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The Azeri *Aşiq* in Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan: Towards a Transnational Comparison of a Diverging Tradition[1]

ABSTRACT
The Azeri aşıq tradition is a genre of musical storytelling that has circulated through the Caucasus and Northern Iran for over 500 years. Aşıqs travelled between regions to perform, and practitioners remained in contact for most of the genre's history. This contact was disrupted in the early 20th century, when northern Azerbaijan was incorporated into the USSR. Divided between two countries, the aşıqs of the Republic of Azerbaijan and Northern Iran have developed along separate paths. This paper will compare contemporary aşıq performances as observed in The Republic of Azerbaijan and Northern Iran, focusing on historical factors, performance contexts, and gender. Finally, it will consider how increased interaction between the two regions since the 1990s may influence the future of the genre. This study is based on the fieldwork and research of Anna Oldfield in the Republic of Azerbaijan and Behrang Nikaeen in Iran.

KEYWORDS
Azerbaijan
Azeri
Iran
Caucasus
Bardic
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Aşıq
Musico-Poetic
Dastan

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In the southern Caucasus and northern Iran, professional Azeri bards called *Aşıq* (*Ah-SHUGH*) have been singing and playing for over 500 years. The genre, also called *aşıq,* is the Azeri people's oldest vehicle for oral narrative, including epic *dastan,* lyric poetry, and verbal dueling. The *aşıq* is deeply embedded in the Azeri cultural imagination and holds an important role in weddings and other life cycle ceremonies. *Aşıqs* travel to perform, and can be found wherever Azeri people live, including in the Republic of Azerbaijan, neighboring areas of the Caucasus, and northern Iran. Once a common tradition that circulated through the region, it diverged in the 20th century as Azeri *aşıqs* were separated into two powerful and mutually suspicious states, the USSR and Iran. Since the fall of the USSR in 1991, *aşıqs* in the two countries have been in closer contact, but now embody two different trajectories of the same genre.

This paper is a working comparison of contemporary *aşıq* performance as observed in the Republic of Azerbaijan and northern Iran. Although the genre has been researched in both regions, there has been little comparative work across the border. This paper seeks to open this comparison by focusing on some initial questions: How are *aşıq* arts different on both sides of the Azerbaijan/Iran border? What factors may have contributed to these differences? How is the genre changing in the 21st century now that the border is more open? This paper discusses our initial exploration of these questions. The first section, *One Tradition, Two Paths: Contemporary Performance***,** offers a window into contemporary *aşıq* performance in the Republic of Azerbaijan and northern Iran. Section two, *Evolution of the Aşıq Genre,* gives a historically framed overview of the tradition. Next, *Split in Two: Political Division in the 20th century,* describes the impact of 20th century historical and political forces on *aşıq* performances in both regions. Sections four and five, *Performance Contexts and Repertoire* and *Gender in Aşıq Performance,* look more closely at aspects that differ between the two regions. The final section, *Contemporary Concerns and Future Possibilities*, concludes the paper and offers direction for further research.

One Tradition, Two Paths: Contemporary Performance

In Baku, the capital of the Republic of Azerbaijan, it's not difficult to find an example of the bardic *aşıq* genre, which is performed frequently at concerts, festivals, and

holidays both in the capital and in other regions. While conducting her fieldwork (2004-6 and 2017-18), author Anna Oldfield observed a number of performances, from spontaneous home concerts to very formal events staged at prestigious state venues. Although there are many possibilities to see *aşıqs* perform at concerts, weddings, and on television, an *aşıq* event in Baku will usually be carefully planned and staged. At a typical *aşıq* concert event you will arrive to see a stage festooned with flowers or banners and a graceful Azerbaijani *saz,* the long necked lute of the *aşıq*, leaning on a podium. As the show begins, an *Aparacı* [Master of Ceremonies] - often a scholar or poet, sometimes an *aşıq* him or herself - will introduce the proceedings. You are likely to be in an audience consisting of men and women of all ages, dressed formally for a night out. Whole families have come out with their children and teenagers - the latter on their cell phones, of course- but in fact, many adults in the audience will use their phones to record the event as well. You will find the crowd both enthusiastic and knowledgeable as they cheer the appearance of beloved performers and respond to their favorite songs with applause.

