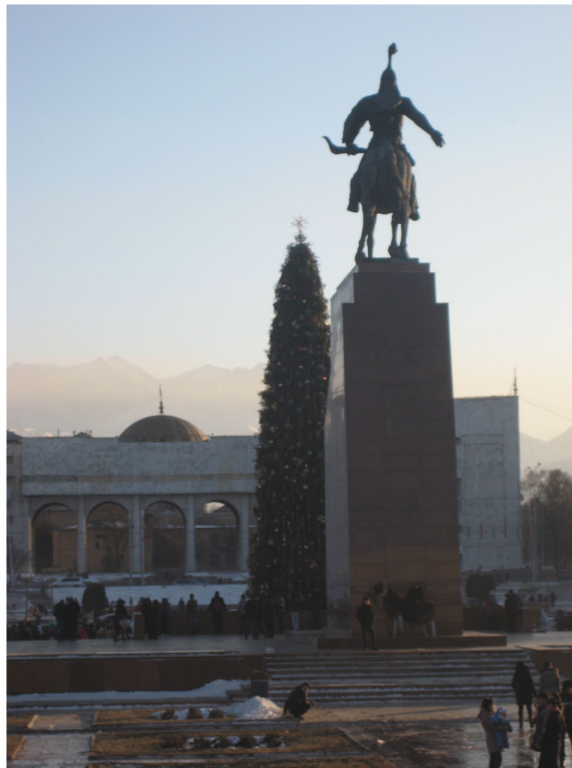
Fragments of Socialist Realism: explorations of form and content in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan

Part I: From International to National



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"For after all, you do grow up, you do grow out of your ideals, which turn to dust and ashes, which are shattered into fragments; and if you have no other life, you just have to build one up out of these fragments."

- Fyodor Dostoyevsky, White Nights and Other Stories

Introduction

Despite the short existence of the Soviet Union, feelings of Soviet citizenship arose, due, not only to forced political and institutional changes, but also through the material and affective experiences that became a part of Soviet life. This can be seen in the memories of any individual for whom the Soviet period corresponds with memories of childhood and young adult life, especially in memories of school, participation in a collective, and holidays such as New Year's Eve. After the Soviet Union dissolved, the newly independent republics had no choice but to set upon the difficult task of recreating citizenship through the development of a new national narrative that could replace that of the Soviet 'international'. In the case of Kyrgyzstan, as well as other Central Asian States, the foundation for this new narrative had already been laid in the Soviet period through the establishment of ethno-national identities with corresponding political and economic territories[1]. Practically speaking, the creation of this narrative was achieved through manipulating the tenants of Soviet realism- in material ways- in order to put forth national forms with 'supranational content'. An example specific to Kyrgyzstan can be found in the national mourning for the Soviet-Kyrgyz writer, Chingiz Aitmatov: During this year of mourning, *koshok* -a form of lament- was used not only to honor the writer, but also to affirm Kyrgyz citizen's participation in the world and the world's participation in them, all the while expressing a deep desire for a better future[2].

Although the creation of this national narrative has been successful for those operating within a Kyrgyz cultural frame, creating a burst of creative and innovative voices, the ethnocentric base of this narrative has resulted in feelings of marginalization

[1] Hirsch, Francine. 2005. Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union. Cornell University: New York.

[2] Pritchard, Maureen. 2011. "Creativity and Sorrow in Kyrgyzstan" *Journal of Folklore Research*. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press.

among people of other ethnic identities who also claim a home in Kyrgyzstan[3]. The 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.

Let me offer a musical example: To the educated ear, a *kuu* [Kyrgyz: melody] is interwoven with beliefs, stories and history. The sounding of a melody can bring these beliefs, stories and histories forth[4]. More so, through the act of performance audience and performer become joined in a kind of conversation[5]. Parts of this conversation can be transposed to other genres, art forms and contexts, but not without changes in meaning- as we see in the creation of orchestral pieces based on komus melodies. However, to the ignorant ear these melodies are 'just noise' as described by one research participant. The perception of noise is symptomatic to a lack of meaning as well as to individual estrangement from a certain process of signification.

