

On Why Sayat-Nova Is Forgotten in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan

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Sayat-Nova was an 18th-century *ashiq*[\[1\]](#) of Armenian origin who is believed to have been a minstrel at the court of Georgian king Irakli II.[\[2\]](#) The majority of the hypotheses regarding the bard's biography draw upon the poetry manuscripts ascribed to him. The first manuscript (*davtar*),[\[3\]](#) which consists of his Armenian and Azeri poems, dates back to the mid-18th century and was likely scripted by the poet himself. (In this article, *Azeri* refers to the majority language of Azerbaijan while *Azerbaijani* is used to denote the citizenship. Sayat-Nova's Azeri songs were composed in the 18th-century Tiflis-Azeri dialect). This *davtar* is unique because it occasionally indicates the composition and/or performance dates of poems. The second manuscript which also contains Sayat-Nova's Georgian poems was copied by his younger son Ioane (Ohan) in the early 19th century. There are also two religious texts copied by the then monk Sayat-Nova,[\[4\]](#) which include his short autobiographical notes (colophons).[\[5\]](#)

Although most of Sayat-Nova's surviving poems are in Azeri, his Azeri verse has often been dismissed for its purported inferiority to the Armenian and Georgian one, thus drawing less scholarly attention. The bard's multilingual *corpus* gave rise to universalist interpretations of his poetry both among pre-revolutionary and Soviet literary scholars who stressed its *internationalist* character. Yet, this appraisal rarely went beyond bolstering Armenian national pride. During the Thaw period (*Ottepel'*), some attempts were made to address the *ashiq's* poetry in Azerbaijan, but they didn't materialize into a long-lasting tradition. The fall of the Soviet Union

replaced the insufficient attention with silence. This article links the rooting of Sayat-Nova in Armenian national literature and the oblivion he fell into in contemporary Azerbaijan to Soviet nationality policy. It outlines the historical patterns of the poet's reception in the long 20th century.

Making a National Poet (1800-1917)

It is difficult to gauge the *ashiq's* popularity before the advent of *print capitalism* in the Caucasus. In the early 19th century, he was mentioned in the semi-fictional encyclopedia *Kalmasoba* (*Alms Gathering*) commissioned by the Georgian prince and writer Ioane Botanishvili. The prince also commissioned the manuscript written by the poet's son Ioane in Saint-Petersburg in 1823. Apart from these two texts discovered later by Sayat-Nova enthusiasts, oral transmission was the only way through which the bard was known among common people following his death.

The nationalization of Sayat-Nova began in the second half of the 19th century with the emergence of the Armenian intelligentsia in Tiflis. While the economic life of Tiflis had long been dominated by Armenian merchants, Alexander II's liberal reforms of the 1860s further strengthened the position of the Armenian bourgeoisie in the city.[\[6\]](#) Liberal nationalism, despite having limited social support, was particularly popular among Armenian intellectuals who gathered around the newspaper *Mshak* (*Cultivator*) established by the Armenian publicist Grigor Artsruni.[\[7\]](#) Characterized by a return to the common people and a growing interest in the folk tradition, this liberal nationalism was brought to Tiflis by Armenian intellectuals who had received a Russian or European education.

Sayat-Nova's nationalization unfolded in an imperial setting from its inception. The first media account of the poet

appeared in 1851 in the Russian-language newspaper *Kavkaz*,[\[8\]](#) which operated in Tiflis. It was written by the Russian poet Yakov Polonsky who distinguished “Sayat-Nova’s lyrical and personal verse from Eastern and Caucasian poetic traditions.”[\[9\]](#) Polonsky’s account was informed by the Armenian intellectual Gevorg Akhverdian’s interpretation of Sayat-Nova’s verse. At the time, Akhverdian was working on the bard’s manuscript. After graduating from Moscow State University and working in Saint-Petersburg, Akhverdian returned to Tiflis where he became preoccupied with collecting the songs of Armenian *ashiqs*.[\[10\]](#) The scholar published Sayat-Nova’s 46 Armenian poems in 1852 after obtaining the poet’s manuscript from his grandson. Akhverdian built a foundation for later studies on Sayat-Nova as his book provided commentaries on the poems taking into account the specificities of the Tiflis dialect of Armenian.