You will probably see many *aşıqs* perform in one evening. Male *aşıqs* will wear boots and a Caucasian *papak* (lamb's wool hat) or a dark suit, while females will wear colorful traditional or evening dress. Each performer will sing one or two songs of about 5-minutes length, sometimes performing musical dialogues in duos or ensembles. All *aşıqs* will play the *saz*, most of them will sing, and they may be accompanied by a double reed wooden *balaban,* and/or percussion. The concert will end in a gala of *aşıqs* and accompanying musicians on the stage all playing together, with closing words from the *Aparacı*. It is a night to celebrate Azerbaijani music, poetry, and heritage, and your experience will be focused and mediated by the formal context of the performance.

Figure 1. *Aşıqs* Gülarə Azaflə and Roman Azaflı with ensemble at the Jubilee of *Aşıq* Rustemov held at the Azerbaijan State Philharmonic Hall, April 2017, Baku, Azerbaijan. Photo by Anna Oldfield.

Occasionally a special guest may be introduced to a hushed, expectant audience – an Azeri *aşıq* from over the border in northern Iran. The guest performer would be brought to the stage and introduced by the *Aparacı* to play one or two songs to enthusiastic applause. During conversations with Azerbaijani scholars,[2] the author understood that the *aşıqs* of northern Iran are perceived to be heirs to a purer tradition, one in which whole *dastan* epics are still told, in which older performance rituals have not given way to popular culture, and where rare regional saz *hava* and singing styles are preserved. In concert, the author observed that performers from northern Iran were met with admiration and respect by Baku *aşıqs* and their audiences.

Back home in Iran, the same *aşıq* may have a very different performance experience. As author Behrang Nikaeen observed during his fieldwork in Zanjan in 2015, people report having mostly seen *aşıqs* performing at weddings rather than onstage at a concert. If you are a man, you would be attending a specific men's ceremony (if you

[2] This is based on consultation with a number of Baku-based Azerbaijani scholars on Azeri *aşıq* arts in Iran, including Məhərrəm Qasımlı , Azad Nəbiyev, Sanubar Baghirova and Kəmələ Dadaşzadeh, as well as interviews with Aşıq Isa Tabrizli, who lives in Iran but often performs in Baku.

are a woman you will see the *aşıq* play later at a mixed gender part of the wedding). You are seated comfortably on a richly decorated carpet on the floor, eating and chatting with your friends, who all settle down on two sides of the room in anticipation. Soon the *aşıq* starts his performance, striding confidently between the lines of seated men, often followed by a *balaban* and a *qaval* frame drum. People are still talking as he recites the opening rituals to hush the audience into paying attention. Soon he will begin a *dastan,* telling the narrative portions of the story in dramatic prose, singing dialogues between characters in song with the accompaniment of his *saz*, making amusing digressions and responding to audience requests. As he strides back and forth through the center of the room full of seated men, his interactive performance pulls you into the *dastan* to experience the adventures of heroes such as the star-crossed lovers *Asli and Kerem* or the lonely *Aşıq Garip.* He closes with a series of rituals and prayers after a performance that has lasted over an hour.[3]

Figure 2. *Aşıq* Mehdi Najafi, and his ensemble, September 2015, Zohreyn Village, Zanjan, Iran. Photo by Behrang Nikaeen.

These performances are both called '*aşıq*' and are both performed by Azerbaijani bards who identify with a single tradition. The performers choose most of their

[3] Several performances of this type were recorded by Behrang Nikaeen in 2015.

music from the same stock of *hava*[4], and most of their sung lyrics from the same stock of Azeri oral literature[5]. However, there are important differences: in the Republic of Azerbaijan audiences will most often see a staged performance managed by an *Aparacı* during which a number of male and female *aşıqs* play and sing, each for a duration of 5-10 minutes. In northern Iran, audiences will most often see a single male *aşıq* conduct the entire performance, leading the wedding ceremony and performing an entire oral narrative *dastan.*

Looking at how *aşıq* arts have diverged between the Republic of Azerbaijan and northern Iran gives us a living example of how traditional bardic arts experience change along with the social and political lives in which they are enmeshed.

