

## Սայեաթ Նովայ – Sayat Nova

### 1. Beyond the Nation State: Sayat Nova



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<https://medium.com/@suhailvawda88/beyond-the-nation-state-sayat-nova-7855ccdba160>

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The works of Sayat Nova reflect the atmosphere of learning and a shared culture of traditions in an era before the implementation of the [rigid nation state](#).

An ethnic Armenian born Harutyun Sayatyan and dubbed Sayat Nova (“King of Songs” in Persian), he was a poet, musician, and ashik (one who sings ghazals — poems sung to the tune of a bağlama, a long-necked lute of sorts).



An oil painting of the bard, Sayat Nova, on canvas. Eduard Isabekyan [CC BY-SA 4.0]

## **Diplomat to Wanderer**

A testament to the varied skill of an intellectual of his time and environment, Sayat Nova, although most recognised for his poems and singing, performed in the court of King Heraclius II of Georgia but worked as a diplomat, too. It is said that he aided in the forging of an alliance between Georgia, Armenia, and the region of Shirvan against a Muslim Persian Empire that was encroaching on largely Christian areas of the Caucasus during the mid-eighteenth century.

Misfortune struck when he fell in love with the king's sister, Ana, and was forced to forfeit his job, spending the rest of his life as a wandering bard, later to be ordained as a priest in the Armenian Apostolic Church. Confronted by the invading army of Shah Mohammad Khan Qajar, Sayat Nova met his demise at the Haghpat Monastery in Armenia, after refusing to convert to Islam.

## **Transnationalism Through Song and Script**

His legacy is one that, ideally, transcends geopolitical boundaries, since his culturally-revered works were expressed in Armenian, Georgian, Persian, and Azeri Turkish (which is the language of most of his living works). The latter, no doubt, serves as fuel for flame wars in the vile comments sections throughout the net.

Some of his poems even covered all four of these languages, and the bard, fascinatingly, composed his ghazals using Persian and Arabic poetic metre with Armenian melodic structure. The final couplet of his ghazals often speak of Sayat Nova in the third-person, a trademark that reflects the works of Persianate poets like Rumi and Hafez, a style which has continued into the modern era by Turks, for example — the likes of [Aşık Veysel](#) and Barış Manço being notable.

One could find his Azeri poems written in a mix of Georgian and Armenian scripts, so it would be unfair to place the poet solely as an Armenian cultural icon instead of the transnational Caucasian bard that he truly was. He lived in a deeply religious society, yet would today find that his works have gained secular and romantic expressionism, [much like Rumi](#) who preceded him.

## **Of Bards and Borders**

As rigid lines separate nation states today, with Armenia and Turkey, [infamously](#), sharing a closed border, [culture tends to transcend](#) the arguably new innovation of hard borders. From the Caucasus, through to Anatolia, the Balkans, and much of the historically Persianate realms, a shared culture is evident.

It's felt on the palate, in terms of food, lives through lineage, and resonates through song and the written word. Sayat Nova serves as just one exemplary and inspirational example of this. Perhaps a little less known globally, if compared to Khayyam or Rumi, but Harutyun Sayatyan deserves a [historical mention](#) in a world suffering from cultural claimants and ethnic disputes.

## 2. The Bard of the Caucasus: Armenian, Azeri, and Georgian Legacies of Sayat Nova

Posted on [June 28, 2016](#)

<https://ajammc.com/2016/06/28/bard-of-the-caucasus-sayat-nova/>

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popular rendering of Sayat Nova.

For those unfamiliar with his legacy, [Sayat Nova](#)'s story can seem like the stuff of myth. His life is fascinating even in broad strokes: he was an ethnic Armenian musician and Orthodox Christian who lived in the Caucasus in the 18th century. He created a unique style of music, and wrote hundreds of songs in Armenian, Azerbaijani, and Georgian. His talent was so great that even though he was born in a humble background, he rose to become the court musician of a Georgian king and founded his own school of musicians.

Sayat Nova was part of a tradition of bards known in Armenian as *ashough* — synonymous with the Turkish *asîq* or Persian *ashegh*, terms used to refer to travelling musicians but literally meaning lover. Such bards worked across a vast cultural landscape that included the territory of modern Turkey, Iran, Georgia and Azerbaijan, and similarly transgressed the Persianate, Armenian, Azerbaijani, and Georgian speaking cultural worlds.

