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Mapping Participant Frameworks in the Aitys of Birzhan and Sara

Here the lens of the "mapping problem" described by Judith Irvine in participant framework studies is used to analyze shifts in the cultural tale "The Aitys of Birzhan and Sara" from its origin as an improvisational verbal duel in the late 19th century, to a Kazakh socialist opera during the Soviet period, to a nationalized historical reference in Kazakhstan. During the multiple recontextualizations of that social text, its discursive pragmatics and characters are preserved within the expanding and shifting participant frameworks enabled by the genre of aitys poetry. Birzhan and Sara are able to "speak"—as poets, characters, and ancestors—to a changing series of audiences, all of whom become involved and implicated in their words and story as a result. They—like all aitys poets and the tradition itself—become a source of cultural authority. Thus the mapping of this social text over time is used as an example, in order to explain why and how an oral tradition is able to overcome or absorb even serious intertextual gaps resulting from shifting historical and political contexts over a long twentieth century. [discourse pragmatics, nationalization of culture, oral tradition, participant framework mapping, recontextualization]

«Мені де «ұрпағым» деп, еске ал, жұртым

Сараның айтары осы аттанарда»

"Remember me too as your descendant, my people

This is what Sara wants to say, before (I) go."

- Sara Tastanbekqyzy

Introduction: The Aitys of Birzhan Sal and Sara Qyz

In the late 19th century, a young Qazaq woman named Sara Tastanbekqyzy became famous among Qazaqs in Central Asia when she performed in a verbal duel against one of the most well-known bards of her time, Birzhan sal.¹ Their reported battle in 1871—part of the poetic tradition *aitys*, where lines are at least partially improvised, sung, and accompanied by the music of the stringed wooden instrument *dombyra*²—was purportedly memorized by members of their audience at the time, and transmitted through oral memory for years, until it was written down for the first time in 1898 by a young poet and collector of oral literature, Zhüsipbek Shaykhislamuly.³ Their meeting is notable not just for Sara's participation or for Birzhan's fame, but also because of the specific content that was discussed: Sara

spoke openly about her impending unwanted arranged marriage, and she used the aitys format as a space in which to publicly air the situation and to shame those responsible. Though Sara would most likely have been just seventeen or eighteen years old at the time, unknown to anyone outside her home region, and singing alone, she held her ground against the older bard, whose reputation was widespread throughout the territory of the then Qazaq khanates, and who had also brought an entourage of fellows there to accompany him. She gained his recognition and support, and Birzhan ultimately joined her in explicitly condemning those village members and elders who wished her to marry against her will. Sara is remembered for her bravery speaking out as a young woman. She and Birzhan are still often referenced in public aitys performances among Qazaq poets in present-day Qazaqstan, now recognized as “ancestors” within the tradition.

Referred to colloquially as the “The Aitys of Birzhan and Sara,” this performance was subsequently canonized as one of the key narratives or texts of a nationalized Qazaq cultural history in the early Soviet period. That canonization was a central component of the broader ideological territorial “nationalization” of ethnic culture and literature under socialism (Hirsch 2005; Martin 2001; Slezkine 1994). The story of the poets’ meeting was retold and rewritten during the Soviet period, thus finding its way into a new genre (opera) and storyline (romantic narrative, revolution against customary authority) deemed more representative of the modernist performative cultural repertoire of a young socialist nation. The Birzhan-Sara opera is still regularly performed today at the Astana Opera, in the capital city of the now post-Soviet Qazaqstani nation-state. In the post-Soviet period, the aitys tradition itself was also revitalized as a performance network in the broader context of ethnic nationalism. Contemporary poets meet across regions of Qazaqstan in televised competitions, and in those performances the Birzhan and Sara aitys continues to be referenced in many different ways, keeping the story and characters alive in cultural memory.

In this article I wish to illuminate the discursive pragmatic features of the aitys oral tradition that give it a mechanism of “staying power” and expand its capacity for genealogical transmission over time (Bauman 2001), despite transformations in modality, content, and even genre. The historical poetic dialogue of Sara and Birzhan and its subsequent recontextualization present an excellent opportunity to explore the longevity of this oral tradition from the perspective of what Judith T. Irvine (1996) has called the “mapping problem” of participant framework studies, or the logics and creation of possible role categories within specific cultural and historical contexts. Aitys does not present a fixed set of roles, but in its conventions of poetic “self” or voice, contextual reference, and audience participation, becomes maximally inclusive in the distribution and attribution of responsibility for “what is said or expressed” in any one performance. Studying the transformations of the Birzhan-Sara story as a social text over more than a century of significant ideological and political change provides an excellent chance to explore how and why aitys as a cultural framework survives over time, to understand its capacity for creative permutation in shifting historical contexts, and most specifically, how the discursive pragmatics and the participant frameworks of this oral tradition engender that very survival.

The “Mapping Problem” in Aitys Poetry

Together with other oral poetic traditions across Eurasia (Abramson 2012; Blackwell 2010; Dawut and Anderson 2016; Salimjan 2017; van der Heidi 2015) aitys constitutes one of the primary performative genres of the region. Aitys does have formal features such as stanza organization, phrase end-rhyme in a verb-final and agglutinative language, metrical phrasing, extended turn-taking, and forms of topicalization, which can also be seen as the “means and resources” for the creation of verbal art (Sherzer and Webster 2015). In their performances together, poets can modify or incorporate other speech genres such as *bata* (blessings) or *shezhire* (ancestral recitation), or even popular songs, into the aitys structures. There are conventional

themes typically commented upon such as kinship, culture, history, and genealogy, as well as current events and news, and aitys thus appears to audiences as having both a “value-laden orientation” (Hanks 1987, 671) as well as being an “official [genre that has] the inherent potential to transform the world as represented” (676). Building on that authority, poets are also known for their capacity to sing about current events in order to inform their audiences (Asanuly 2010), as well as before leaders. Aitys is also recognizable for its stylization, both in the self-presentation of poets and for its sung character: lines of poetry are accompanied by musical instrumentation on the *domyra* (wooden two stringed instrument), and each poet has a signature musical “tag line” in performance. While the structure and topics of aitys poetry are largely conventional, it is also a “verbal duel” (Pagliai 2009), a genre which explicitly encourages or requires improvisation in the moment and therefore becomes “fully poetic only when embodied in concrete works” (Hanks 1987, 676). Aitys is a tradition in which “generic regimentation” is balanced with the “innovation [that] is more conducive to the exercise of creativity, resistance to a hegemonic order, and openness to change” (Bauman 2004, 8 cited in Kroskrity 2009; on improvisation in verbal art see also Duranti and Black 2011).

Soviet and post-Soviet Qazaq scholars do present brief collections of aitys organized by genre—or more accurately sub-genre (see for example Akhmetov and Iskakov 1964–1966; Muqanov and Ismayilov 1942; Nurakhmetuly, Düysenghazy, and Aituly 2004, 2006; Zholdasbekov 2014).⁴ However, in Soviet era canonical folklore studies as well as contemporary ethnographic interviews (see for example Auezov 2014 or Dubuisson 2017), local researchers also point out that while such general descriptions might be helpful to identify some of the key characteristics of aitys poetry, on the whole such typological attributes are not sufficient, to explain the influence or appeal of the tradition. Aitys is better understood not just as a conventional duel between two individual poets, but rather as a conversation between two culturally legitimated figures in front of a live audience. The poetic tradition of aitys is helpfully thought of as a “process of telling” (Finnegan 2001, 49) by poets and audiences together, about their changing cultural world. My own previous ethnographic research has shown that the framework of aitys also allows for a high degree of creativity in discursive pragmatics, and is constitutive and inclusive of multiple social and historical figures and roles (Dubuisson 2010, 2017).⁵ Building from those insights, I argue that the notion of participation is an essential one, in understanding the expansion and maintenance of this expressive genre over time.

