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The *Orteke* Tradition: An Examination of the Relationship Between Music and Puppetry in Central Asia

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Abstract. This study aims to examine *Orteke*, the ancient puppet tradition of Central Asia, in its cultural, musical, and symbolic dimensions. In Kazakh folk culture, *Orteke* represents a unique form of performance that unites music, dance, and puppetry. The research focuses on the animistic origins, rhythmic–musical structure, and cultural representation of *Orteke* within collective memory. Recognized by UNESCO on the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage, this tradition is regarded not merely as a stage performance but as a multilayered cultural practice reflecting the relationship between nature and humanity, ritual aesthetics, and the creative expressive power of the people. The literature review concentrates on *dombra* performance, the synchronization of puppet movements, and the symbolic meaning of the goat figure. The findings indicate that *Orteke* constitutes a significant model for both traditional and contemporary contexts in terms of cultural sustainability and digital archiving.

Keywords: *Orteke*, puppetry, Kazakh musical culture, intangible cultural heritage, rhythm, *dombra*

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Традиция *ортеке*: исследование взаимосвязи музыки и кукольного театра в Центральной Азии

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Аннотация. Данное исследование направлено на всестороннее изучение *ортеке* — древней традиции кукольного искусства Центральной Азии — в её культурных, музыкальных и символических аспектах. В казахской народной культуре *ортеке* — уникальная форма представления, объединяющая музыку, танец и кукольный театр. Статья фокусируется на анимистических истоках, ритмико-музыкальной структуре и культурной репрезентации *ортеке* в коллективной памяти. Включённая ЮНЕСКО в Список нематериального культурного наследия, эта традиция рассматривается не только как сценическое представление, но и как многослойная культурная практика, отражающая связь природы и человека, ритуальную эстетику и творческую выразительность народа. Обзор литературы сосредоточен на домбровом исполнительстве, синхронизации движений куклы и символическом значении образа козла. Полученные результаты показывают, что *ортеке* представляет собой значимую модель как для традиционного, так и для современного контекста с точки зрения культурной устойчивости и цифрового архивирования.

Ключевые слова: *ортеке*, кукольное искусство, казахская музыкальная культура, нематериальное культурное наследие, ритм, домбра

Introduction

The cultural history of Central Asia offers a multifaceted space where music, rituals, and performing arts intertwine. In this region, music has not only existed as an aesthetic form of production but has also been a cultural practice central to belief systems, perceptions of nature, and modes of social communication. Within this broad cultural framework, the *Orteke* tradition emerges as a distinctive art form that integrates musical expression with mimetic movement in Kazakh folk culture. [1] Etymologically derived from “or” (pit, trap) and “teke” (mountain goat), the term *Orteke* reflects both the symbolic interaction between humans and nature and the performative narratives rooted in historical hunting rituals. [2]

In its traditional form, the performer plays the two-stringed *dombra* while simultaneously manipulating a wooden goat puppet with strings attached to the fingers. In this process, sound and movement merge, creating a coordinated performative structure in which the puppet’s gestures visually echo the musical expression. [3] The historical origins of the tradition can be traced to broader Turkic-Mongol cultural spheres and shamanic ritual practices. In shamanic ceremonies, rhythmic gestures, bodily movements, and music functioned as communicative tools with the spiritual world; similar mimetic and rhythmic components persist in the *Orteke* performance today. [Ibid.] Irina Antonova views *Orteke* as “the archetype of modern Kazakh stage arts,” noting that music, dramatization, and dance

are synthesized into a unified performative corpus. [4]

A brief historiographical overview demonstrates that scholarly interest in *Orteke* has developed in several phases. Early Soviet-era folklorists focused primarily on the ethnographic and narrative dimensions of the performance, while later researchers examined its choreographic, symbolic, and dramatic components. Post-1990 studies increasingly emphasized the tradition's cultural and identity-forming functions, as well as its potential within contemporary stage arts. Institutions such as the Kōkil Music College and international *Orteke* festivals have contributed significantly to documenting, institutionalizing, and revitalizing the practice. The inclusion of *Orteke* in UNESCO's List of Intangible Cultural Heritage further underscores its role in cultural memory and national identity.

