



## HISTORICAL ASPECTS OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE THEATER IN KYRGYZSTAN

## ASPECTOS HISTÓRICOS DO DESENVOLVIMENTO DO TEATRO NO QUIRGUISTÃO

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### ABSTRACT

**Introduction.** One of the understudied problems in history, pedagogy, and art history is the periodization of the historical development of the theater in the Republic of Kyrgyzstan. Various forms of theater developed in ancient times due to socially significant events and the influence of Islam and shamanism. The paper aims to analyze the historical aspects of the establishment of the theater in Kyrgyzstan.

**Materials and methods.** The validity and reliability of the findings are ensured by the theoretical analysis of scientific literature and Internet media publications, the analysis of theater experts' opinions, and the oral historical method.

**Results.** The research outlines conventional stages in the development of Kyrgyz theater, determines the content of each stage, and highlights trends and regularities in each stage. Drawing on research, it is established that the clash of pagan traditions with Islam, shamanism, and folklore predetermined the spontaneous development of theater forms.

**Conclusions.** The authors conclude that the dilemma of the Kyrgyz national theater's functioning in market conditions stems from the fierce competition for the audience, the search for national identity, and the rejection of the Russian theater system.

**Keywords:** Islam. Shamanism. Art. Syncretism. Development dilemma. Market.





## RESUMO

**Introdução.** Um dos problemas pouco estudados em história, pedagogia e história da arte é a periodização do desenvolvimento histórico do teatro na República do Quirguistão. Várias formas de teatro se desenvolveram nos tempos antigos devido a eventos socialmente significativos e à influência do Islã e do xamanismo. O objetivo do artigo é analisar os aspectos históricos do estabelecimento do teatro no Quirguistão.

**Materiais e métodos.** A validade e a confiabilidade dos resultados são garantidas pela análise teórica da literatura científica e das publicações da mídia na Internet, pela análise das opiniões de especialistas em teatro e pelo método histórico oral.

**Resultados.** A pesquisa descreve os estágios convencionais no desenvolvimento do teatro quirguiz, determina o conteúdo de cada estágio e destaca as tendências e regularidades em cada estágio. Com base na pesquisa, fica estabelecido que o choque das tradições pagãs com o Islã, o xamanismo e o folclore predeterminou o desenvolvimento espontâneo das formas teatrais.

**Conclusões.** Os autores concluem que o dilema do funcionamento do teatro nacional quirguiz em condições de mercado decorre da competição acirrada pelo público, da busca pela identidade nacional e da rejeição do sistema teatral russo.

**Palavras-chave:** Islã. Xamanismo. Arte. Sincretismo. Dilema do desenvolvimento. Mercado.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The theater has a profound influence on the formation of the national worldview. From a historical viewpoint, this art has gone through evolution. However, the history of Kyrgyz theater is difficult to understand because of the oral historical tradition with its inherent subjectivism (Hernández García de Velazco, 2022).

Kyrgyz theater is distinguished by a unique history influenced by the country's cultural development. The historical development of the theater in the Republic of Kyrgyzstan also follows some general trends. Kyrgyzstan's theater culture has several features characteristic of the theater tradition in Central Asian countries. To a greater extent, ethnic theatrical elements were expressed in the oral tradition (Baimurzina et al., 2019; Ybyraimzhanov et al., 2019).

Because of historical determinants, for a long time, the life of the Kyrgyz people was separated from general global cultural trends (Rzabay et al., 2018). The nomadic lifestyle had a significant impact on the national folklore theater that reflected clan and family ties (Auganbai et al., 2019). Any celebration or significant event requires ingenuity, organizational skills, and improvisation (Ospangaliyev et al., 2023). Theatrical performances were organized through the syncretism of music and rituals. The rich oral traditions of the





Kyrgyz people served as a basis for the formation of modern theater (Iskakova et al., 2023).

Kyrgyz theater is distinguished by a great variety of forms and genres. According to historians and educators, the problem of the historical establishment of Kyrgyz theater is extensive and underdeveloped. Therefore, this problem requires further scientific exploration.

**The goal of the study** is to analyze the historical aspects of the establishment and development of the theater in Kyrgyzstan.