Here I take up the question of what Judith T. Irvine has called the “mapping problem” of participant framework studies, or “the process by which participation structures are constructed, imagined, and socially distributed” (1996, 136). In her own delineation of this issue, Irvine is responding most specifically to multiple attempts in linguistics and linguistic anthropology to elaborate upon Goffman’s (1981) model of participant roles in the interaction framework, which was itself a decomposition of the traditional model of “Speaker /Hearer” or “Addresser” /“Addressee” in structural linguistics. Irvine argues that what would be more important or helpful, would be to transform the classificatory model instead into a theoretical one, to examine the processes and principles of role delineation as a problem in itself, rather than to name constituent categories. Understanding cultural and social context thus becomes crucial, in mapping. This approach proved extremely fruitful for Irvine in her ethnographic study of a highly analogous oral tradition, the genre of Xaxaar insult poetry in rural Senegal (Irvine 1993, 1996). Irvine describes how poets are able to publicly perform insults that might otherwise be disallowed precisely because of the complex participation structures that enable their performance: the public context creates the conditions for insults whose “addresser” is too vague or too complicated, for any one person or group to be blamed.⁶ Because this poetic genre itself provides a format at once structured but also creative and flexible, it becomes possible that in a variety of situations or circumstances, various community members and groups are implicated and can be “responsible” (Irvine 1993) for the words that poets sing in

their live performances, and this is in fact central to the social and cultural power and efficacy of this verbal art form over time. Because each performance “is but one moment in a diachronic chain of discourses, a moment which presumes earlier moments, and in which later moments are already envisioned” (Irvine 1996, 152–153), all of those present in this and future similar contexts become implicated and “engaged” as social actors in this production format (Hanks 1996, 160), accountable for the situation and outcome.

The mapping problem thus has the capacity to expand our understanding of social and cultural interaction beyond the instance of any one specific speech event, toward historical contexts more broadly. How can certain verbal or poetic genres—from Xaxaar to aitys—accommodate or encourage flexibility and inclusiveness in role creation not only to become powerful in the present, but indeed to survive over the long *duree*? Studying the cultural logics and expansion of participant frameworks also harmonizes with the classic insights of intertextuality studies in giving us both “ways of thinking of power and authority in discourse-based terms” as well as “a vantage point on social formations larger than those of the immediate interaction order” (Bauman 2005 cited in Hodges 2015, 146). How can various historical discourses—even political or ideological frameworks—become molded and adapted within the roles and voices offered by poets or other verbal artists in these genres, and how can intertextual gaps be overcome to preserve these traditions as a whole?

In the case of aitys, when poets perform they represent not only themselves, as legitimated bearers of cultural authority before an audience, but also as their families, their regions of living and origin, and their ancestral lineages. They must stand to one another in a named relationship, such as that of kinship, friendship, or romantic interest, one which defines the discursive terms of their performance, and thus their words represent any persons within the culture, who stand in the same sociological or cultural category. Further, in aitys performances poets’ words are spoken not just to one another, but to a variety of audience members, both co-present and imagined: to the hosts who organize performances, to the villages and theatre audiences who watch, to the ancestors and leaders named in performances, to the social groups and lineages of learning of which poets are part. As forms of modal entextualization change, the notion of “audience” becomes ever more expansive—from those who read transcribed texts, to those who watch videos on youtube. But in any case, it is the poets’ relationship with both those social groups they represent as well as with their audience—both speaking to and speaking as—which create the conditions for both the emergence—and the subsequent “textual production, circulation, and reception” (Bauman 2008, 32) of these performances, and thus also for the distribution of responsibility for what is said in any one performance.

The aitys tradition presents a series of “mediational performances” over time, “formalized, routinized communicative structures” in which there are “implicational or indexical relationships between a sequence of dialogues” (Bauman 2004, 130) that together build a cultural platform. In this article I show how the discursive pragmatics of the tradition enable transformations in voice and in responsibility for what is said (Hill and Irvine 1993), such that aitys becomes a diffused and self-referential “traditionalizing” genre imbued with “textual authority” (Briggs and Bauman 1992, 147), a cultural “chain of authentication” (Irvine 1989; see also Agha 2003) with long-standing historical legitimacy. Even significant intertextual gaps—such as radically shifting political circumstances such as socialism or nationalism—can be absorbed into this broader framework. Poets reflect the authority and esteem given to the tradition by the public, and their voices are seen to reflect a broader social “point of view.” Therefore, each aitys as a speech event is inherently linked, to broader cultural and historical frames. It is inevitable that poets’ words and topics come to adopt and reflect whatever the social and political discourses of a particular era may be, as well as those of their poetic ancestors. In order to understand the relationship of aitys performances to one another and to broader cultural and ideological conversations occurring over a long 20th century, it is necessary to

consider this poetry as a process or a form of interaction over time, whose very power emerges within—and is constituted by—its own expansive and inclusive participant framework.

The Historical Aitys of Birzhan Sal and Sara Qyz

The aitys of Birzhan-sal and Sara qyz⁷ is quite well known as a story in Qazaq cultural history, and as a somewhat remarkable event: in the late 19th century, a well-established bard of middle age and high repute, Birzhan Kozhaghuloly, comes to visit the village of a theretofore unknown teenage girl Sara Tastanbekqyzy in order to sing with her. He has heard of her talent for improvisation and wishes to test her skill. This is an honor for Sara, because it is through competition that she can establish her reputation as an *aqyn* (poet). By demonstrating extensive knowledge of ancestry, fluency in common topics and metaphors in aitys, and the capacity to defend herself while at once cunningly cutting questioning her opponent's prowess in their subsequent duel, Sara was recognized by Birzhan to be a talented and worthy competitor. The entire aitys dialogue totals more than nine hundred lines, and so in this section I provide an outline summary with examples, based on my own research team's translation⁸ of a written version of the text compiled and published in Kazan in approximately 1898 by poet and collector of literature Zhüsipbek Shaykhislamuly (Toqtar 2020).⁹ While this aitys is widely accepted today as a canonical text of Qazaq oral literature, there is still also some controversy among scholars over whether and when this aitys actually occurred, the respective age of the poets, whether the text is actually the words of Birzhan-sal and Sara qyz themselves or whether the story has been transformed into an aitys style by another poet (or other poets), and finally, how it was actually transcribed or written for the first time (Erdembekov 2011, 2014; Tolymbekov 2018). The most recent—and further modified—version of the full text was published together with Sara's other works and biographical information by researcher and editor Shārbanu Beysenova in 2014.

It is possible to see two clear traces of this history of entextualization: first, the published written versions of the text are in Cyrillic script, not the original Arabic, a transcription which most likely occurred in the early Soviet period, during the period of script reform in Central Asia (cf Slezkine 1994; Winner, 1952). Another trace is that Shaiqislamoly's text includes not only the dialogue of Sara and Birzhan, but also introduces a third figure, a narrator, who participates minimally to set the scene of the aitys, to describe the location and performers and to offering some minor commentary on sections—all of this itself put into additional aitys verses. Based on commentary in the written version of the poem itself, this is apparently a description or rendition based on the testimony of individuals who had been there, and who came to narrate the aitys to the narrator within the following year after it had occurred. Study of oral transmission and memory among orators in Central Asia has shown that aitys poets are expected to recall previous performances in their entirety (Kunanbaeva 2019). In their retelling, however, while bards are expected to recall basic storylines, they may also individualize or embellish particular turns of phrase (see for example Plumtree 2021) so in any case I do not claim that this version is an "authentic original" in that it represents exactly what might have been said. Rather, in my own translation and analysis of this sung dialogue I pay attention to the themes, topics, and participant frameworks established in order to show how Birzhan and Sara develop and legitimate their voice as poets together in the context of this aitys context more generally, as well as why and how this text or "fragment of culture" (Silverstein and Urban 1996) subsequently circulates and transforms further through changing historical and ideological contexts over a long twentieth century.

Two aitys poets are in name opponents in their verbal duel, but even as they cut each other down, they must gain one another's explicit recognition and praise, in order to establish that they are worthy competitors. In the case of the aitys of Birzhan and Sara, there are two major components to this legitimation process (see examples

in Figure 1 below): first, it is a characteristic of accomplished poets to be proud, and so they each boast about their own both directly and through metaphor. In so doing, they demonstrate confidence and build their reputations before one another and their audience. This is particularly important for Sara, who is trying to “prove” herself as a young poet before a well-known and established bard. Second, the two poets represent two different regions and ancestral groups, and should demonstrate an extensive knowledge of genealogy and lineage histories. The recitation of genealogy across Central Asian cultures more broadly is itself a form of oral tradition, a means of self-identification, political alliance, cultural memory, and historical record (Jacquesson 2016; Light 2018; Salimjan 2021; Yessenova 2005). In the Birzhan-Sara aitys, several hundred lines are devoted to naming and describing particular ancestors of note; their impressive recitation in front of a live audience would also be a form of information sharing for those present, a way of keeping these ancestors’ names and accomplishments alive in a shared cultural history, as seen in Figure 1.

