



## The Ancient and Eternal World of Azerbaijani Folk Games and National Square Theatre

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Plutarch's "Selective Lives" informs us on the play and theatre culture of our grand-parents 2300 years ago.

It was not a coincidence that great Azerbaijani philosopher and poet Nizami Ganjavi had chosen the Greek character – Alexander the Great (356-323 BC) as a leading role in one of his prominent works. Though he lived 33 years, it is impossible not to admire Alexander the Great's life-story, steps and while reviewing the history Alexander is shining in its pages as a phenomenon. Alexander the Great ordered to burn "Avesta" not because he was a barbarian, but because he knew the real strength and power of the book.

The most expensive trophy that he got from the Iranian king Dara was a case. He takes this case to himself and asks his surroundings what

to keep in it. There were a lot of advices but he decides himself and puts "The Illiad" into it (13,387).

In the Ekbatan, capital of Ancient Medes, Azerbaijani turks were living and this place is in the territory of the present Iran, and still inhabited with Turkic people.

Plutarch writes: "When Alexander the Great had a march to the East, he took a lot of dancers, musicians, acrobats and jokers within his army.

... When he finished his works in Medesian Ekbatan, he started to attend theaters and festivals as before. He brought 3000 actors from Greece" (13,431).

From the writings of Plutarch it is evident that the theaters were organized every day. One day when Alexander goes to the theater in Ekbatan, his "beloved friend" Hephaestion gets ill, uses his chance – his doctor also goes to the theatre and he breaks his diet. At the result he dies. Impressed deeply from this death Alexander declares 3 days of mourning and during these days there were not any plays (13, 431).

So, there was not a day when plays and festivals were not organized but only on emergency cases.

Taking the fact that when Alexander had a march to the East, there, also in Azerbaijan there were not any theater, actor, play tradition and after the visit of so many actors, acrobats, dancers, jokers, naturally, such tradition began to grow. Alexander, not depending on his will, was the originator if one tradition – for such amount of actors, new theaters and places were needed, and he was both changing the temples into theaters, also ordering to build new ones.

But the investigators of the History of the Eastern Culture proof the existence of the theaters in the Near and Middle East, as well in Ekbatan.

As the Zoroastrian was an essential religion in the region and it had a lot of events. These events were rich with theatric moments. That is why it is not just a theory that theatre and actor traditions already existed in this region.

In Nizami Ganjavi's "Khamasa" there are a lot of information about the existence and development of the musical performance, composing, drawing, sculpture, and dancing and actor profession in this geographic region.

VII century's writer Moses Kalankatukski speaks about the open-air plays accompanied with dances in the VI century in his book "Albanian History" (7,153).

The description of these massive – plays by Moses Kalankatukski's and the elegy in the "For Javanshir's Death" are real and rich source for us (7, 151-160).

It is interesting that the Armenian Church hated the play culture and theaters that spread widely among the Albanians. Armenian Chatolicos Iovanna Mandakuni's words to the people loving theatre are very popular: "Those who are fond of jokers and are spending time in the atheist theatres will suffer. Those who laugh will cry forever because he is the one to suffer" (9, 76).

On one of the written monuments of the ancient Turkish language – Gultekin monument there is a sentence about these events: "Yughchu, sighitchi... kelipen sightamish, yughlamis" (18, 72) ("Grand Gultekin" monument, 4th writing) ("A person came and cried his eyes out" – in different publications this sentence was not adapted exactly into the Azerbaijani Language (18, 64; 27 78)).

Then this event was called "Aghlashma" (Mutual weeping) and a literary genre "Aghy" (Elegy) originated from this.

