

# Bridal Laments in the Turkic World: A Casualty of Modernity?

*Arienne M. Dwyer*

## *The Way In*

Public demonstrations of grief and dissatisfaction are strongly circumscribed in many contemporary societies. Even though formerly private matters such as sexual transgressions have become a staple of public news, discussions of death or public displays of deep sorrow remain largely socially taboo. At the same time, the repertoire of symbolic practices for familial discord and death –as opposed to spontaneous outbursts of emotion in these contexts— have become ever more limited. The suppression of ritual lamenting can be viewed as a casualty of the reflexivity of the modernity of nation-states: laments are perceived as old-fashioned, even backwards.

Far from being solely a Western malady, in Central Eurasia we also find that reflexive perceptions of modernity suppress laments and other symbolic practices. These perceptions are promulgated both by governments and individuals. During the socialist periods in Central Asia and Western China (1920s–1990s and 1949–present, respectively), governments condemned laments and other oral arts as “feudal”; after several decades of suppression, individual citizens developed an ambivalence towards these practices. Some were fully abandoned, some were practiced secretly. Visiting some Salars of northern Tibet in early 1990s, for example, I sought out people who had experienced or performed these communicative arts in their youth. On the one hand, they had a nostalgia for these perceived keys to their collective heritage; on the other hand, they also partially rejected them, having had also assimilated the notion promulgated by the PRC government since the 1950s that these practices were associated with backwardness (*luo huo*) and premodernity. In both the former Soviet sphere and the Sinosphere,<sup>1</sup> various degrees of ambivalence towards such “traditional” oral arts can be observed in people old enough to remember them. Individuals were also sensitive to trans-regional and global media, which portrayed oral chants and canonical songs as part of the past, while sometimes incorporating their melodies into modern popular music.

This reappropriation of oral art forms is part of a larger trend of growing reflexivity towards cultural heritage, which is appropriated for ethnonationalist, nation-state, and other ideologies. In much of the Turkic world, be it in Turkey, the

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<sup>1</sup> The term, originally describing a linguistic and cultural area of Chinese influence, is from Matisoff (1990).

former Soviet realm, or western China, long-suppressed and nearly moribund oral arts are partly being resuscitated to serve these new agendas. Certain iconic orally transmitted art forms, such as the epic *Manas* in Kyrgyzstan, the *Dede Korkut* stories in Turkey, and overtone singing in Tuva are revived, standardized, and promulgated in order to bolster new modern-yet-traditional national identities in these regions.

Laments, however, do not lend themselves well to such reappropriation and nationalist discourses: they are too personal and too somber. They are therefore nearly extinct in many Turkic areas. Since ritual laments are no longer integrated into e.g. weddings and funerals, the only means of getting access to them is by interviewing lament “rememberers.” This study stems from my visits during 1992 and 1993 to the Turkic Salars in northern Tibet in search of oral art forms. My interest in the social uses of Turkic laments stems from a chance meeting in May 1992 with an elderly woman, who volunteered to perform as much of her own bridal lament as she could remember. I was to record only one other Salar lament, also re-created by the performer out of context, but these moving encounters led to an interest in characterizing the discourse and social functions of Salar and, more broadly, Turkic laments.

### *A Typology of Laments*

Laments are a stylized expression of grief. Symbolically, the lament represents a “transition to another state or world” and with it, “the possibility of symbolic renewal” (Porter 2005). A lament may be sung, chanted or spoken; in a given culture it has a particular textual and possibly also musical structure.

Though not all societies have laments, a universal characteristic of laments is that they are associated with a ritual leave-taking. Most commonly, laments are performed during funerals and weddings, taking leave of the deceased and the natal home, respectively. Other laments precede literal departures, e.g. a mother’s lament as her son goes to battle. All of these express grief about a departure, be it from a home or from this world.

Laments are most often performed by women. Given that men are also physically and cognitively capable of stylized oral grief, scholars have hypothesized causes for the gender bias in lament performance. In a number of cultures, the public display of emotion is primarily or even exclusively licensed to women. In much of Europe and North America, for example, women are licensed to be the primary conduits of public grief displays, while the display of grieving in men is socially circumscribed, except under certain limited circumstances. In eastern China, laments may well serve a social protest function within a society where other societal rituals are presided over by men. Watson (2000) considers Chinese laments to be an important platform for women to voice their opinions and power. In other contexts, they may serve simply as an expressive genre.

