills revealed her education. She had continued her university studies to the graduate level [Russian: aspirantory]. I found it interesting that Marat’s wife- unlike the journalist writing about Marat- was not fully convinced of her husband’s spiritual gifts.

“When did [the ability to see spirits] begin?” I asked. Marat seemed confused by the question, so I rephrased it, asking him: “Did you always see these spirits, even when you were a child?”

“When I was a child I turned away from them [out of fear],” Marat joked, but after thinking for a few moments he added that he didn’t see them in the army. “It began after I returned from service.”

In the course of the conversation I came to understand that Marat’s spiritual gift had been inherited, but that this inheritance had changed through the generations:

Marat’s grandfather had the ability to call upon nature; he could command both animals and the weather. Marat’s father, on the other hand, held no such powers. He, like his son, was a sculptor and he had worked with German craftsmen, making wooden sculptures, ornamental woodwork and wood reliefs characteristic of many village houses; he also made komus. Marat said that his father not only saw spirits, but spoke to them. Marat’s said that on his deathbed his father had been ‘hurt’ because his spirits had left him and had gone to Marat. Marat could not speak to spirits the way that his father did- he could only see them.

Marat’s close relationship to spirits directly impacted his work. When I returned to Marat’s workshop the following afternoon, I noticed the scent of juniper lingered in the air. Given Marat’s gift of sight, this fragrance that permeated the workshop was indicative of the craftsman’s relationship to a particular set of beliefs, and a reminder to me, as a researcher, that I was not alone with Marat in his workshop.

As we moved through the space Marat showed me the chair and table where he carved wood with crude hand-made tools. He showed me how he placed the

unfinished instrument on a tire while carving because the rubber's bounce took the force of the blow away from the wood. He pointed out how the wood on the komus had to be set from large rings to small. As Marat spoke about his work, I was struck by the way in which he related to the wood with the totality of his senses and as though it were not only living but interactive, something to be seen, smelled, heard, touched, felt and listened to..

Picking up a komus made by another craftsman, Marat showed a frame was too thin. He showed me another whose resonating cavity was too deep. According to Marat these 'offer a louder but less tasty sound'. Typically a komus's neck is very thin at the place where it meets the body of the instrument, however, Marat prefers to make this makes this point of connection thick. He also angles the back of the instrument, setting it with elaborate folk patterns. The spirits had helped Marat make these innovations and to correct the mistakes made by other masters. For example, the first time folk patterns began to appear before his eyes 'as if on a Rolex' Marat wasn't sure what was happening. Now, instead of feeling overwhelmed, he just reaches out and selects a pattern for the making. On another occasion the spirits offered Marat a vision of smoke in order to show 'how an instrument breathes', enabling him to make a new design in which air is circulated and released.

### Legitimizing Craftsmanship

While Marat's father was still living, there had been a competition among instrument makers. Having been refused a workspace in at the Bishkek Philharmonic, Marat decided to make the instrument at home. He had never made a kil kiyak before, but he managed to win first place. Marat showed me the award as proof. When I asked Marat how he had made an excellent kil kiyak without prior attempts he answered "When I told my father that I would make a kil kiyak, he said that I would win first place." Probably Marat's father's confidence lay not only in his son, but also in his budding gift and in the presence of ancestor-spirits. In any case, winning the competition legitimized Marat's skills as an instrument maker so much so that he was invited to work at the Philharmonic where he had previously been refused a space.

After working at the Philharmonic for some time Marat moved to a workshop at the Ustat Shakirt Music School; however he left this space after a relatively short period of employment. Feeling diminished, disrespected and 'pushed aside', Marat

quickly left this new workspace. Marat attributed his dissatisfaction to the fact that the other two instrument makers were from the same region and always stood up for joint interests: it seemed that this mainly came out in quarrels over finances. Marat's instruments were more in demand than those of the other instrument makers and the other instrument makers wanted a portion of that money. Marat recounted how one evening after a few drinks his fellow instrument maker confessed that he envied Marat's skill. With compassion in his voice Marat explained that although this other instrument maker had received all the best training, he simply didn't have the spiritual gift that enabled Marat to make his instruments.