Just like other artisans, during this era being an *ashough* was like joining a class of professionals. But Sayat Nova's style of music was unusual, he created new musical forms and compositions in all three languages.

Despite the formidable and cosmopolitan legacy of this bard, his appreciation has largely been confined to the domain of Armenian cultural heritage. Sayat Nova is mostly associated with and remembered for his works in Armenian. The reasons for this are largely due to what

history has passed down to us (or failed to preserve), but that still begs the question: what more could we understand about Sayat Nova, if we were to further explore his story and music beyond his Armenian identity?

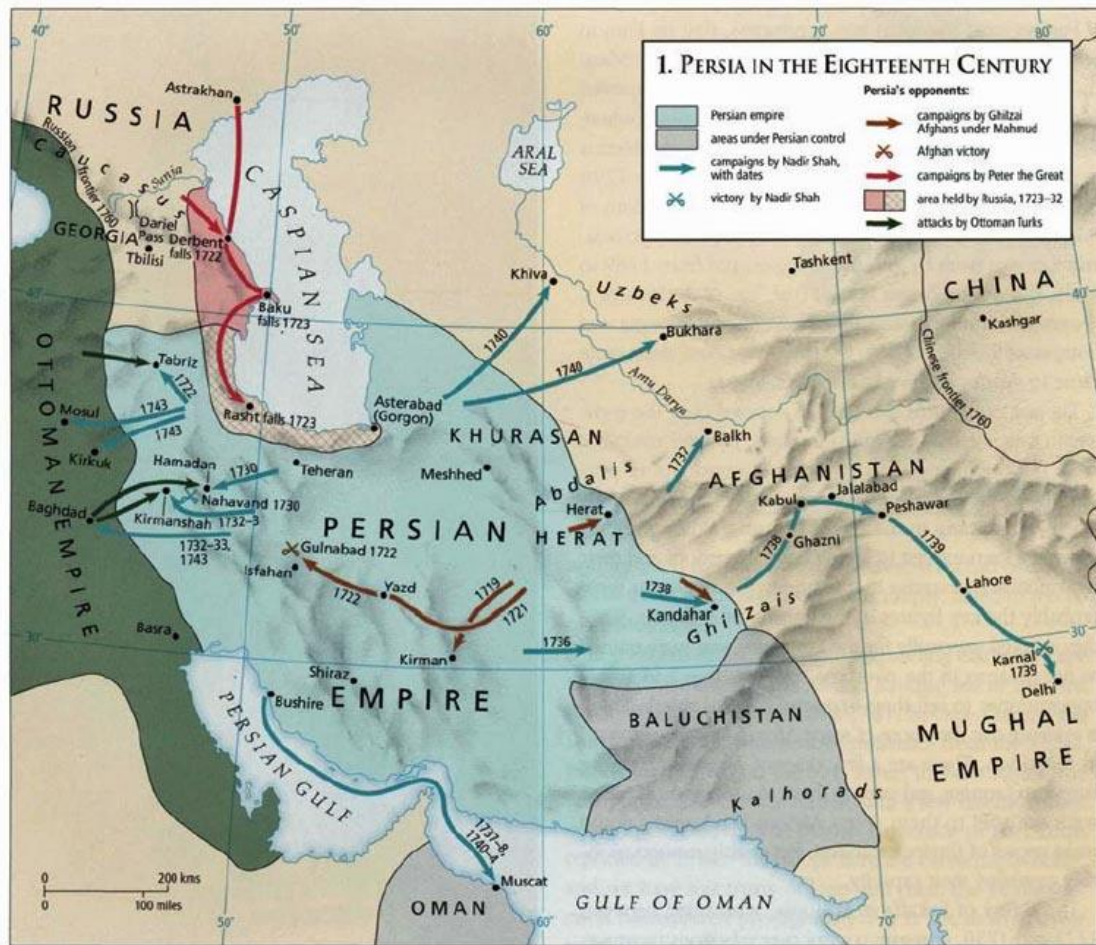
<https://youtu.be/SPI-3CZonPA>

*A Sayat Nova composition being performed by a modern ensemble.*

To understand how an 18th century bard could create such a corpus of work, it helps to start with the basics of the musician's biography. Although there is contention over the details of his life, Sayat Nova was likely born in the northwest of modern-day Armenia. Supposedly, he was to become a trained weaver only to instead travel to India and fight in one of Nadir Shah's invasions of the Mughal Empire. He eventually returned to enter the *ashough* guild and officially gained the moniker Sayat Nova, from the Persian *sayyad-i nava*, or "hunter of songs."