Another significant dimension to laments is how they reflect and reinforce local belief systems. Symbolically, laments may function to communicate with a spirit world. They often have a magical function, and are frequently associated with the exorcism of inauspicious spirits or evil. In so doing, performers of laments may neutralize negative forces and, like trance mediums, effect a transition to and from the spirit world.

Laments differ in style and structure around the world. Though instrumental accompaniment may be present, *a capella* vocalization is the primary vehicle. Recitation and stylized crying are generally involved, which may or may not involve the activation of tear ducts. Recitation may be of preexisting texts or partially or wholly improvised, but there is generally an established discourse structure to laments.

Socially, laments differ from spontaneous individual expressions of sadness, mourning, disappointment, and frustration in that the grievances expressed in laments are collective and formulaic in their rhetorical persuasion (McLaren & Chen 2000: 209). Women are the primary performers, and the laments themselves are most often transmitted intergenerationally by older to younger women, who may even be present while laments are being performed by younger women. Such female apprenticeships are also the rule for the transmission of certain song forms (e.g. the Chinese *hua'er* dialogic song forms, see Dwyer 2007). Typically bridal laments are memorized from older village women in local girls' houses, and can be improvised to some extent.

Structurally, laments can be spoken, sung or chanted; they can incorporate gestures; and some degree of improvisation and creativity is permitted, even accepted. Laments possess set musical and discourse structures that are distinct from everyday discourse. Vocalization may include techniques that significantly alter or mask the normal vocal timbre to signify the performative space or communication with spirits; this vocal *Verfremdung* can be similar to that practiced by trance mediums. Lament "texts" are generally specified for mode (chanted, sung, spoken), rhythm, rhyming, alliteration, and coherence; some may also be specified for line length. These fundamental structures, their melodies, and key phrases are memorized from older women and previous weddings or funerals but a degree of improvisation is also expected (cf. Feld 1990). During the performance of a lamentation, there may or may not be significant audience interaction, but no lament occurs without an audience. Their topics can be "boisterous and histrionic, but do not threaten major male concerns" (Johnson 1988: 157).

Thematically, all laments focus on a transition: from girl to woman and bride, and in the case of funeral laments, from life to death and/or the afterlife.

The rituals of marriage transform the unmarried into the married, boys into men, girls into women, and daughters into wives (...). Elderly women from both the bride's and the groom's village preside over these transformations. It is their job to empty the bride-daughter and reconstruct her as a fertile wife (Watson 1996: 107).

Laments may even function as magic to exorcize evil spirits; in the Chinese context, weddings most typically are held during the late-January early February new year's festivities, when there are a host of other ritual exorcisms associated with driving away evil from the previous year (McClaren & Chen 2000: 210).

There is a good deal of persuasive rhetoric involved to assure the best possible outcome: a good marriage and continued close relations with the natal family (and, in funerals, an auspicious and smooth departure of the deceased). As such, laments contain a mixture of invocations of good fortune and curses and quasi-narratives. While many funeral or bridal laments contain similar thematic elements, local knowledge determines which are fixed and obligatory, and which are variable and optional. We will focus our attention on bridal laments.

### *Bridal laments at the intersection of cultures: some examples*

Bridal laments are a common feature of Turkic, Sinitic, and some Tibeto-Burman and surrounding peoples, as well as Russians, Finns, Bangladeshis, Romanians, Kalulis, to name some of the more famously-studied examples. Wedding and funeral laments are absent in the region among the Khalkha Mongols<sup>2</sup> and in most modern societies, at least among their dominant groups. It may well be more productive to view laments as regional symbolic acts rather than being exclusively associated with a particular ethnic group or even ethnolinguistic family.