Evolution of the Aşıq Genre

The *aşıq* genre begins its early history in oral narrative (which makes it difficult to place its origins empirically), but from the earliest *dastan* narratives such as *Qurbani* many scholars believe it evolved as a form of Western Turkic bardic singing and storytelling at the end of the 15th century in early Safavid Iran (Axundov and Tahmasib, 2005: iii; Köprülü, 2006: 174). The genre developed as *aşıq* bards, accompanying themselves on a long-necked lute called the *saz,* or sometimes, the *qopuz*, traveled to sing *dastan* and compete in verbal dueling contests at gatherings called *məclis* throughout northern Iran and the Southern Caucasus. *Aşıqs* have always been mobile, and sharing music and narratives across larger geographies is integral to the tradition; as they traveled, *aşıqs* became conduits for music, stories, and news, creating a larger sense of community that went beyond nationality and language (Oldfield, 2014: 230).[6]

[4] *Hava* are named musical structures that are played on the *saz.* They can be played simply or improvised upon. *Hava* can be regional, but there is a collection of traditional *hava* recognized by all Azeri *aşıqs.*

[5] The Azeri *dastan* is a prosimetric epic in which the story is told in speech and the dialogue is sung to a *saz hava*. The songs themselves can be embedded in the *dastan* or sung by themselves. *Aşıqs* also sing lyrics taken from oral poetry and compose lyrics themselves; however, all *aşıq* songs will be sung to a *hava.*

[6] Closely related genres that branched out across Western Asia include the Turkish *aşık*, the Turkmen *bakhshi* and the Armenian and Georgian *ashug* (Başgoz, 1970: 402; Ustunyer, 2009: 137).

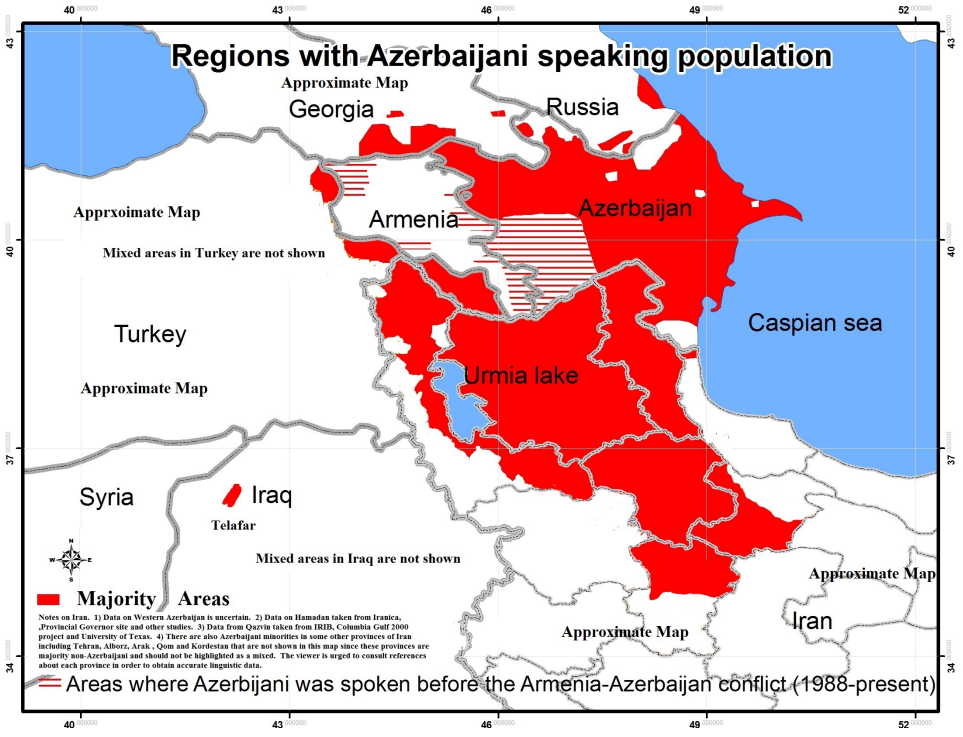

Figure 3. Approximate Map of Azerbaijani Speaking Regions in the Caucasus and northern Iran ('Regions': 2013)

