

# Sonorous Şifr<sup>1</sup>: How Sonic Practices Helped Bashqorts and Tatars to Keep Their Identity

*Stas Sharifulla, Marsel Gani*

“Patsha<sup>2</sup> took his lute and, standing on the minaret tower, began to play a song. It was so mournful and sad that it touched the hearts of all the warriors: Russians and Tatars fell to their knees and wept. Then patsha began to play another song — a cheerful one, and all the warriors began to dance... And he sang a third song, and again everyone wept and sobbed. Then patsha smashed his lute and flew away.” (Nigmedzyanov 1984: 26)

The events of this ancient legend, as recorded by the ethnomusicologist Mahmut Nigmedzyanov from a rare source (Salitova 2008: 79), take place during one of the battles at the walls of besieged Kazan. The fall of the Kazan Khanate in 1552 would subsequently pave the way for the Tsardom of Muscovy along the Idel<sup>3</sup> River, a significant link between East and West. Historically situated between two distinct geographical perspectives, Tatar and Bashqort cultures<sup>4</sup> are often depicted as mere dots on the map, primarily seen as instruments for symbiosis, integration and unification. For instance, the official website of the Republic of Tatarstan states: “The territory of Tatarstan is a meeting point between Europe and Asia, a region of spiritual and cultural symbiosis between the East and the West. Kazan, the capital of the republic, finds itself at the crossroads of different paths, along with diverse cultures.” While the bidirectional, defocused colonial gaze attempts to delineate the contours of the space it has observed (and consequently invented), the musical culture of the Bashqorts and Tatars utilises its experience of colonial violence to encrypt an important inward message. This transmission also calls for unification, but with entirely different goals in mind. A middle-aged woman tightly grips the microphone of a portable loudspeaker, vigorously and clearly chants, syllable by syllable, to the accompaniment of the accordion: “Tatarlar, berläşegez!” (“Tatars, let's unite!”) Tatars, gathering in the square during one of the rallies for the independence of Tatarstan in 1992, echo back: “Azatlıq! Azatlıq!” (“Freedom! Freedom!”) The legend of patsha can be interpreted in various ways—for example, from the perspective of a Eurocentric view of music as some kind of “universal language.”<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, it will still tell the story of the siege of Kazan.

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<sup>1</sup> Pronounced as "shifr" [ʃifr], derived from the Arabic word "صِفْر" [sifr], meaning "zero." In this paper, the authors use the modern Yañalif (the Latin alphabet for Turkic languages) for transcriptions from Bashqort and Tatar, which are typically written in extended Cyrillic.

<sup>2</sup> From Persian "پادشاه", which translates to "padishah" in English, meaning "emperor" or "king."

<sup>3</sup> Idel, or Itil is a Turkic name for a major river in the European part of North Asia. The commonly used name variations are Idel (Tatar), Izel (Bashqort), and Volga (a Russian colonial place name).

<sup>4</sup> The conversation about the histories and cultures of Tatarstan and Bashqortostan in conjunction is driven by their close centuries-old geographical proximity, which has resulted in numerous processes of linguistic and cultural diffusion. Many other ethnicities also inhabit the lands mentioned above.

<sup>5</sup> The concept of music as a universal language can be traced back to Western philosophers such as Schopenhauer. Anthropologist, DJ and composer Terre Thaemlitz [challenges](#) this notion, using house music, originally emerged within non-white, queer, HIV-positive communities, as an example. Thaemlitz argues that the original meanings associated with this genre were lost with the rise of online distribution platforms, while the widespread dissemination of house music altered its contextual framework, leading to a shift in its meanings. According to Thaemlitz, music is not universal; its significance is heavily influenced by context.

## “Music and Songs of the Ural Muslims”

When analysing the cultures of the Idel and Ural Turkic peoples through the lens of Western musical theory, the concept of symbiosis is only applicable when discussing the historical development of these cultures. It is evident that the evolution of Bashqort and Tatar musical traditions was influenced by the pagan, Tengri, and Islamic legacy. The closer examination of musical instruments<sup>6</sup>, and performance techniques provides further clarity on this matter: “References to Tengrianism and shamanism can be traced not only in the use of specific musical instruments but also in such a traditional form of vocal-instrumental performing as özläü, the art of overtone throat singing” (Raximov 2006: 35). Researchers also emphasise monody and the use of a pentatonic scale among other borrowed features, while underscoring the uniqueness of Tatar and Bashqort music: “Building upon this foundation, the musical culture began to take shape, incorporating elements of ancient traditions and setting out on a distinct path of development” (Salitova 2008: 10). Nonetheless, significant disparities can be observed between the two musical cultures, as both of them were shaped by different factors of varying nature, from geographic location to religious traditions. Here, one can highlight the importance of the Bashqort quray<sup>7</sup>, a wind instrument traditionally crafted from the dried hollow stem of a plant with the same name<sup>8</sup>, which grows exclusively in North Asia. The quray is not only a key instrument in Bashqort music, but also a fundamental cultural symbol present in various aspects, from myths and epics to the flag and coat of arms of the Republic of Bashqortostan, both of which feature the stylized image of the quray flower. It is worth noting that the majority of other ethnicities inhabiting these geographies (Kryashens, Teptyars, Nağaybäks, as well as Mishar, Astrakhan, and Siberian Tatars) also have their own distinctive musical traditions with characteristics that diverge from those of Bashqort and Tatar.

