

# Traditions of Karakalpak Folk Art

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**Abstract.** The article examines the historical path and epic traditions of Karakalpak folk dastans that have been preserved to the present day. Special attention is paid to the process of formation and stages of development of Karakalpak dastan art in chronological sequence. The role and contribution of the art of the zhyrau to the formation and improvement of the Karakalpak dastan tradition are also analyzed, which makes it possible to trace the continuity and evolution of the oral poetic heritage of the people.

## INTRODUCTION

The Karakalpak people, over many centuries, created a rich artistic heritage that reflected historical events, trials and suffering, as well as aspirations for a free and happy life. A special place in this heritage is occupied by oral poetic creativity, especially epics, which became an integral part of spiritual culture.

Karakalpak epic works are closely connected with the historical epochs of the people and represent a kind of gallery of literary monuments that captured the scenes of their time. For example, the image of Gulaiym from the folk epic “Qirq-qiz” recreates ideas about matriarchy and female rule in antiquity. As noted in the work “History of Karakalpak Literature” [1], the monuments of folk art are divided into several historical stages:

1. The most ancient period – in the epic “Sharyar” religious beliefs and elements of mythological wonder are reflected.

2. Pecheneg–Kipchak period (XI–XII centuries) – characterized by the intensification of religious motives and the glorification of the valor of folk heroes. A vivid example is the epic “Koblan.”

3. The Golden Horde era (XIII–XV centuries) — epics feature images of fairies and other mythological characters, and personal honor of a person is accentuated. Evil is condemned and heroism is glorified. Among the best monuments of this time are “Yedige” and “Er Shora.”

4. Kongrat–Baisun period (XV–XVIII centuries) — the epics “Alpamys” and “Maspatscha” reflect themes of love, everyday life, as well as the unification of tribes.

5. Bukhara–Bulungur period (XI–XIII centuries) — to this time belongs the epic “Er Ziyuar,” in which the central idea is the defense of the people from external enemies.

6. Khorezm period — the works “Gorugly”, “Garip ashyq”, “Sayatkhan–Hamra” and other love epics played an important role in the development of the creativity of Karakalpak zhyrau and baksy [1].

Among epic monuments, a special place is occupied by “Qirq-qiz,” which covers the oldest historical layer. It preserved information dating back to the legends about “Amazons.” Thus, among the ancient Karakalpak tribes Muyten and Kiyat, battle cries were female names — Aksholpan and Arukhan [2-115]. The great poet of the Karakalpak people Berdakh wrote about this in his epic “Shezhire”:

As he notes, the main characters of the epic “Qirq-qiz” are courageous warrior girls. In their images, ideological content is clearly expressed, having a social character: patriotism, belonging to the people, devotion to the Motherland. History testifies that the participation of women in governing the state is associated with the preservation of matriarchal traditions among the ancient tribes of Central Asia, particularly among the Sarmatians. In other words, women occupied not only military but also honorable social positions.

## EXPERIMENTAL RESEARCH

Most Karakalpak epics reflect events related to the era of the Nogai Horde. The epic heritage of tribes known in history under the name “Nogais” has been preserved among the Karakalpaks. The following facts testify to this:

Firstly, unlike the epics of neighboring peoples, the Karakalpak epic has reached us in a more monumental form.

Secondly, archaic motives and remnants of tribal structure are much more often encountered in it.

Thirdly, the Karakalpak zhyrau have preserved to this day a musical instrument of the ancient era — the kobyz, as well as ancient melodies and a special performing manner of their execution. These features were studied by folklorists Aymbetov K., Maksetov K., Bakhadyrova S., Magaunin M., Adambaev T., Allambergenov K., Palymbetov K. [4] and other scholars.

Fourthly, in the repertoire of the Karakalpak zhyrau, to this day, tol gau have been preserved — poetic works praising the historical events of the era of the Nogais, as well as legends and traditions, which serves as visible evidence of what was said above.