As *aşıqs* fanned out into the Caucasus, the genre merged with regional traditions and became influenced by local narratives. Local schools took root around certain *ustad* (master *aşıqs* who could teach apprentices), and developed their own styles, repertoires and instrumentation (Qasımlı, 2003: 58). The *aşıq* became deeply integrated into village and community life, taking on special functions in weddings and holidays. Regions and micro-regions developed distinctive instrumental and vocal traditions and repertoires of *saz hava,* and many hava are named after their places of origin, such as *Tabrizi, Zancan Dubeytisi, Şirvani,* or *Göycheli* (Eldarova, 1984: 59). [7] However, because *aşıqs* traveled to perform with others as part of their profession, performers kept in communication with different regions, and a large shared repertoire developed among Azeri *aşıqs* across northern Iran and the southern Caucasus. Thus although widely dispersed, Azeri *aşıqs* remained part of a single performance community.

[7] For example: In the eastern regions of Iran most *aşıqs* play with ensembles that include a *balaban* and a *qaval* frame drum, while in the eastern regions of the Republic of Azerbaijan most *aşıqs* play in ensembles with a *balaban* and two percussionists. In the Western regions of both countries most *aşıqs* perform solo.

Split in Two: Political Division in the 20th century

At the beginning of the 19th century the Russian Empire expanded into the Caucasus and challenged the borders of the Persian Qajar Empire in a series of wars. In 1828 negotiations led to the Turkmanchai Treaty, which divided the greater Azerbaijani region between the Russian and Persian Empires along the Aras River (Swietochowski and Collins, 1999: 129). Azeri people found themselves living in two different countries: in the south, they remained as a large minority in the Persian Empire, while in the north, they were incorporated into the Russian Empire. Nonetheless, *aşıqs* still travelled frequently between the two regions and remained in close contact.

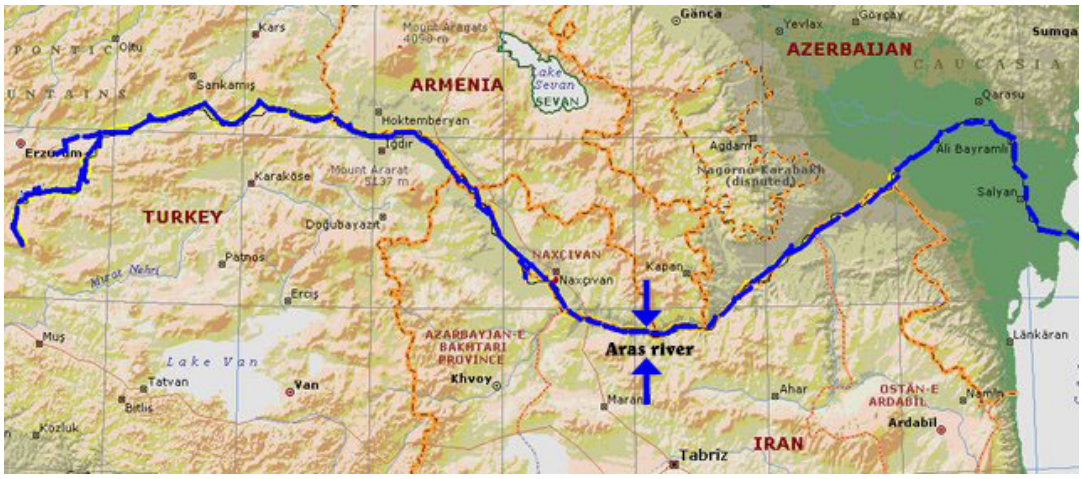

Figure 4. Map of the Aras River Border (Heidari, 2011: 430)

This contact between *aşıqs* north and south of the Aras was dramatically disrupted in the early 20th century. Northern Azeri territories in the Russian Empire were set free by the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, leading to the formation of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic, which was then conquered by the Soviet Union in 1920. After the USSR consolidated power, the government worked to sever Azerbaijani cultural ties with Iran and Turkey and reorient them towards Moscow. Communication with Azeris in Iran was largely closed off. As political and cultural change (such as changing the written alphabet to Cyrillic) made it difficult for citizens of the new Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic to keep contact across the border.