In order to understand the process of signification and the possibilities of estrangement from it, it is necessary to choose some of the material that makes up this narrative and examine them within specific contexts. This particular paper examines the continued use of a genre that emerged during the Soviet period and remains prevelant in Kyrgyzstan. This genre is called *meropriyatiya* in Russian, which may be loosely translated as 'celebration'. Here I would like to remind the reader that genres are not fixed templates but flexible categories based on shared formal characteristics. Thus, although weddings are often considered to be their own genre, portions of the wedding ritual may be categorized as *meropriyatiya*. Characteristic of *meropriyatiya* are a cabaret-style series of performances, which often including a parade of folk forms interspersed by games, speeches and toasts unified by the narration of a *vidooshee* [Russian: Master of Ceremonies]. The role of a vidooshee is to lead and commented upon each event.

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[3] Gullette, David. 2010. *The Genealogical Construction of the Kyrgyz Republic: Kinship State and "Tribalism"*. Kent: Global Oriental.

[4] Daukeyeva, Saida D. 2010. "Dombra Performance, Meaning and Memory among Mongolian Kazakhs". Ph.D. diss., School of Oriental and African Studies University of London.

[5] Schieffelin, Edward. 1993. "Performance and the Cultural Construction of Reality: A New Guinea Example" in *Creativity/Anthropology* edited by Smadar Lavie, Kririn Narayan and Renato Rosaldo pp. 271-292. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Through the *vidooshee*'s careful engagement of the audience, often calling for audience members to present songs, dances, speeches, toasts and to join in games-, the boundaries between audience and performer become blurred, as do the barriers between theatre, ritual and play[6].

In this paper I will present description and analysis based on two celebrations of language and culture among the **** diaspora[7], one a men's social gathering, the other a youth competition followed by my observation of a series of multi-ethnic *yolka* [Russian: fur tree] celebrations that took place as part of the preparation for the New Year.

The **** Collective

As I walked through the lower level of the large banquet hall displaying, beneath elaborate carved wood balconies in order to join an evening of socialization, entertainment as well as the celebration of **** language and culture. Within the banquet hall, 150 men were gathered around a series tables, each seating ten and laden with fruits, salads, bread, sweets, tea, juices and vodka. I could not help but note the presence of an artificial fur tree complete with tinsel and ornaments in front of this audience of men, the majority of whom pray *namaz* at least once a week, on Friday.

Indeed, this 'Christmas' tree, which for Soviet citizens became a symbol of the New Year, served as the background for a series of performance as well as a continuous reminder- to me as a researcher- of the way in which a specific community could maintain its cultural identity while at the same time participate in the larger 'international' identity of the Soviet Union. As a *miripriyatia* this event was guided by a *vidoshee*, who engaged in a combination of scripted and improvised narrative and performance. The language of the evening was **** and the evening's program began with a series of youth dance ensembles with performances by both children and teenagers. The fact that these performers were chosen from among the more talented students was betrayed by the presence proud yet anxious teachers helping to tune instruments and watching from the sidelines.

[6] Turner, Victor. 1987. *The Anthropology of Performance*. New York: PAJ Publications.

[7] Asterisks [*] represented coded information, omitted for the protection of research participants.

Although viewers and performers described all performances as *narodniki*, a Russian term which may be translated as people's, national or folk, depending on the context, these performances were clearly staged: dances featured a combination of theatre and movement with choreographed figures. For example, one dance number began with a little girl coming out of a wrapped gift box, bringing a frozen chorus to life by tapping each dancer one by one. The number ended with this same little girl dancing with three ceramic bowls on her head and a plate, fork and spoon in each hand. Other dances displayed hybrid movements, such as a very lovely performance of a **** folk dance *en-pointe*.

These performances may be understood as having been transposed from a more spontaneous event to a staged presentation of the same movements. According to listeners the music was also 'folk music' made for dancing; however, I suspect that like the dancing this music was a transposition of certain rhythms into a more contemporary sound. Although it is possible to make distinctions between movement and sound through analysis of content and in doing so to create frames of authenticity in relationship to a particular tradition, it is important to note that in the minds of audience and performers all of these varied types of music and dance fell under a single category: ours.

Keeping in mind that the self can be created, understood and performed through musical activity, it is important to accept and acknowledge all the shifting, mixed and contradictory layers of individual and collective identities which are part of any particular performance. For example, one musician present at the performance described this more contemporary sound not as a different kind of music, but as a music that lacked the qualities of a particular region and in which instrument- not unlike people- had different roles to play. Likewise, the musician that when compared to * [another ethnic group] the difference was purely stylistic. More than musical facts, these are statements of identity constructs made through musical activity.