The conventional Western methodology tends to overlook many of these distinctions and subtle nuances, offering instead its orientalist, patronising attitude. There are numerous texts that still require a critical, decolonial approach, especially those regarding the territories historically subjugated by the Russian Empire and currently subsumed within the Russian Federation today. This approach can be applied to most of the ethnographic texts published by the Russian Geographical Society and its affiliates, as the overwhelming majority of them contain numerous inaccurate observations and conclusions, often very harmful in their implications (Vyatchina 2023). These inaccuracies persistently resonate today, with some still forming the very foundation of academic knowledge, without undergoing any critical analysis, despite occasional acknowledgments by the authors themselves regarding their methodological limitations.

"Defining the tonality of *inorodtsy's*<sup>9</sup> melodies is a complex and still insufficiently understood issue and, in any case, cannot be determined using the methods of Western European music theory," acknowledges Sergey Rybakov (1897: 7), "the founder of Bashqort musical ethnography" (Sagadeeva, Raximov 2018) and

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<sup>6</sup> For example, kubyz (Bashqort: qumız), a type of jaw harp.

<sup>7</sup> There is also a Tatar quray, which is a similar but different instrument—a short whistling flute.

<sup>8</sup> In binomial nomenclature referred to as *Pleurospermum uralense* (Bashqort: Ural qırlı qurayı).

<sup>9</sup> In the Russian Empire, "inorodtsy" (Russian: инородцы) referred to non-Slavic subjects who received special legal treatment, typically applied to indigenous peoples of the Caucasus, Central Asia, and North Asia.

descendant of Russian settlers, while recognizing the limitations of his method. Born in 1867 in Samara to the family of a State Councillor and a theology scholar, Sergey Rybakov received a decent education in St. Petersburg: he graduated from the Faculty of History and Philology, followed by a course in composition theory at the Conservatory. At the age of 24, while working as an employee of the Russian Geographical Society, Rybakov embarked on his first ethnographic expedition to the Southern Urals to collect local folklore<sup>10</sup>. In 1897, after publishing several articles based on the collected material, he released his magnum opus titled "Music and Songs of the Ural Muslims with an Outline of their Life." This work brought him fame as the leading Russian expert on the musical culture of the Idel and Ural Turkic peoples<sup>11</sup>.

Despite the typical features of Russian ethnographic studies during this period, such as messianism<sup>12</sup>, essentialism<sup>13</sup>, and in some cases, undisclosed demonstrations of squeamishness<sup>14</sup> regarding the lifestyles of "primitive *narodnosts*"<sup>15</sup> (1897: 4), this work is paradoxically intriguing, as its value lies in the significant amount of incorrect information, errors, and inaccuracies it contains. The precise nature of these inaccuracies is delineated by the Bashqort writer and researcher Gazim Shafikov in his comment on Rybakov's description (1897: 131) of the main character of the song "Qahım türä", which says: "Qahım türä was a regimental commander of the Bashqort army, known for his diligence and skills; he was poisoned with sulema due to envy." Here, Shafikov (1993: 49) correctly points out that the historical circumstances of Qahım türä's murder differ from the ones outlined by the Russian ethnographer: "He was deliberately poisoned in the city of Vladimir while returning home [from war]. The young Bashqort commander was poisoned by tsarist satraps who were afraid of the victorious army, which, upon returning home, could potentially spark a new rebellion against the Russian autocracy."

We would prefer not to speculate on the reasons behind Rybakov's numerous mistakes. Various assumptions are put forward in the studies of his works: from rather diplomatic remarks stating that "the study of ethnic culture is a lengthy and very delicate process, requiring a special research approach" (Sagadeeva, Raximov 2018: 142), to more straightforward, but reasonable conclusions that the Russian ethnographer knew "neither the language, nor the way of life, nor the customs" of the ethnicities he studied (Axmarov 1908: 341). Some feasible clues can also be found

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<sup>10</sup> In his early expeditions, Rybakov collected not only music, but also legends, myths, epics, proverbs, fairy tales, etc.