Marat contrasted the certainty and even envy of his skill with a misunderstanding of his title. "When people hear that I am an 'Ustat' [Kyrgyz: master] they think that I am a low-class person who works with his hands- a builder. But I am not a builder," Marat said, "I am a Master, an artist." Marat elaborated on this saying that sometimes a person of status and influence would call, demanding a brand new instrument in a day but he didn't care, after all "a komus can't be made in a day; it has to be made slowly so that the sound will be good and the wood won't warp; also, if it's made quickly as the result of a demand, it will not be made from the heart." In this way Marat demonstrated that he was aware of his own power as an artist to set his own conditions for labor.

Marat carried these ideas with him to Paris, where he and a team of instrument makers had been sent to participate in a festival of instrument-makers. At the festival people from all over the world were interested in his bow. They wanted to buy it separate from the kil kiyak, but Marat refused, saying that the bow belonged to the instrument. While in Paris also encountered the spirit of a female French composer whose was residing in the same house as the instrument makers: Marat said that he was unable to sleep until he had asked permission of the spirits in this new place to live and work among them.

Although Marat's close relationship to spirits brought meaning and continuity to his work and legitimacy to his practices in many ways, I noticed that many people- including my own kil kiyak teacher- reacted to Marat's beliefs with amusement. This reflects less upon Marat's own experiences and more upon the relationship of the listener

to such beliefs and practices. For me as a researcher this became even more apparent in an encounter with another instrument maker with very different views.

### An Engineer

Like Marat, Turat had graduated from art school, as a sculpture and woodworker. Like Marat, Turat had learned to make komus at the Bishkek Philharmonic. However, unlike Marat, Turat was more closely tied to the tradition of European art music and worked primarily a maker of violins.

Knowing that the two men were acquainted, I asked Turat whether or not he knew Marat, saying that Marat's spirits-ancestors help him with his work.

"Is it the same with you?" I asked.

Turat said that it was the same and yet, his answer showed that he understood the concept of spirits and ancestry in a very different way than Marat did.

Pulling out a book on Kyrgyz craftsmen, Turat opened to an article about his grandfather. Born in At-Bashi in 1905, Turat's grandfather was a 'universal man who could do anything': he worked with wood, leather, sewed, made tables and fixed watches. Drafted in the Second World War, Turat's grandfather always raised his hand when the commander asked for a volunteer. Finally the commander reprimanded him:

"Why do you always raise your hand? Do you think you can do everything?"

"I can do everything," his grandfather replied.

When the commander realized it was true, he kept Turat's grandfather close to him instead of making him to go to the front. In saying this, Turat explained that talent was passed through 'the blood', genetically and he had inherited his grandfather's talent.

Turat's violins cost 1,000 dollars. Not only are Kyrgyz people too poor to buy them- according to Turat- they have little appreciation of classical music. Turat claimed that although folk music is on the rise in Kyrgyzstan, classical music is not appreciated and there is not much support for the arts through the government. His instruments were bought mainly by people in Kazakhstan who Turat claims have a greater appreciation of classical music. Still people prefer a violin from Italy, France or Vienna.

"So only people from Switzerland want a violin from Kyrgyzstan?" I joked, referring to a story he had told about a friend from the Geigenbauschule Brienz School in

Switzerland who had traveled to Kyrgyzstan through Moscow by train in order to visit Marat and buy an instrument.

Turat had studied violin making at Geigenbauschule Brienz, graduating in 2009. When asked how he came to study in Switzerland, Turat answered that this had been a result of the festival of instrument makers that Marat had attended in Paris. One of the other masters who had attended the festival had met a violin maker in Paris. In explaining that there was no one who could make violins in Kyrgyzstan a project arose. Soon afterwards that violin maker came to Kyrgyzstan and held a workshop, attended by ten Kyrgyz instrument makers. From among those ten, Turat was chosen to go to Switzerland and he did, but only for a few months.

Although funding had been offered for study in Switzerland, it had been restricted to people under the age of 33 and so Turat- in his 50s- was unable to access these funds. It so happened that Turat's brother- a doctor- went to Austria on business. While he was there, he dropped into Geigenbauschule Brienz and explained Turat's situation. As a result the university set up funding that enabled Turat to complete a full course of study in Switzerland. In addition, the university provided Turat with materials, tools, and instruments in need of repair so that he could begin a violin workshop upon return. Since that time, Turat has been invited to India and Dubai as a repair man for orchestras.