Synergy between audience and performers made it clear that these performances were part of a living tradition and not an artificial staging of frozen cultural forms[8]. This was underscored by cues from the audience, who, while socializing amongst themselves

[8] Levin, Theodore. 1996. *The Hundred Thousand Fools of God*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

also paid close attention to the performers: Audience members clapped along with the music in a gesture of enjoyment and encouragement even as individuals responded to moments within performances with anticipation- demonstrating knowledge of what should happen- as well as signaling affirmation of success. For example, as one male dancer leapt into the air only to land on his knees and bend his spine backwards, touching the back of his head to the floor, an elderly audience member exclaimed "Opa!" and slapped his hand on his leg as if to say "By gum, he did it!" Likewise, as the second half of the program moved to more serious musical performances by adults instead of children, the men- some who had become tipsy from vodka- began to sing along quietly. Some even got up to dance, making use of much of the same vocabulary of movement as the preceding staged performances.

These interchanges between audience and performer are indicators of a signifying process taking place. More so, in addition to offering an example of a Soviet form given national content, this event also provides an example of the multiple aspects of musical performance: not only does engagement in music and dance become a measure of linguistic and cultural identity, it also becomes a form of cultural capital for those teachers eager to impress their peers through their students. Likewise, musical activity becomes a gift from performers and audience to one another as well as a source of entertainment, play and social engagement for a group of men who have chosen to spent their evening together. Finally, this performance offers the possibility of intellectual and emotional response- that is, a construction of beauty-- for each individual audience member.

A Youth Competition

These observations may be expanded further through a second celebration which I attended within the same community one week later. This was a competition held among a group of young men in the effort to obtain a scholarship abroad. These young men were given a chance to demonstrate their wit, character and their **** language skills through the performance of popular songs as well as their own original verse. At the same time, they were expected to have a good time and to put on a good show- regardless of the outcome- for themselves and for the audience of peers set before them.

Unlike the previous event, the language of the evening was Russian and waitresses and contestants alike were adorned in festive red elf caps. This time the *vidooshee* was none other than the hero of the New Year, Father Frost accompanied by Snigoricka, the Snow Maiden. The competition featured three rounds of singing interspersed with a variety of song, dance and games. Unlike the previous performance which focused on **** folk forms, this one was more international in content, featuring everything from hip-hop, Belly Dancing and Tango. It also included speeches and guest performances by members of other diaspora communities who offered their fraternity through the gifts of kind words and performance.

<u>A Theatre Performance</u>

Much like the events in the **** community, *yolka* [Russian; fur tree] celebrations also featured a stream of cabaret-style performance. One such celebration sponsored by the Russian Embassy in conjunction with a local dance studio took place inside a large theatre with numbered seats. In contrast to a theatre performance in the United States or Europe, the children brought costumes with them which they put on upon arrival: looking out into the audience, one could see Cossacks, tin soldiers, crusaders, dragons, Zoros, lions, peacocks, Batmen, queens, princesses and Snow Maidens, among others. One noteworthy aspect of this performance was the blurred line between audience and performer, performance and everyday life: Not only were the children in costume but as the curtain opened, Father Frost and his niece, Snigorichka, walked through the audience, to join a team of hip-hop elves and stylish fairies on stage enthusiastically performing a well known pop-song.

The performance was built upon a very loose and simple plot that allowed the organizers to thread together a series of fantastic vignettes based on color and fairy tale: enchanted birds represented by dancers with flowing silver scarves, a mysterious princess performing a quatrain at a ball; a circus featuring parodies of American folk melodies, costumes and dance movements; a seascape created by dancers in neon followed by the movement of moon and stars; a series of folk dances performed- including a guest performance by certain diaspora ensemble- before a Sultan. These events were led and narrated by a boy and a girl traveling through a magical clock. The show ended in a grand

finale, with all the performers moving in a *korovot* [Russian: a circle dance] around the fur tree, just as the children do at home with their mothers and in their school classrooms with their teachers.

Rather than closing the curtains, clapping, and calling the performers out for a bow- as one might expect- the audience left while the performance seemingly continued on. As the children came out into the hall, they discovered the various characters that had been performing on stage- children in costume just like themselves- were now waiting around the *yolka*. Father Frost and Snigorichka soon joined them, leading the children in movement games, song and poetry.

<u>An Event at School</u>

This theatrical performance was not much different than the 'lighting of the fur tree' I attended at a local school. As the children gathered around the *yolka*, they were greeted by a male and female cowboy clown performing ridiculous parodies of American language, dress, music and dance movements. These cowboys served as *vidooshee*, that is, as the host and narrators of the *yolka* celebration. The cowboys playfully checked to make sure the kids knew their right from their left before asking the kids to form a circle and to move around the room in a long snaking line, with adults forming bridges at the ends. This is the same *korovot* that was performed on stage during the embassy sponsored event. It is also the same dance that is performed at home by children and parents on New Year's Eve.