We cannot speak of specifically *Turkic* laments expressing particular ethnic identities. Much of Central Eurasia has eight-syllable line laments in a typical octosyllabic line, that is, an alternating five-line/three-line pattern. This structure is apparently of Kipchak origin, but spread to Russians, Bashkirs, and other groups. A similar rhythm is even found in Hungarian and Romanian wedding songs and Georgian laments, probably from the Kipchak influence in 12th century Georgia (Porter 2005). In northern Tibet, the Salars reside at the intersection of Turkic, Sinitic, and Bodic (Tibetic) cultural areas. The practices of the first two ethnolinguistic complexes are by far the most influential.

In China, bridal laments (哭家, lit. 'cry-home;' *kujia* in Mandarin, *kuga* in Cantonese) and funeral laments (哭喪, lit. 'cry-funeral' *kusang*) were very common but are now endangered, especially in the urban areas of eastern China. Bridal laments, for example, apparently disappeared in Hong Kong in the 1960s (Watson 1996: 108), yet are still widely practiced in rural areas.

<sup>2</sup> The absence of bride-crying is as significant as its presence. Though bridal laments are or at least were common among the peripheral Mongol groups such as the Monguors, the central Khalkha have no such practices. Songs are exchanged, but no one laments. In the Mongol world, Pegg (2001: 195, citing Sampildendev 1990: 20) notes that “[i]n *üzemchin* weddings, the bride's father performed wish-prayers to advise his daughter on how to conduct herself in her new life. Both the bride and her mother grieved.”

The apparent paradox in hypothesizing that these are also, if not primarily, regional rather than purely ethnic symbolic practices is that participants see these as expressions of language and ethnicity, closely tied to belief systems—as contributing to the definition and re-definition of ethnic identity. But regional commonalities and emically viewed local or ethnic differences are simply two aspects of the negotiation of ethnolinguistic identity, whether overtly viewed as such or not. Just as linguistic features and language groups may be productively analyzed via common inherited (“genetic”) features from the language family, as well as by areal features (shared with neighboring languages), so can laments be assessed according to either ethnicity or area. That is, both an areal and a family-specific approach (in this case, Turkic) are useful.

What is common to Turkic laments (but also Chinese and those of other groups) is the absence of musical accompaniment: laments are usually sung or chanted a capella. In contrast, eastwards of the Turkic world in Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, Korea, and Japan, instrumental accompaniment plays a large role in for example funeral laments.

Taking the example of *a capella* Kazakh laments or ‘weeping songs’ *sıngsima* (< *sıngsī* ‘to cry’), together *köris ajıw* ‘songs of sorrow,’ these constitute a series of songs sung by the bride immediately before her departure from her home village, the *awıl*.<sup>3</sup> She sings to her relatives (especially to her father, brother, and sister-in-law) and to the threshold of her natal home (“do not let me get away”). If we first examine the themes of such bridal laments (here a wedding lament *köris* in an English translation by Halik et al 1998: 113-121), the bride’s regret at leaving the natal home is palpable:

On me I wear a white skirt,  
My folks are sending me away.  
The place I go to is far, far away,  
Oh, I will remember you with longing.  
(...)  
There are twins in the sheep herd,  
the ends of rivers are in the ocean.  
My *awıl*, you will no longer call me Girl,  
From now on you will say, ‘the young wife is coming’

She recognizes and does not relish her changing role to that of a woman, and she expects to be homesick and lonely in the groom’s home, which is typically in another village:

How hard-hearted you all are!  
(...)  
How can I endure all the bright days?  
How can I endure the nights?

<sup>3</sup> The Kazakhs also have funeral laments, *zhoktau*.

While I am in such a strange place  
 Deep sorrows accompany me from daybreak until night.

After singing these laments in her natal home, she then mounts a horse and with her dowry she travels to the groom's house for the wedding ceremony and celebration.

The chronology of the Kazakh wedding ceremony—including the public display of anguish by the bride—is typical for not only Turkic but other laments in the region, such as Chinese laments. These mark a rite of passage, even an exorcism of the girl that once was. These laments also serve to indirectly honor the bride's family with her words. I was told both at Kazakh weddings (in 1992) and by Salar consultants during the same year that the bride and her family would be judged by her "skill": her faithfulness to the common themes of bridal laments, her depth of expression, and her creativity in innovative variation of these themes.

