A PLURALITY OF SYNTHETIC SOUND AROUND THE ARAL SEA: HOW ELECTRONIC MUSIC TRANSCENDS THE BORDERS OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

Music and culture were key ways through which the Soviet Union maintained control in twentieth-century central Asia. Over time, the proliferation of foreign music through the audio cassette market eventually developed into online music streaming and Westernised forms of local popular music, though official state attitudes remained wary of their effects on national identity and traditional values. This wariness persists today, but is increasingly challenged by younger generations participating in the global digital economy, drawing influence from Western culture via the internet. This paper focuses on Uzbekistan and Tajikistan to better understand the role that electronic music, namely hip-hop and electronic dance music (EDM), plays in challenging the status quo. It discusses the recent festivals Stihia, near the Aral Sea, and the World Through Student Eyes, in Tashkent, as examples of a burgeoning Pan-central Asian youth identity. Electronic music embodies this changing identity in central Asia, spurred by economic growth, tourism, and the global music business. Against the scrim of conflicting generational views on identity, central Asian youth is creating a breakout identity through electronic music that reconciles patriotism with individual creative expression. The result? A plurality of musical and cultural worlds with which to create one's own narrative.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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INTRODUCTION

Nation and culture are intimately intertwined for historically nomadic groups in central Asia, where music became, and remains, one of the main vehicles of regulating and maintaining social thought and behaviour. Electronic music is the current inspiration for many younger local musicians and, spearheaded by global cultural exchange through the internet, hip-hop in particular has become a critical means of disseminating foreign values in central Asia. Although hip-hop is not generally classified as electronic music, for the purposes of this paper, the genre includes the spectrum ranging from hip-hop to the myriad forms of EDM because they utilize repetitive, programmed beats at constant tempos. Clearly, a new form of national identity is emerging throughout central Asia. Young artists and listeners are finding a home in a genre wherein they view themselves as unrestrained by the Soviet dogma of decades past and seek to redefine themselves in a rapidly globalising world. But while differing ideals of national identity and traditional culture remain problematic for older generations, the young simply see it as a facet of everyday life.

Stefan Kirmse, who writes about Kyrgyzstan and post-Soviet central Asia, sees this new identity as representative of the youth inhabiting "'plural worlds' (Nilan and Feixa 2006) in that they deploy a range of local, regional and global identity discourses" (Kirmse 2010, 390–93). These worlds are further strengthened by a sense of community which, for our purposes, is also found in electronic music and festivals. Kirmse suggests that globalisation should be seen as a marketplace for styles and identities, a framework which lends profound insight into the reactions by political powers to new and/or Western cultural trends. This framework can explain the forward-thinking World Through Student Eyes (WTSE), a hip-hop festival in Tashkent, Uzbekistan; and Stihia, a government-supported electronic music festival near the Aral Sea. These two festivals should be regarded as turning points in the struggle against artistic control between the individual and the state that came to define the collective Communist ethos. Electronic music then represents a totemic shift towards individual expression and can be construed as the contemporary vehicle for changing constructs of national identity.

HIP-HOP AND HIGH CULTURE

As cultural theorist Raymond Williams asserts in Culture, "no full account of a particular formation or kind of formation can be given without extending description and analysis into general history" (Williams 1981, 85). It is commonplace that music has been instrumental in shaping national culture and cultural policy throughout the twentieth century; ethnomusicologist Jean During argues that similarities in language and culture aside, the "promotion of collective expression and the silencing of individual expression has been the most spectacular effect of musical policy in the Soviet world" (During 2005, 148). A crucial part of Stalin's nation building aimed at creating distinct regional identities from the feudal peoples of the Soviet Union and elevating them to a more refined level of national culture. By promoting a nation-first mindset that implied the fraternity of Socialist peoples, Soviet Russia managed to fundamentally alter the individualistic [1] role of traditional music and ensure that future art would be heavily regulated (Spinetti 2005, 191; Levin and Qureshi 2002, 191; During 2005, 144). This attitude persists today, but has been slowly changing. A solo performer, even though they may be playing a traditional instrument, does not embody the same attributes of nation and culture in the eyes of the government as a group ensemble or orchestra playing nationalist music does, and thus may not be officially endorsed or even allowed to perform as the artist does not sufficiently represent the country.

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[1] 'Traditional music' in this context refers to music derived from a number of Soviet Central Asian ethnic minority groups that is normally performed with and created by one's community and kin, and uses lyrics and/or rhythms that tell stories of local traditions, culture, and history through local language. This music can also be 'individual' in the sense that it highlights the skills of particular musicians or the life experiences of certain community figures, but overall, is clearly from a particular group.

