

Oldfield, Anna C. *Azerbaijani Women Poet-Minstrels: Women Ashiqs from the Eighteenth Century to the Present*. Lewiston, Queenston, Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press. 2008. Bibliography, archival sources, discography, videography, index. 210 pp. \$109.95 (cloth) ISBN-13: 978-0-7734-4990-9; ISBN-10: 0-7734-4990-6.

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

group in Baku takes its name. She chronicles the lives of *Ashiqs* Besti, Ziuleykha, Qendab, Nabat, and others. For each performer she gives not only biographical information, but also samples of poetry, provided both in the original and in parallel English translation. More detailed information is given for twentieth century performers than for those from the nineteenth century. Some of this information comes from published sources and some comes directly from the author's field experience. Oldfield shows that while many performers married and raised families, a number remained unmarried. This, as she points out, should lead to a more nuanced understanding of traditional female roles and options for defying traditional expectations. Between parts II and III the author gives a set of photographs, some taken by her and others provided by the women Oldfield worked with.

Part III takes the *ashiq* tradition into the present. Oldfield gives a brief history of the *ashiq* assemblies, a local version of the Soviet-era writers' unions that came into being with Soviet domination of Azerbaijan. By 1984 these meetings had come to emphasize preserving Azeri identity over serving the Soviet state. It was at this time that women's ensembles came into being and started performing in major cities. One such ensemble, the Ashiq Peri Meclisi was the one that became the focus of Oldfield's work several decades later. We get a brief history of this ensemble and a look at some of its performers. Contemporary *ashiqs*, the author tells us, act as a bridge between the present and the past. They have succeeded in bringing the tradition through the period of Soviet rule and they have maintained Azeri cultural identity into the present. Again we get brief glimpses of individual performers.

The book ends with a bibliography, a list of archival sources, a discography, a videography, and a list of interviews and performances observed or recorded by the author. A very brief index follows.

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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