Culturally, *Orteke* is not merely a form of entertainment but a symbolic system where ritual aesthetics and expressive modes converge. Gulnara Zh. Kuzbakova, drawing on performance anthropology, describes *Orteke* as a "living performance," emphasizing the continuous reproduction of meaning through the interaction of gesture, sound, and audience. [5] Modern stage interpretations — particularly those of the Turan ethnofolkloric ensemble — have recontextualized traditional elements within contemporary aesthetics, demonstrating the adaptability and ongoing evolution of the form. [Ibid.] From a musicological viewpoint, the *küy* repertoire associated with *Orteke* frequently displays dotted or broken rhythmic structures, with melodic contours shaped by quartal and quintal intervals characteristic of Central Asian modal systems. [3]

This article examines the historical origins, musical structure, and symbolic dimensions of the *Orteke* tradition through the lenses of musicology, performance anthropology,

and cultural heritage studies. By doing so, it aims to clarify both the historical continuity of the tradition and its contemporary transformations within modern performance practices.

Historical Background: Origins and Cultural Context

The origins of the *Orteke* tradition trace back to the ancient Turkic-Mongol cultural sphere and shamanic ritual practices. This art form reflects the dynamic relationship between the nomadic lifestyle and nature, both rhythmically and symbolically. In Kazakh culture, the term *Orteke* is derived from the combination of "or" (pit, trap) and "teke" (mountain goat). This naming signifies both the performance's connection to hunting rituals and the symbolic representation of the goat as a symbol of vitality, agility, and liveliness in nature. [2] In traditional narratives, the movements exhibited by the goat as it struggles to escape the trap became the primary inspiration for the puppet performance. [4]

The earliest written record of *Orteke* appears in a newspaper article written by Ahmet Jubanov in 1935. This document demonstrates that the tradition was still alive in the 20th century. [2] However, considering the power of oral culture in its transmission, it is understood that the roots of *Orteke* go back to a millennia-old ritual music tradition. [3]

In the Turkic world, the goat figure (Il. 1) is a prominent mythological and aesthetic symbol across various regions. Frequently seen on rock paintings, calendar discs, and shaman drums, this figure represents resilience and agility in the face of harsh natural conditions. This demonstrates that the goat became a symbol of the rhythmic and combative way of life that Turkic peoples established with nature.

When examining the traditional game practices in Asia, it can be observed that the goat figure is also present in the folk games of regions such as Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan,



Il 1. Goat Figure. Studio "Mergen" (2016)¹

Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. According to Victor S. Vinogradov, the Kyrgyz *tak teke* game and the *buz-bazi* games of the Uzbek and Tajik peoples are concrete examples of this cultural continuity (Cit. ex: [6, pp. 219–220]). In the Kyrgyz folk dictionary, the term *tak teke* is defined as “a clown on a string”; this expression implies a visual rhythmic representation through puppet movements. [7, p. 721] Therefore, this game can be considered a remnant of ritual performances where musical tempo and gestural movements merged in an early form. Researchers note that the origins of the *tak teke* game have a parallel historical depth with the *kopuz* tradition, and the goat figures seen in rock paintings and calendar discs in Turkic-inhabited regions are connected to the ancient rituals of this game. In this regard, *tak teke* is viewed as an early performance form that portrays a rhythmic creation narrative imitating nature.

Irina Antonova evaluates the *Orteke* tradition in Kazakhstan as the beginning of

puppet theater and suggests that this tradition may have a history of nearly three thousand years. [4] In *Orteke*, the goat puppet (Il. 2) moves synchronously with music; this directly overlaps with the goat imitation and rhythmic narrative structure found in the *tak teke* game. Thus, it can be said that there is a historical and cultural continuity between *tak teke* and *Orteke*, and *Orteke* developed as a modern variant of ancient Turkic ritual games.