<sup>11</sup> In the order mentioned in the manuscript, there are Bashqorts, Tatars, Teptyars, and Nağaybäks. The affiliation of the Teptyars with the Turks remains a subject of debate.

<sup>12</sup> From the preface: "Undoubtedly, the study of the native Russian people should take precedence, but by the fate of Russia, it is intended to bring enlightenment and Christian culture into the lands of Eastern peoples. However, to more successfully carry enlightenment, we need to closely and thoroughly acquaint ourselves with the lives of Eastern peoples: the force of circumstances inevitably brings us closer to inorodtsy, and even the centre of our cultural and state interests is increasingly leaning towards Asia, the East, where, perhaps, with the growth of Russian culture, a new great stage for the global work of humanity is being prepared. In the East, and especially in the Russian East, great tasks and great deeds for the future of humanity are ripening." (1897: 1)

<sup>13</sup> About the Bashqorts: "The general conclusion regarding the people we are studying is that they are more artists than life practitioners. To a certain extent, they are feeling and thinking, sensitive to the poetry of the surrounding nature of the Urals, but they are not achieving success in life and are incapable of defending their own well-being." (1897: 122)

<sup>14</sup> About the Bashqort household: "The interiors of their houses were very dark and black, filled with soot, so there would be no great pleasure in staying in them." (1897: 10)

<sup>15</sup> A derogatory term for "ethnicity" used during the Russian Empire and the early Soviet era.

in the text of the Rybakov's monograph itself: "The Bashkirs<sup>16</sup> turned out to be very aloof and looked at us with distrust and silence; upon our repeated requests to stay in their izba<sup>17</sup>, the owner grumpily refused; the same thing happened at another izba" (1897: 254).

### **It's impossible to say**

The lack of hospitality can be easily explained through a basic study of history. From the mid-sixteenth century, the cultures of the Bashqorts and Tatars began to deteriorate due to numerous restrictions imposed by the "Russian world": prohibitions on settlement in significant geographical locations of the region, oppressive taxes, widespread closure of madrasas and mosques, degradation of the Muslim clergy, public executions of nobility, construction of fortresses, *ostrogs*<sup>18</sup>, and *katorgas*<sup>19</sup>, forced Russification, Christianization, land expropriation, and establishment of Russian settlements. All these events sparked a series of revolts and uprisings, with some of them ending in massive bloodshed, resulting in at least a few hundred thousand victims among the indigenous population. The unprecedented cruelty was accompanied by equally ruthless censorship. Here is what Gazim Shafikov writes about Salawat Yulayev, a revolutionary, poet, and Bashkort national hero: "The Tsarist punitive authorities, under threat of death, even forbade mentioning his name" (1993: 111).

Nevertheless, the Empire's repressive apparatus failed to suppress orally transmitted stories. In an effort to preserve the memory of the Bashqort uprisings of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, local *säsäns* (improvising poets and musicians) created an extensive corpus of poems and songs that commemorate historical events and honour their heroes; not only Salawat, but also Batyrsha, Qarahaqal, Buranbay, and others. In its turn, the cultural resurgence for the Tatars started in the late nineteenth century, despite Tsarist prohibitions on the publication of Tatar literature, newspapers, and the establishment of Tatar schools. In defiance of these restrictions, the music thrived (Muftakhutdinova, Khurmatullina 2015). Drawing inspiration from the verses of the poet Ğabdulla Tuqay, Tatar composers and musicians created songs that would become significant symbols of the 1905–1907 revolution, including "Berençe sada" ("The first cry"), "Ikençe sada" ("The second cry"), "Şäkertlär jırı" ("The students song"), "Muslim Marseillaise", and more. Facing the inability to speak, new instruments for addressing colonial trauma emerged within musical culture.

The modern policies of the Kremlin towards Bashqortostan and Tatarstan echo the violence experienced by the indigenous people of these lands from the sixteenth to the early twentieth centuries. Certain colonial instruments from this period have been meticulously preserved and reintroduced in present times, ranging from the violent

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<sup>16</sup> Bashkirs (Russian: башкиры, башкирцы) is an exonym for the Bashqorts used by the Tsardom of Muscovy and all later incarnations of the Russian state since the 16th century until today. Also, the colonial place name Bashkiria (Russian: Башкирия) has been used instead of Bashqortostan.

<sup>17</sup> Here, Rybakov is using a Russian word for hut (Russian: изба), as opposed to a house.

<sup>18</sup> A small military fort constructed predominantly from wood. It was commonly established in colonised regions or along fortified lines, in contrast to the larger kremlin fortress. Originating from the Russian word "стругать" (strogat'), meaning "to shave wood."