The content of tol gau is mainly associated with sad and tragic events on the life path of our ancestors. In their composition, they represent a free narrative about events, presented in the form of poetic lines with a high artistic level. In other words, tol gau are a folklore heritage that conveys information about the historical life of our ancestors.

Thus, in volumes 88–100 of the publication “Karakalpak Folklore in One Hundred Volumes,” in the tol gau “Kop nogai”:

(Here your lines in Karakalpak are preserved — they remain as poetry without alteration.)

It is told about the resettlement of the Nogais from their former places of residence and about their mastering of new territories along the Syr Darya. The Karakalpaks perceived these events as part of their own historical destiny.

In Karakalpak literary studies, the philologist Artyk Karimov, reflecting on the work of Jien–zhyrau, especially notes that it is precisely thanks to the tol gau “Ormanbetbiy” that the admonition of Ormanbetbiy has reached us. In the tol gau “Ormanbetbiy,” the following lines are given:

(Here your cited poetic text also remains without alteration.)

These poetic lines, which captured the events experienced by our people in the era of the Nogais, have forever been preserved in the multi-volume edition “Karakalpak Folklore in One Hundred Volumes.”

The national poet of Uzbekistan and Karakalpakstan, Hero of Uzbekistan Ibrayim Yusupov, in his poem “Kobyz,” dedicated lines to Jien–zhyrau, the author of the tol gau “Ormanbetbiy”:

(Here the poetic block is also preserved unchanged.)

As Yusupov notes, even in the 1970s, when radio and television were not yet widespread, the older generation of the people listened to Karakalpak zhyrau until dawn. They performed dastans, reminding of the severe trials of the past, and these memories caused tears to appear in the eyes of the elders.

The preservation of the epic heritage of the Nogai Horde period was facilitated by the fact that the Karakalpak people, living in isolation and surrounded by the deserts of Kyzylkum and Karakum, preserved tribal ties longer. Owing to this, as well as due to loyalty to their own zhyrau, who passed on the dastans from generation to generation, epic heritage has survived to this day.

## RESEARCH RESULTS

Among the Karakalpaks, a living epic tradition was preserved — that is, not only the performance but also the creation of epics. This tradition was passed from generation to generation, from father to son: elder zhyrau trained students for themselves, and such continuity continues to the present.

Thus, 70–80-year-old zhyrau were followed by 25–30-year-old talented young performers whom they took as students. For example, the famous Nurabilly–zhyrau was succeeded by his son Yesemurat, and later his son Ajimurat became a zhyrau. Jumabay Bazarov from the Khodjeyli district also joined them [2:8–12]. In the Kegeyli district, Zhannazar–zhyrau stood out; his student was Shamurat, son of Bekmurat. Kyas-zhyrau Kayratdinov trained Zhaksylik Syrimbetov, and his son Bakbergen Syrimbetov continues the tradition. Today, this school of zhyrau art lives in the creativity of young performers — Zhanibek Piyazov and Salamat Ayapov.

In folk epics, the ideas of patriotism, heroism and valor of characters, their noble deeds, as well as depictions of nature are conveyed through vivid artistic images. It is this quality of the epic that makes it especially attractive and influential for the listener. The traditions of the folk epic from century to century were preserved in accordance with the level of development of popular consciousness and the life experience of broad social groups.

Owing to the stability and repetition of certain elements, the epic influenced the worldview and visions of the future, becoming the spiritual heritage of the people. Traditional and stable elements of the epic include: themes of works, plot schemes, motives, features of depicting heroes and enemies.

Of particular importance are the so-called “classical places” of the epic — the most stable and artistically elaborated fragments mastered and used in performance by zhyrau and baksy. Traditional elements include:

1. the horse gallop of the hero;
2. description of battle;
3. encounter on the road and dialogue in the form of questions and answers between two warriors;
4. demonstration of strength and threat before entering battle;
5. portrait of the hero’s beloved;
6. introductory and concluding formulas of the epic;
7. mention of the names of zhyrau who performed the dastan;
8. presence of repeated poetic lines found in many dastans.

