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Epic Storytelling and Cultural Transmission in The Qashqadaryo Oasis of Uzbekistan: An Anthropological Study of Bakhshi Traditions

Turgunjon Joylovovich Yarmatov[1]

Abstract

This article examines how epic knowledge and performance traditions are transmitted across generations in the Qashqadaryo oasis of Uzbekistan, focusing on master–apprentice relationships, regional connections, and changes in repertoire. It explores the local performance traditions of Chiroqchi, Shahrisabz, and Qamay within the broader context of bakhshi, or epic bardic, traditions in southern Uzbekistan. Adopting a historical and anthropological perspective, the study applies historical-comparative analysis to published folklore scholarship, accounts of bakhshi activities, and records of folklore expeditions. The analysis highlights the importance of artistic lineages, repertoire, and performance experience alongside geographical affiliation in understanding local epic storytelling schools. It argues that the coexistence of traditional epics and newly composed works within performers' repertoires reflects the interplay between cultural continuity and creative adaptation. Master–apprentice relationships and connections among local performance communities are examined as mechanisms of cultural transmission. The Qashqadaryo case contributes to understanding how oral heritage is maintained and reshaped through intergenerational learning, performance, and repertoire renewal.

Keywords: Cultural anthropology, Uzbek folklore, oral traditions, Qashqadaryo oasis, bakhshi traditions, epic storytelling

Introduction

Epic storytelling (dostonchilik) is an artistic tradition based on the composition, oral performance, and intergenerational transmission of folk epics. It brings together narrative, poetic expression, melody, and performance skills. A bakhshi, or

[1]Lecturer, Department of Social Sciences, Termez University of Economics and Service – Uzbekistan

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epic bard, recounts the narrative while conveying the characters' emotions through vocal expression, intonation, and musical accompaniment. Epic storytelling therefore constitutes a complex cultural practice encompassing literature, music, and communal communication. The Qashqadaryo oasis is an important centre of Uzbek epic storytelling. Bakhshis active in Chiroqchi, Qamashi, Shahrisabz, Kitob, G'uzor, and Dehqonobod have contributed significantly to preserving and enriching the oasis's epic heritage. The dissemination of epic storytelling has been associated with the livelihoods, wedding ceremonies, rituals, and artistic needs of agricultural and pastoral communities. Studies of the regional characteristics of southern Uzbek folklore likewise identify connections between epic storytelling and the lives of communities inhabiting foothill and pastureland areas (Murtozova, 2015).

Review of the Literature

Scholarly research on epic storytelling in Uzbekistan has developed through the collection of oral traditions, the documentation of bakhshi repertoires, the classification of local epic schools, and the analysis of the artistic characteristics of epics. Research on the epic traditions of the Qashqadaryo oasis forms an integral part of this scholarly endeavour. A comparison of the existing literature reveals a gradual expansion of research beyond epic texts to encompass performers' individual characteristics, master–apprentice relationships, and local artistic environments. Hodi Zarif's collection and preparation of folklore materials for publication established an important documentary foundation for the systematic study of Uzbek epic storytelling. His O'zbek folklori and the study of Uzbek heroic epic co-authored with V. Jirmunskiy played a significant role in making this heritage available for scholarly investigation (Zarifov, 1941; Jirmunskiy & Zarifov, 1947). Early scholarly accounts of bakhshis from Qashqadaryo and Surxondaryo are particularly valuable because they allow epic works to be examined in relation to specific performers and regional contexts. These studies also contribute to historical source criticism: information about the performer accompanying a recorded work provides a foundation for subsequent research on repertoire and artistic transmission.

M. Afzalov's article "O'zbek xalq baxshilari" gives considerable attention to performers' skills, the training of apprentices, and activities across regional boundaries. Accounts of Sherna Bakhshi's performances in different regions and his teaching of apprentices demonstrate the importance of individual performers in the dissemination of epic traditions (Afzalov, 1946). These materials provide a basis for examining Qashqadaryo epic storytelling in relation to Surxondaryo and

neighbouring areas. An important methodological implication of Afzalov's observations is that the history of a local epic tradition cannot be separated from performers' mobility and artistic connections.