*An Inner Asian lament, both Turkic and Sinitic:  
 the Salar saghesi*

The Salar *saghesi* [saʂəʂi] wedding lament survived only until the 1930s and 1940s. Therefore only the oldest women remember its words, melody, and archaic language. Salar weddings are usually held in the winter, when food is readily available and work is minimal, and those people who have left the village for secondary work have returned. On the wedding day, there are two centers of activity: the bride's house and the groom's house.

Although all the public-realm ceremonial activity—the actual marriage ceremony—occurs at the groom's house, the bride-crying occurs at the bride's house. The Salars separate public and private-realm activities sharply, and not surprisingly, the bride's taking leave of her natal family and mourning the departure are confined to the bride's house. Women used to crowd into the house to see older women dress her up and watch her cry and sing laments.

The bride learns *saghesi* a month or so before the wedding from her older female relatives: grandmothers (often the paternal grandmother) and aunts. The song first praises those woman who are helping the bride get dressed up, then praises concerned relatives, and then bemoans her early marriage, the primacy of men, the downside of arranged marriages. This subtly denounces those present. However, the *saghesi* finishes with the hope that everyone will wish her well in her new life.

The etymology of the Salar word, which is a different but related etymon from that of the Kazakhs, seems to be related to *sığıt* 'weeping, lamentation.' Clauson (1972: 806) claims this possibly onomatopoetic form "survives only (?) in NE Koib., Sag, Tel, Khak. ...Xak. Kash. id., Kom." A more promising form phonologically is *sağdiç*, a denominal noun from *sa:ğ-* 'sound, healthy, right,' which

only occurs in Oghuz. Clauson (id.) states that this form “survives only(?) in Southwestern Turkic, e.g. Azeri *saghdiš*, osm. *saghdic* ‘a bridegroom’s best man, bride’s attendant.’”

### *Text analysis*

Below is a lament that I recorded in 1992 from an elderly “rememberer” in Mengda, Xunhua county, Qinghai province. The “exoticizing” features that suggest that this performance is not of the everyday realm: there is preaspiration before every word (e.g. *ʰajak*, *ʰini*, and so on), and nasalization of many words (*el* > *ʰaʔiŋ*). These “strange” features delineate the supernatural realm from the everyday one, and are reminiscent of the performances of trance mediums. They also indicate the power of the performer through her connection with the spirits.

Note on the transcription: The first lines are *phonetic transcription* in the International Phonetic Alphabet; second lines are *phonemic transcriptions* in a practical orthography based on Chinese *pinyin*. In the latter, N.B. x=[ç], [ʂ] (ş, ş, ş); q=[ç], [ts] (č); i=[dʒ] [dʐ] (c, ĥ). The third lines are part-of-speech annotation.<sup>4</sup> A free translation into English follows.

The octet pattern of other Central Asian laments is absent; the stanzas are generally five lines:

#### I.

1.	<i>ʰη</i>	<i>sagħxi</i>	<i>jo</i>	—	<i>ʰajak</i>	<i>galħan</i>	—
	Sagħxi	yo!			Ayagh	galħan.	
	lament	EXCL	foot			remain-PERF.EXP	
2.	<i>ʰini</i>		<i>ʰidżilirim</i>	—	<i>ʰini</i>	<i>ʰawalirim</i>	—
	Iyinighi		ijälirim,		iyinighi	abalirim:	
	self-GEN		mother-HON-POS1		self-GEN	father-HON-POS1	
3.	<i>ʰa</i>	<i>mini</i>	<i>pasi:ma</i>	—	<i>ʰaʔiŋ</i>	<i>qoħufuldži</i>	—
	Mini		bashima		el	koyghufuji	
	my-GEN		head-3POS-DAT		hand	lay-PURP-PERF.DEF	
4.	<i>ʰa:dži</i>		<i>poħda:xt</i>	—	<i>ʰaba</i>	<i>laji mu:xtʰi</i>	—
	Aji		bogħdagħi		aba	layi mushti	
	grandmother		neck-3POS		grandfather	??	

