
The book under review is old-fashioned in the best sense. Based on the author’s fieldwork, on written and archival sources, and on discussion with Azeri scholars, it provides background information about the ashiq or minstrel tradition in Azerbaijan and a description of contemporary women performers. Oldfield begins with a brief description of her encounter with women performers in Baku, then heads back in time to look at what we know about the history of minstrelsy in general and women performers in particular. Women appear in the *Book of Dede Korkut*, an epic narrative dating back to the 14th or 15th centuries, yet dating the appearance of professional women performers is difficult. We know for sure that women performed in the 19th century because they are attested in written records; speculation must of necessity be used when it comes to earlier periods.

After giving the historical background, Oldfield describes the ashiq’s role. The “master” ashiq performs in public and composes his or her own poetry. Lesser ashiqs know the cannon of songs and narratives or compose poetry without being able to sing or play the traditional musical instrument of the ashiq, the saz. Ashiqs who create verses typically insert their names in their compositions. This disqualifies such compositions as folklore in the eyes of Soviet and post-Soviet scholars who still insist that the composer of a folksong must not be known. While many scholars have emphasized the primacy of words over music, the ashiqs themselves have a different view. Azeri ashiqs told Oldfield that words did not take precedence over the ability to play the saz. According to the interviews, musical ability and poetic ability are both important to the tradition. In addition to talking about the ashiqs, the author describes verse types and discusses performance situations. Ashiqs play at weddings and, in recent times, have formed guilds of sorts which perform in urban venues and at festivals. Being able to tour and to travel is important and this requirement has limited the number of women who can undertake a minstrel’s life.

Part II of the book gives the biographies of a number of performers. Oldfield has sought to reconstruct the lives of famous performers of the past. She talks about Ashiq Peri, from whom a contemporary women’s
Azerbaijani Women Poet-Minstrels is a good introduction to the topic. Its shortcomings are that it is brief and very general. The treatment of almost all issues addressed in the book is cursory. There is little engagement with contemporary Western scholarship that addresses the issues of post-Soviet life. Gender issues are also visited only briefly. Perhaps the greatest lack is an in-depth description of the lives of contemporary women minstrels and the issues affecting these lives. Considering that Oldfield was in Azerbaijan interacting with the women who are the subject of her work, the reader expects a more detailed, more intimate portrait. Perhaps the author chose to keep biographies of
contemporary performers short to allow room for historical information. But information on performers of the past must necessarily be speculative. It would be better if it did not overshadow real and contemporary lives. Still, with the historical background, the book provides a good overview of the tradition and offers a nice introduction to Turkic minstrelsy for those who are new to the topic.

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