Moses Kalankatukski describes this event as: "They sacrificed horses to their giant and ugly gods called Aspandiat by the Persians. They gained different sins without thinking properly. They were playing musical instrument on the corps of the dead people and injured their cheeks, hands and feet and made them bleed. Sometimes the naked men were fighting with each other in the squares near the cemeteries. Big stacks were competing, wrestling, doing immoral acts or riding horses. Some were crying, while others were acting like a devil. They were busy with doing immoral things like dancing, conducting mentally unhealthy actions. They were sacrificing to fire and water, worshipping to moon and all things looking extra-ordinary to them" (7, 166).

The information provided by the Albanian historian is very important as it differentiates the actor playing the crying people and the people playing the roles. Albanian historian has nothing to say to person who is crying because of his own grief, and he curses the ones who act like crying – actors who were damned by the church as well and call them "satan".

Famous Azerbaijani writer Abdurrahim bey Hagverdiyev described this event as: "It was a tradition to cry out the big heroes in the Ancient Azerbaijan. When a hero died, people were collected in one place. This collection was called "yugh" (from the word "to cry"). These people were provided with food and the special people who were for "crying" had their instruments for singing and dancing. The "cryer" first praised the hero due to his achievements. Then converted his speech into the sad emotions and began to cry. And the people around were crying as well. This process is connected with traditions of singing, dancing and crying on the graves of the Huns in the North of Azerbaijan. They had faints in these events" (2, 76).

In the description of the classic this event had two prominent moments: dances and faints.

Actually, it was not the dance performed in the weddings or festivals but the ritual and the faints were not because of the power of grief or mourn but because of the ecstasy at the end of the ritual. The point resembled "yugh" ceremony to the real play was that the players were living their real own life. But the players of "yugh" ceremony were also actors as their appointment was not to live their grief only, but to reflect mourning of the surroundings. Their duty was to impress the people around with their performance, singing and dancing in this sad ceremony.

It is obvious that special skills were required from the player in the "yugh" ceremony and they were the first tragic actors in our literature.

Up to present there are some people attended the mourning ceremonies to make the people cry in the different regions of Azerbaijan. At the beginning of XX century one of such people – "Crying Rubaba" was very famous in the mourning ceremonies around Baku city (5, 44).

The methods of performances, dances that originated from the "yugh" ceremonies have already become a history. But in the beginning of the XIX century these mourning dances had simple methods. In 1812-1813 years in Iran, South Azerbaijan the French traveler – Caspar Druvil admired extra-ordinary dances at the graves and soon understood its philosophy – they were not the reflection of joy, but the way of mourning. "To see 500-600 women crying and putting flowers on the grave impressed Europeans very deeply" (2, 98).

The examples of "yugh" ceremony is also described in "Kitab-i Dede Gorgud"(8).

Because of the origins formed on the "yugh" ceremonies, the tradition of present "crying" peoples, elegies, mourning were founded not in the Islamic center – Arabian countries, but in Azerbaijan and Iran. Mirza Fatali Akhundov also notes that this tradition was first appeared by Deylami kings, then in Safavis reign (2, 92).

Famous Orientalist Y.Bertels in his "Iranian Theatre" investigation states that the elegy tradition was one of the building points of the Safavis reign in the XVI century (4, 474).

"Elegy" is the upper level of the tragedy and differs from the open-air theatres resembling more to the European theatre. It has its own plot, characters, director, etc. though it is very simple. But the "Yugh" based on improvised actions, mostly their text themes. At the ancient times the "crying" people were very skilled in the actions as well as in the composing poems and observation of the surroundings. They would get acquainted with the real life of the dead person, study his character, get more information about him and reflect all of the learned features during the "yugh" ceremony. It is also evident that the elegies were not for making people suffer deeply and cry, but to clear their souls with the tears that were rolling on their cheeks.

While watching the women crying in the mourn ceremonies one can easily notice their habits of "crying with poems" like in the ancient times during the rituals and "yugh" dances.

The "yugh" style being one of the methods of the Azerbaijani open-air theatre was re-formed by very talented director Vagif Ibrahimoglu (Hasanov). He created the "Yugh" theatre which has got the status of "state theatre" and joined the historical traditions with the modern times.