T. Mirzayev's Xalq baxshilarining epik repertuari occupies an important place in repertoire-based approaches to epic storytelling (Mirzayev, 1979). Such an approach makes it possible to analyse a bakhshi's creative range, the coexistence of different epics within an individual repertoire, and the continuity of inherited traditions. It is also relevant to the schools of Qashqadaryo: identifying the epics performed by a particular bakhshi helps clarify the performer's artistic environment and connections with other practitioners. Nevertheless, the presence of the same epic in several regions does not establish that their schools are identical. Repertoire must therefore be examined alongside distinctive features of performance and interpretation.

Later studies of the history of Uzbek folklore scholarship also address the scholarly continuity between Hodi Zarif and To'ra Mirzayev. The seventh volume of O'zbek folklorshunosligi masalalari identifies the preservation and expansion of folklore archives, together with continued expedition-based research, as important factors in the development of Uzbek epic studies (Turdimov, 2018). This demonstrates that the history of research on epic heritage involves scholarly continuity among researchers as well as artistic transmission among bakhshis.

M. Murodov's Sarchashmadan tomchilar is an important source bringing together local accounts of bakhshi traditions in southern Uzbekistan (Murodov, 1984). Materials concerning performers' lives and artistic activities enable epic storytelling to be studied through individual experience. The value of such biographical information lies in its capacity to connect a performer's place of residence, artistic environment, and repertoire. However, accounts of an individual bakhshi require comparison with evidence concerning other performers before they can be generalised to an entire school. In the present study, the biographical approach is used to examine the relationship between artistic transmission and geographical affiliation.

A. Qahhorov's monograph Yangi dostonlar is distinguished by its focus on innovations in the repertoires of bakhshis from Qashqadaryo and Surxondaryo (Qahhorov, 1985). It addresses the emergence of new works within established epic

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traditions. Its contribution lies in enabling bakhshi practice to be understood both as the preservation of inherited heritage and as the artistic representation of new social realities. This perspective is important for examining continuity and change together in the development of epic storytelling.

When newly composed epics are studied as historical sources, the period depicted in the narrative must be distinguished from the dates of composition and recording. Similarly, thematic affinity, plot similarity, and membership in a particular epic cycle are distinct analytical categories. From this perspective, the regional material discussed by Qahhorov provides a basis for examining the relationship between new epics and traditional repertoires. The present article interprets this relationship in terms of the adaptation of epic imagination to historical circumstances.

A. Ergashev's Sherobod dostonchilik maktabi represents an approach to southern epic traditions centred on a particular storytelling school (Ergashev, 1991). For the analysis of Qashqadaryo epic storytelling, this study provides a basis for comparison with a neighbouring artistic environment. Such comparison is most productive when it examines specific evidence of performers' connections, shared repertoires, and master–apprentice relationships, rather than transferring characteristics of the Sherobod school directly to Qashqadaryo. S. Murtozova's article on the epic storytelling schools of the southern regions provides an additional source concerning the geographical distribution of epic traditions and their relationship with local cultural environments (Murtozova, 2015).

O. Safarov's textbook O'zbek xalq og'zaki ijodi offers important comparative material for the classification of local schools. It identifies Abdulla Nurali as a representative of the Shahrisabz school and as an apprentice of Rajab Shoir (Safarov, 2010). These two affiliations demonstrate that geographical association and master–apprentice relationships may reflect different dimensions of a performer's biography. The classification of epic schools therefore requires geographical affiliation, artistic lineage, and repertoire to be considered together.

J. Eshonqulov's study of bakhshi art emphasises the relationship between epic memory, live performance, and artistic continuity. Its discussion of representatives of the Qamay school and their connections with the Shahrisabz artistic environment helps situate local schools within a network of relationships (Eshonqulov, 2024).