## 2 METHODS

To achieve the research goal and support the obtained results, we used the methods of theoretical analysis of scientific literature and Internet media materials, the analysis of theater experts' opinions, and the oral historical method.

The history of Kyrgyz theater is based on oral testimonies and oral history, full of subjectivity. Oral history demonstrates the dynamics of people's assessment of events depending on the situation in society and the time, allowing us to observe the suppression of some interpretations and the prevalence of others. According to scholars, oral testimonies lag behind historical events. Ultimately, oral history transforms the research focus of historical science (Butko, 2010).

## 3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The problem raised in the article has been the focus of attention of theater pedagogy researchers, historians, art historians, and politicians.

Individual and group forms of Kyrgyz folklore were realized by means of oral tradition, transmitting the everyday life, customs, traditions, and rituals of the people. A characteristic feature of the style of folk performers is the mastery of improvisation through the various means of expression used by the bearers of Kyrgyz tradition (*akin* and *manaschi*) in literature, dance, singing, and music.

Of fundamental importance to understanding the specifics of the theater is the theatrical performance by *manaschi*, capable of transforming into a specific character using various methods of stage art and acting skills. Key elements in the epic "Manas" are facial expressions, gestures, melody, and words. The ability to uncover the epic's rich content and keep the audience in suspense are the leading signs of theatrical skill demonstrated in





various historical periods by S. Orozbekov, S. Karalaev, etc.

The comprehension of the historical past of Kyrgyz theater is greatly aided by the analysis of the works of *kuuduls*, i.e., wordsmiths, orators, singers, storytellers, comedians, and masters of musical art. A particularly prominent professional in these arts is Sh. Temerchikov. Before the professionalization of Kyrgyz theater, theatrical elements were observed in public and religious festivities, during weddings and household rituals, at celebrations and feasts, and in entertainment. At the roots of the theater lies the musical folklore of Kyrgyz shepherds.

Without dwelling on the specifics of rituals, we should draw a conditional periodization of the historical development of Kyrgyz theater.

The first stage – the initial phase in the establishment of theater culture and creativity of the Kyrgyz people – is the beginning of the 16th century. As an integral part of the national culture, the theater was formed by the Kyrgyz people in the early 16th century. Historians testify that at this time, a tradition emerged represented by lyrics, epic songs, and moral poetry (*nasiyat* and *sanat*). The development of epic genres is noted. Historians point out the close connection of Kyrgyz theatrical culture with the cultures of neighboring peoples of Central Asia, Persia, Arab culture, and even Sayano-Altaic peoples (Akhmetzhanova, 2022; Kadyrov, 2022). The use of shamanic rituals and images in Kyrgyz theatrical performances indicates the important role of shamans in Kyrgyz theater.

At this stage, the leading trend was the integration of the traditions of Islam, Kyrgyz folklore, and shamanic traditions. Among the historical regularities in the development of Kyrgyz theater, we should emphasize the following. First, the spread of Islam among the Kyrgyz people predetermined the emergence of new theatrical forms based on the rituals and celebrations of Muslims (Zakirov et al., 2022). Secondly, the interaction of Islamic and national culture led to the formation of a national theatrical style.

The second stage is associated with the cultural expansion of the USSR in 1918-1993. This stage saw the localization of Kyrgyz theatrical centers (Pishpek, Frunze, Osh). This period is considered to have marked the beginning of the establishment of the theater as an independent art form. Kyrgyz theater personnel were primarily trained in Moscow and Leningrad (Borisenko, 2020). This was largely facilitated by the professorial and pedagogical staff of the Moscow Conservatory (Gorina, 2011). According to the Institute of Ethnography of the USSR Academy of Sciences, the Kyrgyz Republic had 17 theaters at that time. Kolkhoz-sovkhoz and amateur theaters (seven in total) developed separately (Tolstov, 1963). In addition, there was the Red Army garrison theater. This stage is characterized by





the synthesis of a biomechanical approach with epic and ethnic theater (V.E. Meyerhold, K.S. Stanislavski). The most prominent representative of the Soviet era in Kyrgyz theater is the scholar K. Tynystanov, who contributed substantially to dramaturgy. During the Soviet era, theater developed within the framework of Soviet realism to glorify the Soviet regime. For this reason, the work of renowned theater directors was subject to government ideological control, an element of which was the membership of the theater professionals in creative unions. Cultural figures who went beyond socialist realism were repressed (Ploskikh, 2016). In the opinion of Kyrgyz researchers, state theater policy was compromising in nature (Li, 2017). The work of the Bureau of Worker-Spectators Organization and the Bureau of Organizational and Concert Activities under the Soviet planned economy solved the problems of filling Kyrgyz theaters at the regional level.