During the Soviet Union period – 70 years "crying" ceremonies were forbidden as the part of the Religion. But the people stayed very loyal to these ceremonies as each one was crying his own grief, sufferings. Most times they could not publicly declare their feelings and kept in their hearts. In these ceremonies the reflected grief was not his own but the other people's and these people had a reason to cry out their own suffering with stranger's purpose. Their Religion once a year had a mourn period in which the ordinary people were changing the reason of this period with their own – they placed their own losses with Huseyn, Hasan, Hazrat Abbas, Fatima, etc. The changes were only made for the figures. The theme was the same. Why we sadden from Euripides', Aeschylus', Sophocles' works at present from the literary point of view, but connect the Karbala to the religion. This also has a plot; there was need only for the people delivering this plot to the people.

It is also possible that the real historical events were dramatized, enriched with the real tragedies, poems, lyrics by the Persian, Arabian, Turkish writers and music was composed to them.

Muhammad Fuzuli's "Hadigat us-suada" (Garden of Martyrs) was also inspired by such tragedy. In its introduction it is said that not only Arabians and Persian people, but also Azerbaijani Turkic people were listening to Karbala elegies. Regarding the fact that in Arabic and Persian there are a lot of books and nothing in Azerbaijani Turkish language, Fuzuli wrote this book for the Azerbaijani people to admire. This theme was then repeatedly worked in the works of Valeh Gulabli (1776-1834), Dilsuz Mammadamin (death year 1834), Abbasgulu agha Bakikhanov (1794-1847), Shahnigar khanim Ranjur (1850-1890), Mammadbaghir Khalkhali (1830-1892), Molla agha Bihud Shirvani (1832-1892), Hajimehdi Shukuhi (1829-1896), Mirza Jabrail Sipehri (death year 1902), Ismayilbay Nakam (1839-1906), Mirza Alikhan Lali (1845-1907), Mirza Hasib Gudsı (death year 1908), Mirza Alasgar Novras (1846-1918) and many others.

Gumri (Mirza Mahammadtaghi Ibrahim oghlu, 1819-1891) described Karbala story in his "Kenz ul-mesaib" (Calamity Treasure) with the motives of the last two centuries. One should be a stone in order not to get impressed by the lyrics in this work. These poems were also dramatized with the crying of the people listening to them.

Raji (1831-1876) was one of those poets whose poems were full of emotional feelings including grief. His elegy dedicated to the death of Yahud Ali-Aba is one of the examples of such greatness. Raji who was very famous with his elegies in Iran and Azerbaijan died in the storm in the Red Sea while returning from Makka visit. His poem describing Saint Huseyn's person is very rich with emotional descriptions and can touch the soul of every one (11, 42-43; 54-55).

Due to the different and rich theme elegy was one of the most spread poem type with its own plot which lead it to the theatre on mourn days. Though elegies were investigated very detailed in Azerbaijan, there are a lot of examples with same and different themes, describing Karbala events, and its episodes.

During the history many singers with wonderful voice were interested in these elegies in the mourn ceremonies. They preferred to perform in such events rather than being a well-known singer living in the XIX-XX centuries. Kharrat Gulu (1823-1883) is one of such singers. History still remembers singers like him in Garabagh, Shirvan, Absheron.

Historical reality is evident: after the death of Prophet Mohammad (570-632), first Abu Bakr ibn Abdulla, after his death in 634 Omar ibn

Khatab, and after his murder in 644 Osman ibn Affan, and after his murder in 656 Ali ibn Abu Talib became khalifas.

Hasan became khalifa in Irag as his father - Ali was killed in 661. But he was removed from the government and committed suicide. And in 680 his son Yazeed came on the throne. Ali's little son's march against the reign of Yazeed in 680 results in the cruel death of the former with his family.