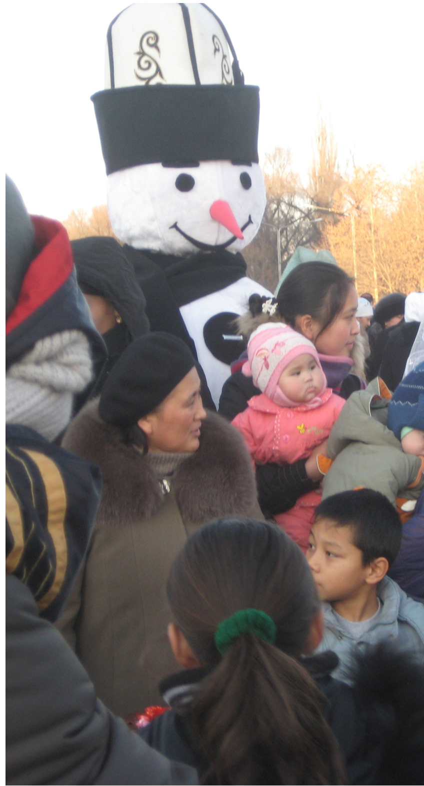
After moving around a bit, the children returned to their circle formation in order to greet a belly dancer and a Turkish soldier who performed a dance for them. This is part of the 'parade of nations' which happens in so many varieties of performance. All of a sudden, death came, wearing a hood and bearing a scythe and killed one of the cowboys. The surviving cowboy called a magician onto the stage. This magician taught the children magic words with which they could bring the cowboy back to life if only they shouted loud enough: this game has its roots in the ritual games of Old Russia that celebrate the triumph of life and virility over death. After several attempts the kids brought the cowboy back to life and called Father Frost and Snigorichka. These New Year heroes led the children in magically lighting the *yolka*. This event was followed by celebration:

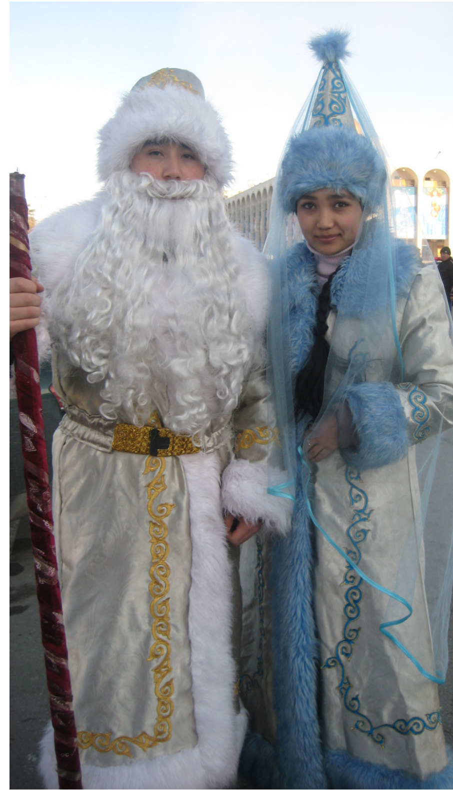
recitation of poetry as well as a series of dances including the formation of a Chinese dragon, with a masked head and tail carried by all the children moving in a long line.

Cultural Appropriation

Both the *yolka* celebrations and the events in the **** community demonstrate the continued salience of Soviet form in the process of celebration. At the same time, changes in content reveal the flexibility of this form as well as attempts by individual citizens to adapt to the changing context of life, especially shifts in politics as well as identity. This can be seen in other Soviet forms as well, such as the theatre and comedy competitions known as *KVN: Club Visoli Nahotniki* [Russian: Club of Cheerful Wits]. In Naryn, in 2003, these were still played in their original Russian-language format; however, it was common to hear a team interject a line in Kyrgyz saying 'Why are we playing this game in Russian?". Since that time, KVNs have come to be played in three languages: English, Kyrgyz and Russian. At the same time many citizens of Kyrgyzstan still enjoy watching Russian language performances played in Moscow and aired on national television.