Once the two poets have established the genealogical and interpersonal “ground” from which they will meet one another and their audience in performance, specific themes can emerge within the story of this particular aitys performance that Birzhan and Sara co-create. Once she has been deemed worthy to perform as a poet, Sara may bring up her own topic, and there is in fact an immediate and urgent matter at hand: Sara has been traded to this village in marriage, but does not wish to marry the man who has been chosen for her. As a respectful young person, she herself cannot openly speak against her elders, nor as a young woman against her future in-laws. Therefore, in her public performance space, she entreats upon Birzhan, as a well-known and respected cultural figure, to advocate on her behalf to the elders of the village, to change her fate. In the excerpts provided in Figure 2, I show how Sara presents herself and her situation. She identifies as the daughter of a wealthy family, as a member of a tribe and lineage, as a confident young poet, as a young woman risking humiliation from Zhienqul, the young man she is meant to marry, but who has nonetheless kept silence as is culturally befitting her social station—an irony now that she is being established as a gifted orator.

Over several turns, Sara is able to establish the particular theme of her impending marriage, her dislike of her husband-to-be, Zhienqul, and the notable absence of

Birzhan sal:

Арғыннан артық болды салған әнім,	The song I sing is better than any Arghyn -
Найманға Арғын түгіл болды мәлім.	It is famous to the Naymans as well as Arghyns.
Ән салып тоқсан екі түрлендіріп,	Having sung in ninety-two variations,
Найманның бір жияйын тірі жанын.	Let me gather every living soul among the Nayman.

Sara qyzy:

Қызы едім Тастанбектің атым Сара,	My name is Sara, I am the daughter of Tastanbek,
Ішінен ер Қаптағай шықтым дара,	From among Er Qaptaghay, I alone stood apart.
Он үште домбыра алып сөз сөйлеп ем,	I took up the dombyra and started to sing when I was thirteen years old,
Келемін бір сүрінбей жалғыз кара.	I am the only one who did not stumble even once on her way.

Figure 1. The Introduction and Co-Legitimation of Aitys Poets.¹⁰

i.

Қолдай көр, ер Қаптағай, ата-бабам,	Please give me support, Er Qaptaghay, my ancestor,
Сөзімді тыңда, құрбым, келсе шамаң.	If your courage is enough, girls, come and listen to my words.

ii.

Әкемнің төрт түлігі бәрі де сай,	My father has all four types of livestock, all suitable,
Алты ауыл аруақты үш ағам бай	Three of my noble uncles from six villages are wealthy,
Бұлаңдап асау кердей жүрсем-дағы,	But even so, I am still miserable,
Токтыдай борышқа кеттім, уа дариға-ай.	Like a little lamb, I was traded, alas!

iii.

Қажеке-ау, мынау қалай шақырады!	Qazheke-aū, what an invitation this is!
Жиенқұл тез келсін деп ақырады!	Let Zhīenqul come quickly, he roars!
Көрсетсек асылыңды ап келіндер,	Let's show your precious one, go and bring (him),
Ауылыңда ол келгенше отырады.	(Birzhan) is willing to wait in your village until he comes.
Арғынға жол бермеген есіл тілім,	My vain tongue does not let the Arghyn speak,
Күн өтпей қор боп ұшқан қызыл гүлім!	My red flower has not gone one day without being humiliated!
Сіздерден ұялғаннан үндемеуші-ем	I kept silent out of respect for all of you,
Есекке қосақтаулы өтті күнім!	(but) my days are passing (while I am) attached to this donkey!
Өзі білер деуші едім жақсылардың,	I thought these good people could think for themselves,
Ақыры қайры болды енді мұным.	In the end, this situation is for the best.

iv.

Өздерің Жиенқұлды көріп едің,	You've seen Zhīenqul yourselves,
Құдайдан қорықпай шыдап беріп едің.	Without fearing God, you gave (me) away.
Шақырған найман шалдың аруағына,	To the Nayman ancestor spirits you called upon,
Бәріде қыз да болсам серік едім.	I stand with them all, even if I am a girl.

Figure 2. Sara's Summary of Her Situation, Excerpts.

Zhīenqul from the present company (a misstep which signals impropriety, disrespect, or shame). As Sara's story builds, Birzhan acknowledges her theme, and also begins to make direct notice of their immediate hosts in the village. Together, the two poets directly name and invoke several other participants who are presumed to be in the gathered audience, or who would have representatives seated there, as well as those

deceased relatives whose position should be respected. These include: Sara’s father Tastanbek, Sara’s uncles including Esimbek (who would stand in some kind of brother or brother in law relation to her father), the head of the current village Turysbek, the elders (*aq saqaldar*) and the “good people” of this same village. All of these are in a position to defend Sara, against the family who has taken her against her will—the young Zhienqul and his father. During their aitys Birzhan comes to recognize that Sara is asking for his recognition and help, and he finally takes a clear stand comes to her aid, addressing the entire audience as seen in Figure 3.

i.

Законда зорлық болмас жақсы адамға.	According to the law, difficulty cannot come to a good person.
Жақсыны қор қып болмас бір жаманға.	If you guard goodness, a person cannot find their way to badness.
Және де аят пенен хадисте бар,	There are also (Quranic) verses and hadiths,
Жылатып берме деген еш наданға.	“Don’t bring an ignorant person to tears,” they say.

ii.

Өзіне құдай беріп қойған шақта,	God gave a person what they have,
Дұшпанның топ етеді алысқаны.	He is the best among the enemies who wrestle.
Көрмеп пе Сарадай қыз қатын тапса,	If he looked for a girl like Sara (as a wife) could he find her,
Ішінен өнер қысар ауызын жапса.	If her mouth is closed her art compels her from inside.
Қор қылып Жиенқұлға жібергеннен,	Instead of humiliating her by sending her to Zhienqul,
Қытайша он есе артық басын шапса.	It is better to behead her ten times, like the Chinese (do).
Тұрысбек, Есімбекпен сау тұр аман.	Turysbek (stands) well and healthy with Esimbek.
Таянды қайтар уақытым елге таман.	My time to return to (my) people has drawn near.
Айналып ендігі жыл бір келермін,	I may circle back (here) in one year’s time,
Тысқара топырақтан болсам аман.	If I am alive and well.
Сараны Жиенқұлға бере көрме,	Please do not give Sara to Zhienqul,
Қыз түгіл ер құнына келер шамаң.	Your wealth (could support) a son, not just a girl.
Бар болса сүйегінде ойларсыңдар,	If there are thinkers among your people,
Өлі тілін тірі алмас деген заман.	They say the laws of the dead don’t apply to the living.
Байлаулы бала құстай Сара сорлы,	Poor Sara is like a baby bird leashed in a cage,
Жоқ екен осы күнде мұнан жаман.	There can’t be anything worse these days.

Figure 3. Birzhan’s Reply (Excerpts).

While the aitys unfolds in the words of two poets who face off in a dual, those poets not only represent their family, lineage, and region, but they are also surrounded by audience members who are always present in building performance with their visible and audible reactions (Äuezov 2014). Birzhan in turn calls upon the authority of both God and ancestral law, to implore the audience—including the family and village elders—to make a wiser decision about Sara’s fate. Birzhan has an entourage with him on this visit including other poets, who will be able to remember this aitys and to recite it in their future travels. Sara has performed extremely well, so the reputation of the village is truly at stake.¹³ All together, these discursive features are constitutive of the participant framework of this speech event, as well as its pragmatic potential.