Genius Fuzuli was a willing light-turner of Ali's grave till the last days of his life. Every night he was going to his grave and lit a candle, and every morning he was switching it off. And he made a testament to be buried in the lower side of his grave (10, 24).

His love to Ali was also very emotionally described in many of his poems. His love to Ali was not reasonless. Ali was against Yazeed's reign and with a little troop decided to fight. He knew he would lose but despite of this he did his best in order to defend his side with his beloveds and supporters. That is why Karbala tragedy was the symbol of the fight and victims in the name of the belief. "Asirlarin Karbalaya dakhil olmasi" (Prisoners entry to Karbala), "Alinin gatlı" (Ali's murder), "Madina safari" (Madina visit), "Imam Huseynin shehid olmasi" (Saint Huseyn's being martyr), "Hezret Abbasin shehid olmasi" (Saint Abbas's being martyr), "Fatimanin gatlı" (Fatima's murder), "Karbala davasi" (Karbala fight) and many other plays were staged on the Azerbaijani theater for years.

It was not a secret that to present such themes to the audience was not a simple work. It was very difficult to find out the needed figures that were able to learn the text, to assimilate the role, to sing the parts properly, to prepare costumes for the actors, the persons to hint the actors when the texts were forgotten, etc. They even arranged artificial effects like blood while getting murdered from the animals' blood. The main difficulty that the organizers faced was to find the proper persons for performing negative roles like Yazeed, Shumr and so on. Most Muslims did not agree to act in these roles. That is why many times these roles were performed by the actors of different religions which resulted in the unexpected issues many times.

K. Inostransev notes that in the XVIII century in the play "Imam Huseyn shabihi" (Saint Huseyn's elegy) the role of Shumr was performed by a kazakh actor. He was instructed to run when the saint would fight him, but he did not follow this instruction and began to fight with him who caused the audience to laugh. When he was asked the reason of his disobedience, he replied that he could not afford a young boy to make him run on the stage (2, 112).

Azerbaijani writer Abdulla Shaig (1881-1959) also remembers that one Armenian actor agreed to play Shumr in this play in Tbilisi. He was instructed that Huseyn would come up to you and beg you to give him water, and you would not give him. When the play began and Huseyn came up to Shumr for water and he gave him water as felt sorry for him (1, 39-40).

An outstanding Azerbaijani actor, singer and ethnographer Huseyngulu Sarabski also speaks about the elegies in the XIX-XX centuries: "Elegies were widely spread in Baku, on night you may hear Aliakbar elegy, the other night Gasim elegy, and then many different

ones. On the 10th day of the month of Maharram 50-60 people wearing all black would say elegies in the mosques of the cities. They would decorate one horse and put a white cloth on it. This was the symbol of Saint Huseyn's horse- Zuljanah".

In the month of Muharram of the 1885 year the people saying elegies were moving in the direction of Bayil region and the daughter of the Governor was frightened when seeing this crowd".

These elegy ceremonies were the examples of the nation's open-air theater on one side, on the other side they were the easy condition for the development of the religious ignorance. Many ignorant actions like injuring themselves, making their heads bleed were the reflection of the fanatic religious people. It would not be fair if we speak about elegies' being a historical tradition and but not to mention its negative sides.

It would be noted one more that elegy ceremonies were the reason for the people to cry out their sufferings, grief and mourn for the saints and their own lost. But along with these ceremonies there were organization of entertainments. And these ceremonies were much wider than the tragic ones.

Some types of the nation and open-air theaters still exist in nowadays. One of the comedy types spread wide was "hogga" (juggling). The person doing juggling was called juggler. This comedy type originates from the shaman magicians. Firstly there were only magic, conjurers, hand-works, etc and then became open-air theater (for more information about such games). The name of this game was taken from the word "juggling". Juggling appeared as a show in the circus but then it got improved and developed into the theater show.