Cultural Representations: The Symbolic Meaning of the Goat Figure

At the center of the *Orteke* tradition lies the goat figure, which in Kazakh folk culture symbolizes not merely an animal depiction but the harmony between nature and humanity. The *teke* (mountain goat) represents endurance, freedom, and vitality in Central Asian mythology. The agile movements of the goat have been compared to the nomadic societies' ideal of swiftness and dexterity. [1] The rhythmic leaps



Il. 2. Traditional Puppet Performance in Kazakhstan²

¹ *Orteke, traditional performing art in Kazakhstan: Dance, puppet and music* [Photograph]. UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage Lists. URL: <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/orteke-traditional-performing-art-in-kazakhstan-dance-puppet-and-music-01878> (accessed: 24.11.2025)

² *Kukol'naya istoriya (Puppet story)*. Photograph by D. K. Chizha-2. *Informbirzha News*. URL: <https://ibirzha.kz/kukolnaya-istoriya/> (accessed: 24.11.2025).

of the puppet recall the goat's struggle to escape a trap; in this sense, the performance symbolizes the limits of human power and the struggle for survival within nature. This narrative also reflects the animistic worldview of the Kazakh people, in which animals are regarded as spiritual beings. The goat is therefore not only a mythological character but also a rhythmic and symbolic medium. The puppet's movements are determined by the rhythmic accents of the *dombra* melody, thus transforming the goat into a visual embodiment of musical rhythm. [3] The recurrence of the double-horned goat motif in steppe folk arts — such as weaving, embroidery, and wood carving — demonstrates the continuity of this symbolism in collective cultural memory. In this regard, *Orteke* is not merely a form of performance but an aesthetic expression of collective identity.

The archaeological foundations of this symbolic continuity can be clearly traced in the rock carvings of Central Asia. In particular, the Saimaluu-Tash site in Kyrgyzstan and Tamgaly in Kazakhstan contain thousands of ancient petroglyphs depicting goat figures in dynamic scenes [8] (Il. 3). In these carvings, the goat symbolizes fertility, life energy, and the cosmic balance between nature and humanity. [9] The double-horned goat depictions reflect the ritual connection that Central Asian societies maintained with nature; these figures frequently appear in scenes of hunting, dancing, and collective ceremonies. [10] The dynamic goat forms found in the Saimaluu-Tash petroglyphs closely parallel the puppet's leaping gestures in *Orteke* performances. This visual and symbolic resemblance indicates



Il. 3. Petroglyphs of the Archaeological Landscape of Tanbaly
Photo: Ko Hon Chiu Vincent³

that the goat figure has retained its expressive power across millennia. [8]

The puppet tradition, meanwhile, carries pedagogical and ontological significance beyond its ritualistic and aesthetic dimensions. One of the key thinkers who approached puppet art from this perspective in Turkish intellectual history is İsmail Hakkı Baltacıoğlu. He emphasized that puppetry allows the expression of suppressed aspects of the child's psyche, serving as a means to develop social awareness through humor. According to Baltacıoğlu, the puppet "gives the child infinite pleasure because it voices the grotesque beings living in his unconscious" and thus becomes "one of the spectacles that nationalize children." [11, p. 61] The puppeteer, in this sense, is an artist who gives voice to the hidden grotesques of the human spirit. Baltacıoğlu further claimed that the Turks were the inventors of puppet art, grounding this argument in the discovery of three ancient puppets found in a Turkish ruler's tomb near Turfan. He argued that

³ Ko Hon Chiu V. *Petroglyphs of the Archaeological Landscape of Tanbaly* [Photograph]. September 30, 2008. UNESCO World Heritage Centre. URL: <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1145/gallery/&index=13&maxrows=12> (accessed: 24.11.2025).

these were not cultic artifacts but theatrical representations, suggesting the pioneering role of the Turks in the emergence of puppet art. [Ibid., p. 73]

Aktolkyn Kulsaryieva, Madina Sultanova, and Zhanerke Shaigozova [12] link the goat figure directly to creation myths, interpreting it through the concept of the “Dance of Creation.” According to their analysis, the goat within ritual dance represents not only a reflection of nature but also a creative being that generates reality itself. This approach elevates the goat beyond a symbol of natural vitality to that of a sacred and generative force representing cosmic order. Thus, the rhythmic gestures observed in *Orteke* performances become a tangible manifestation of cosmic balance, where music, movement, and tempo aesthetically reconstruct the cyclical structure of the universe.