Because the context of aitys allows poets to become multiply layered in their “self” presentation before a public (see Lindforrs 2019), poets are culturally legitimated to articulate social commentary that might not otherwise be said, sometimes resulting in the dynamics of “speaking back to power.” Even as mediational performances are “core structures” that “are constitutive of social life: traditionalization, the socialization of discourse, and authorization,” at the same time they may play the reverse role, by turning those very structures “upside down, reminding us yet again that what serves authority can also challenge it” (Bauman 2004, 158). Indeed, in the historical example of Sara and Birzhan, this is precisely what allows a young woman to voice her concerns about her own unwanted arranged marriage, and what allows a man who is factually a stranger to publicly support her and to admonish her village elders, something which neither of them would be culturally sanctioned to do, if they were speaking as their “ordinary” selves. They are stronger in the relationship they construct together in performance, and legitimated together as bearers of cultural authority before their audience. While it is those specifically present who are responsible for fixing Sara’s immediate situation, she is also a sociological character. Here foregrounding the “mapping problem” of a specific historical and cultural context (Irvine 1996) helps us to understand, who has actually been implicated in this poetic event: *all* those who claim to uphold religious and customary authority, are responsible for Sara’s well-being, and for that of all the young women like her in their own families and communities.

Sara’s story did become a touchstone reference, and experience and performance told and retold. In the remainder of this article, I will show how Sara and Birzhan ultimately emerge as “characters” who—through shifting ideological contexts and storylines—have remained strong and enduring cultural figures in a nationalized (and semi-mythologized) Qazaq literary history.

Socialist National Culture in the Early Soviet Period

The end of the Russian Imperial period, and the beginning of the Soviet Socialist Republican period marked a significant historical process of entextualization for many cultural forms including most notably a time of intentional and rapid cultural and linguistic transformation, when written literacy was heavily emphasized as a key condition of the move from “backward” nomadic or Islamic traditions in Central Eurasia, to a global socialist modernism (Fierman 1991; Marzluf 2017, 2018; Winner 1952). Rather than embracing oral traditions and musical traditions as extemporaneous, in the early in the socialist period of the early 20th century, performances of narrative, poetry, and music were recorded and transcribed, resulting in texts, scripts, and scores from which “national” (ethnic, territorial) types were identified and typified—this was true across Central Asia both in the former Soviet Union as well as in socialist China (Harris 2008). Great attention in scientific and academic research was given specifically to describing characteristics of particular genres of artistic forms based on such collected examples; for example, the version of the aitys of Birzhan and Sara created by Zhüsipbek Shaykhislamuly was included together with other texts of poetry, folktales, and epic narratives, and these were used for this

purpose, re-cited by famous early Soviet folklorist Muqtar Äuezov, who was responsible for an encyclopedic cataloguing and description of oral folk genres in Qazaqstan.¹⁴

Descriptions of “national culture” in the early socialist period were decidedly ethnographic in nature—collections of detailed notes by ethnographers and musicologists determining which aspects of “folklore” which might be costumed, staged, and performed again and again throughout the Soviet period to demonstrate the “successful internationalism” of the large polity across each of its semi-autonomous republics (Hirsch 1997; Tishkov 1997). Previous differences in language, genealogy, or lifeway were downplayed, as each of the new “folk” was designed to represent a titular nationality corresponding to newly created republican borders (Edgar 2004; Suny and Martin eds. 2001). Many different art forms became part of a newly “national” culture and were performed or showcased in the centralized system of republican “culture houses” local outposts of the ministries and theatres meant to bring socialist art forms to the masses, as well as in the republican capitol and in “international” performances in the Soviet center of Moscow (Grant 1995; Igmen 2012; Shelekpayev 2018); this structural organization remains active to this day in fact, at the regional level (Dubuisson 2020). In other words, the Soviet political and ideological system created from the complexity of languages, cultural traditions, and territorial identities certain national socialist types, of which performances became tokens, based on ethnographic descriptions of ethno-cultural categories. The “self-consciousness” and “diversity” of Soviet nationality policy was—ironically—meant to showcase the anticolonial and liberating nature of Soviet modernity, as opposed to the oppression of the Russian Imperial system (Tagangaeva 2017, 394–395; Martin 2001).¹⁵

The nationalization of culture in the Soviet period gave artists and performers of many different genres the possibility (or requirement) of a doubly laminated voice (Bakhtin 1984) in their very presence on the stage, where the national “language” of performance comes into being in and through the conventions of discourse (Tannen 2004, 403, cited in Volek 2014), in this case a socialist discourse. In the case of aitys generally, rather than representing ancestral lineages, poets could represent Sovietized “units” such as nationalities, administrative regions, or collective farms (Zemtovsky and Kunanbaeva 1997). However poets—still recognized as embodying “the voice of the people” (Dubuisson 2017, 90)—could also notably speak as and for the class of the proletariat, against the authority of the wealthy or religious elite. In the operatic version of the Birzhan-Sara tale first scripted by composer Muqan Tülebaev and performed at the Abay State Opera theater in 1946 for a public audience, Birzhan and Sara are presented in a romantic narrative as star-crossed lovers, who are impeded by the “oppressive” rules of village elders and mullahs. Birzhan comes to speak more predominantly as a brave young revolutionary, speaking out against traditional authority. Thus in the case of this particular cultural story, while the characters remained and village context remained, it is precisely the participant framework and discursive pragmatics that were removed, replaced with a variety of culturally stereotyped figures who were together meant to animate instead the narrative of the socialist state.¹⁶

The opera is broken into four major scenes, which I summarize here, based on the scene descriptions provided online by Astana Opera. In the first opening scene, we see a colorful traditionalized holiday village celebration, where famed poets are coming to perform—Birzhan from northern Kökshetau, Sara from southern Zhetysu. But, in the first scene we also meet the villains of the tale—the first is the rich man (Kaz: *bai*) Zhienqul, with his retinue of guards and servants—he is the nephew of the local authority Zhambota. A new character, Zhambota’s daughter Altynay, is introduced as a villain as well—she is in love with Birzhan and hoping to attract his attention on this visit; she is thwarted however when Birzhan meets Sara, as they

meet in an aitys wildly applauded by the villagers (as seen in excerpts of this aitys in Figure 4 below), and quickly fall in love. Similarly, when he sees the poet Sara, the cruel Zhienqul demands to take her as his fourth wife. Sara refuses him, and Birzhan sings openly against him, further gaining the popular support of the crowd, and so Zhienqul is initially forced to leave.

Birzhan:

Саражан, бала жастан сөзің өткір Іздесең, келіп тұрмын Біржан сері.	Sara dear, who grew up (with) sharp word(s), Here I am, Birzhan, if you were looking (for me)
Әуелі қазақшалап көріселік, Бері кел, жасың кіші менен гөрі.	From the start let us greet each other Qazaq style, Come closer, you are younger than me.

Sara:

Ежелден-ай сен басылған жерді көрдік. Таң қалдым сәулетінді сенің көріп, Сал Біржан.	From ancient times we saw the land where you lived, I was surprised to see your “light” appearance, Sal Birzhan.
Өлеңді қолқа қылсаң ағытармын, Ендеше көрісемін, қолым беріп, Сал Біржан.	If you ask for poetry, I will express myself fully, I I see it this way, I will give (you) my hand, Sal Birzhan.

/choir/

Birzhan:

Сөзімді өлгенше бір ашпассын Мырзанды Жиенқұл-дай құдай алмай	You will remain silent until the end, Until the Almighty takes your “lord” Zhienqul.
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Sara:

Әй, Біржан арнайсың сөз алсаң Бауырым, өңіріме, кел қасыма	Hey Birzhan, your word(s) are dedicated (to me) My darling, come to my side, be near me
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Birzhan and Sara:

Асқағы туған сөздің, салдық сәлем Табиғат берген екен бір басыңа Ояң көз және кесин жәрменке думандай	Your proud native words, we welcome everyone It turns out that nature has gifted to one person (such) beautiful eyes like a festive fair
Біржан мен Сара дауысын-ай? Бір ғасыр-ай; Бір ғасыр-ай!	What are the voices of Birzhan and Sara? Ay, one century, one century!