Following Akhverdian’s discovery of Sayat-Nova, no major work appeared until the early 20th century. A new wave of interest in the bard emerged in the 1910s among the Armenian intellectuals of Tiflis. In 1912, *Mshak* published an article by the Armenian painter Gevorg Bashinjagian criticizing the neglect of Sayat-Nova’s legacy and calling to erect a monument under the walls of the St. George church where the poet was allegedly murdered by the troops of Persian Agha Mohammad Shah Gajar. Another article appeared in the newspaper *Orizon* (*Horizon*) by Armenian poet Hovanes Tumanian in support of Bashinjagian’s appeal. Both calls drew the attention of the Armenian intelligentsia and contemporary *ashiqs* of Tiflis who joined the initiative of the Society of Armenian Writers, which established a committee to organize the building of the memorial through donations and *ashiq* concerts dedicated to Sayat-Nova.[\[11\]](#) The inauguration of the monument took place on 15 May 1914. The ceremony was accompanied by *ashiq* performances and people laying roses on the poet’s tombstone which began the tradition of *Vardaton* (Feast of roses) celebrated to this day. Among the attendants of the ceremony

was the Georgian poet Joseph Grishashvili who, inspired by the event, decided to collect the bard's Georgian songs. As mentioned earlier, Sayat-Nova's *davtar* consisted of only Armenian and Azeri poems, while his Georgian poems did not exist in a written form and could only be collected from the works of other *ashiqs*. The manuscript of Ioane found later by Georgian linguist Nikolai Marr in Saint-Petersburg became the main reference for Grishashvili's work (1918).

The construction of Armenian national literature went hand in hand with its display to other nations. The publication of the first Armenian anthology in Russian in 1916, a volume which included several of Sayat-Nova's poems, served the same purpose. Edited by the Russian symbolist poet Valery Briusov and published with the support of the Armenian diaspora in Moscow, the anthology was organized based on artistic merit. It selected the *great* works of each period that would familiarize Russian readers with the best representatives of Armenian poetry.[\[12\]](#) In the pantheon of national poets and particularly among the Armenian *ashiqs*, Briusov granted Sayat-Nova a special place arguing for his universal significance. The quote by Briusov that later travelled through the works of Soviet literary critics perfectly encapsulated an intertwining relationship between the national and the universal: "The genuine sublime was also created by the best *ashiqs*, whose epitome was the 18th-century poet Sayat-Nova, magnificent, protean, sensitive like Tiutchev and passionate like Musset: one of those first-class poets who through their genius cease to belong to a particular nation and become part of entire humanity."[\[13\]](#) Validating the worth of Armenian national literature, Briusov called for its worldwide appreciation which was later partially realized with its inclusion in Soviet multinational literature.

Sayat-Nova and Soviet Multinational Literature

While the prerevolutionary studies on Sayat-Nova played an important role in the poet's canonization, they were primarily

driven by the enthusiasm of Armenian and, to some degree, Georgian intellectuals. Soviet scholars usually emphasized that the bard received the public attention he deserved only after the establishment of the Soviet Union. This is not far from true. The nationalization orchestrated by the Soviet state fixed Sayat-Nova's place in the Armenian pantheon. However, it did not happen immediately after the Bolsheviks came to power.

During the NEP years, contemporary revolutionary literature was at the center of attention instead of the classics. From the 1930s on, the trajectory of Soviet nationality policy began to steer discourse away from its initial *affirmative action* direction to the reimagination of the Soviet Union as a multinational state.[\[14\]](#) This shift manifested in the simultaneous promotion of national literatures and Soviet multinational literature through an impressive translation project and union-wide celebrations. Each titular nation turned to the past to reconstruct a national history of literature and to define its canons.

On an institutional level, such a turn manifested itself in the establishment of the Union of Soviet Writers to celebrate Soviet multinational literature. In the First Congress of Soviet Writers that inaugurated this process, the major nationalities of Transcaucasia presented the development of their national literature. Sayat-Nova was included in the accounts of both Armenian and Georgian representatives as part of their literary history, while the Azerbaijani delegate to the Congress M. Alakbarli did not mention the bard in his speech. According to the Georgian delegate M.G. Toreshelidze, "because he is ethnically Armenian but connected to Georgia in terms of culture, language, and the place of activity (Tbilisi) and at the same time, because he has adopted the motifs of Eastern folk music, Sayat-Nova is an international poet of the Caucasus."[\[15\]](#) The cultural and territorial belonging of the poet to Georgia was later reaffirmed by the inclusion of his poems in a Georgian anthology published in

Russian in 1948.[\[16\]](#) On the other hand, the Armenian delegate D.A. Simonian capitalized on the bard's ethnic identity.