<sup>4</sup> Abbreviations used in this text are the following: DAT dative, EXCL exclamation, EXP experiential, GEN genitive, HON honorific, HORT hortative, PERF perfective, POS possessive, PURP purposive, 1,2,3 first, second, third person, respectively.

5. **haxor aŋuŋ** — **xε giji jo** —  
 Ahur aghur xay gi yo  
 now daughter shoe wear HORT

## II.

6. **ŋ saŋəŋi jo** — **hajaš galšan** —  
 Saghixi yo! Ayagh galghan  
 lament EXCL foot remain-PERF.EXP

7. **hini hidiŋlirim** — **hini hawalirim** —  
 Iyinighi ijälirim, i[yi]ni[ghi] abalirim:  
 self-GEN mother-HON-POS1 self-GEN father-HON-POS1

8. **h a miŋi pačima** — **h a' in qoŋufudži** —  
 Mini bashima el koyghufuji  
 my-GEN head-3POS-DAT hand lay-PURP-PERF.DEF

9. **h a' aŋəzti jdža: dzju** —  
 Aghizi ija jiu  
 mouth mother EXCL

10. **h a' a cia p i: xajt k h i** — **jo** —  
 cia bir xaj ki yo  
 one shoe wear HORT

## III.

11. **hŋ saŋəŋi: jo** — **haja galšan** —  
 Saghixi yo! Ayagh galghan.  
 lament foot remain-PERF.EXP

12. **hini hidiŋlirim** — **hini hawalirim** —  
 I[yi]ni[ghi] ijälirim, I[yi]ni[ghi] abalirim:  
 self-GEN mother-HON-POS1sg self-GEN father-HON-POS1sg

13. **h a miŋi pačima** — **h a' in qoŋufudži** —  
 Minighi baxima el koyghufuji  
 my-GEN head-POS3-DAT hand lay-PURP-PERF.DEF

14. **habu:m hidiŋa: dzjo** — **ha d iŋna p i:** —  
 Abam ija jiu, d iŋna bir  
 father-1PS mother EXCL listen one

15. **xaji k h i jo** —  
 xay gi yo!  
 shoe wear HORT

In language use, the performer makes use of otherwise extinct lexemes, such as *abur* ‘now,’ *aqa* ‘elder sister’ (compare modern Salar *quxur*, *ajie* for these lexemes), and *adıngghan* ‘stagnant.’ Furthermore, her grammar reflects archaisms in e.g. the consistent use of the possessive on nouns (e.g. *abam* ‘my father’) and the use of the plural in parental address forms to indicate respect (*abalirim* < *aba* + pl. *lAr* + POSS (*i*)*m*), usages which have been weakened and lost, respectively, in modern Salar.

The above is an abridged version of this *sagbeshi* rememberer’s performance, in which the above three stanzas repeat with some variation; see the English translation immediately below.

*English translation*

I

- 1 Oh, lament! My feet remain behind.
- 2 My mother, my father:
- 3 Listen, those who lay hands on my head.
- 4 My grandmother’s neck. My grandfather.
- 5 I’m putting on my shoes.

II

- 6 Oh, lament! My feet remain behind.
- 7 Listen, oh father and mother
- 8 Listen, those who lay hands on my head.
- 9 The mouth of my mother.
- 10 I will put on a pair of shoes.

III

- 11 Oh, lament! My feet remain behind.
- 12 Listen, oh father and mother
- 13 Listen, those who lay hands on my head.
- 14 Mother and father, you listen a minute.
- 15 I’m putting on my shoes.

IV

- 16 Oh, lament!
- 17 Listen, oh father and mother.
- 18 I’m putting on my shoes
- 19 Your daughter, it was the matchmaker who is sending me
- 20 out [into the cold]. [You are combing] my hair [for the last time].

Here, the combing of the hair symbolizes her transition to adulthood as a woman; Chinese bridal laments include one called ‘putting up the hair’ 上头哥 (cf. Ho 2005: 56-57).

## V

- 21 Oh, lament!
- 22 Listen, oh father and mother.
- 23 Listen, my sisters.
- 24 My shoes, I'm putting on my shoes.