The political changes of the 20th century had a major impact on how music evolved in the USSR. In Soviet Azerbaijan the *aşıq* genre was subject to a complex of cultural

manipulation policies, which sought to harness local traditions to arouse enthusiasm for the building of socialism and support for the new state. Because it was the art of the rural lower classes, the *aşıq* genre was strongly encouraged, and given new teaching and performance opportunities (Huseynova, 2016: 56). With new performance norms structured by the *Union of Aşıqs,* the formerly interactive *dastan* performance, which had integrated audience requests, digressions and commentary, quickly became a mediated stage appearance where *aşıqs* performed short songs in a fixed program, contextualized by an *Aparacı* to suit the event (Anniversary of the October Revolution, etc.). Still important at festivals and holidays, male and female *aşıqs* played throughout the 20th century, often openly supporting the USSR, but also keeping a traditional parallel culture alive in rural performances, where pre-revolutionary *dastan* were still told for much of the 20th century (Oldfield, 2018: 149).

In the 1970s-80s *aşıqs* gained more independence from Socialist directives and became an important part of a powerful movement that hailed traditional folklore as a national identity in opposition to Russification and Soviet culture. As a result, songs from traditional *dastan* were revived in concert, and older *aşıqs,* who still knew *dastan* were recorded. By the fall of the USSR in 1991, *aşıq* concerts, television, and radio shows had long become vehicles to celebrate Azerbaijani national culture, not the Soviet State.

In Iran, Azeri *aşıqs* who began the 20th century in the Persian Empire, underwent a similarly tumultuous century. The early century saw the Constitutional Revolution and trouble in the Azeri regions, which were ambushed twice by the Russian Empire (Keddie and Amanat, 2008: 205-7). After the First World War, Reza Khan ousted the Qajar dynasty to become the first Pahlavi Shah, only to be forced out and replaced by his son Mohammad Reza Shah in 1941. In northern Iran, the Azerbaijan Democracy Party (ADP) formed in 1945 (Hambly, 2008a: 245). The ADP guaranteed the territorial integrity of Iran, but aspired to civic, economic, and cultural autonomy; this was unacceptable to the state and the ADP was disbanded (Atabaki, 1997: 120). In the 1950s, popularly elected Prime Minister Mossadeq replaced the Shah, but was removed by a coup backed by Great Britain and the US, who placed Mohammad Reza Shah back in power. The Shah became deeply unpopular, and in 1979, the Islamic

Republic of Iran was able to take power during a popular revolution (see Hambly, 2008b).

The Azeri people of Iran weathered these storms and preserved the *aşıq* genre throughout. Unlike in the USSR, the Iranian government made no attempt to influence or interfere with Azeri *aşıq* performance. However, the cultural policies toward the Azerbaijani language were quite different; while in the USSR Azerbaijani was used as a written language and taught in schools in parallel with Russian, in Iran, Farsi was the only language taught in schools. One of the policies of the first Pahlavi Shah was to make Farsi the only national language, repressing other ethnic languages (Atabaki, 1997: 71; Atabaki and Zürcher, 2004: 238). This language policy was an ongoing source of conflict with Azeris, and it was part of the unsuccessful ADP program (Atabaki, 1997: 114). As their language could not be taught or written, the *aşıq dastan* became a vital agent in preserving Azeri literature.

Ilhan Başgöz noticed this cultural function of *aşıqs* in Tabriz, Iran in 1970: "Azerbaijan Turks are a minority group. Among them *ashiks* are the only ones able to offer a cultural activity in Turkish" (403). Still today, Azeris take marked pride preserving the *aşıq* narrative tradition, and performance of full *dastan* has remained an integral feature of performance. *Aşıqs* have kept a huge body of oral literature alive for the Azeris in Iran, a vital cultural function for a minority people.

In the Republic of Azerbaijan, Azerbaijani is the official language and is spoken by the majority. Even during the Soviet Period, Azerbaijani was widely used and had a flourishing written literature. [8] *Dastan* were written down by folklorists throughout the 20thcentury, and *aşıqs* in the north did not need to take on the function of preserving the language and literature. The authors theorize that this has allowed *aşıqs* in the Republic of Azerbaijan the freedom to pursue paths farther away from the bardic traditions. The performance context of the concert stage rather than the wedding has further encouraged virtuoso musical performances rather than *dastan* narration.