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This approach explains epic storytelling through both its body of texts and the activities of the individuals who preserve and perform them.

These strands of Uzbek scholarship intersect with international research on oral traditions. K. Reichl notes that, alongside learning from a master, performers in Turkic epic traditions may acquire their repertoires through manuscripts, books, and sound recordings (Reichl, 2003). This observation helps explain how forms of oral heritage transmission expand in response to historical circumstances. In the analysis of Qashqadaryo materials, this perspective is used to explore the relationship between traditional apprenticeship and written documentation.

R. Bauman's performance-centred approach examines verbal art through the relationship between performer, audience, and communicative setting (Bauman, 1975). J. Assmann's account of cultural memory explains how knowledge and shared understandings are transmitted across generations through recurring social practices (Assmann, 1995). These perspectives help interpret local evidence concerning Qashqadaryo bakhshis: a repertoire acquired from a master is articulated anew in live performance and connected to the cultural experience of the community.

The literature reviewed provides a substantial historical and folkloristic foundation for studying Qashqadaryo epic storytelling. It addresses performers' biographies, repertoires, local schools, and newly composed epics in varying depth. The present article brings these strands together within a unified historical analysis. Particular attention is given to interpreting school affiliation through the relationship between geography and artistic lineage, distinguishing the formation of a tradition from its scholarly documentation, and examining repertoire innovation alongside cultural continuity. The article's contribution lies in comparing existing evidence through these analytical criteria to clarify the relationship between the local characteristics of Qashqadaryo epic storytelling and broader processes of oral heritage transmission.

Methodology

The study draws on published accounts of bakhshi traditions in Qashqadaryo and neighbouring regions, folklore scholarship, and records of performers' repertoires. The work of V. Jirmunskiy and H. Zarifov on Uzbek heroic epic, M. Afzalov's article

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on bakhshis, T. Mirzayev's study of epic repertoire, and the works of M. Murodov and A. Qahhorov provide the principal foundation for the regional historical analysis. A. Ergashev's research informs the comparison of Qashqadaryo traditions with the epic performance environment of Sherobod. Performers' activities and folklore expeditions were examined within their respective historical contexts. A historical-comparative method was employed to identify similarities and differences among local schools. Historical source criticism distinguished the existence of an epic storytelling tradition from its recording and scholarly classification, treating these as separate processes. Performers' school affiliations were assessed through the relationships among their places of residence, masters, and repertoires. International scholarship informed the interpretation of performer–audience relationships, the transmission of oral knowledge, and cultural memory. The study adopts a historical and anthropological perspective, combining historical-comparative analysis of published sources with concepts of performance and cultural memory. It examines the transmission of epic knowledge through documented master–apprentice relationships and repertoire practices. The analysis draws on existing historical and folkloristic materials; no new ethnographic fieldwork or interviews were conducted.

Results

Historical evidence concerning Qashqadaryo epic storytelling indicates that the existence of an epic tradition and its scholarly documentation are distinct processes. Hodi Zarif's identification of bakhshis such as Boysari, Rajab, and Abdulla Nurali o'g'li during his investigations in 1929 suggests that researchers encountered an already established performance environment. The performers' repertoires and master–apprentice relationships indicate that epic knowledge had been transmitted across generations before scholarly observation began (Jirmunskiy & Zarifov, 1947). Accordingly, 1929 is regarded as an important milestone in the scholarly documentation of the oasis's epic traditions rather than the date of their emergence. This distinction avoids equating the formation of storytelling schools with the dates of research expeditions.

M. Afzalov's accounts of Sherna Bakhshi address his performances, training of apprentices, and travels across regions. His performances in Qashqadaryo, Surxondaryo, and parts of Turkmenistan indicate that the dissemination of epic traditions was also associated with performers' mobility (Afzalov, 1946). On this

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basis, Qashqadaryo bakhshi practice is characterised as an artistic environment that developed through interaction with neighbouring regions.