One of the most popular actors of this genre was Mashadi Jabbar Vahabov who was famous with his nick-name "Lotu Jabbar" (the word "lotu" was also given to several prominent persons of that times – Lotu Ibish who was a comedian from Nakhchivan and lived in Garabagh. Lotu Ismayil Bezzas - a joker living in the South Azerbaijan in the XIX century. Due to its origin the word "lotu" originates to the Prophet Lut. People who were known for their free behaviour, negative steps were also known as "lotu").

Mashadi Jabbar lived in the XIX-XX centuries. Along with the memories about this person, his live voice also survived till our days – the songs "Sharbatali", "Mirza play", "Garavalli", "Animal speech", "Selling sour-milk", "Jeyran", etc. were recorded by the company "Ekstrafon" in 1915.

Mashadi Jabbar was from Ardabil and working as a juggler in the Nikitin circus. The he became a travelling-actor and from time to time had plays in Absheron, including different regions of Azerbaijan, as well as Georgia, Turkmanistan.

As a usual he started his show with magic, put cotton into his mouth and got a thread for hundred meters from it. He showed an empty cap to the audience but then got an egg in it.

This kind of shows was followed by the story-telling that resulted

in the dramatization of these stories on the stages. In his stage play "Man dovletli idim" (I was rich) Lotu Jabbar played 12 satiric roles on his own.

One of these actors who were very famous in the XX century in Azerbaijan was Abdal Gasim. He was one of the most prominent actors of the open-air theaters. Like Lotu Jabbar he also a master in the story-telling and acting like different roles on the stage (On the 11th February of 1915 year the newspaper "Seda-yi hagg" it is said: If the Europe had such an actor, he would be popular for the World. He had stories "Kurdish story" and "Pahlavan Panba" which would make the saddest person on Earth laugh (16, №3).

But his activity differs from the other as along with the juggling and storytelling, he could masterly conducting puppet plays. Puppet plays historically were called differently in different times. In the ancient times it was called "oyugh". This word still exists in this pronunciation but the meaning of which is "a garden watch". These puppets were different from the dolls in their sizes, features, materials that they were made of (wood, baked clay, pelt, cloth, etc.). Big puppets were called "Muqavva" (scarecrow), the medium ones – "bebek" (baby). This game was called "lobet" and the person playing with puppets – "lobetbaz". This game was mentioned by Nizami in the XII century. This information makes us think of two ways – either about the puppet game in its real meaning or the shadow play that was also popular at that time. These two were different type of games and existed in Azerbaijan from the ancient times. The game called "Khayal az-zill" in Arabic countries was famous when this game was known in Azerbaijan with the names of "Khayaloyunu" (Game of imagination) or "Garagoz" (Black-eyed). The latter word had the meaning of the person who cried by false, and during the plays the actors had to cry instead of the puppets, that's why the play had this name from the audience (see 6).

One of the most popular and beloved games of the open-air theater is "Kilimarasi" (Between the carpets). One of the prominent features of this play is that it is characteristic only for Azerbaijan. This game was made by the actor who lied between the carpets, stayed unseen for the audience and accompanied with the music. Two actors were playing with four puppets in their hands and two people were keeping the carpets so that it was a barrier between them and the audience.

"Maral Game", "Tapdig choban" games were where the actor held two puppets in his hands, made them move and told the text himself. These plays were variations of "Kilimarasi".

German scientist Adam Olearius was in Shamakhi in 1637 year and saw this game. He wrote about the actor holding puppets in his hands and talking to the audience (12, 543).

On June 16, 1931 the Puppet theater was opened in Azerbaijan. But till this time Azerbaijan had a 1000 year of history of puppet games. Azerbaijan state theater had a wide variation of games but open-air theater and comedies are very important among them. They are having the best features of the cultural history and tried to include the best sides of the nation. They were very powerful when joining with the different genres of the theater and were very effective on the audience.

Some of these plays were seasonal and performed on the certain months of the year, on certain holidays, but some were still played on non-occasional cases (17, 30-65).

