



Razia Sultanova, *From Shamanism to Sufism: Women, Islam and Culture in Central Asia*

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Central Asia

RAZIA SULTANOVA, a native of Uzbekistan, is a Soviet-trained ethnomusicologist and researcher at the University of Cambridge. This new paperback edition presents her unique field data on music, musicians, and religious practices of the Fergana valley, a region that lies at the intersection of eastern Uzbekistan, northwestern Tajikistan, and southwestern Kyrgyzstan. The research grew from the author's realization that rituals in this region in general and women's rituals in particular

were largely absent in the scholarly literature. Her fieldwork as a native of the region contains descriptions of local customs, verbatim excerpts from interviews with leading musicians, carefully selected anecdotes, and collections of songs in Uzbek and Tajik. Although grounded in Ferghana, the work also incorporates insights gained from fieldwork with Khorezmi musicians (western Uzbekistan), Uzbeks in Afghanistan, and Azerbaijani musicians, as well as comparative statements about Islam and Shamanism that extend beyond Central Asia. In addition to original fieldwork, the book provides useful access to secondary scholarship in Russian and Uzbek.

The book combines academic and popular registers with uneven results. The sixteen-page historical overview on pre-Islamic, Islamic, Soviet and Russian Central Asia, for instance, condenses a good deal of information in a way that would be useful for a short unit on Central Asia in a world music course, but it may not be sufficient for such a unit in a history or religion course. Given the book's focus on shamanism and the vast cross-cultural literature on the topic, the second chapter, "Shamanism in Nomadic Culture," seems underdeveloped. The third chapter, "Sufism in Central Asia," while short, is surprisingly concrete and useful, cataloging the differences among some of the major Sufi orders as well as listing the various spiritual stations (*maqāms*) through which the Sufi acolyte is supposed to pass.

"Cataloging" is the key word here, for although the book's data are often engaging, the author does not use a dominant idea or argument as the basis for choosing what to include. Most of the book reads like a dictionary or an encyclopedia, with lists of topics and definitions, songs and song texts, with little analysis. There are interpretive moments, such as when Sultanova dubs modern women's practice of *zīkr* in Uzbekistan "reflective Sufism" because it is an "essential shadow" of its former self, "melting in the vascillating image of time" (137); she writes that "according to scientific opinion ... women's emotional domain is greater than that of men" and in that regard, "Performance is one of the ways to act out accumulated concerns and problems" (121). But these kinds of ideas do not provide the scaffolding for an overarching argument. The book also lacks a theoretical justification for a focus on women and gender. Each chapter presents general information about a given topic and then says, in effect, "women do this too."

Chapter 4 bears the unfortunate title "Female Sufism," as if to suggest that there is a different form of Sufism for women. The chapter contains short biographies of female poets and figures central to the history of mystical Islam, including most notably Rābiyah al-Adawiyah. The reader is introduced to the *ghazal* poetic form in this chapter—an odd organizational choice given the centrality of the *ghazal* form to so many kinds of oral expression in the Muslim world. The author omits an essential element of the *ghazal's* structure, the two-part rhyme consisting of *qāfiyah* and *radif*. Only the *radif*, the so called monorhyme consisting of a repeated word or set of words, is mentioned. Also left without discussion are the poetic meters of *ghazal* poetry and the important role of poetic meter in the rhythm of singing. Many poems listed as *ghazals* appear throughout this work and a clear explanation of the poetic structure would have been beneficial at the outset. In some cases, poems labeled *ghazals* do not conform to the structure

and yet are left in the text under that heading without explanation (for example, on page 163).

Other inaccuracies and ambiguities are sprinkled throughout the text. For example, after discussing the use of “music with poetry readings” (it is unclear whether this means musical instruments or melodic recitations), the reader is told, “Love poetry with symbolic meaning was accepted for such purposes, often taking a simple form which originated from folk poetry, like Rubai” (53). It is not clear whether we are to think that *rubais* are originally “folk poetry.” *Rubai* is not exclusively a folk form, and given its centrality to poetry throughout Central, South, and West Asia, it ought to have been explained alongside the *ghazal*.