<sup>19</sup> A penal labour system in both the Russian Empire and later the Soviet Union, involving the transportation of prisoners to remote colonies, where they endured severe conditions of forced labour (Russian: каторга).

crackdown on peaceful protesters with consecutive detentions, beatings, tortures, and uninvestigated deaths in custody (Latypova 2024), to repressive language policies. Over the past decade, the Kremlin has effectively implemented its new program of cultural homogenization, which involved diminishing support for education in indigenous languages and curricula incorporating regional and/or ethnic elements. A bill passed by the Russian State Duma on 19 June 2018 rendered education in languages other than Russian optional, overturning previous laws established within the twenty-one national republics and limiting lessons in indigenous languages to just two hours per week. In response to this enforced Russification, the use of language itself has begun to emerge as an important tool in the struggle for identity. In the contemporary music scene of Tatarstan, while the representation of Russian and English languages remains significant, it is no longer as predominant as it once was, for example in the early 2010s. Undoubtedly, not all texts written in Tatar represent an open protest or glorification of indigenous culture; rather, Tatar remains a functional, living language present in various spheres of activity among the residents of the Republic of Tatarstan. Nonetheless, the mere presence of the Tatar language in the public sphere is often perceived by the Tatar-speaking community as a desire to contribute to its preservation.

One such example is the album "Pıyala" ("Glass" and/or "Cup"), released in 2020 by AIGEL, an electronic pop duo comprised of Russian musician and producer Ilya Baramiya and Tatar vocalist and composer Aigöl Ğäysinä. Despite Ğäysinä mentioning in several interviews that the concept behind the album lacked any political significance, the fact that the album's lyrics are entirely in the Tatar language led many to perceive it as a political statement. This fact did not escape the attention of the metropolitan music press. In some of the [reviews](#) of "Pıyala," Muscovite music media outlets delve into traditional Orientalist clichés, arguably aimed at highlighting hierarchy and establishing a comfortable distance: "In this form, the songs of the duo sound more abstract and may evoke associations with magical incantations or ancient rituals". In one of the early [interviews](#) associated with the album's release, the political importance of her native language is further highlighted in Ğäysinä's own words. She acknowledges her "special connection" with Tatar, noting that it allows her to remain connected with her "lineage" and provides numerous opportunities for self-expression:

*"It's impossible to say it as sentimentally as I would in Tatar. And I wanted to say it in that way. I think my writing style in Russian is somewhat more detached, and I cannot afford certain expressions. I was surprised that within the Tatar language, I feel at home, even though I don't use Tatar in my everyday speech. And in my home, I can be anyone I want to be. <...> I have this feeling that when I speak Tatar, my ancestors stir in the depths of centuries. They wave at me and say, 'Hey! We are with you, we support you, we are your lineage.' That's exactly what I feel."*

In 2023, the title track from "Pıyala" became a phenomenon in Russia due to its inclusion in the soundtrack for the drama television series "The Boy's Word: Blood on the Asphalt," which portrays criminal life in Tatarstan, particularly in Kazan, during the final years of the USSR. Consistently featured in the most brutal scenes of the series, the track is not credited in the titles (nor are the musicians mentioned), prompting viewers to use music identification apps to recognize the track. This is likely how "Pıyala" reached the top spot on Shazam, subsequently making its way onto Spotify, Apple Music, and the American Billboard charts for TikTok music, thus becoming an international hit. Directly funded by the Russian Institute for

Internet Development, an important pillar of the Kremlin's propaganda machine, the authors of the television series made the decision to exclude AIGEL from mention due to their political stance: both Ğäysinä and Baramiya have consistently spoken out against Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and their live shows have been banned in the country since September 2022. Nevertheless, their stance creates disarray within Russian indigenous and decolonial activist circles, with some activists supporting AIGEL, while others criticise the duo for collaborating with the state propaganda outlet. In their statement on 7 December 2023, the Ukrainian Ministry of Culture designated the series as "hostile propaganda," rendering its viewing illegal. In February 2024, certain Telegram channels affiliated with Kremlin propaganda started spreading a video containing excerpts from the television series, where its characters encouraged viewers to engage in the upcoming Russian presidential elections. "Pıyala" played in the background, with the original Tatar lyrics replaced by Russian ones, urging everyone to go to the polls, and stating, for example: "the pindoses<sup>20</sup> are the evil turned against us."

Co-optation is among the numerous strategies employed by colonisers, yet it proves highly effective as it acknowledges the potential of indigenous cultural practices. However, most of these strategies are tainted by the colonisers' arrogance and wishful thinking, as they persistently aim to uphold the status quo, reinforcing and legitimising the existing hierarchy. "These savages just can't handle music with multiple voices," comments one of Rybakov's interlocutors (1897: 244), a Russian settler, and a colonial landowner in the Bashqort lands, discussing the monophonic nature of Bashqort musical tradition. The arrogance of colonisers gives them a false sense of superiority and control. While it is challenging, it is still possible to fit pentatonics into European notation. It is also achievable to record, transcribe, and translate the words that constitute the "magic spells." Entirely reliant on their knowledge, tools, and technologies, colonisers have learned to hear but have lost their ability to listen, thus impeding their capacity for true understanding.