In 1935, an article by Georgian poet Titsian Tabidze in *Literaturnaia Gazeta* drew attention to "the internationalism in Sayat-Nova's poetry" calling for "complete publication of his poems in all three Transcaucasian languages as well as their translation to other Soviet languages."[\[17\]](#) By that time, the bard's published Armenian and Georgian songs had been dispersed in various books and anthologies whereas his Azeri verse remained unstudied. It was not until 1945 when Soviet Armenia was celebrating the 150th anniversary of the poet's death that the complete collection by the Armenian philologist Morus Hasratian was published. The jubilee year was also marked by the Russian translation of Sayat-Nova's poems, which, for the first time, included his Azeri songs. Nonetheless, there was not yet a noticeable effort to commemorate Sayat-Nova in Azerbaijan.

The interpretations of the 1930s highlighted Sayat-Nova's *internationalist* character, that interpretation was fully exploited during the Thaw period. The main indicator of this brief development was the emergence of Azerbaijani scholarship on the poet. The first monograph on Sayat-Nova in Soviet Azerbaijan was published in 1954. *Pevets narodov Zakavkaziya* (The Singer of Transcaucasian Peoples) by the Yerevan-born Azerbaijani philologist Mirali Seidov provided a relatively comprehensive analysis of the bard's life and poetry.[\[18\]](#) But the study was mostly based on the Armenian songs of Sayat-Nova. In the same year, the state publishing house *Azerneshr* published *The Anthology of Armenian Poetry*, which included the translation of 10 Armenian poems of the bard. Finally, the first more or less comprehensive collection of Sayat-Nova's poems in all three languages edited by Hamid Arasli appeared in 1963.

The simultaneous nationalization and Sovietization of Sayat-

Nova reached its climax with the 250th anniversary of the poet's birth which took place in October 1963. The jubilee was celebrated on an unparalleled scale, especially in the Transcaucasian republics and Moscow.[\[19\]](#) The celebrations involved a wide range of events such as publications, academic conferences, concerts, and exhibitions, one of which was attended by John Steinbeck.[\[20\]](#) Along with seizing upon Sayat-Nova's *internationalist* potential, the 1963 commemorations further embedded the bard in Soviet Armenia by creating his *lieu de mémoire* in Yerevan. It included the building of his monument and naming one of Yerevan's central streets after him. Meanwhile in Tbilisi, the tradition of *Vardaton* was restored with a demonstration at the poet's tombstone visited by Armenian, Azerbaijani, and Georgian representatives, and followed by a concert.

The Janus Face of People's Friendship: Looking Backward

The Thaw-era capitalization on the Transcaucasian friendship bore the elements of Stalinist nationality policy in the sense that the friendship among the peoples presupposed the reification of nationalities. Sometimes, that reification took a rather conspicuous form. A collection of articles entitled *Iz istorii literatur narodov Zakavkaziia* (*From the Literary History of the Transcaucasian People*) published in Yerevan in 1960 was illustrative of this tendency. Celebrating the Transcaucasian friendship, the book consisted of separate articles on the literary canons of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia with no attempt to connect them. In his review in *Voprosy Literatury*, Azerbaijani critic Aziz Sharif criticized the national framework of the volume pointing out the lack of effort to compare and relate the works of the Transcaucasian poets while the analogies to Russian and Western European literature were abundant in the analyses of the prerevolutionary literature.[\[21\]](#)

The prevalent discourse regarding the shared traditions of the region also took national identity as a given. The revisionist

histories of Soviet peoples retroactively projected the idea of friendship into their distant past.[\[22\]](#) This kind of interpretation, which assumed the perennial nature of Soviet nationalities, transferred the present state of friendship and enmity to the 18th-century Caucasus in which Sayat-Nova lived. The poet came to epitomize the friendship between the Armenian, Azerbaijani, and Georgian people while symbolizing their struggle against the Persian and Ottoman imperial powers. Sayat-Nova's multilingual *corpus* proved particularly useful in conveying such a narrative. The Azeri and Georgian songs showed his high regard for and familiarity with the Azerbaijani and Georgian people, and their literature. From this point of view, the literary histories of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia represented independent temporal dimensions that occasionally came into contact while maintaining their own pace of development.

