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A sonic ontology of Kyrgyz eagle-hunting: interspecies vocality, soundmaking and the sound-making of species

In the ancient Central Asian tradition of eagle-hunting, eagles are vocally trained by men to catch prey and return to the glove (McGough 2019; Soma 2015). During fieldwork in Bokonbayevo, Kyrgyzstan (2023-2024), I observed hunters interacting with eagles through three vocal modalities: the sounds *kyittu* and *ku*, talking, and singing/crooning/whispering. *Kyittu*, 'the sound of our ancestors' (Rinat Mirlanov, personal communication, 12 August 2024), is passed down from master to apprentice to summon eagles. It connects to ancestry, linking humans and nonhumans through chains of mastership and apprenticeship across time (see also Bentivegna and Eldund 2022). *Ku* is sometimes used to call the eagle during hunting. Thanks to its conciseness, this vocalisation helps the bird locate the man in a mountainous landscape when far from each other: the longer the (physical) gap between species, the shorter the sound that reunites them. While consistent talking is central to developing intimacy by helping the eagle recognise the human's voice, in the context of theorising interspecies communication the concept of 'talking' seemingly defeats the purpose of voices as an 'in-between' (Thomaidis and Macpherson 2015, 5), emphasising their 'asymmetry' (Dolar 2006, 90). Expecting interspecies correspondence, it suggests that the non-human interlocutor be able to communicate as a human (Radick 2007; Steingo 2024; Rendell 2024). Singing/humming/crooning, on the other hand, bring the voice to the forefront' without the urge to convey meaning (Dolar 2006, 39). In man/eagle vocal and relational dynamics, human vocality does not equal hegemony. In this partnership, agencies shift and are subverted. This reveals the human to be interacting through sonic negotiations originating from hearing (Menezes Bastos 2013). The falconer must adapt to the eagle as his success is to the extent of his eagle's having learnt to listen and return to him. This reliance on the bird's responses produces the conditions for its personhood, agency and musicality - through its own vocality - to emerge. This lecture examines the sonic ontology of Kyrgyz eagle-hunting and how vocality generates interspecies closeness while simultaneously preserving species distinction (Mundy 2108; Ochoa 2014). The lecture finally evaluates the sustainability of the human voice as a mediator or a source of conflict in human/wildlife relations.

Federica Nardella has completed her PhD in Ethnomusicology at King's College, London. She is an MMus Ethnomusicology graduate from SOAS. Her current postdoctoral project explores the sound ecology of Turkic Central Asia and the use of vocality in constructing partnerships between eagle-hunters and golden eagles in Kyrgyzstan.



Master Aitbek Sulaimanbekov on a hunting morning, Federica Nardella. 16 November 2024, Tuura-Suu, Kyrgyzstan.

Institutskolloquium Sommersemester 2025 Leitung: Matthias Krings

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