### **Şıfır and şafıra<sup>21</sup>**

When discussing the ontological basis of sound as not only natural, but socio-cultural phenomenon, modern scholars often adopt a dual approach, distinguishing between the "audible" and the "sonorous." The audible refers to what can be perceived within the scope of human physical experience, particularly within the auditory range. The sonorous exceeds subjective experience: when there is no one to hear a sound, it does not cease to exist as a natural phenomenon, as its trace continues to resonate. "Even before materialising or becoming a signal, the sonorous—sound—in order to be, must leave a trace," writes sound scholar François J. Bonnet (2016: 7). "The trace is not necessarily a material, physical host; it precedes the pertinence of any such distinction." Hence, the sonorous has the capacity to surpass materiality, evolving into the idea of sound: if a tree falls in a forest and no one is there to hear it, it doesn't generate the audible, yet it emits the trace, which remains subject to analysis from diverse perspectives—be it physical, ontological, epistemological, political, social, and so forth. In this context, the role of an observer, or in our case, a listener, becomes significant. "Like a parasite, in order to exist it first of all needs a host," concludes Bonnet (2016: 7). Given that all potential listeners are societal

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<sup>20</sup> A derogatory ethnic slur for citizens or inhabitants of the United States (Russian: пиндосы).

<sup>21</sup> Pronounced as "shafira" [ʃafira], derived from the Arabic word "صَفِير" [safira], one of its meanings can be translated as "to empty."

entities characterised by the assembly of identities, experiences, and perspectives they incorporate, defining a listening host exclusively through a phenomenological framework is simply insufficient. And considering the aforementioned ontological duality, it also seems inadequate to develop an objective, universal model of what is referred to as "sound" within the discipline of "sound studies," as a listening host is limited in its ability to have direct access to the sound itself, but rather only to the trace it leaves as it propagates. However, within this framework, it is indeed possible to develop methodologies better suited to study the process of listening, its various tactics, and strategies, all inherently connected to a listening host—or multiple hosts, as the sonorous may also include a shared experience or collective memory.

We may not hear ultrasound when using a smart car parking system or an ultrasonic dental cleaner, yet we are all aware of its presence and function. We think about the ultrasound, thus engaging in the act of listening. Similarly, we may not hear any sounds at all when Paul Celan takes heavy, visceral pauses while [reading](#) his poetry about the Holocaust. Nevertheless, we can distinctly feel the resonating silence of its gaping voids. What resonates in these pauses is "impossible to say," or measure, or calculate, or capture with musical notation or audio recording technologies. It lacks a physical body and defies any attempts at capture and appropriation. It is not an abstraction, nor an empty signifier open to interpretation, but rather a clear and comprehensible message purposefully devoid of any semantic content. It is encrypted with the void, intentionally "emptied," *şafira*. Through the process of *şafira*, it transforms into an immaterial, yet still sonorous, emptiness — "zero," *şifr*. While incorporeal, it continues to resonate and also resists any attempts at capture (try to catch the emptiness with your palms). The sonorous *şifr* can still be heard, but to do so, one must learn how to listen.

### **Taşqayzarğa soqop yazım qarğış<sup>22</sup>**

In the lower octave, play La twice, followed by Re, Do, Si in the lower octave. Then, repeat Do, Re, Mi, Do, La in the lower octave, and finally, Mi in the lower octave. These ten notes make up the Bashqort National Radio interval call, accurately replicating the initial melodic phrase from a popular *qısqqa qöy* (short song) about Salawat Yulayev. Reproducing this melody would be easy for anyone familiar with musical notation, but those with a deeper knowledge of Bashqortostan's culture and history would also tie it to the heroic, albeit tragic, context associated with the song. It tells the tale of a 22-year-old<sup>23</sup> Bashqort rebel who joined forces with Yemelyan Pugachev, an ataman of the Yaik Cossacks, in resisting the colonial aggression<sup>24</sup> of the Russian Empire, only to be captured and spend the remainder of his life in *katorga*.

When transcribing the text and musical notation of this *qısqqa qöy* in "Music and Songs of the Ural Muslims with an Outline of their Life", the ethnographer Rybakov only introducing its first quatrain, avoiding a direct reference to Salawat Yulayev: "If we turn to historical data concerning Bashkiria, we will find that during the Pugachev Rebellion, in which the Bashkirs were significantly involved, a certain Bashkir named Salawat Yulayev played a prominent role. <...> The song may perhaps refer to this

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<sup>22</sup> "I carved my curse on these rocks" (Bashqort).