[8] This is not to discount the impact of Russian and Soviet policies which privileged the Russian language. Soviet Azerbaijan had both Russian and Azerbaijani schools; however, Russian had a higher official status land was seen by many as a road to getting a higher education, better employment, travel, etc.

Performance Contexts and Repertoire

In contemporary performance**,** *aşıqs* in Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan show marked differences in performance contexts. Although new performance opportunities have been developing, *aşıqs* in Iran have kept firmly to the most traditional venues, the coffeehouse (*kahvehane*) and the wedding (*toy majlisi)*. These venues were noted by Başgöz and Albright in the 1970s, and are still strong today. Both feature the telling of whole *dastan* and a high-level of audience interaction including digressions, banter, and requests, especially at wedding ceremonies.

The wedding ceremony is by far the most important venue for *aşıq* performance in Iran. Weddings are one of the most vital life cycle ceremonies in Azeri culture as in many others (Van Gennep, 1960: 116-145), and include people of all ages and social status. When interviewing Azeri people of Iran, they most often cite the wedding as the place where they have seen *aşıqs* perform.

The *dastan* recitation is the most complex performance demand for the *aşıq* at the wedding. During this section, he will open the ceremony with specific prayers, reciting *ustadname* (words of wisdom by an *ustad*) and playing specific songs. He will then recite, narrate, and act out the events of the *dastan*, punctuating his narrative with song, then finally close the narrative with ritual prayers. The audience sits on a carpet on two sides of the room as the *aşıq* walks back and forth between them throughout the performance.

Audience interaction is extremely important for *aşıqs* in all performance contexts in Iran. At the coffeehouse or the wedding, the *aşıq* performs very close to the listeners, who react to the music and are free to make requests. *Aşıqs* are judged by their ability to respond to any and all requests, which can include *dastan* as well as many types of *aşıq* or popular song. Requests have had a strong influence on *aşıq* repertoire in Iran, keeping it in tune with the tastes of the audience.

In the Republic of Azerbaijan, audience interaction is limited as a result of the *aşıqs* being on stage rather than walking close to listeners. The program is decided ahead of time and requests are seldom part of a performance. The *Aparacı* mediates the performance, his or her words serving in place of the rituals with which an *aşıq* would begin and end the performance. The musical repertoire features traditional

saz hava and Azeri poetry; often the songs are taken *from dastan*, but whole *dastan* are not performed in concert venues.

After the Soviet Union fell in 1991, *aşıqs* in the newly independent Republic faced many new challenges. No longer supported by the state and seen by many as old-fashioned and Soviet, they suddenly needed to compete in an entertainment market against a new influx of global popular music. Although still supported by a loving and loyal base, and still integrated into weddings, holidays, and festivals as a sign of national culture, *ashiqs* in the Republic of Azerbaijan have had to adjust themselves to a new world. The continued popularity of the concert venue with a push towards musical virtuosity has marked the post-Soviet era. *Dastan* are no longer performed at weddings nor in concert.[9] However, the prevalence of songs taken from *dastan* shows respect for and familiarity with the tradition.

Gender in Aşıq Performance

A notable contrast in performance north and south of the Aras is the difference in gender norms. Researching in coffeehouses in Tabriz in the 1970s, Albright wrote that "the title *'aşıq'* refers to a male, professional musician" (1976: 221), and observation shows the same today; *aşıqs* in Iran are men, and many performance contexts are for all-male audiences. However, this limitation for women is specifically for public performance; woman can learn the *aşıq* arts and study *saz* in music institutes in Iran, but they cannot work professionally as *aşıqs*. In the Republic of Azerbaijan, audiences at all performance venues are of mixed gender, and many of the most respected and popular *aşıqs* are women (Oldfield, 2008: 8). How is it that women are excluded from performing professionally in one region and fully engaged in another?

Certainly, 20th century politics and social engineering have affected gender in the *aşıq* genre in both regions. In Iran there have been strong state controls on musical performances by women since the foundation of the Islamic Republic in 1979; this

[9] That is not to say *dastan* are not valued as cultural artifacts. The State Sound Recording Archive of Azerbaijan and the Folklore Institute of the National Academy of Sciences are two institutions that have worked to record older *aşıqs* who know *dastan* and to preserve recordings. Sanubar Baghirova, who has worked on UNESCO projects connected to *aşıq* arts, reports new initiatives to bring *dastan* to a wider audience (personal conversation, 2018).

has been an evolving issue, but currently, women are allowed to play musical instruments but not to sing (except in a chorus). But even before the establishment of the Islamic Republic, researchers did not observe any women *aşıqs,* nor was an Azeri woman ever seen in a coffeehouse (Başgöz, 1970: 399). It was never questioned that the genre was all male.