Eventually, the public's continual exposure to Western popular music such as jazz, hip-hop, and techno caused the Soviet notion of high culture to give way to a more plural culture shared between "newer and older means of production, with the market dominant in the new reproductive technologies and subsidy most evident in the older 'live' forms" (Adams 2008, 623; Spinetti 2005, 194–95). Market shifts towards reproductive technologies are readily apparent today with digital streaming and YouTube, where Kirmse's consumers of globalised identities in central Asia are regional cultural marketplaces instead of individuals. While radio, TV, and cassette tapes were among the first methods of bringing foreign music and culture into the home, these mediums, subject to restriction and censorship, have since had to contend with new arrivals like the internet and digital music streaming. Compared to TV and radio, the effects of music streaming are compounded and the reachable audience expanded due to the near-instant communication and ease of dissemination the internet facilitates.

Like TV and radio, the internet is also subject to governmental regulation. But the nature of the internet provides individuals with more ways around censorship than a TV or radio broadcast did, like using a virtual private network (VPN). This access has given rise to new musical expression that in many ways has been formed in this online wrinkle - and one might argue that today, national community can be found in this uniquely individual expression as seen in Stihia and WTSE, and in central Asian electronic music in general. But the effect of Soviet nationalism on musical and cultural output can still be heard and felt in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, no matter the degree of talent or popularity of the artist. A DJ set or a hip-hop festival directly contradicts the controlled and unified face the state puts on for outsiders, mirroring Soviet attempts to adapt or eliminate individualistic music deemed of no use to a new society.

Today, central Asian rappers, producers, and DJs often face scrutiny, condemnation, or blacklisting for just this reason. Electronic music has been a crucial method of expression in contemporary Uzbek and Tajik societies thanks to the emergence of Kirmse's marketplace of influences that globalisation has created. Though the question of censorship in the region still lingers, particularly in Tajikistan, as of 2016 the new and more open Uzbek government has shown remarkable progress with regard to media independence as well as to addressing past misdeeds. In the era of digital streaming services, electronic music in Uzbekistan's cultural marketplace is finding new space to breathe not only in the form of festivals, but in the loosened regulation of nightclubs and television.

ELECTRONIC MUSIC IN THE DESERT

The Dance Music Fest in Tashkent, for example, held its second iteration last year, an event not thought possible just a decade earlier given that pulsing rhythms are tricky to justify as promoting positive national values. And in September 2018, the government approved the Aral Sea electronic music festival Stihia despite setting the bar high for such ambitious events in Uzbekistan. The brainchild of Otabek Suleimanov - Uzbek lawyer by day, DJ by night (Telekom 2018, 3) - it aimed to capitalize on the recent governmental commitment to tourism and reform by merging electronic music, community, and environmental awareness with tourism. Government approval was critical to host an event that otherwise would have been an Uzbek Burning Man [2] or mere "abstract electronic music in the desert" in a remote part of Uzbekistan (Davies 2018, 3).

[2] Burning Man is an annual arts, culture, and music festival held in the desert in Nevada that is all about freedom, self-expression, love, and acceptance through music, counterculture, art, community, and alternative lifestyles. Commonly written off and stereotyped as merely a large hippie gathering, it's become more mainstream in recent years by including famous musicians in their lineup and receiving increased political support and societal acceptance.

To reap the economic benefits of tourism, the organisers created a host of events around the festival that included tours of ship graveyards and salt quarries led by locals in the nearby town of Moynaq. And the government was fully supportive, with the prime minister personally overseeing the plans and arranging a police convoy to accompany the shuttle busses (Davies 2018, 5; Telekom 2018, 3). Experimental electronic musicians, audiovisual artists, and DJs from across central Asia who for years had been part of the underground in-crowd in Almaty or Bishkek flocked to Stihia (Premiyak 2018). Artists included the Uzbek Orgatanatos,[3] Kazakh Nazira,[4] Tajik Maria Breslavets, Russian Dasha Redkina, and Georgian HVL, among many others. These festivals - WTSE, Dance Music Fest, and Stihia - were deeply meaningful to both attendees and musicians because decades long cultural policies had created a generation of bedroom producers and DJs who couldn't perform much, if at all, in public (Yellepeddi 2015).