A comparison of accounts concerning Abdulla Nurali o‘g‘li revealed that geographical affiliation and master–apprentice relationships constitute complementary dimensions of a performer’s identity. O. Safarov’s textbook describes him as a representative of the Shahrisabz school of epic storytelling and identifies him as an apprentice of Rajab Shoir (Safarov, 2010). Meanwhile, the historical materials used in this article associate Rajab Shoir with the Chiroqchi artistic environment (Jirmunskiy & Zarifov, 1947). These accounts indicate that Abdulla Nurali’s association with Shahrisabz coexisted with an artistic lineage connected to Chiroqchi. Defining his school affiliation solely through his place of residence or his master’s geographical affiliation would therefore overlook some of these historical connections. This finding does not establish that the Chiroqchi and Shahrisabz schools were identical. Rather, it demonstrates that an individual bakhshi’s activities could connect different artistic environments. A school’s name and a master–apprentice lineage thus does not necessarily correspond to the same geographical area.

Accounts of the Qamay school document both its local performers and its connections with the Shahrisabz artistic environment. J. Eshonqulov associates bakhshis such as Abdukarim Juyruq, Mulla Xolnazar o‘g‘li, Bozor Sherqul, and Hazratqul with the Qamay tradition (Eshonqulov, 2024). These records provide a basis for describing Qamay as a local epic performance environment represented by identifiable practitioners. The analysis distinguished the scope of “bakhshi practice in the Qamashi area” from that of the “Qamay school of epic storytelling.” The former broadly encompasses bakhshi activities within a geographical area, whereas the latter denotes a distinct artistic tradition identified in the literature. There is therefore no basis for automatically assigning every bakhshi active in Qamashi to the Qamay school.

Qamay’s connections with Shahrisabz and the relationship between Rajab and Abdulla Nurali demonstrate the interconnected nature of the oasis’s artistic environments. However, these connections are supported by different types of evidence: the first concerns documented relationships between schools, while the second involves a specific master–apprentice relationship. Distinguishing between

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these forms of evidence made it possible to avoid conflating geographical proximity with artistic lineage.

Accounts of local repertoires indicate that inherited epic traditions and newly composed works coexisted within Qashqadaryo–Surxondaryo bakhshi practice. T. Mirzayev's study of repertoire and A. Qahhorov's monograph on new epics illuminate two interrelated aspects of this process: the preservation of epic heritage and the expansion of repertoires through new works (Mirzayev, 1979; Qahhorov, 1985).

Repertoire accounts drawing on Qahhorov's research associate works such as Kelinoy, Iqboloy, Jumagul, Pardaxol, Xonsuluv, Oysuluv, and Ali va Jang'il with different bakhshis. Their presence indicates that artistic innovation within the southern epic tradition was not confined to a single performer. Nevertheless, information about titles and performers alone does not establish that all these works belong to a single narrative cycle or were composed during the same historical period. In this analysis, repertoire innovation was identified through the documentation of new works. Since the complete epic texts were not compared, no conclusions were drawn concerning differences in their poetic structures, systems of imagery, or performance variants. Nor were the dates of historical events depicted in the works treated as their dates of composition. The analysis consequently supports the conclusion that repertoire continuity and innovation were compatible: the bakhshi tradition preserved inherited epic heritage while providing an artistic environment in which new works could emerge.

The literature examined illuminates different aspects of the history of Qashqadaryo epic storytelling. The materials associated with Jirmunskiy and Zarifov, together with Afzalov's accounts, provide information about performers and historical connections. Mirzayev's study focuses on repertoire, while Qahhorov's monograph examines newly composed epics. The works of Murodov and Ergashev broaden the study of local bakhshis and the southern epic performance environment (Murodov, 1984; Ergashev, 1991). Considering these approaches together yielded three relationships through which the history of Qashqadaryo's epic storytelling schools can be interpreted: performer and region, master and apprentice, and traditional repertoire and new composition. These relationships concern, respectively, the geographical setting of performance, the transmission of artistic knowledge, and continuity and change in epic heritage. The findings derive from a historical-

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comparative analysis of published evidence; they are not presented as the results of new fieldwork or textual comparison of epic variants.