Chapter 5, on knowledge transmission, provides useful translated excerpts from a fifteenth-century treatise by Husain Koshifi on master-disciple relationships, information about guilds in the present day, and the qualifications of a good singer (*hāfiẓ*). This information, which pertains to the tradition as a whole and not to women in particular, is balanced in the following chapter by a useful discussion of female masters and musicians. Included in this latter chapter is a section on Sufi masters and music that refers to the Indian mystic Inayat Khan’s writings. A list of music’s five “aspects” is included, one among which is *rāga*, explained inadequately as “music which appeals to the intellect” (73). Sultanova provides no information on *rāga* or any of the other five named aspects in musical terms for readers unfamiliar with the music of South Asia.

The section on female *maqām* singers later in the same chapter is among the most useful in the book, but even there we find a vague statement such as “To be able to produce a strong Sufi style sound the voice has to be trained in the way of the old Sufi professionals” (86). In contemporary ethnomusicology, scholars are interested in, among other things, how Sufism is used as a global marketing label. Sultanova, in tacitly assuming the sound of Sufism is inherent, missed an opportunity to investigate how and why musicians perceive certain kinds of sounds more or less Sufi.

The emphasis on female mystics and poets is warranted in this work because their biographies and poetic output are arguably of intrinsic historic and ethnographic interest. However, statements regarding gender as a general issue in musical culture and Islam require a kind of ethnographic or historical grounding that is largely absent in this book. In the chapter on musical instruments and dance, Sultanova attempts to emphasize a connection between women and the two-stringed lute, the *dutār*, by writing that its “softness made it suitable for female gatherings” (107)—another lost opportunity for investigating how performers construct gender through music. One may argue that Sultanova, being Uzbek, is wearing her “informant” hat when making such statements. Nevertheless, the book would have benefitted from a clearer articulation among the different kinds of authority expressed in the text.

For readers who are just beginning to connect what they are reading here with what they might have read on a similar set of topics on West, Central, and South Asia, the spellings used in this book are likely to be confusing. No guide to pronunciation is provided and the transliteration conventions are inconsistent and

non-standard for English publications. It may help readers to know that “h” is often used to represent a velar fricative—usually represented by “x” or “kh” in English orthography (Sultanova uses “kh” for this sound in a few instances, which adds to the confusion). Sometimes a modern Uzbek romanization is used for the Uzbek language. In modern Uzbek orthography, a single quotation mark designates a glottal stop or is a diacritical mark that applies to the letter it follows. In other places, extraneous appearances of the letter “y” make otherwise familiar terms hard to recognize. This is usually the result of transliterating a non-Russian term as if it were written in Russian using the “soft sign” (*myagki znak*). In most cases the extraneous “y” follows an “l.” Persian terms will also look unusual because they are transliterated from Tajiki, which is also written in Cyrillic; thus the letter “o” transliterated from Cyrillic refers to the long vowel “ā” in Persian and not to the short vowel indicated by a *dammeh* in Perso-Arabic script.

In sum, this book is an uneven amalgam of field observations, personal opinion, local knowledge, speculation, and translations of primary and secondary sources from Central Asia. Much of the book is written in a way that invites the attention of the reader who is unfamiliar with religion and society in Central Asia. However, the copious use of lists, especially of names of local performers, will be of limited use to such readers. Those who are already familiar with these names will also be familiar with much of the book’s other cultural and religious information. The book offers something for college students, specialists, and general readers who are curious about Islam in the lives of women in a region of the world given relatively little attention in recent decades. For those searching for a new approach to shamanism or Sufism in the region, they will be disappointed. However, for those interested in what female performers have to say, in their own words, this book is unique and valuable.

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