When it comes to New Year's celebration, changes in context demonstrate a reframing of a previously Soviet form: I observed the same skits and games performed in underneath a *yolka* in December performed again in March, on Navrus in celebration of the 'Muslim' or 'Kyrgyz' New Year. These shifts in paradigm do not necessarily happen through conscious thought but rather through material means such as choices in patterns, colors, sounds, language, images, motifs and formulae. For example, while walking through the Center of Bishkek on New Year's Day, I witnessed a crowd of Father Frosts and Snigorichkas eager to have their picture taken with children and parents. What made this scene worth mentioning was the prominence of Kyrgyz folk motifs: a snow man wearing a *kalpak* [Kyrgyz: a tall felt hat for men], Father Frost in a *chapan* [Kyrgyz: a long jacket for men] and Snigorichka in a *shokoloo* [Kyrgyz: a long pointed hat used by performers], all shadowed by a large statue of Manas who seemed to be charging directly into the decorated fur tree (see front cover page).





In an attempt to check my own visual analysis, I asked a random passerby whether or not this was a Kyrgyz variant of children's beloved New Year's heroes. The woman laughed aloud at my question exclaiming "So you have also noticed! Indeed, it seems that Kyrgyz Father Frosts and Snigorichkas are also in existence!" Unfortunately, this small alteration in costume and dress are symptomatic of a much larger process of appropriation that is taking place in Kyrgyzstan.

In the past months I have observed a tendency to brand beliefs and customs shared by many ethnicities throughout Central Asia as 'Kyrgyz'. A fellow researcher has observed an exclusion of other non-Kyrgyz ethnic groups from the collective memory of certain spaces. In my own research, members of the **** community have expressed distress to find writers, monuments and history whom they proudly claim as their own to be subsumed into 'Kyrgyz' history within their children's newly published textbooks.

This process of appropriation is accompanied by the elevation of the 'Kyrgyz' nationality through claims of Arian origin and the pollution of this once pure genetic pool through submission to foreign domination the interethnic marriages that resulted. This claim might seem strange if it weren't for the systemic presence theories of ethnogenesis

and social Darwinism as espoused by the Soviet Union. As much as it is common to hear that Kyrgyz people are emotional, primitive and wild due to their nomadic history, it is also common to hear assertions that all nations were born from the Kyrgyz nation, going as far as to claim that the Prophet Adam was Kyrgyz.

This is a far cry from the image of a 'communal home' of the Soviet Period. This epitome of the utopian dream in which all people of all nations live in comfort and harmony under a single roof became prevalent throughout all aspect of material culture, from language to literature to art: The image of a communal home is the primary metaphor in Andrei Platonov's allegory *The Foundation Pit* whose characters spend their life's energy preparing the foundation upon which this future house- and government- may be built. It is also a common motif in early Soviet architecture as artists and engineers sought to turn utopian ideals into material realities. Upon the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the president of the newly independent Kyrgyz Republic- Askar Akaev- continued to use this Soviet image, adapting it to a more national identity by declaring Kyrgyzstan to be 'our general home'. Amidst rising criticism of the Akaev regime it was common to hear a play on words that turned this image of a utopian space into something poor, transient and ill-kept: "Nashee Obshee Dom' became 'Nashee Obsheejitel' that is, our dormitory. This bit of humor was indicative of shifts that were taking place in all levels of society as Kyrgyz people began to push for their right to political, cultural and economic ownership of Kyrgyzstan.

In an interview, one musician recalled how, as a small child, he had joined a **** folk ensemble through his local 'Dom Kulturi' [Russian: House of Culture- an institution designed to promote and advance the arts throughout the Soviet Union]. Two years later, at the age of eight, this musician initiated his musical career by giving a televised performance on Kyrgyz Television-Radio (KTR) in the city of Frunze- the Soviet name for Bishkek. He commented that this show, which was called Kyrgyzstan Nashee Obshee Dom and which featured all kinds of inter-ethnic performances, had been taken of the air 'because Kyrgyzstan is no longer our general home'.

Conclusion

In concluding this discussion, I would like to return to the image of the first man being Kyrgyz. Upon hearing this one man exclaimed: “This is ignorance. Adam was the first man- that’s why the word for ‘man’ is Adam in Kyrgyz, just as it is in every other Turkic language!” Likewise, a woman expressed her bafflement by saying: “How can it be so? At that time there was no ethnicity.” Although this woman and man are of different ethnicities and faiths, they both interpreting this creation story not as a story of nation, but the story of something more universally human. What I hope to do in this larger research project is to draw forth these more universalizing threads in the work of various artist and musicians, especially the experiences of beauty and emotion. In doing so, I hope to better understand how in choosing to make a break from its Soviet past, Kyrgyzstan can still remain an ‘international’.