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On: 22 May 2012, At: 03:33

Publisher: Routledge

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Central Asian Survey

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ccas20>

Book review

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Available online: 22 May 2012

To cite this article: Rafis Abazov & Andrey R. Khazbulatov (2012): Book review, Central Asian Survey, DOI:10.1080/02634937.2012.688502

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2012.688502>



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Book review

Zolotaia Zhila: Ocherki o folklore i duhovnoi kulture Kazakhstana [Golden vein: essays on the folklore and spiritual culture of Kazakhstan], by Seit Kaskabasov, Moscow, Khudozhestvennaia Literatura, 2010, 668 pp., ISBN 978-5-280-03502-7 (in Russian)

The book *Zolotaia Zhila* is a collection of essays and research articles on the folklore and nomadic culture of Kazakhstan in comparative perspective. It represents the growing number of studies conducted since Kazakhstan's independence in 1991 that aim to rediscover the Kazakh oral epic and folkloric traditions, as well as to reconceptualize the cultural history of the Kazakhs. These studies have become especially important as some representatives of the Kazakh intelligentsia are seeking to rethink the concept of Kazakh national identity in non-Western frameworks.

Seit Kaskabasov plays an important role in these intellectual discourses on contemporary Kazakh culture as well as on the place of Kazakh oral traditions in the folklore traditions of the Turkic nations of Eurasia. As Director of the Mukhtar Auevov Institute of Literature and Art, he is one of the most respected Turkologists in Kazakhstan and Central Asia. He states that his publication is designed to present to both the general public and an expert audience 'many centuries of folklore and oral creative poetry', which became a part of 'contemporary multi-genre literary culture' (p. 5).

The publication is divided into three sections. The first section covers ancient folklore traditions from archaic myths to popular ancient tales and legends. The author carefully assesses the links between ancient Turkic myths and cosmology and Kazakh folklore. In doing this he tries to avoid the trap of building a mythology of national state identity, a tendency that can be seen in the writing of many scholars in the region. So many scholars and intellectuals in Central Asia have laid outright national claims on ancient myths, legends and tales, trying to prove the ancient roots of the Kazakhs (or Kyrgyzs, Turkmens, and so on). Kaskabasov constructs a more nuanced approach suggesting that 'ancient archaic myths' (p. 57) and folklore elements have been common among all Turkic tribes since the time of the early Turkic Khanate (sixth to seventh century AD), and that these elements can be traced through the archaic and syncretic elements of contemporary Kazakh folklore.

The second section deals with medieval-era folklore, especially the changes and 'dialogues' of various folklore and cultural traditions in the territory of contemporary Kazakhstan, the Middle East and southern Russia (p. 413). This section covers the cultural history, intensive cultural interactions with 'Muslim literary traditions' (p. 421) and the evolution of Kazakh folklore between the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries. The author argues that the culture of the people on the territory of Desht-i-Kypchak (which includes the territory of modern Kazakhstan) evolved mostly in the form of oral poetic traditions, in sharp contrast to the settled peoples of Central Asia, where written forms (handwritten books and various forms of written works) began to play a greater role during this period. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries historic and heroic epics flourished among the nomadic people of the steppe, carefully developed and preserved by singers and bards (*zhyrchy*) travelling with military units. At the same time, some individual poets (*akyns*) began creating their very own *kuis* – legends, songs and poems, on various themes including love, the meaning of life and heroic panegyrics – as well as songs about native lands left behind. These songs were often accompanied by musical instruments. Between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries the epic and folklore traditions were

entrenched; some of them were even written down under orders from *sultans*, *khans* and *biis*. During this era the Kazakhs also developed *dastans* – epics created in verse or prose – on various everyday-life themes, although these *dastans* increasingly came under influences from settled areas of Central Asia (p. 427). Some of these *dastans* included strong religious (Islamic) and mystic motives, metaphors and allegories, which were traditional among Persian-speaking neighbours in the region. During the fifteenth through eighteenth centuries the *zhyrchy* were largely replaced by *akyns*, professional poets and bards, who often improvised their own poetic works in public (*aitus*).

The third and probably most interesting section assesses the evolution of folklore and traditional oral nomadic culture in the twentieth century. It focuses on oral epic traditions and folklore in the twentieth century being what he calls ‘living traditions’ (p. 639). During the twentieth century most of the significant oral works were written down, studied and incorporated into the modern literary and theatrical traditions – especially in the national cinema (p. 661) – as a part of the Cultural Revolution and nation-state building. It is important to note that although the Kazakhs accepted and incorporated many new Western forms of art (theatre, opera, ballet, cinema, Western-style prose), they tried to preserve their original nomadic themes, including favourite epics and legends. The new generation of Kazakh artists and scholars systematized and synthesized ‘national’ folklore and new ‘national oral culture’ from various forms of tribal and local folklore and epic traditions. The author brings up the example of Zhambyl Zhabayev, who combined two traditional roles – *zhyrchy* and *akyn* – in this artistic career.

One of the strengths of *Zolotaia Zhila* is the use of a wide range of primary and secondary materials, especially unique materials published in Kazakh and other Turkic languages, to illustrate the main arguments and findings. Well-organized footnotes and endnotes help even the unprepared reader navigate easily through the unfamiliar universe of nomadic oral-cultural heritage, while experienced scholars will find that these references are useful for conducting further studies on this complex topic.

Unfortunately, Seit Kaskabasov’s work provides no index or comprehensive bibliography, although he supplies a short list of major publications at the end of each chapter. In order to conduct further research in this field it would be extremely helpful for Western scholars to have access to a full bibliography and the list of primary sources used in this book. There is also a disconnect with the rich Western scholarship on this topic, as the author does not use major Western publications published during recent years especially in France, the United States and the United Kingdom. Furthermore, it would be useful to learn more about recent debates and studies (some of them presenting different and quite controversial views) on Turkic culture and folklore, published by scholars in Kazakhstan, as well as in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

Overall, Seit Kaskabasov’s book should be considered a noteworthy contribution to the field of Turkic studies and current intellectual debates on the role of Kazakh folklore and oral culture in the rise of Kazakh national identity, as well as to the study of the relation of Kazakh cultural traditions to those of other Turkic nations across the region.

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