Musical Features and Role of the Dombra in *Orteke* Performance

In the *Orteke* tradition, music is not merely an accompanying element but the core factor that shapes the movement dynamics of the performance. The performer plays the two-stringed traditional instrument, the dombra,⁴ while simultaneously directing a wooden goat puppet attached to strings on their fingers (Il. 4). This synchronicity creates both a rhythmic choreography and a visual manifestation of the music. The musical language of *Orteke* is based on the microtonal flexibility provided by the fretless structure of the dombra. This flexibility, combined with short, broken motifs that reflect the goat’s jumping



Il. 4. Studio “Mergen” (2016)⁵

movements, produces what may be described as “*rhythmic humor*” — a metaphorical expression used here to denote the playful, light-hearted, and mimetic character of the rhythmic figures. The term is not a standardized theoretical concept but is employed in this study as an interpretive description of the performance’s humorous rhythmic gestures.

In the context of *Orteke* performance, the fretless structure of the dombra enables microtonal slides, subtle intonational inflections, and rapid ornamental figures that mimic the agile movements of the goat puppet. The characteristic sound patterns of the instrument include short, broken motifs (*sertpe* and *tokpe* styles), dotted rhythmic formulas, and recurrent ostinato figures that visually correspond to the puppet’s jumping motions. Specific right-hand strokes — such as sharp downward strikes, repeated tremolo-like patterns, and percussive finger taps on

⁴ The dombra, the primary instrument used in the *Orteke* tradition, is a long-necked, two-stringed lute characterized by its lightweight wooden body and fretless fingerboard. The instrument is typically constructed from carved apricot or walnut wood, with a pear-shaped resonator and a thin soundboard that enhance its bright and penetrating timbre. Its two metallic or gut strings — traditionally tuned in fourths or fifths — allow for both melodic clarity and rhythmic articulation.

⁵ *Orteke, traditional performing art in Kazakhstan...* Op. cit.

the soundboard — play a crucial role in generating the mimetic “imitation complex” of the *Orteke* phenomenon, creating an audible parallel to the puppet’s dynamic gestures.

Abisheva and Utegalieva describe *Orteke* as a musical and theatrical form in which bodily movement is translated into sound through a close interaction between music, dance, and puppetry. Their analysis of *Orteke* kyuis emphasizes the role of pauses, repeated intonations, dotted rhythmic patterns, and melodic jumps, all of which function as musical representations of movement and dance. These rhythmic features contribute to the performative character of *Orteke*, in which sound imitation and rhythmic articulation mirror the dynamic gestures and motions of the dancing figure. [3, pp. 64–69]

The performance in *Orteke* is not only a rhythmic act but also a movement art guided through music. Kulsaryieva et al. describe the puppeteer’s action as that of an artist performing “through the musical instrument.” [12, p. 41] According to them, in *Orteke*,

the puppeteer controls “not only a spatial object — the goat, but also a temporal element — the music.” [Ibid.] This interpretation presents one of the clearest examples of the simultaneity of music and movement. When the rhythmic structure of the *dombra* merges with the puppet’s jumping movements, a syncretic performance form emerges where sound is transformed into a bodily action.

Nezir Temur emphasizes that the origin of the musical motion in *Orteke* lies in the imitation of natural sounds, such as wind, animal calls, and foot rhythms, which are voiced through the *dombra*, forming the foundation of the tradition. [1] Irina Antonova further notes that in this context, the *dombra* is not just a musical instrument but also a rhythmic engine that activates the puppet’s “life energy.” [4] Each *Orteke* performance is, from the musician’s perspective, also a “rhythmic reflex art” (Il. 5); the performance shapes itself not from a pre-learned form but within an improvised rhythm-space interaction.



Il. 5. *Orteke* by Nevruzbay. Performer: Abdi Alimşaruli [2, p. 112]

Performance Analysis:

The *Orteke Küyü* in Traditional Execution

The musical logic of the *Orteke* tradition becomes particularly clear in the performance of *Orteke Küyü*, where the rhythmic-motor synchronization between *dombra* execution and puppet movement is most evident. The piece is built upon short, sharply articulated rhythmic cells that follow an “accent–pause–accent” pattern, a structure frequently identified in Kazakh instrumental styles and described in detail by Abisheva and Utegalieva. [3, p. 64–71] Each strong downward stroke of the right hand initiates the puppet’s upward leap, while the micro-pause created by lifting the hand suspends the motion, and the lighter returning accent produces the visual effect of the goat’s landing. This rhythmic pulsation operates continuously throughout the performance, enabling an uninterrupted kinetic cycle. Melodically, the *küy* relies on quartal and quintal intervals characteristic of the regional modal system, producing an open and resonant sound that supports both rhythmic variation and the narrow, jump-like melodic contour that parallels the puppet’s movements. The interpreter employs short staccato attacks, accented *şertpe* strokes, subtle microtonal slides, and open-string resonances, all of which serve to intensify the playful, agile character associated with the mountain goat and to enhance the visual imitation of its jumps. As each sonic gesture corresponds directly to the puppet’s bodily motion, the performance becomes a unified kinetic-musical structure in which auditory and visual rhythms merge into a single expressive act. This example demonstrates that *Orteke Küyü* is not merely a musical piece but a performative form where rhythmic articulation, melodic contour and symbolic movement coalesce into an integrated aesthetic whole. [Ibid.]

Modernization and Transformation:

The Revitalization of *Orteke* in the Post-Soviet Era

During the Soviet era, cultural production was redefined within ideological boundaries, and many traditional art forms were pushed to the background. The *Orteke* tradition, within this political framework, survived only as a “local folk entertainment,” losing much of its original ritual context. [1] However, with Kazakhstan gaining independence in 1991, the process of rebuilding national identity began, and within this context, *Orteke* became an important element in the re-symbolization of ethnic-cultural identity.

In the post-independence period, state-supported cultural policies encouraged the systematic documentation and archiving of local heritage elements. During this process, institutions such as the Kökil Music College and the Kazakh National Academy of Arts integrated *Orteke* into their teaching programs, institutionalizing the transmission of the tradition. Furthermore, groups like the *Turan Ethno-Folkloric Ensemble* have developed new interpretations by combining *Orteke*’s musical structure with modern stage language. [5] This form of staging has contributed to both the preservation of the tradition’s essence and the enhancement of its international visibility. *Orteke* is a syncretic ritual form where different sacred elements combine structurally. Talasbek Asemkulov [13] and Bayan Abisheva [14] note that this tradition creates a synthesis between shamanic ritual aesthetics, animal symbols, and musical representations of nature. In line with the approaches of Leonid Potapov [15] and Mircea Eliade [16] on shamanism, *Orteke* performances can be interpreted as a cosmogony scene symbolizing the recreation of the universe. In this context, staging the tradition is not only a revival of the past but

also the re-production of cultural memory through musical rhythm in the present.

The post-Soviet development of digital technologies and media tools has also strengthened the visibility of *Orteke*. Especially performance recordings published on platforms like YouTube and documents available in UNESCO's digital databases have ensured that the tradition is represented in the global cultural memory. These developments have made *Orteke* one of the rare performance forms that balances modernization with cultural origins.

Conclusion

The analysis results reveal that *Orteke* tradition is a unique art form that combines music, rhythm, movement, and symbolic thought within Kazakh folk culture. This performance offers a narrative space where musical performance and bodily movement merge, reinterpreting the aesthetic and spiritual relationship between humans and nature. The rhythmic structure of the *dombra* and the jumping movements of the puppet create an organic harmony between sound and body; this harmony is a concrete manifestation of the Kazakh philosophy of living in harmony with nature. Today, *Orteke* is not only a folkloric

display but also a tool for redefining national identity in a modern context. Its inclusion in UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage List has granted the tradition international legitimacy, thus opening new channels for transmission and research.

The preservation process should not be limited to archival documentation; it should be supported by educational programs that promote master-apprentice transmission, community-based performance spaces, and digital media environments. The contemporary dimension of cultural sustainability is possible through the creation of digital memory and the systematic archiving of audiovisual recordings. In this context, video recordings, scores, and narratives of *Orteke* performances stored in digital music archives form an important data source for both ethnomusicology and cultural heritage studies. These digital archiving efforts not only contribute to the preservation of the tradition but also help it gain visibility in global cultural sharing networks.

Orteke is not a mere aesthetic remnant of the past; it is a living model of cultural heritage that re-produces Kazakhstan's cultural memory in the digital age. This model has the potential to create a sustainable shared memory among the music cultures of the Turkic world.

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