

The Khorkhyt-Ata monument

In 1980, a huge complex of monuments was built on the bank of the Syr Daria. 18 kilometres beyond Zhosaly, dedicated to Khorkhyt (or Korkut), the legendary musician, philosopher, narrator and inventor of the kobyz, known among many Tirkic nations. Jointly, architect Bek Ibrayev and phychologist S.Isatayev put together an ingenuously constructed musical image. Four half-tubes made of armoured concrete of eight metre height each point on the directions of the four winds. The shape of the stakes reminds of the kobyz – and not only their shape. The wind that never fails to blow here is being caught by the widening half-tubes and produces a moaning tune which can often be heard from a long distance. This is facilitated by the organ-like interior of the four stakes which consists of a sound box made of 40 metal tubes. The steles are decorated with ornaments that are supposed to symbolize the cosmic images of the ancient nomad peoples.

Until 1950, a mausoleum is said to have been located on this spot, about which legends tell the following story.

In the IXth century, a woman in an aul along the Syr Daria bore a child, the sight of which made all women who had gathered in the yurt shriek and run away, since the newborn creature looked like a shapeless sack. But the mother opened the sack (the uterus) and a baby appeared and immediately started crying. On hearing this, the women returned to the tent and were reassured. They recommended the mother to name the child Khorkhyt, meaning terrifying.

The boy grew up as a clever and perceptive child, but with a remarkable level of sensitivity. This characteristic stuck to hi. When Khorkhyt was 20 years old, he had a bad dream, in which white-robed figures told him that he had only 20 more years to live. Khorkhyt decided to search for immortality. He roamed into the world on the back of his camel Zhelmaya. One day, he met people who were digging a grave. They answered his question by telling him that his grave was meant for Khorkhyt. He understood that this was not the place to look for immortality. Restlessly he moved on in all four directions of the wind, but everywhere he met death.

Finally, he returned home. He sacrificed his camel Zhelmaya, built a musical instrument and span its soundbox with the skin of Zhelmaya. The kobyz was thus born. Khorkhyt drew sad melodies from the instrument made from the felt of his beloved animal. This “sound from afterlife” turned into magic force. Death appeared but could not take Khorkhyt, who sat on the bank of the Syr Darya and played the song of life on his kobyz day and night. But at one stage he fell asleep and death appeared in the shape of a poisonous adder and took him after all. The kobyz is said to have been lying here for a long time. The wind drew soft tunes from it. Ever since, music has been fighting death successfully. Where it resounds, death has no power.

Not far from the monument there is a museum and a small amphitheatre. Sitting on its stone benches, participants in travel groups can be ear- and eyewitnesses of performances by musicians and dancers, to be ordered on forehand. The melancholic sound of a kobyz at sunset makes a deep impression.

Resource: “Exploring Kazakhstan”, Dagmar Schreiber, Almaty, 2006