As he rose to fame for his musical ability, he became the court musician of King Heracle II of Georgia in Tiflis (modern-day Tblisi). He composed and performed his famous repertoire of work during this period, until legend has it he was kicked out of the court for falling in love with the King's sister. He lived out his final years as a monk.





A map of the Afsharid dynasty detailing their campaigns against the Mughals in modern-day India. Sayat Nova is claimed to have participated in these battles.

In the 17th and 18th century, despite conflict between empires of different ethnolinguistic makeup and demographics, linguistic and cultural cosmopolitanism was the norm in royal courts. Sayat Nova was particularly valued in the Georgian Court for his ability to contribute Persianate culture and Persian-style music (although the music he performed in the court was almost exclusively in Georgian, Armenian, and Azerbaijani).

Fortuitous timing also gave Sayat Nova the space to create his particular repertoire and be appreciated. In the 17th century, Western and Eastern Armenia had been split by the Ottoman and Safavid Empires, respectively. The Safavid Empire fell to Afghan invaders in 1722 who were then overthrown by Nader Shah and his Afsharid dynasty — the rulers of the empire during the century between the Safavids and the Qajars.

The multiple transfers of power allowed the Kingdom of Georgia a chance to shake off years of Persian meddling, tribute taking, and general interference. While the Afsharids were occupied fighting against the Mughals in the East, Georgia had a chance to cultivate its own court culture — enter Sayat Nova.

<https://youtu.be/WYwjuOifsY>

*A Sayat Nova composition in Georgian from a film biopic about his life. The Armenian version is titled “Dun el Glkhen.”*

Many parts of Sayat Nova’s musical legacy survive to this day. His songs are still widely performed in Armenia, with countless recordings available in a variety of formats. But the nature of his enduring legacy doesn’t match the transcultural life and music of Sayat Nova: most of the available recordings of his music are exclusively in Armenian.

The significant cultural projects that attempt to continue his legacy are tied to the Armenian community and diaspora, including the upcoming [Sayat Nova festival](#) that will be held in Yerevan. While there are Sayat Nova monuments in Armenia and Georgia, there is no monument to Sayat Nova in Azerbaijan, even though the majority of his surviving poems are in the Azerbaijani language. Most of his Azerbaijani and Georgian poems, in their original language, are out of print or nearly-impossible to find.

Part of this is due to the difficulties of historical preservation. We have many of Sayat Nova’s lyrics in all languages thanks to his biographers and the documents gathered by his son, but his melodies are less well-preserved. Musical notation was not common in Sayat Nova’s time and milieu, so the Armenian melodies that survived were passed down orally for 150 years until they were finally notated. The projects to track down these melodies (that continues to this day) were mostly [Armenian initiatives](#). While it is likely that Georgian and Azerbaijani melodies of his still survive and are being performed, they are not as widely available as his Armenian repertoire.

It seems unfitting that Sayat Nova is solely remembered through the lens of Armenian culture. Of his surviving works, scholars have located 117 Azerbaijani poems, 72 Armenian poems, 32 Georgian poems and six Russian poems. It is this cosmopolitan legacy that arguably makes Sayat Nova unique.

Sayat Nova compositions notably used Persian and Arabic poetic meters with Armenian melodic structures. With these techniques, Sayat Nova founded the Tbilisi “school” of *ashough*, a tradition that was notable at the time for performing Georgian music in the Persian style. Even people unfamiliar with these languages, when listening to a Sayat Nova composition, will notice that the final couplet of his *ghazals* often refer to Sayat Nova in the third person — a trademark of the *ghazal* form that many associate with Persianate poets such as [Hafez](#) and [Rumi](#).

<https://youtu.be/y6Ci0IsaxzI>

*At the end of this song, Sayat Nova refers to himself in the final couplet. This is very common in the ghazal form in other languages as well, such as Persian, Arabic, Turkish and Urdu.*



A bialphabetical Sayat Nova manuscript from his notebook. The text is one composition written in both the Armenian and Georgian scripts.