/choir/

Figure 4. Excerpts of the Sung Aitys, from the Birzhan-Sara Opera.¹⁷

In the second scene, Birzhan sings longingly for his beloved Sara, and his mother tries to console him. But his father has been warned by the religious leaders (mullahs) not to act against the local authorities. Unafraid, Birzhan sings to his friends in the village, including the songs of the poet Abai, and vows to fight for Sara. Birzhan and Sara have a moment in private to declare their love, a union blessed by Birzhan's mother. But they are interrupted by the villains—Alтынay, who attempts to seduce Birzhan with promises of wealth, and Zhambota, who accuses them of violating custom and tradition. Zhambota's guards kidnap Sara and take her to the house of Zhienqul. In the third scene, Zhienqul already prepares for his impending wedding to Sara with an elaborate feast. Birzhan, after wandering alone with rage and grief, bursts in on the gathering to rescue Sara, although she is already technically betrothed—he suggests taking her north to Kokshetau, where his friends can help them. They attempt to escape, but again are betrayed by Alтынay and captured by the villains; Birzhan is beaten and imprisoned by the guards. Sara attempts to visit Birzhan at the prison, but is again betrayed by Alтынay. In the fourth and final scene, Birzhan is put on trial for his failure to follow traditional religious and customary law—he is condemned by Zhambota and the mullahs. Sara arrives with Birzhan's parents and friends to the scene—when Alтынay sees her, she tells Zhienqul, who shoots at Birzhan in a jealous rage. But Sara blocks him, and is the one who is shot and dies. Birzhan dies of grief and injury—his last song in the final scene of the opera is sung in honor of Sara, for poets, his parents, friends, and homeland. After he passes, his mother sings a traditional *zhokhtau* (mourning song). The last image of the opera is of Birzhan Sara standing hand in hand above a waterfall—the description reads, “They were not fated to be together, but the story of their love remained in the memory of the people, and the songs of Birzhan are sung by a new generation of lovers.”¹⁸

There are many readily apparent differences in the operatic presentation of the storyline. Birzhan and Sara do meet as poets, but quickly develop a central romantic plot of their own; their mini aitys is restyled in quatrains, and serves as a conceit to show their initial attraction. They end this by singing couplets together in harmony—something which would never occur in an actual aitys. Their lines are regularly interjected by the gathering of villagers who serve as a Greek chorus to show their support and admiration of the poets' love. The aitys focuses on their meeting, and does not locate either poet in any lineage of ancestry at all. Zhienqul appears actively as a villain in this opera—in the original aitys he fails to appear at all, which is central to Sara's criticism of him. In the opera Birzhan is given a jealous counterpart in Alтынay, and together they are part of a powerful and wealthy family who colludes with religious leaders to force the marriages they desire. That dynamic is entirely absent from the historical aitys; the opera is instead very much a narrative of the socialist revolutionary goal to overcome traditional authority. Finally, the conflict and showdown between the young idealist Birzhan and his oppressors becomes embodied and physical in a series of altercations; in the original aitys of course, his criticism of village elders remains in words only, and they do not have the opportunity in the performance framework to answer him in any way.

In this version of the Soviet-ized opera, an example of nationalized culture under socialism, the gender dynamics of the original aitys are presented differently, but not without some irony. Both Sara and Birzhan alike are presented as young people who wish to be unconstrained in their choice of romantic partner, able to act and choose independently from village or religious authority. In presenting the character Sara this way alongside Birzhan, this operatic version of the story underscores the discourses and themes of women's liberation in Soviet Central Asia, which centered around women's marriage rights, education and literacy, and participation in the public sphere—conversations which were specifically addressed in the realm of art and culture, and which continue to the present day (Kassenova and Rukhman 2019, Ulugova 2020).¹⁹ However, in the re-presentation of the relationship between the two poets as a romantic one, rather than one of mutual respect and support, Sara's role is

also somewhat undermined. In the original historical aitys, Sara Tastanbek was able to manipulate the very structures and dynamics of social and cultural authority, to defeat an unjust situation. Birzhan advocated for her alone, not for himself. In the opera, those dynamics are reversed: traditional authority is completely rejected as feudal and repressive, and Birzhan's perspective and voice are given most space, such that Sara becomes a supporting character in his larger story of overt opposition.

The Soviet period could be considered an unusually long (seventy year) "intertextual gap" (Briggs and Bauman 1992) in the life of the oral tradition of aitys, wherein there was an explicit state ideological effort to transform the narrative. However, it is essential to state that the duality of the socialist-nationalist framework was not a totalizing cultural colonialism, but rather allowed for a reasonable degree of freedom in local or regional definitions and emphases in definitions and presentations of "nation" in the sphere of art and literature (Kluczevska and Hojjeva 2020; Kudaibergenova 2017; Tagangaeva 2017). It is perhaps better to understand how in this cultural context, the oral tradition "minimized" the gap itself (Wilce 2005, 67; see also Briggs and Bauman 1992) through absorption or reincorporation. From the metaperspective of mapping, it is clear to see how certain key features of the participant framework of the (now staged) performance were conflated with the original poetic speech event and thus remained intact, preserving in other ways the dialogic potential of the story. The partial adaptation of aitys to opera is helpfully seen as an historical form of "grafting," a process of enregisterment wherein a "register of one social arena is implanted" in a different but analogous (even conventionally opposed) arena, but where "the citational practice . . . denies that there is a difference between the two terms of the analogy" (Gal 2018, 16). However, while the genre frame, messaging, and staging were all changed, the dialogue between the central characters was preserved *as aitys*. The villager characters on stage were thus functioning doubly now as the voice of local public opinion for poets and as a greek chorus to the theatre audiences, those meant to support and champion the cause of Birzhan and Sara as well. This socialist crowd is now also implicated, in the conversation, dynamic, and goals of the young heroes—who are, at the heart, most valuable and influential precisely because they are poets and thus already legitimated as key representatives of this cultural group.

Due to these forms of conflation in the larger discursive dynamics of performance, there are now three ways in which the aitys tradition has been able to reabsorb or overcome the gaps of "textual" transmission. Not only was the relationship between poets and their supportive audience thus preserved in the opera, but today the short "aitys" duet of the first scene is re-performed on aitys stages—lifted from the operatic context and recontextualized within the oral tradition itself. Further, Birzhan and Sara are listed as "ancestors" themselves within the lineages of poets and cultural heroes named regularly within contemporary performances. Finally, the original character of Sara and her voice or speaking figure as a "young Qazaq woman"—constructed in both the discursive pragmatics of the historical performance context as well as to some extent within the opera—have also survived. I elaborate upon all these points in the following section of this article. What story, values, or experience does this historical poetic performance continue to bring to its present days "audiences"? What kind of cultural, social, and historic lessons, is this oral tradition seen to impart?

Birzhan and Sara in a National Present

Since the fall of the Soviet Union and the emergence of Qazaqstan in 1991 as an independent state, there has been an extensive and ongoing effort toward national identity building. Qazaqstan has invested heavily in multiple forms of nation-branding, which seek to balance competing domestic interests, as well as regional and international perspectives (Fauve 2015; Marat 2009; Savdakassova 2017). This is true to varying extents across the Central Asian republics, but one major common

trend which can be seen is the prominent symbolic showcasing of ethnic culture within the countries themselves, and in that regard, the work of elite cultural organizers and public-staged performance plays a central role (Adams 2010; Adams and Rustemova 2009). Such “spectacle” can be seen to a large extent as the (re)traditionalization of culture—specifically oral and epic poetry—of nationalizing regimes, bringing confluence of language and history together with an “immediacy” of form (Bauman and Briggs 2003, 163). In the case of Central Asia, the idea of Soviet “nationality” must be re-coded as the ethnicity of each now sovereign state. However, while tradition is quite central to public life in contemporary Central Asia, it would be a mistake to reduce its role to a top-down political pageantry. Rather, it is better to understand how populations, cultural elites, and state officials can find new forms of “alignment” in projects of nation-building, and to understand how “practices of traditionalization [have] allowed new forms of instrumental meaning-making to emerge, thereby providing a foundation upon which the elite could promote tradition as a marker of identity and political reconstruction” (Beyer and Finke 2019, 310).

The Soviet era networks of regional offices of cultural affairs and regional and national theatres, as well as renewed popular and academic attention to traditional performance networks, have been reinvigorated in post-Soviet Qazaqstan.²⁰ In the sphere of aitys, it is notably prominent figures like poet and television presenter Zhürsin Erman, as well as academic researcher and diplomat Murzatay Zholdasbekov, who are most directly responsible for the re-establishment of a national network of competitions, and for the recording and inscription of the vast majority of performances, together with collaborators from state universities and the union of writers (another formerly Soviet institution). As a result of their efforts, it has become commonplace in the last decades to see regular aitys duels on everyday television, as well as staged performances of aitys for national holiday celebrations. The re-nationalization of culture—as it was during the early Soviet period as well—must be seen as the extensive collaboration of a wide variety of interests and actors, which simultaneously legitimate national governance, while allowing for creative mobilization and interpretation on the ground (Beyer and Finke 2019, 323).