Noteworthy historical trends in the development of Kyrgyz theater at this stage include 1) the predominance of the Russian classical theater system; 2) changes in the institutional forms of the classical theater system; 3) the development of Kyrgyz theater as part of a state cultural policy for the first time in its history (Gorina, 2013). Among the historical regularities that contributed to the establishment of Kyrgyz theater during the Soviet stage we should emphasize the following: 1) the creative growth of Kyrgyz theater was facilitated by the international composition of the theaters; 2) the common socio-political framework of interaction between the Soviet and Kyrgyz cultures allowed for the accelerated development of the potential of European and Russian theater cultures; 3) the work of the first professional theaters strengthened the interest of Kyrgyz citizens in the theater (Ulanova, 2019).

The third stage in the development of the Kyrgyz theater system is the modern stage – from 1993 to the present day. Over the past 30 years, researchers have noted a lingering conceptual crisis in Kyrgyz theater, expressed in the dilemma of choosing between European and Russian theatrical systems. Over this period, national theaters have been withdrawing from the influence of the USSR state cultural policy. As a consequence, the country has gained independence in choosing the vector of state cultural policy in the theater, on the one hand, and a set of economic and personnel problems in theaters, on the other.

At the current stage, Kyrgyzstan is seeing the emergence and development of youth and experimental theaters. This trend is characteristic of most Central Asian countries. However, the operation of these theaters also requires the development and implementation of new approaches to management in the market and digital economy. Special attention should be given to the shortage of qualified administrative personnel for theaters, competent in the





matters of production, management, and marketing. The condition of Kyrgyz theaters is further aggravated by financial problems and legislative restrictions on patronage, which deprives theaters of support. A positive aspect associated with a solution to this range of issues is the cooperation of Kyrgyz theaters with the Russian GITIS to solve the problems of theater management and the creation of theater brands at the regional level. There is a pressing issue of attracting spectators given the competition with various alternative forms of leisure activities. The existing problems are additionally complicated by the shortage of theater personnel (Borisenko, 2023).

Notable trends in the development of the Kyrgyz theater system at present include the following: 1) the emergence of a hybrid theatrical system combining European and Russian elements; 2) attempts to develop alternative principles and approaches to the development of the theater system through the rejection of the Russian theatrical system and the adoption of European and world theater principles (Ploskikh & Sushko, 2023); 3) reduction of state expenditures on Kyrgyz culture; 4) low quality of the national theater and its relevance to the audience in the repertoires of regional Kyrgyz theaters.

Among the regularities of the development of Kyrgyz theater at present, we should highlight the following: 1) displacement of Kyrgyz theater with the help of Western export mass culture at the expense of a greater attractiveness of alternative forms of leisure through marketing; 2) the predominance of foreign products in the Kyrgyz cultural space reduces the interest of the viewer (Kadyrov & Shaanov, 2020); 3) significant influence on the Kyrgyz theater is exerted by the deficit of an artistic comprehension of the modern Kyrgyz reality; 4) the resolution of the current crisis of the Kyrgyz theater depends on the renewal of the forms and content of the theater (Akhmetzhanova, 2024).

## 4 CONCLUSIONS

Summarizing the results, we conclude that the development of Kyrgyz theater at different historical stages was contradictory. The stated problem is distinguished by the historical, social, and national nature of development.

The proposed conditional periodization of the historical formation and development of Kyrgyz theater includes three main historical stages: initial (the formation and development of the oral theatrical tradition and the development of its unique forms and content under the influence of Islam and shamanism), Soviet (professionalization and state policy regarding the theater), and modern (crisis in the functioning of Kyrgyz national theater and urgent





problems associated with its existence in market conditions). Each stage is accompanied by distinctive historical trends and regularities.

Further research prospects include a periodization of the formation and development of Kyrgyz theater within each of the identified stages.

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