Discussion

Evidence concerning Qashqadaryo epic storytelling makes it possible to explain the continuity of oral heritage through several interrelated processes.

The first process is the transmission of artistic traditions across regional boundaries. The relationship between Rajab Shoir and Abdulla Nurali demonstrates that a bakhshi's place of residence and the environment in which their artistic skills developed do not necessarily fall within the same geographical area. This reveals the limitations of defining local schools solely by territorial boundaries. A school's historical character is also embodied in relationships among performers. Reichl's observations on Turkic epic traditions identify the use of books, manuscripts, and sound recordings alongside learning a repertoire from a master (Reichl, 2003).

The second process involves the coexistence of repertoire preservation and artistic innovation. Tosh Shoir's performance of traditional epics and his creative engagement with Kelinoy indicate that an individual performer could sustain inherited traditions while also exploring new themes. Fidelity to tradition and artistic innovation were therefore compatible. This relationship demonstrates the limitations of treating epic storytelling as a collection of fixed texts. Bauman approaches verbal art as a performance event, emphasising the relationship of the text to its social setting and enactment (Bauman, 1975).

The third process is the documentation of a living tradition as a body of material available for scholarly study. The observations made in 1929, the expedition of 1945, and subsequent recording activities contributed to the preservation of bakhshi repertoires. Nevertheless, a recorded text represents a particular performer's interpretation at a particular moment. It cannot directly establish the characteristics of an entire school throughout its history. For example, epics recorded from Tosh Shoir provide a basis for examining his repertoire. Identifying the broader characteristics of the school, however, requires comparison with versions performed by other bakhshis, evidence of master–apprentice relationships, and accounts of performance. Such comparisons can clarify the relationship between individual artistry and collective tradition.

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The fourth process concerns the social significance of epic memory. Assmann's approach to cultural memory explains how understandings of the past are preserved through practices transmitted across generations (Assmann, 1995). In Qashqadaryo epic storytelling, this process is manifested in the bakhshi's repertoire, knowledge acquired from a master, and performances before the community. The historical value of an epic does not depend on every event in its narrative having occurred exactly as described. An epic also reveals how a community imagined its past, which virtues it valued, and how it represented contemporary changes through artistic expression. Examining Alpomish or works from the Go'ro'g'li cycle alongside newly composed epics makes it possible to trace this interplay of continuity and change. The relevance of the Qashqadaryo case to international scholarship lies in these relationships. Regional evidence illuminates the connections among apprenticeship, the performer's individuality, audiences, and written documentation through historical examples. Local detail thus provides the evidential foundation for broader theoretical conclusions.

Conclusion

The historical development of epic storytelling schools in the Qashqadaryo oasis is closely connected to regional artistic environments, master–apprentice relationships, and repertoire continuity. The traditions of Chiroqchi, Shahrisabz, and Qamay developed through interaction with neighbouring epic traditions while retaining their distinctive characteristics. The relationship between Rajab Shoir and Abdulla Nurali demonstrates the importance of artistic lineage in defining a performer's affiliation. Tosh Shoir's repertoire illustrates how an individual performer could preserve diverse epic works while engaging with new themes. These examples suggest that the continuity of tradition was sustained through the interplay of reproduction and artistic innovation. Twentieth-century folklore expeditions marked an important stage in the documentation and scholarly classification of bakhshi traditions in the oasis. Distinguishing the historical formation of epic storytelling schools from their documentation by researchers improves the precision of historical interpretation. Bringing local scholarship into dialogue with studies of performance and cultural memory makes it possible to understand Qashqadaryo epic storytelling as a regional case of the intergenerational transmission of oral knowledge and cultural change.

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Correspondence:

Turgunjon Joylovovich Yarmatov

Yarmatovturgun@gmail.com

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