<sup>23</sup> There is no documentary evidence to confirm whether Salawat indeed led the rebellions at this exact age; however, this figure is mentioned in all existing versions of the song.

<sup>24</sup> This refers to the so-called Peasants' War of 1773–1775.

hero" (1897: 116). According to the Soviet musicologist Lev Lebedinskiy, this was a deliberate gesture of goodwill aimed "to avoid attracting the attention of censorship" (1965: 27). However, it seems worthwhile to compare Rybakov's research approach with the methods used by his contemporary counterparts, such as Philipp Nefedov.

Like Rybakov, Nefedov also formally serves the Russian emperor, having been elected as a member of the Society of Devotees of Natural Science, Anthropology, and Ethnography in 1874. However, being not only an ethnographer but also a *Narodnik*<sup>25</sup> and the son of a serf, he openly demonstrates sympathies towards the Bashqorts and is unafraid of drawing the attention of censorship. Without implying that it is precisely the difference in class background that enables Nefedov not only to hear the audible but also to listen to the sonorous, he certainly demonstrates an attempt to solidarize with the Bashqorts and grasp the "impossibility to say" concealed within the ten notes of "Salawat:"

*"It is impossible to convey the fascination, the passion with which the dzhigit sang. The song completely took possession of the singer and carried him far away; he forgot about himself, and the whole world. The tune of this song was peculiar and wild; within it, one could hear both unrestrained freedom with its unbreakable energy and courage, and the call of the people's leader... I heard the stomping of countless horses' hooves, as if thousands of formidable horsemen were rushing straight at me, and a thunderous chorus rolled through the gorges of the mountains from edge to edge: "Salawat is coming! Ayda!"<sup>26</sup>" (Lebedinskiy 1965: 27).*

In the earliest and arguably most authentic version of the qısqı qöy "Salawat", transcribed by folklorist Fanuza Nadyrshina, there is no mention of Yemelyan Pugachev. However, the historical figure appears in later, altered versions of the song published during the Soviet<sup>27</sup> era, in two variations: the first describing Salawat and Pugachev as "Üž ileneñ toğro yegete" ("Faithful *jigits*<sup>28</sup> of their country"), and the other as "Äräsäyzeñ danlı yegete" ("Russia's glorious *jigits*"). The mention of nationality is another new element that emerges in these altered versions, aligning well with the contradictory nature of the Soviet Union's policies towards its indigenous peoples. These policies began with the processes of *korenizatsiya* ("indigenization" or "nativization"), and ended up with the superficial "friendship of peoples". On one hand, this hypocrisy was widely exploited by the Soviets to actively promote the narrative of the "heroic struggle of the masses against violence, for national and social liberation" (Aqmanov 1993: 223). On the other hand, they implemented measures to suppress the growth of the national consciousness of "minorities". Expressing dissatisfaction with the fact that numerous foreign research works on Salawat Yulayev have not been translated into either Bashqort or Russian languages, Gazim Shafikov makes the following conclusion: "Such scientific studies were unnecessary for the Soviet Bolshevik empire. For seventy years, the supremacist national policy of the totalitarian state was reducing the unique history of

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<sup>25</sup> The Narodniks were part of a movement within the Russian Empire during the 1860s and 1870s, with some engaging in revolutionary agitation against tsarism (Russian: народники).

<sup>26</sup> Derived from the Bashqort word "äyžä" (Tatar: äydä), which translates to "come on!"

<sup>27</sup> The earliest altered version is found in Salawat Galin's book "Bashqort xalqınıñ yır poeziyahı" ("The Song Poetry of the Bashqort People"), published in 1977. The authors could not find any sources with these altered versions before 1977.

<sup>28</sup> A term of Turkic origin typically referring to a courageous and brave male person in the Caucasus, North Asia, and Central Asia.



ethnic minorities to nothing, especially for those who did not wish to exist on bended knees and with bowed heads" (1993: 112).

### **Qaber taşları miña nider söyli<sup>29</sup>**

In the absence of any accessible historiographic tools, numerous word-of-mouth practices and oral genres become significantly important: *maqtauw* (commendation), *yır* or *jır* (song), *äyteş* or *aytış* (poetic dispute), and many others. Most of them were composed in written form but transmitted orally, usually accompanied by music. One of the most noteworthy genres in this category is *bäet* or *bäyet*, epic songs with a form intentionally simplified for easier transmission. The origin of *bäets* typically traces back to the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries, with some of them possibly rooted in myths conceived centuries earlier. Thus, according to one of the versions, the well-known *bäet* “Sak-Sok” narrates a religious dispute between pagans: sun worshipers and moon worshipers. In Bashqort culture, besides *bäets*, a similar role is fulfilled by a separate genre called *qobayır*<sup>30</sup>, a lyrical or heroic epic often performed with the accompaniment of a *dombra*.