## VI

- 25 Oh, lament! Listen, oh father and mother.
- 26 Your daughter, like the heel of a shoe,
- 27 like a stagnant pool, useless, [you think]. Alas!
- 28 The people of our village; my uncle;
- 29 they are coming [to bring me away].
- 30 I will go.

## VII

- 31 Oh, lament! Listen, oh father and mother.
- 32 My mother's head, my body, those who lay hands on my head.
- 33 My back.
- 34 [My father], one of your shoes.

## VIII

- 35 Oh, lament! Listen, oh father and mother.
- 36 From my mother, from everyone,
- 37 from everyone I will be separated.
- 38 My father, one of your shoes.

## IX

- 39 Oh, lament! Listen, oh father and mother.
- 40 Those who lay hands on my body.
- 41 My mother's mouth.
- 42 Sigh, I'm putting on my shoes.

## X

- 43 Oh, lament! My feet remain behind.
- 44 My mother, my father:
- 45 Listen, those who lay hands on my head.
- 46 My grandmother's neck. My grandfather.
- 47 I'm putting on my shoes.

## XI

- 48 Oh, lament! Listen, oh father and mother.
- 49 Listen, those who lay hands on my head.
- 50 The mouth of my mother. I will put on a pair of shoes.

## XII

51 Oh, lament! Listen, oh father and mother.  
 52 Listen, those who lay hands on my head.  
 53 Mother and father, you listen a minute.  
 54 I'm putting on my shoes.

## XIII

55 Oh, lament! Listen, oh father and mother.  
 56 Your daughter, like the heel of a shoe,  
 57 like a stagnant pool, useless, [you think].  
 58 Alas!

After she has sung, the bride is taken outside, flanked by two elder women. In earlier times, she would lead a horse or mule three times in a counterclockwise circle (distinctly reminiscent of Buddhist circumambulations) and scatter some grains. This symbolizes the wealth of her birth home, along with the wish that she will take root and flourish in her new household. The bride then mounts the horse or mule and rides to the groom's house, wearing a full veil and accompanied by two married female relatives. These days, most brides ride on a tractor. Other relatives and friends surround them, running to the groom's house, where the formal ceremony occurs.

All of these wedding rituals, including the lamentations, are no longer practiced by Salars. Instead, emphasis is now placed on the wedding ceremony (*nikah*) and village meal thereafter, in the style of the local sinophone Muslims (Huis).

Scholars have looked at these performances from the perspective of feminism (as social protest, women "finally" having a voice), structuralism (as sharing many features with epics<sup>5</sup>), and sociologically (as part of a larger matrix of belief systems; men do one kind of shamanizing, the women another). Wedding laments are undoubtedly the women's realm.

*Laments as a casualty of modernity*

Modern life scarcely has room any more for laments (Wilce 2006). Death is taboo in many Western societies; public displays of mourning are subdued and little or no mourning is stylized. Brides marry happily. The decline in laments performance can be linked to an overall decline in oral arts. There is certainly a correlation between an increase in the level of written literacy to a decrease in oral literacy, as well as the incompatibility of economic advancement and modernization with oral performance. To take perhaps a simplistic example, how many

<sup>5</sup> Such features include a potential endlessness, strict regulation of content, chanting pattern. Also, the performer continually contextualizes the event and is judged by an audience.

North Americans or even Western Europeans can sing spontaneously, other than “Happy Birthday” and their favorite pop song? What rituals remain in major life passage events in Euro-American cultures? The rise of both karaoke (generally “happy”) and even revived laments groups (generally “sad”) in industrialized, economically advanced countries may signal a need for the *stylized* public displays of emotion, despite taboos against spontaneous displays. Often, the decline in laments was related not just to government policy, but also to the proscriptions of a dominant religion. Yet today, some in post-industrial societies are searching for alternative religions, and lament practices offer a connection to a supernatural and magical realm. These reinvented practices bear little structural resemblance to Eurasian laments, though the social functions are similar.

If we can speak of the social consequences for a decline in laments in the Turkic world and Eurasia more broadly, then it is their value as a psychological and social tool: laments certainly constitute cultural and linguistic heritage, but they are more than that.

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