How then to explain the robust participation of women in the genre north of the Araxes? Certainly, northern Azerbaijan's incorporation into the Soviet Union compelled the inclusion of women in all aspects of public life, as a way to break with traditional culture, and gender segregated events became a thing of the past (Naroditskaya, 2000: 245). Female musical performers were especially encouraged "to create an image of emancipation" across all of the republics (Sultanova, 2011: 113), and cultural centers across the republic attracted and taught girls to play saz. In the 1980s the poet Narinc Xatun travelled around Soviet Azerbaijan looking for women *aşıqs* and found them in all corners of the republic; she founded a women's collective called the *Aşıq Pəri Məclisi*, which went on to become a major success in concert and on television (Oldfield, 2008: 152). Prominent women performers, such as Gularə Azaflı, who won the '*Aşıq* of the Year' award in 2011, are still popular today. Clearly, the 20th century and the Soviet era encouraged the public performance of women in the genre, and their popularity has continued after independence.

However, while it is tempting to see women *aşıqs* as the result of Soviet cultural policies, women were in the genre well before the Soviet Era. Azerbaijani scholars have traced women *aşıqs* back to at least the 17th century, and in the 19th century many of them had become well known (Cəfərzadə, 1974; 3, Qasımlı, 2003: 212). All research shows that north of the Aras river, female *aşıqs*, if they were able to achieve mastery in the genre, shared the same repertoire, social function, and performance norms as men, differing only in dress.

There are, as far as the authors know, no professional women *aşıqs* in northern Iran at this time. But the existence of women *aşıqs* in Iran has not been researched and could open up new possibilities. Although possible, it seems puzzling that there would be women in the genre for hundreds of years north of the Araxes but not in

the south, and the question is worth further research. In addition, there is the question of whether women will continue to stay out of the genre in Iran as contact with the Republic of Azerbaijan increases, and women performers are seen and heard on radio and television coming from Baku. With modern technology, such as cell phones, it will be more and more possible for audiences in Iran to see professional women *aşıqs* performing in the Republic of Azerbaijan.

Conclusion: Contemporary Concerns and Future Possibilities

In 1991, the Soviet Union fell and the Republic of Azerbaijan came into being as an independent state. Contact between Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan was revitalized, and is robust today. Azeri people, many of whom had divided families, began to travel more easily over the border from both sides. The two parallel *aşıq* traditions, which had known each other mainly through radio and tv signals, could now meet freely in person. Now that they are able to meet, they are also influencing each other again in ways that will create new possibilities in the future. Northern Iran is now seeing *aşıq* performances in concert halls very similar to those in the Republic of Azerbaijan, and *aşıq* concerts are featured on the television and radio channels of the Azeri provinces. Clearly, *aşıq* arts in Iran are also moving to include staged, musical performances, although traditional *dastan* narration is still strong.

Keeping the *aşıq* tradition alive in the modern world is challenging. Some factors at work in both regions include cultural change, globalization, cell phone technology, the commercial music marketplace, and declining attention for lengthy *dastan*. In addition, *aşıqs* now travel widely again and artists of many regions may meet to perform together and learn from each other, Today, this process of musical exchange exists not only between *aşıqs* of different regions, but also between *aşıq* and other musical cultures, such as classical, *mugham,* urban song, and popular music.

Of course, this discussion is only the beginning of a comparison of the *aşıq* genre between the Republic of Azerbaijan and northern Iran. As well as further research, this study needs interviews with *aşıqs* themselves to understand how they perceive their differences. However, the authors believe it is an important collaborative topic, and we are eager to begin the conversation with this paper. Observing this genre as

it has developed in the past, and watching it continue to evolve, it is clear that the genre will continue to change in conversation between *aşıqs* and their audiences. The newly enlarged transnational context of *aşıq* arts across the Azerbaijan/Iran border shows a dynamic field of possibilities that is open to the future.

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