In a similar vein, Soviet interpreters treated any form of cultural fusion and intertextuality in Sayat-Nova's poetry through the language of influence, which imposed the romantic notion of individuality on tropes pertaining to the shared conventions of the *ashiq* tradition. The poet extensively alluded to Persian poetic themes to express the power of his love.[\[23\]](#) He frequently referred to himself and his beloved as the protagonists of the Persianate love stories *Leili and Majnun* and *Farhad and Shirin*. The motifs of these popular stories were adapted by different poets in the Persianate world including Nizami Ganjavi, who was canonized as an Azerbaijani national poet. This commonality led to the hypotheses about Nizami's influence on Sayat-Nova showcasing the literary relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Another of the hypotheses of influence common among Soviet scholars were claims concerning the poet's relationship with his Azeri contemporaries. Hamid Arasli proposed that Sayat-Nova might have met the 18th-century Azeri poets Molla Panah Vagif and Molla Vali Vidadi because the former was believed to

have visited Tiflis once, while the latter was supposedly a minstrel at the court of Irakli II.[\[24\]](#) Unlike Sayat-Nova, Vagif and Vidadi were the representatives of classical (*divan*) poetry while also using the *ashiq* prosodies. Therefore, their poetry exhibits similar tropes to that of Sayat-Nova including complaints about the transience and unfairness of life. These attributes rendered all of them suitable for the cliché of a national poet whose verse gained a pessimistic tone after facing the adversities of life. Yet, according to Arasli, the commonality between Sayat-Nova and the two Azeri poets could indicate, if not prove, their influence on each other as well as their acquaintance. Such a reification of nationalities and national cultures, which was at the core of the people's friendship discourse, reinforced the canonization of Sayat-Nova as a distinctly Armenian poet.

Conclusion

A brief episode of Azerbaijani enthusiasm around Sayat-Nova was an exceptional phenomenon. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the poet's memory in independent Azerbaijan fell into oblivion. When Armenia and, to a lesser extent, Georgia were celebrating the 300th anniversary of Sayat-Nova in 2012/2013, no commemoration took place in Azerbaijan. Amidst the ethno-territorial conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which has often been accompanied by cultural disputes, one could imagine a scenario where the national identity of the bard was contested by the latter since most of his surviving poems are in the Azeri language. However, that has not happened. What happened instead was in line with Soviet nationality policy. That policy, which prioritized the ethnic identity of Sayat-Nova over his cultural milieu, secured the poet's place within the Armenian literary canon while accentuating his multicultural appeal. In the long 20th century, Sayat-Nova's Azeri *corpus* drew the least attention, and the Thaw-era spike in Azerbaijani scholarship around the poet was not sustained as a long-standing practice. On the

other hand, the Georgian interest in the bard that can be traced back to pre-revolutionary times was motivated by a Georgian imaginary of cosmopolitan Tbilisi. Unsurprisingly, the long tradition of Sayat-Nova's celebration in Georgia was carried on in the post-Soviet era.

Notes and references:

[1] Before its nationalization in Turkey and Soviet Azerbaijan, the *ashiq* tradition spread across the Near East. *Ashiq* performances combined rhymed songs and storytelling (*dastan*) accompanied by a string instrument, usually the *saz*. The performers and/or composers of *ashiq* songs are called *ashiqs*. The tradition started to gradually die out after modern cultural forms arrived in the region. However, the preservation of *ashiq* art proved more persistent in Azerbaijan as a result of which it is listed in UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity as part of Azerbaijani culture. UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage, "Art of Azerbaijani Ashiq," UNESCO, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/art-of-azerbaijani-ashiq-00253>.