Like Marat, Turat is also not trained as a musician. Turat said that musical training is usually part of the requirements to be a violin maker, but that the university in Switzerland had made an exception for him. He took theoretical and practical courses, studying acoustic theory as well as the history of musical instruments. According to Turat his violins differ from European violins in that they are made of apricot and fur. Much like Marat, Turat seemed preoccupied with the smell of the wood and the feel of the wood, saying that violin making and wood working in general was pleasurable. The feel, the smell, the color, texture, sound of wood made his labor enjoyable and selling an instrument only added to that pleasure. Asked whether there was some difference between making sculptures and making violins Turat answered: "I can make a sculpture that will stand somewhere and maybe somebody will look at it, like it, but a violin is played by a musician and its sound is enjoyed by many people; also an instrument lives longer than a person and thus carries a history."

### The Evolution of People and Instruments

Perhaps as a result of his European training, Turat believes that there is an evolution of instruments. For example, Turat explained that an instrument very similar to the kil kiyak was the predecessor to violin. Over time the instrument became smaller, its number of strings changed and it began to be played tucked under the chin. In time this instrument became the contemporary violin. According to Turat such an evolution is necessary for Kyrgyz instruments as well as European.

Turat insisted that it is necessary for instruments to be adapted. To support this Turat first explained origins of the komus through a well known tale: One day a hunter heard a beautiful sound. The hunter sought for the source of the sound only to find the gut of an animal caught on an apricot tree: he took the gut, cut down the tree and made a komus. Turat argued that although the komus was the oldest instrument, having divine origins and existing in the time of Manas, its sound which sounds is very nice in the yurt cannot stand up to the vastness of the concert hall. "Some people think that the instrument should remain as it was first made, but I don't agree because performance contexts are changing."

Upon hearing this, I reminded Turat that the Soviets had also made variants of Kyrgyz national instrument: "They were right to do so," he responded. Like his Soviet predecessors, Turat had vision of altering Kyrgyz instruments in such a way that would make them more suitable for Western-style contexts and travel to new climates. Turat wanted to build a place to attach a microphone could be built into the komus as had been done for guitar. He also felt that the instrument should be varnished so that it would be less susceptible to humidity. He also felt that it was possible to make a lighter komus and one that was constructed out of pieces instead of carved from a single piece of wood.

In support of this statement Turat asserted that in the past people recognized a komus's quality by its lightness. He showed me a carved komus which had fragmented through the center, saying if this same instrument had been made in pieces like a violin the broken pieces could be exchanged without throwing out the entire instrument. Turat said although some komus masters are using a process of soaking and bending wood the fact that this wood is seven millimeters thick makes it difficult to bend and once bent, it

doesn't keep its shape. As the wood dries it bend back and warps or breaks. He dreams of making a komus out of pieces that are only 1 milimeter thick- like the violin- so that the wood could be more easily manipulated and holds its form when dried.

Despite his interest in innovation, Turat did not want to throw away the past completely. He told me that in ancient times Kyrgyz people had buried the wood in dung. This dung seeped into the wood through weathering and fortified it. The result was a hard dried wood. In Switzerland they are trying to reproduce this chemically but the chemical process is not as good as the natural one.

"How do you know that this was done in Kyrgyzstan?" I asked.

"It is passed by word of mouth," he said. "Folk knowledge," I mused aloud.

"Yes," he agreed, going on to say that he'd like to try the technique.

"You should," I said "Then you could market your instruments as environmentally friendly."

#### A Disagreement

As the conversation continued, I baited Turat by telling him that Marat was trying to make thicker komuses similar to the kil kayak. Although Turat responded that 'probably the kil kiyak is as it should be' his eyes gazed upward at the violins hanging in his study and glistened, as though he was dreaming of future innovation.

Many weeks later- having broken a decorative knob on my kil kiyak, I went to ask Marat for a quick repair. I told Marat about my visit to Turat. This brought forth a stream of memories from Marat who had worked together with Turat at the Philharmonic. It was clear that Marat enjoyed Turat's company and admired his skill as a violin maker. However, Marat criticized Turat's attitude towards Kyrgyz instruments. Turat was trained in Switzerland and now he wants to make all Kyrgyz instruments the Swiss way but this only confuses the sound. Marat drew an analogy saying that if the Swiss were to be trained by Mongolians their violins would come out sounding more like carved fiddles and this sound wouldn't make sense in the context of European music.

Although both men agree on the close ties between sound and context, they disagree on what that context is. In the case of Tazibek, it is easier to see the context of Kyrgyz music, because that context has already passed into history. However, Turat and Marat are contemporaries who have a difference in vision: For Marat, Kyrgyz music is

must remain grounded in a mythical past, but for Turat it is the possibilities for a changing future that are the most interesting.