The Azeri Aşiq in Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan: Towards a Transnational Comparison of a Diverging Tradition1

ABSTRACT

The Azeri aşiq 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 aşiqs of the Republic of Azerbaijan and Northern Iran have developed along separate paths. This paper will compare contemporary aşiq 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
Aşıq
Musico-Poetic
Dastan

1 Working research on this paper was presented at the ICTM World Conference at the University of Limerick in 2017 and at the International Music and Dance Studies Symposium at the Trabzon University in 2018. We are thankful to everyone who discussed the paper with us in both venues and would like to specially acknowledge Lois Anderson for her encouragement and suggestions.
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 aşiq, is the Azeri people's oldest vehicle for oral narrative, including epic dastan, lyric poetry, and verbal dueling. The aşiq 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 aşiqs were separated into two powerful and mutually suspicious states, the USSR and Iran. Since the fall of the USSR in 1991, aşiqs 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 aşiq 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 aşiq 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 aşiq 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 aşiq 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 aşiq 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 Aparaci [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 Aparaci. 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.
Occasionally a special guest may be introduced to a hushed, expectant audience – an Azeri aşiq 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 aşiq 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 aşiq arts in Iran, including Məhərrəm Qasımlı , Azad Nabiyev, Sanubar Baghirova and Kəmələ Dadaşzadeh, as well as interviews with Aşiq Isa Tabrizli, who lives in Iran but often performs in Baku.
are a woman you will see the aşiq 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 aşiq 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 ‘aşiq’ and are both performed by Azerbaijani bards who identify with a single tradition. The performers choose most of their

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

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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).
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). 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.
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 Turkmanchay 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.

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 aşıks 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 20th century, 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 and 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

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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 Pari Maclisi, 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; 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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