[2] It's unlikely that Sayat-Nova was a court poet in its traditional sense since *ashiqs* usually played the role of entertainers in such settings. Xi Yang, "Sayat`-Nova: Within the Near Eastern Bardic Tradition and Posthumous" (PhD diss., University of California, 2016), 79, <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/sayat-nova-within-near-eastern-bardic-tradition/docview/1757267786/se-2?accountid=15607>.

[3] Keeping notebooks (*davtar*) was a common practice among more literate *ashiqs*. They were mostly used for writing down rhymed songs, while longer narrative poems were passed down orally from masters to disciples.

[4] After being expelled from the Georgian court, Sayat-Nova

is believed to have served as a married priest changing his baptismal name Arutiun to Stepanos.

[5] Charles Dowsett, *Sayat-Nova: An 18th-century troubadour: A Biographical and Literary Study* (Louvain: Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, 1997), 22-25.

[6] Ronald Grigor Suny, "The Emergence of Political Society in Georgia," in *Transcaucasia, Nationalism, and Social Change: Essays in the History of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia* ed. Ronald Grigor Suny (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1996), 119.

[7] Ibid., 131.

[8] *Kavkaz* was a literary-political newspaper aimed at familiarizing the Russian people with the Caucasian culture. At the time, Polonsky was sent to Tiflis to serve in the chancellery of the Caucasus viceroy where he also published his poetry book called *Sazandar* dedicated to the peoples of the Caucasus.

[9] Yakov Polonsky, "Sayat-Nova," *Kavkaz* no. 2 (1851), 6.

[10] B. Ovakimian, "Istoria pervogo izdania pesen Sayat-Novi," *Literaturnaia Armenia* no 10 (1963), 79-80.

[11] S. Arutiunian, *Z.G. Bashinjagian: 30 let, ot daniie Sayat-Nove* (Yerevan: Izdatelstvo Yerevanskogo Gosudarstvennogo Universiteta, 1963), 22-23.

[12] Valery Briusov, *Poeziia Armenii s drevneishikh vremen do nashikh dnei* [Armenian poetry from ancient times to the present] (Moscow: Izdanie Moskovskogo Armianskogo Komiteta, 1916), 11-12.

[13] Ibid., 7.

[14] Terry Martin, "The Friendship of the Peoples" in *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the*

Soviet Union, 1923-1939 (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2001), 432.

[15] *Pervii vsesoiuznii siezd sovetskikh pisatelei: Stenograficheskii otchet* [First Congress of Soviet Writers: Stenographical report] (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1934), 81.

[16] "Antologiiia Gruzinskoi poezii," *Literaturnaia Gazeta* no. 54 (1948), 1.

[17] Titsian Tabidze, "Sayat-Nova," *Literaturnaia Gazeta* no. 16 (1935), 2.

[18] The book was later republished in Russian in 1963 on the eve of the poet's 250th anniversary.

[19] The Soviet press claimed that the poet was celebrated all over the world. While I could not verify the accuracy of these likely exaggerated claims, one particular evening was reported to take place in Prague where Czech artists recited the bard's poems translated into the Czech language. "Na iazikakh narodov mira," *Zaria Vostoka* no. 253 (27 October 1963), 3.

[20] John Steinbeck attended a theatrical evening dedicated to Sayat-Nova in Yerevan during his visit to the Soviet Union in 1963. Interestingly, the writer did not discuss his experience in Soviet Armenia in *A Russian Journal* which detailed the journey. Peter Bridges, "A Note on Steinbeck's 1963 Visit to the Soviet Union," *Steinbeck Review* 4, no. 1 (2007), 84-85.

[21] Aziz Sharif, "Stranitsi istorii literatur narodov Zakavkaziia," *Voprosi Literaturny* no. 2 (1962), 198-203.

[22] Lowell Tillett, *The Great Friendship: Soviet Historians on the Non-Russian Nationalities* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1969), 4.

[23] While Persian high literature exerted influence on *ashiq* poetry, it is unlikely that the bard had direct knowledge

about its conventions considering the generally humble background of *ashiqs*. Xi Yang, "Sayat`-Nova: Within the Near Eastern Bardic Tradition and Posthumous," 236-237.

[\[24\]](#) Hamid Arasli, "Dostlug mugennisi," in *Sayat-Nova* (Baku: Azerneshr, 1963), 7.