Like Stihia, the 2017 World Through Student Eyes festival, organized by Uzbek art student Abbos Tamatov, aimed to capitalize on the appeal of hip-hop among young people. It was only possible after the ending of an unofficial ban imposed in 2011 (Eurasianet 2017, 1). Just a half-decade earlier, the government had broadcast a documentary called Melody and Calamity which assailed Western music - in particular hip-hop - because official sentiment was that rappers like Shoxrux, Shaxriyor, and Timsi had become too critical (Eurasianet 2017, 2). This ban was followed by a similar one in 2014 in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, where hip-hop was deemed "alien to national and universal values" (Sodiqov 2014, 1).

BARKING LIKE A DOG OR COLLECTIVE PRAYER?

Inevitably, hip-hop would come under fire for promoting a lifestyle that embraces self-expression, political and societal criticism, sexism, consumption, and money. (Sodiqov 2014; Von Rüdiger 2014, 116). How do BMWs and bling, or repeated, pulsating rhythms respect and promote national values? In the era of digital streaming, ideological dominance through cultural diplomacy is crucial for social cohesion. The rise in young artists making electronic music or rapping threatens pervasive ideas about the role music plays in nationhood and the way the nation is perceived abroad. The newfound communal and hybrid identities in electronic music, along with a general governmental wariness of public assembly, are fundamentally at odds with state attitude in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan because they threaten the Soviet ideals of nation-first that has been the status quo for decades. Yet in some places such as Uzbekistan, we see a willingness to open up to new forms of expression, even though the number of electronic producers remains few and rappers still face a hostile environment.

Rappers like S.O.R., Dorob YAN, Shon MC, and Ummon have been blacklisted in and from travelling to their countries, criticised, or outright banned for not being acceptably patriotic or just generally "meaningless" (Peleschuk 2013, 1). Others like M.One and Boron[5] have begun releasing songs with more patriotic lyrics instead of scathing political commentary due to harassment (Sodiqov 2014, 3–4; Bland 2016, 6). Thanks to globalisation, central Asian electronic music is often interspersed with samples of traditional instruments and vocals, and provides social commentary whilst maintaining a national flavour. A dual, hybrid identity is widespread in the music of rappers and DJs in the twenty-first century, reflecting the upbringing of its creators in lyric and theme, but drawing influence from the West via electronic beats (Bland 2016, para. 12; Sodiqov 2014, para. 3).

[3] www.orgatanatos.net
[4] www.soundcloud.com/naziranazira
[5] His 2016 single "Dear Motherland" was the first Hip-Hop video to be featured on Tajik state TV in two years.

Official opinion is still divided between supporting and resisting a changing culture like it is between the traditional and the modern. Even though states like Uzbekistan have taken steps to the left, the head of the local administration in Moynaq, for example, decided to pull the plug on Stihia once he saw it descend into a giant party. And to those present, that was "all the more frustrating since it came at a moment when the divide between the locals and guests appeared to finally dissipate" (Telekom 2018, 6). Some Tajiks like Shon MC's critics see him "barking like a dog," hoping that hip-hop isn't the future for popular music, and then there are the villagers of Moynaq who are "all having lots of fun, even though for us this is very strange... it sure feels like one big collective prayer" (Telekom 2018, 5). In response to the criticisms of Shon MC, the arguments of Kirmse, and sociologists Vincent Mosco and Laura Adams are useful, where Adams argues that "while Central Asian young people consume American rap music...they also produce their own rap music where Hip-Hop is understood as a universal cultural form" (Adams 2008, 635).

CONCLUSION

The greater struggle between the state and youth and between the past and present aligns with Mosco in that cyberspace and the digital age invoke both a "desire to retain our individuality and yet participate fully in a collective community" and "the wish to control our circumstances, even as we also desire to give up some control to bring about a more democratic society" (Mosco 2004, 28). Creative freedom has emerged in central Asia today as a reaction to political control through art and electronic music, where the young, influenced by Western culture and the internet, have found a way to achieve emancipatory expression through critiquing policy and life.[6] Kirmse's theory of plural worlds is playing out in the cultural and musical marketplaces of central Asia, further highlighting the continual nature of globalisation manifesting itself as a platter of styles and identities.

Over time, changing norms, growing economies, and the collective power of internet assembly will inevitably drive local interpretations of foreign music and art (Wang 2004, 12). In the post-cassette era, ideological dominance through cultural diplomacy is still crucial as young electronic artists can threaten constructs about the nation without using lyrics (Davies 2018, 7). And while resistance to change is always strong at first, electronic music is evidence that national identity is becoming flexible, individualised, and globalised through younger generations in central Asia. Festivals like Stihia and WTSE remind us how effectively Westernisation has forced the hand of former Soviet states in cultural diplomacy as the footfalls of globalisation lumber toward the finish line.

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[6] See Usama Kahf in (Von Rüdiger 2014, 1)

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