*Bäets* and *qobayırs* play a crucial role in linking the memories of generations—while their texts live on, so do the historical episodes<sup>31</sup> they tell about, even the most tragic ones. For instance, the *bäet* “Perepis xaqında” narrates the dismal events that occurred during the population census conducted in 1897, when more than two hundred residents of Tatar villages stood up in an attempt to resist another forced Christianization effort. To suppress the protests by force, the Russian emperor ordered punitive detachments, popularly known as *obzhor-komandy* (gluttony squads), to be sent to the *auls* (villages). These detachments beat peasants with whips, raped women, and engaged in looting (Ahmetova-Urmanche 2005: 473).

In terms of musical structure, there are also much more complex genres that narrate people's tragedies. One of them is *ożon qöy* (lingering song), a genre characterised by long, continuous musical phrases with intricate dynamics, ornamented with multiple glissandos and melismatic chants, typically accompanied by *quray* (though it can also be instrumental). Considered the most challenging genre to perform, *ożon qöy* demands a high level of skill. One of the most well-known *ożon qöys* is “Täftiläw,” a “curse song” dedicated to the tragedy of 24 January 1736, when more than a thousand men, women, and children from the Bashqort village of Höyántöž were shot, bayoneted, and burned alive on the orders of Russian Army colonel Alexei Tevkelev. Today, a memorial to the victims of the genocide stands at the site of the former village, featuring lines from the song carved into it: “Qara la ğına urman qaya bite, şawlayzır za kisen, yel saqta. Taşqayzarğa soqop yażım qarğış, yeyändärem uqır ber saqta” (“The black forest on a cliff is noisy in the night, when there is wind. I carved my curse on these rocks, one day my grandchildren will read it.”)

In his 1897 monograph, ethnographer Rybakov presented one of the most unique

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<sup>29</sup> “Tombstones tell me something” (Tatar).

<sup>30</sup> Ethnomusicologist Gulnur Buxarova proposes the following hypothesis about the origin of the genre name: “The word could have been formed from the Bashqort *qoba*, meaning 'soul', and *yıry*, meaning 'song', i.e., 'a song dedicated to the soul'” (2019: 98). However, it is worth noting that the Bashqort word *qoba* usually means “light brown”, “raw”, or “naked”.

<sup>31</sup> The documented varieties of *bäets* are historical, legendary, didactic, domestic, and fairy tales.

interpretations of "Täftiläw." Initially, he states that the "taftelskaya song" is equally esteemed by both Bashqorts and Tatars and is extensively spread throughout these areas: "Everyone knows how to sing it" (1897: 83). Further, he provides two versions of the qobayır's origin, transcribed from the accounts of local residents: Bashqorts "assert" (1897: 64) that authorship belongs to the daughter of the Ufa mufti Kutulkay Tevkelev, depicting her unhappy love. Subsequently, according to the Tatars' "explanation" (1897: 73), the song originated during the wedding of the nephew of the same Ufa mufti, who married his cousin. None of Rybakov's interlocutors mention Tevkelev's military origins and the tragic events. Finally, the ethnographer presents a truly singular text of "Täftiläw," comprising only two verses:

*You are the nightingale, and I am the swallow,  
Let us sing some more if it's not enough;  
Whose life will you make use of,  
If your own life is short?*

*When I crossed you, River Belaya<sup>32</sup>,  
My hand grew tired from rowing;  
My mind was lost, my reason disappeared,  
When I remembered my past life.*

While engaging in şafira, the encryption through emptiness, it is possible to explore diverse forms of solidarity. By defying various forms of oppression, one might replicate a unique code inaccessible to colonisers, who only remain shallow observers. This exemplifies the precise mechanism of how the Tatar *moñ* operates, standing as one of the most illustrative examples of sonorous şifr born in the process of şafira. Islamic scholar Alfrid Bustanov maintains that *moñ* is a fundamental concept in Tatar culture, highlighting specifically the impossibility of accurately conveying its meaning in Russian (or any other) language. A common and somewhat arbitrary interpretation of *moñ* is sadness and yearning for the lost past (Zakirova, Fakhruddinova 2016) symbolising the "acute sorrow of the people for the lost greatness, their statehood" (Bustanov 2019). But despite being a cultural archetype rooted in history, it persists as a living, contemporary phenomenon that continues to be referenced today. Thus, the authors of this paper observed a number of *moñ*-related comments under Tatar music videos on YouTube, with users expressing sentiments such as "moñlı" (an adjective form of *moñ*) or "moñ belän jırlıy" (singing with *moñ*), and general remarks about the songs can only be considered "worthwhile" if they have *moñ* as their component. It is not related to scales or the tempo of the song, but rather to an elusive feeling. A classic example of this phenomenon as a component of a song is often found in the ożon qöy genre; however, some scholars distinguish *moñ* as a genre of its own. In her book "Nation, Language, Islam: Tatarstan's Sovereignty Movement," anthropologist and writer Helen Faller dedicated an entire chapter (2011: 262) to the phenomenon. The chapter recounts an event in which a group of Tatar-speaking individuals travelled on a ferry along the River Idel, with the renowned Bashqort and Tatar singer Färidä Qudaşeva performing on board. Faller describes the passengers' experience, where they feel no need to concern themselves with whether those around them understand Tatar. What unites them all is *moñ*, with its silent yet sonorous presence.