In that highly performative but multi-faceted context of post-Soviet nation-building in Qazaqstan, there are three major ways in which I would argue that the contemporary aitys tradition has incorporated or overcome the intertextual gaps presented here—from the passage of time (a long century), to the shift in modes of entextualization (writing, opera, television, and back to oral tradition again). First, the short dialogue between Birzhan and Sara from the opera has been restaged several times as a part of public celebrations *as an aitys* in that same context. The pageantry of the public presentation and the prominent acclimation of Birzhan and Sara as poets of the tradition both help to disguise the fact that the poetic content of the operatic aitys and other aitys performances are not actually the same; the aitys of the opera and of the national framework are in this sense presented as “contiguous discourses”—those which are not opposed *per se* but are rather seen as related to one another “along the axis of combination” of such factors as “voice, textiness, or footing” (Irvine 2005, 77–78; see also Agha 2005). They are presented as being “like” again, as tokens of the aitys type; in their visual styling and performative re-presentation, opera is quietly blended or embedded into “aitys”: the poets in their relationship and song become a metonym of “Qazaq” culture that transcends historical context.

For example, the life story of Birzhan Sal was also made as a film of the same name by Kazakhfilm Studios in 2009, creating from the poet an epic character in another multi-media context for a new generation of viewers.²¹

Second, the figures of Birzhan and Sara are now themselves referenced *as ancestors* in the genealogical recitation or summary of poets performing today. They may be mentioned or described in a list of other cultural heroes and figures considered important to the establishment and continuation of Qazaq history, culture, and aitys itself. For example, in a live and televised performance with Muqammedzhan in the

early 2000s poet Aibek explicitly recognized the work of Jursin Erman in maintaining this ancestral tradition, and by emplacing Sara and Birzhan in a list named “the history of aitys” as seen in Figure 5.

The brief mention of Birzhan and Sara as ancestors in aitys is a strategic reference, an index of cultural knowledge linking poets both to a community and to a cultural history; such pragmatic recontextualization can be helpfully compared to the token use of native languages as a means of identity-building in the context of language endangerment, where speakers seek to bridge possible intertextual gaps (Ahlers 2017), a means of recalling and embodying “ancestral voices” that seeks to overcome the “dismemberment” of historical conditions of linguistic and cultural colonization (Perley 2013, 244). Birzhan and Sara must come to stand as more than themselves: they must become quickly recognizable cultural figures, in the new national context, figures who have survived the coloniality of the Soviet cultural and nationalities frameworks. The work of cultural organizers like Erman and Zholdasbekov—those who organize competitions and find sponsors to maintain the tradition and to keep it alive in some contemporary fashion—becomes essential as well in this regard, and they, together with all the poets, also become directly implicated in the extended framework of participants in the community, working to make such performances possible.

In contemporary aitys performances it is possible to see how these poets have grown and developed *as intertextual selves*, the selves of memory and interaction, “calibrated over time” (Agha 1995, 143, cited in Haviland 2005, 81) who have the capacity to be embodied in a broader cultural and performative genealogical worlds, both within and beyond the aitys community. Building on the work of Ochs and Capps on the narrated self (1996), Haviland explains that the “notion of a “coauthored” intertextual self implies an evolving set of texts derived from chains of narratives, through processes of inscription, revision, and editing involving many

Атымызды паш етіп алты алашқа,	Our names our made known to the six Alash,
Бұл жайлы Жүрсін ағам мың ойланған.	My good uncle Zhürsin thought of this a thousand times.
Көз жүгіртіп қарасақ тамырына,	If (you) run quickly to look at the root,
Бұл айтыстың тарихы былай болған.	The history of aitys was like this.
Қырғыз барып айтысып Сүйінбайлар,	The Qyrgyz went to have aitys with (those like) Süyinbay;
Ұлт бейнесін сомдаған ұлы ойлардан.	The image of the nation was forged from great thoughts.
Біржанды Жетісуға жетелеген,	Birzhan was brought to Zhetisu,
Сара жайлы шұғыла-шұрайлы арман.	Sara best reflected back to him the bright dream.
Жанақ, Түбек, Шөже мен Орынбайлар,	Zhanaq, Tübek, Shozhe and Orynbaylar -
Жұрт көңілін тазартты лайланған.	The mood of the people was purified.
Әсет пен Кемпірбайдың айтысында,	In the aitys of Äset and Kempirbay,
Бақилық жарастықтың шырайы болған.	The beauty of harmony was passed to the world.

Figure 5. Opening of Aitys Performance By Poet Aibek.²²

voices, in addition to those of the “person” whose “self” is thus assembled, articulated, polished, as well as contested. Like any other discursive object, this “self” incorporates participant frames and voices, as well as allegiances, footings, and stances; it has its allusions and its chronology, looking both to the past and to the future” (2005, 82). The ability of poets to become “selves” both lasting and transformed is the third way in which the aitys tradition is able to ultimately overcome its own possible intertextual gaps.

An excellent example of the expansive and incorporative poetic and ancestral “self” in aitys comes from my own ethnographic research on the tradition in Qazaqstan in the early 2000s. It so happens that one of the most popular young poets in the national performance framework at that time was a young woman also named Sara—Sara Toqtamysova, representing northern Semey region. In one of her performances in 2004, against the poet Däuletkerey representing Astana, she sang about the prospect of being married, and the two discussed and joked together about how he would come to participate in her wedding.²⁴ As her opponent was roughly ten years her senior, she names him as an older brother (Kaz: *agha*), and seeks his advice. In that context, she directly invokes the historic Sara Tastanbekqyzy as an ancestor not only for aitys or for the Qazaq people in a general sense, but also for herself to demonstrate a more serious point: the modern Sara hopes that her own marriage scenario will be happy, an experience different than that of her “mother,” as seen in Figure 6.

Here it is necessary to explore the “mapping problem” of aitys, in order to understand how the contemporary poet Sara is using the principle of genealogical reference and lineage building central to the poetic genre itself (Dubuisson 2017), and how she is pragmatically reincorporating the relationship between the historical Sara and her “people” back into the current participant framework: she invokes a direct comparison between herself, and “our mother” Sara. She also implicates her fellow poet Dauletkerey, by praising him and highlighting his reputation, and asking for his support; this move runs directly parallel to the way in which Sara Tastanbek asked for the support of Birzhan. Our modern Sara hopes that her own fate in marriage will be a happy one. While she obviously lives in a different time with shifted marriage norms and conventions, in voicing the topic this way Sara is asking her opponent and her audience to have compassion for her perspective as a young potential bride and to ask for their support. This is an effective move, because everyone can relate her to the girl or daughter in their own families, who might be at a similar stage of life, and in so doing she repeats the original performance, and expands the participant framework of the original Sara’s voice and utterance.