Sayat Nova was unable to read the Perso-Arabic script, but his Armenian poems often blended Persian words with the language. This speaks to the role Persian played as a language



of high culture: it was a language of literacy in the Caucasus that transcended ethnic boundaries.

In his handwritten manuscripts Sayat Nova would even [switch between scripts](#) mid-poem. Picture this: his Azerbaijani poems are written in a mix of Georgian and Armenian scripts, and his Armenian poems are often written in both Armenian and Georgian scripts. His songs in colloquial Tbilisi Armenian were written in the Georgian script, and the Armenian script was reserved only for the classical Armenian language — widely considered “sacred” by devout Armenian Christians.

Why then, are the cross-cultural celebrations of Sayat Nova so few and far between? Azerbaijanis and Georgians have just as much to celebrate in Sayat Nova as the Armenian cultural mainstream.

Unfortunately a more pancultural perspective of Sayat Nova is not just difficult due to the historical record, but politically fraught. [This video](#) of an Azerbaijani version of Sayat Nova’s song “Kamanche” highlights the vehemence of the arguments that often accompany celebrations of Sayat Nova.

<https://youtu.be/pXkZl9zwLp0>

*An example of a Sayat Nova composition adapted into Azerbaijani Turkish, framed by the uploader as an example of “plagiarism.”*

The video shows clips of the song being used to celebrate Azerbaijan and Turkey’s form of pan-Turkic ideology that arose in the 20th century — an incarnation [with anti-Armenian ideology](#) — while criticizing Azerbaijan for cultural theft.

This is doubly confusing: Azerbaijani nationalists using Sayat Nova for pan-Turkic goals, while Armenian reactionaries respond by disavowing the fact that this bard actually had strong ties to Azerbaijani culture. [Comments on a video](#) of a Georgian translation of an Armenian Sayat Nova song meanwhile try to excuse or explain his non-Armenian works, rather than acknowledge that they are a significant part of his canon.

This is a tragedy, as some of the most integral parts of Sayat Nova's identity were linked to his non-Armenian cultural capital. For example, 19th century Sayat Nova biographer and documenter Akhverdian recorded a story in which the *ashough*, as a retired monk, hides his identity in order to meet a young new *ashough* visiting the city in search of the infamous Sayat Nova.

When the youngster meets a disguised Sayat Nova and asks where to find the renowned bard, Sayat Nova's answers are a series of Azerbaijani plays on words: [bilmanam](#), [tanimanam](#), and [gormanam](#). Which could either be translated as “I don't know,” “I don't recognize him,” and “I have not seen him,” or, “know, I am him,” “recognize, I am him,” and “see, I am him.” The beauty of this word play brings the young bard to surrender his instrument to Sayat Nova, to show that he has been humbled in the face of the master.

These sides of Sayat Nova's legacy are often forgotten or glossed over. It appears that Sayat Nova's Georgian and Azerbaijani sides have been both lost on accident and forgotten on purpose over the course of time. The Sayat Nova Project, now renamed Mountains of Tongues, seeks to document and explore musicological phenomena in the Caucasus beyond a nationalist lens.

There is great interest in reviving a multicultural Sayat Nova. [Mountains of Tongues](#) (formerly known as the [Sayat Nova project](#)), is a multicultural ethnomusicological research project that attempts to document the region's musical heritage while breaking free of nationalist tropes. But that work has unfortunately become politically tenuous. The borders of Armenia and Azerbaijan remain [closed](#) in the face of the ongoing [Nagorno-Karabakh conflict](#). Funding for Caucasus-based musical research is often tied to a [single culture](#) and involves the explicit practice of nation and identity building. If Sayat Nova was alive today, far-right nationalists from all three communities in the Caucasus would likely denounce him for daring to perform in the languages of the “others,” whoever they may be.

But just as a modern Sayat Nova would be denounced, there would perhaps be those awaiting his return. Could there be a radical, transformative potential in remembering the multicultural Sayat Nova? Over three centuries on, the natural cosmopolitanism that Sayat Nova embodied seems lost to us. In the face of ethnic homogenization and conflict in the Caucasus, there are no easy answers. The clichés of past cultural fusions are no panacea for the contemporary political problems that the region faces. Cultural dialogue and civil society is important in

such a situation, but it is important not to overemphasize the role of shared cultural heritage in examining contemporary political problems.