For example, the plays like “Kos-kosa”, “Kosa oyunu” (Game of Kosa), “Gulverme” (Giving a flower), “Shahbezeme” (Decorating a Shah), “Shah oyunu” (Game of Shah) were performed during the Novruz holidays, whereas “Ekende yokh, bichende yokh, yeyende ortag gardash” (Brothers on the good days), “Cheltikchiler” (Rice plougher), “Shabih oyunu” were played on the different month of the year. Or the “Garavelli”s that was the different variant of the national theater with dancing and songs. Playes like “Dayirman oyunu” (Playe of windmill), “Hambal ve khanim” (Porter and lady), “Nakhirchi molla” (Shepherd mullah), “Tajir Muhammad” (Merchant Muhammad) were “Garavalli” versions that performed by various talented actors in the regions of Azerbaijan and based on improvisation. The main importance of these plays were that the audience was not only watching, entertaining, resting but also getting lesson from them.

While investigating the theater history of Azerbaijan theatre cultures, the most attractive point is the multifunctional skills of the actors who were very unique. That is why the aerobics and dances were the inseparable part of the actor abilities.

“Masqara” plays were not only famous in Azerbaijan but also in the Western countries. The word itself is also international and exists in the same style in different languages – in Italian “maskhera”, in Persian “masghara”, in Spanish “mascara”, etc. with the meaning of “mockery, fun, joke”. This word was used by greeks 24 centuries ago and it is possible it got spread from them. Mockery actors were very close to the jokers in the palaces and that’s why they were also called actors in the East and West. Along with the entertaining the ceremonies, festivals, talking jokes, different funny plays, they were very clever. The lords had given the right of talking the truth to the jokers because they were sophisticated and able to criticize everything including the lord himself without any fear.

“Talkhak” (mockery) was a person living in the palace of Sultan Mahmud Gaznavi in the X-XI centuries. He was the master of this profession, danced very well, could compose numerous numbers of jokes and even became the main figure of others’ jokes. Meanwhile his name became famous and spread all around the region. It is also evident that not all mockeries could get into the palaces and it was the reason of the creation of the “masqara” theaters.

One of the figures of the national theater culture was “Kechel” (Bald-headed). Kechel was a hero of many stories. He was bright, kind-hearted and fought black power, harm, tyrants with his intellect. He was not only the character of the stories but there exists separate play named “Kechel oyunu” (Game of the Bald-headed). In Iran there is also similar play called “Kechel pehlevan” (Bald athlete) but it is very different from the Azerbaijani one in its theme and plot. In “Kechel oyunu” the performers are two brothers, their old mother, ignorant people and the audience. In all versions of this plays Kechel wins. The other thing that remains unchanged in all regions of Azerbaijan is the look of Kechel. This role was performed skillfully by many actors but the prominent one was Kechel Inayat who lived in the palace of I Shah Abbas during the XVII century. Then his name underwent to dissimilation and remained like Kelniyet in the history.

And in the XX century – 1912-1913 years the satiric magazine issued in Baku the publisher of which was Seyid Huseyn was named as “Kelniyet”.

Thus, Azerbaijani open-air and nation theaters that passed more than two thousand year of development was a foundation for many actors, directors, dramatic works the most of which were written down in the XX century. Those who worked during this long period reflected the moral and spiritual progress of the Azerbaijani people, helped them to grow, educated in the love to the beauties of the life, gentle feelings towards the people.

Different moments of the Azerbaijani open-air and nation theaters were described in the portraits of many foreign artists travelling to Azerbaijan in the XVIII-XIX centuries. There is also preserved the image of the Azerbaijani actor painted by the Azerbaijani artist. In one of Sultan Muhammad’s paintings who was the XVI century’s prominent miniature artist, an actor in the goat skin was described in details – an unknown actor is acting in front of the audience.

Azerbaijani people are very grateful to the unknown masters who preserved the valuable examples of national theater traditions!

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