Sara Tastanbek has become a social persona who was originally created through concrete dialogic connections to others in the specific discursive context of “staged performance” (Bell and Gibson 2011). In that historical poetic context of aitys, through her demonstration of style, topic building, and knowledge of ancestry, Sara was legitimated as a “real” poet in her ongoing dialogue with her opponent Birzhan, a famous and already well-established figure, just as his own identity had been legitimated in his own co-constructed performances with other aitys poets in the past. Once recognized or identified in this way, Sara sings not only as a young girl in a village in the register of everyday talk, but also as an empowered aitys poet who happens to be female, a person or discursive figure co-established through footing, alignment, and dialogue, who is able to perform within the cultural domain and range (Agha 2005, 38–39) of aitys poetry. Thus it is that Sara’s social “voice” is “differentiable from its surround” as inclusive rather than individual: at once constituted by the original participant framework of performance, but also metadiscursively indexing a form of social personhood (40). Over time, Sara has become doubly laminated both as culturally legitimated *aqyn* (poet), but also as a prototypical “Qazaq girl,” a figure who has been licensed to speak both *as* and *for*, an “image-text of reversible encompassment” (Nakassis 2019), who can be re-entextualized in new

Қайрылып бұл заманға орал десен, Оралып Сара анамыз соғар ма екен.	If you ask me to come back to this world, Will our mother Sara visit us?
Сөзімен үлгі болған ұрпағына, Көзідері кейінгінің шалар ма екен?	Exemplified for posterity by her speech, Will generations remember later?
Қазаққа біткен өнер- өнегенің, Иесі мен киесі соларда ма екен?	Art is the heritage of Qazaqs, Maybe they were the authors and patrons?
Өмірде оң лайықты жалын болып, Өнерде Сара анамыздай болар ма екен?	Becoming a worthy flame in life, Will there be artists like our mother Sara?
Бірақ та Жиенқұлға қолды болған, Оны ойласам, көңілімнен бір ұшқын соғар бөтен.	But becoming a slave to Zhīenqul, If I think about it, a strange fire burns in my soul.
Алла мені қор қылмай Жиенқұлға, Тағдырым оңға бастап, оңар ма екен?	Allah, do not (let) Zhīenqul humiliate me - Maybe fate will have mercy, everything will get better?
Тастанбектің қызына қонбаған бақ, Тоқтамыстың қызына қоңа ма екен?	The bird of happiness flew past the daughter of Tastanbek, (But) will it come to perch on the daughter of Toqtamys?
Сөзінді жыр-маржанмен көмкересің, Көзінді елге қарай төңкересің.	(You) are framing your words with precious pearls, There is a langourous look in your eye.
Өр мінез, жалын жанды ағам едің, Санасына сіңірген ел кеңесін.	You're (of) high character, blood aflame, my brother, (You have) absorbed the advice of your people.
Ағамыз жылы қабақ таныта алса, Сара қыз еміреніп еркелесін.	If our brother can show warmth, The girl Sara will sing happily.
Сүйікті елден бата алған бұл, Ағамның биіктерден көремін әр төбесін.	Having received the blessing of (our) beloved people, I see my brother's accomplishments at the highest peak.
Қолымнан келгенінше көтеремін, Алтын басты ағамының мәртебесін.	I will always support as much as I can, The honor of my famous older brother.

Figure 6. Aqyn Sara Toqtamysova References the Historical Sara Tastanbekqyzy.²⁵

and ever changing social discourses and frames, such as that of contemporary Qazaqstani ethnic nationalism.²⁶

Conclusion: Cultural Mapping

In 2018 Qazaqstan celebrated the 165th anniversary of her passing, a competition featuring many poets in which Sara Toqtamysova also participated, and in which contemporary poets sang aitys in her honor. A public announcement of the events described the Birzhan and Sara aitys as a widely known piece, characterized by women's equality.²⁷ Reflecting back on the life of the poet, and the efforts to keep her material and cultural legacy alive today, one of representatives of the public fund *Naq*

Birlik supporting such activities was quoted in a local newspaper, and recalled some lines attributed to Sara near the end of her life, saying that her words will live forever in people's memories (Figure 7).²⁸

In this brief excerpt, Sara Tastanbek reflects on her identity and contribution as a poet, and asks to be remembered by her people. Her wish was realized, as she has been memorialized in a museum in her home (southeastern Almaty) region, which was opened in 1992, and continues to be recognized in now nationalized anniversary events, as well as—as shown here above—in the words and recognition of new generations of poets today. The meaning of her life and work—and especially of her very first public performance with Birzhan, which is to date far and away her most famous piece—has shifted and expanded in different ways, for new audiences and new periods of political history that she herself perhaps would not have imagined. But Sara Tastanbek is now firmly entrenched in Kazakh cultural and oral history, newly (re)entextualized as image, as character; she was a poet, but now has—as she wished—become an ancestor to future generations. Her role has changed, but within the tradition of *aitys*, Sara continues to contribute in different ways to evolving conversations and discourses in the present.

Within the basic structure of a verbal duel, *aitys* presents a multilayered dialogic framework, the discursive underpinnings of who poets are as (i) accomplished and worthy individuals, (ii) representatives of regions, lineages, and social groups, and (iii) interlocutors—what relationship can they establish to one another within performance? Within this cultural region, particular kinship and social relationships are beset with expectations and prescriptions—from support to avoidance, from joking to respect—and poets may embody and adapt those accordingly to establish the discursive ground of their performance which unfolds accordingly. These three dimensions of their social “voices” are typically established in the early stages of performance, and once ratified, allow poets to each *blend* these identities into one unified and legitimated role. It is precisely that unification, “embedding” of voice, or “the layering of multiple actors in a single utterance” and the resultant “interdependency of roles” (Hanks 1996, 169) which allows poets to enter properly into the discursive positionalities of the poetic form to find the embodied persona from which to “speak” with one another (Kaz: *aitysu*), and which creates the cultural authority of that dialogic speaking voice (Dubuisson 2010). Such layering by *aitys* poets is helpfully seen as a “role alignment” between voice(s) and social personae, whereby performances become events, in which “characterological figures indexed by speech . . . establish some footing or alignment with figures performed through speech, and hence with each other” (Agha 2005, 40; Agha 2007), and intertextual gaps such as time can be overcome in their dialogue. It is the mediated discursive pragmatics of its ever-expanding participant framework (see Bauman 2004) that ensure the continuation of this oral tradition.

«Елудің төртеуіне келгенімде, Дерт жеңіп, қалып барады өлеңімде.	Having lived to be fifty-four years of age, Illness has won, there is no time for poetry.
Болды ғой қысқа менің қу өмірім, Алпысқа жетпей бір күн өлемін бе?	My artful life was cut short, it turns out, Will I die one day, never having reached the age of sixty?
Біраз күн еңбек еттім дос-жаранға, Өлеңім аз да болса мақтанарға.	I labored many days for my beloved friends, I can be proud of my poems, (even) though they are few.
Мені де «ұрпағым» деп, еске ал, жұртым. Сараның айтары осы аттанарда».	Remember me too as a “descendant”, my people. That is what Sara wanted to say before (I) go.

Figure 7. Last Words Attributed to Sara Tastanbek.²⁹

Aitys as a genre is very much a “transposable frame of reference in terms of which communicative action is possible” (Briggs and Bauman 1992; see also Hymes 1987), one that allows for integration and change, such that the “voice” of the tradition perdures through time. As we see in the survival of a particular aitys story and its characters across more than a century, the oral tradition must be able to transcend and become embodied in other performative contexts, in order to “come back” to itself again in the future. It is the characterization allowed by particular multidimensional participant frameworks in the aitys genre itself, which allows for the adaptability of the tradition over the long duree. This poetry is a discursive space which allows for the emergence of characters or selves—such as ancestors—whose identities and words move across contexts from the immediate to the general and back again. The attribution of responsibility for what is said in any one performance—or for the entire tradition to date—is maximally inclusive; ultimately, it is a whole cultural group, who is implicated in this poetry. It is such flexibility and social incorporation that allows this oral tradition to survive over time, even in dramatically shifting ideological and political circumstances. Using Irvine’s “mapping problem” as a mechanism of analysis in the aitys example helps us to understand how and why the participant framework of a longstanding oral tradition is best seen not as a specific set of given roles or rules, but rather as a potentially infinitely expanding series of participants *in multiple specific cultural and historical contexts* (Irvine 1996), who are together able to absorb within their ongoing dialogues the shifting ideological frames, personae, and discourses of the times. The “mapping” of this poetic tradition helps us to understand how voice connected to character, speech event to social discourse, and ultimately, how poetic ancestors can be connected to new generations of audiences in the future.

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Notes

1. The eponym “sal” here refers to Birzhan’s status as a bard.
2. The specific *aitys* tradition is found among Qazaq populations in Mongolia and Xinjiang, but highly analogous poetic traditions can be found among populations as far west as Turkey, as well. While the tradition in China and the former Soviet Union has been nationalized as a part of cultural ethnic identity under socialism (and therefore today most often appears as part of an ethnic or nationalist framework), it is equally important to recognize its place as one of many related oral traditions across Eurasia predating these particular political formations.
3. The complete collection of Shaykhislamuly’s collected works edited by Zhangabek Shaghatay was published in 2015 by Qazaqstan’s National Library and is now publicly available online; the volume containing the aitys of Birzhan and Sara as well as biographical information about Shaykhislamuly himself can be accessed here: <http://nabr.kz/bookView/view/?brId=1177921&simple=true&green=1&lang=kk#>
4. A summary list (with brief descriptions) of aitys collections from 1942 to the present may be seen here: <http://aitysker.org/?p=10853>.