But at the very least, the very work of filling out our collective image of Sayat Nova could bolster a longstanding cultural unity in the region. The mix of knowledges it takes to appreciate Sayat Nova's oeuvre is no longer easily found: people knowing Georgian, Armenian, Azerbaijani, Persian and Russian is no longer as common as it once was. Perhaps filling our mutual gaps of knowledge could bring fans of this famous *ashough* together to at least remember what once was, and dream of what again could be. Until then, the very least that fans of Sayat Nova can do is heed his own hand-written introduction to his second written song:

“This divani (*type of song*) is very good

If you learn it, pray for my soul.”

And here is the poem he was humbly boasting about:

*Special thanks to Hasmig Injejikian's dissertation on Sayat Nova. Please refer to her [publication](#) for more specific information on Sayat Nova's life and the academic discourse surrounding his biography, works, and legacy.*

### 3. Sayat-Nova Bio

<https://mypoeticside.com/poets/sayat-nova-poems>



Sayat-Nova was an 18<sup>th</sup> century Georgian/Armenian poet, musician and sometime royal court diplomat. He entertained courtiers for a while before falling out of favour and then lived the life of the wandering minstrel (local term – *ashik*). Later in his life he became an apostolic priest in Armenia which was, at that time, a deeply religious country.

Records suggest that he was born Harutyun Sayatyan in June 1712, in the Georgian city of Tbilisi, which was also the birthplace of his mother Sara. His father was called Karapet and may have had Syrian or Turkish roots though this is not certain. He adopted the nickname Sayat-Nova and grew up writing and speaking the language of his mother and was soon exhibiting great skills as a writer, singer and musician. He learned to play a variety of stringed instruments such as the Persian kamancheh, the Georgian choghur and the Turkish tambur. He was also a talented writer of music and eventually wrote songs and poems in a number of different languages including Armenian.

His abilities were recognised by the ruler of Georgia, Erekle II, and he entertained courtiers daily. He was also granted diplomatic status and it is believed that his skills in that line were utilised during the formation of an alliance between the countries of Shirvan, Armenia and Georgia against the threat posed by the much larger Persian Empire. Sayat-Nova was, though, more artist than politician and he let his heart rule his head when forging an alliance of his own. He fell in love with the sister of King Erekle and was summarily banished from court.

To prevent any further recriminations he wisely chose to take to the road as an ashik, singing and playing traditional Georgian and Armenian folk songs wherever he went. He married and his wife Marmar bore him four children but she died in 1768. In 1759, at the age of 47, he took holy orders within the Armenian Apostolic Church and he remained a priest for the rest of his life. He had ministries in several locations including Tbilisi and at a monastery in the northern Armenian town of Haghpat. Unfortunately it was here that he met a violent death in 1795.

History shows that Sayat-Nova was a hugely influential poet and musician throughout Armenia. Even though he spent most of his life in a society steeped in religious fervour he wrote in a romantic style, never afraid to express his true feelings about love and life. He never allowed religion to influence his work in any way with most of his poems and compositions being very much of a secular nature. A good example is the poem simply called *Love Song* and the first two verses are reproduced here:



I SIGH not, while thou art my soul! Fair one, thou art to me  
A golden cup, with water filled of immortality.  
I sit me down, that over me may fall thy shadow, sweet;  
Thou art a gold-embroidered tent to shield me from the heat.  
First hear my fault, and, if thou wilt, then slay this erring man;  
Thou hast all power; to me thou art the Sultan and the Khan.

Thy waist is like a cypress tree, sugar thy tongue, in sooth;  
Thy lip is candy, and thy skin like Frankish satin smooth.  
Thy teeth are pearls and diamonds, the gates of dulcet tones;  
Thine eyes are gold-enamelled cups adorned with precious stones;  
Thou art a rare and priceless gem, most wonderful to see;  
A ruby rich of Mt. Bedakhsh, my love, thou art to me.

At least 220 songs are known to have come from his pen but it is very likely that he wrote many more. They were mostly written in the traditional Armenian style, in a variety of languages including Persian, Georgian and Armenian.

Sayat-Nova was killed in September 1795 at the Haghpat monastery by soldiers who were part of the invading armies of the Shah of Iran. He was 82 years old and his body was interred at the Cathedral of Saint George in Tbilisi.