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<sup>32</sup> The colonial place name of the Agidel River (Bashkort: Ağızel, Tatar: Ağıydel), a loan translation that literally means "white" (Russian: Белая).

## Our land

The sonorous şifr (bäet, qobayır, moñ, etc.) only reveals itself to listening hosts who consciously consider the contexts of its trace, and thus, listen carefully. In contrast, hearing bodies would likely interpret the contexts behind the trace and related experiences based solely on their own preconceptions. These hearing bodies—colonisers—are solely focused on tangible results: music notations, records, audio files that can be distributed, or a piece of text ready for automatic translation. This focus is their strength, allowing them to continually reinforce their status in the hierarchy. However, it is also their weakness, as they fail to grasp the potential power of "subordinate subjects" and their well-hidden mechanisms of unity and solidarity.

In a more straightforward statement, the sonorous şifr reveals its concealed political potential. In the track "1552<sup>33</sup>" by the Tatar rap artist Nazim Ismagilov, also known as USAL<sup>34</sup>, there is a carefully incorporated sample from the Kryashen folk song "Bezneñ il" ("Our land"). When this sample blasts from the speakers of the Kazan Kremlin's musical stage, the entire crowd becomes listening hosts. The lyrics pose a powerful question: "İrtägä telem betsä bugıma bügen miña bu irek?" ("If tomorrow my language disappears, why the hell do I need this freedom today?") Here, the language itself creates a political space; before performing his track "İt" ("Meat"), Ismagilov takes a brief pause to further engage the audience with his recurring political<sup>35</sup> mantra: "Azatka — Azat! Azat Miftaxovka — azatlıq!" ("Freedom to Azat! Freedom to Azat Miftaxov!").

The audience vigorously echoes back: "Azatlıq! Azatlıq!"

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<sup>33</sup> The year referenced earlier in the text, marking the decline of the Kazan Khanate.

<sup>34</sup> It can be translated as "angry".

<sup>35</sup> On 18 January 2021, the Golovinsky District Court of Moscow sentenced Azat Miftaxov, a graduate student at Moscow State University and mathematician, to six years of imprisonment for "hooliganism committed by a group of individuals using weapons." According to the investigation, Miftaxov and his wife broke a window at the office of a branch of the United Russia party in one of Moscow's neighbourhoods and threw a smoke bomb inside. Many activists and human rights defenders came out in support of Miftaxov, calling the criminal case politically motivated. Miftaxov himself and his wife claimed to have been tortured after their arrest; he did not admit his guilt.

The first version of the audio paper was originally published in [Bashqort](#), [Tatar](#) and [Russian](#) languages by *Beda Journal* (2023).

### Tracklist ([Download MP3](#))

- [00:00] Asiya Äxmetşina — Tatarlar, berläşegez
- [02:13] Xäyzär Näzerşin — Qahım–türä
- [05:00] AIGEL — Pıyala
- [07:20] Excerpt from the podcast "Tvorcheskiye Plany: AIGEL in Tatar — berni dä añlaşılımy, no bik qızıq (nothing is clear, but very interesting)
- [08:25] Bashqortostan National Radio interval call
- [08:40] Alim Kayumov — Salawat (edit)
- [09:22] Vener Mostafin — Salawat
- [11:55] Mäsgudä Şämsetdinova — Sak-Sok bäete
- [17:18] Sälimä Ğärifullina, Xäyzär Näzerşin — Bayas
- [21:37] Aydar Niyazov, Alina Belyaeva, Alla Isargakova, Sergey Kostyuzhov — Ayu bäete
- [25:20] Ğäli Xämzin — Täftiläü
- [28:58] Färiyä Qudasheva — Qaz qanatı
- [32:50] Läysan Timerxanova — Oźatiu (an excerpt from 'Babich', a motion picture by Bulat Yusupov)
- [33:45] USAL — It (live at Tat Cult Fest, Kazan, The Republic of Tatarstan National Library, 30th August, 2022)
- [34:44] USAL — It (studio version)

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