5. It is always the case that any “genre” is situated within particular social and historical contexts, and may thus change over time (Bakhtin 1984; Bauman and Briggs 1992, Hanks 1987). Judith Irvine (2001, 64–65) also points out that the very notion of “genre” description itself must be carefully considered within the context of colonial collection and description: with whom do ethnographers and linguists work to understand categories of cultural discourse, and on the basis of what authority?

6. Irvine (1989) and Sweet (2019) also show how frameworks of interaction may also translate into and inform the distribution of forms of material value and status among participants in that community.

7. The term “qyz” in Qazaq means literally girl, but also daughter, depending on context, and both these references are meaningful within the context of this aitys; the ending “y” is a genitive marker—girl or daughter of whom—in this case, it is her father, “the man Tastanbek” mentioned in the poem. The same could be true for the son of a father (-uly), and this is a common surname practice in Qazaq and other Turkic cultures. Further, it should be noted that surnames do not typically change upon marriage, so they can be indexes of a genealogical patriline.

8. Together with student research assistants Madina Mussagazina, Lyazzat Kulmakanova, and Indira Makhazhan, all then volunteer student research assistants at Nazarbayev University, we prepared a partial translation of approximately one half of the larger Birzhan-Sara aitys. The co-authored collaborative partial translation will be published as “The Aitys of Sara and Birzhan: a young woman’s voice in Qazaq oral history” in McGuire et al. eds. *Tulips in Bloom: An Anthropology of Modern Central Asian Literature* by Palgrave (Dubuisson et al., forthcoming).

9. Shaykhislamuly’s adaptation was not the only adaptation of the text, and its authenticity or veracity became a subject of debate when another version was published by Ärip Tangirbergenov (a student of the famous poet Abai Qunanbai) in 1907 (Erdembekov 2014).

10. The text on the left hand side of the translation is that given in Shaghatay, ed. 2015, printed in Cyrillic script. The translation is to English on the right, with the exception of proper names or cultural terms with no equivalent, which are also noted in footnotes. The Latinization of Cyrillic for Qazaq language is taken from the United States Board of Geographic Names, which was updated in 2019 and available online; this was also used for terms through the text itself for terms and references. The only exception are works published in English before the more recent changes. It should be noted that Qazaqstan is currently engaged in an ongoing Latinization project for Qazaq language and it would be expected to see further changes and updates in the near future, such as the replacement of /zh/ with /j/ and others.¹¹

11. According to the narrator of the aitys text, Birzhan is of the lineage Altay-Qarpyq, the son of Qozhaqul.¹²

12. *Er Qaptaghay* (the man Qaptaghay) was a famous Nayman, and also this name became a shorthand, to refer to all Naymans; both uses appear in this text.

13. In the end, it seems that her creative entreaty was successful, as Sara Tastanbekqyzy ultimately married someone else. She is commemorated today in a museum in her home region where many of her descendants still live and where her story is told to visitors, which I describe in the final section of this article.

14. A complete collection of Muqtar Äuezov’s writings was published in multiple volumes was published by Däür Press in 2014. In the early Soviet period, it should also be noted that certain primary narratives and cultural figures were prominently emphasized within each republic as exemplars in their respective collections of written and oral literature, remade in various version. In the Soviet republic of Qazaqstan, three main pre-revolutionary narratives or biographies were chosen to remake in this fashion: the life story of the poet Abai Qunanbayuly (McGuire 2018), the story of Qyz Zhibek (McGuire 2019), and the aitys of Birzhan-Sara.

15. In his talk “Making Opera in the Steppe: A Political History of Musical Theatre in Qazaqstan 1930–2015” at the Einstein Forum in Postdam in 2018 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pLQOUrTQeUM>), cultural historian Nuri Shelekpavev notes that the early Soviet project to ‘bring opera to the steppe’ in the late 1920s and early 1930s “involved abusing and normalizing vernacular art, forcing it to conform to imposed tastes, and fit into externally inflicted categories.” Once this had happened, however, opera quickly gained popularity in metropolitan centers, and became a new form and infrastructure with its forms social and political capital—indeed, creating for the semi-autonomous Qazaq republic a new kind of cultural elite. Performers could be recognized, for example, with “Artist of the People” awards from central Moscow. Opera in Qazaqstan is best seen as part of a broader historical process of Soviet internationalization and identity building. Like Shelekpavev and other researchers I also

argue that cultural forms were melded into a fixed, stable, and enduring image of unified language, ethnic identity, and performance style in each of the socialist republics, thus making a “Soviet Central Asia” recognizable and “translatable” (as to Russia) from stage (Holt 2015) to literature (Caffee 2018; Kudaibergenova 2018) to music (Rouland 2005; Sultanova 2005) to film (Isaacs 2018; Drieu 2019).

16. For other examples of such cooption of socialist figures or narrative in Qazaq oral tradition, see Winner 1958. It would be a mistake however to consider such double-voicedness of socialist-national as simply parroting the message of the state—it is important to consider the ways in which each voice there maintains some integrity. This example supports the point of Volek (2014), who argues that the metaphor of “ventriloquism” has been incorrectly used or attributed to Bakhtin in his presentation of double-voicedness, through the wording of Michael Holquist, in his well-known translation and interpretation of Bakhtin’s collected writings.

17. The excerpts of the sung aitys from the Birzhan-Sara Opera presented here were collected and translated by student research assistant Madina Mussagazina, Nazarbayev University. I have made edits to the final English version.

18. The scene summary of the Birzhan-Sara opera in Russian language from Astana Opera can be accessed here: <https://astanaopera.kz/afisha/15> A filmed performance of the opera (Qazaq language) can be viewed in its entirety here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uq4kN1lxn5A&ab_channel=MuslimAmze

19. On early Soviet women’s liberation campaigns in Central Asia see for example Northrop 2003; for further discussion of the legacy on these campaigns in post-Soviet Central Asia see for example Kamp 2016.

20. For a description and discussion of contemporary aitys performances in the context of Kazakhstani nation-building see for example Asan 2017.

21. <https://kazakhfilmstudios.kz/movies/6023/>

22. This aitys excerpt is taken from its published form (Zholdasbekov 2014, 9), and was translated by student research assistant Madina Mussagazina, Nazarbayev University. I have made minor edits to the final English version.²³

23. The phrasing “alty Alash” is reference to the historical legend of Alash, the Khan credited with uniting six Qazaq tribes. One well-known transcription of the legend was made by Soviet era ethnographer Shoqan Walihanov (2005).

24. The aitys between Däuletkerey Käpuly and Sara Toqtamysova excerpted here was transcribed from a DVD recording released in 2006 by Dastan Studios and editor Zhürsin Erman as a part of a multi-part series.

25. This aitys excerpt was transcribed and translated by student research assistant Madina Mussagazina (Nazarbayev University). I have made minor edits to the final English version.

26. For example, in 2018 the civil rights NGO Women of Qazaqstan tweeted, “Famous aitys between Birzhan Sal & Akyn Sara (Sara Tastanbekkyzy) transformed into opera in 1946 (Qazaq composer Mukan Tulebaev upon a libretto of Khazhim Djumaliev) and now is playing at Astana Opera. Sara is known as one of the 1st poetress [sic] to fight for #Genderequality.” (<https://twitter.com/womenofkz/status/988403146052521984>). This short tweet captures intertextual minimization in two ways—both by conflating aitys and opera, as well as by presenting Sara Tastanbek as a recontextualized self in a new and different contemporary discourse of gender rights in Qazaqstan. It is in these ways like this that the aitys tradition continues to creatively expand its audience, modalities, and message, and to stay relevant in a newly national present.

27. <http://7-su.kz/news/cat-4/3234/>

28. <https://24.kz/ru/news/culture/item/190844-portrety-sary-tastanbekkyzy-budut-khranitsya-v-muzee-akyn-sary>

29. This short poem was translated by student research assistant Madina Mussagazina (Nazarbayev University). I have made minor edits to the final English version.

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