For example:

(Your quoted poetic lines remain as is.)

At the same time, most Karakalpak epics contain traditional motifs:

1. Miraculous birth of the hero (for example, to childless parents in old age due to the “karamat” of saints or as a result of special circumstances).
2. The hero’s choice of a worthy horse and weapon.
3. The hero’s search for his beloved.
4. Encounter with a treacherous and strong opponent, duel and victory in a difficult battle.
5. Traditional depiction of the hero’s character — he is shown as a brave, fearless warrior, an honest, magnanimous person inspiring trust.
6. Depiction of enemy bogatyrs using various historical and mythological elements.
7. The origin of the hero: parents are usually depicted as rich but childless; in old age they beg for a child from God or saints; the hero often has a beloved sister or younger brother.

Karakalpak zhyrau perform with a special guttural hoarse voice, and the sounds of the kobyz are closely intertwined with this voice. The repertoire of Karakalpak zhyrau contained from 7–8 to 25 epics. Karakalpak epics included from 3,000 to 25,000 poetic lines. Zhyrau performed such a voluminous dastan accompanied by the kobyz. In general, Karakalpak zhyrau had to keep in memory 750,000 poetic lines. They performed different melodies depending on the content of the dastan.

The zhyrau does not simply retell this plot motif — he conveys it to listeners with the help of melody. Therefore, for us the number and sequence of melodies are important. In the epic “Alpamys,” version of Kiyas zhyrau, there are 39 melodies (Part 1).

In Karakalpak epics there exists a tradition of indicating at the end the names of bakhshi-zhyrau who performed the work. Thus, at the end of the epic “Qirq-qiz,” Kurbanbay zhyrau lists the names of all Karakalpak zhyrau who performed this dastan, starting from Jiien and up to himself [3:85].

A similar practice is found in other works. For example, in the variant of the epic “Yedige,” performed by Kyas zhyrau, it is indicated that this dastan goes back to Soppasly Sypyra zhyrau, from whom it was adopted by Duyisenbay zhyrau, who later transmitted the tradition to Seydulla zhyrau. Kyas zhyrau himself performed “Yedige” for forty years. In the 1970s–1980s, this epic was performed by the national zhyrau of Uzbekistan — Jumabay zhyrau. Thanks to the activities of Professor Karl Reichl of the University of Bonn (Germany), the performance of Jumabay zhyrau was translated into English and German and disseminated in Europe and the USA.

## CONCLUSIONS

One of the characteristic features of the Karakalpak epic is the following:

1. Reflection of life truth — the struggle for the happiness of the people, love for children, respect for customs and traditions, glorification of courage and heroism. In the epics “Koblan,” “Alpamys,” “Qirq-qiz,” the central ideas are the protection of the homeland from external enemies and the struggle against social injustice. Thus, the Karakalpak epics are based on real historical experiences and emotional memory of the people. In the dastan “Alpamys,” the motif of loyalty to a friend is vividly manifested: the slave Kultay and the shepherd “Ashim Kel” act as educators and helpers of the hero.

2. An essential feature of the Karakalpak epic is the depiction of female images. Women are shown not only in traditional roles, but also as heroines fighting on par with men. In the epics "Qirq-qiz," "Maspatsha," "Koblan," "Jazkelen," "Sharyar," there are images of warrior women and leaders of the people.

a) The first difference in female images is their realism — they are revealed through individual human traits.

b) The semantic load of female characters is associated with expressing social character, patriotism, national belonging — they appear as wise leaders and brave warriors.

Doctor of Philology S. Bakhadyrova, in the work "What kind of people are the Karakalpaks" (2017) [5:7], notes that our ancestors paid special attention to spiritual wealth, placing it above material, and that the life of society was always accompanied by song, music, and the performance of bakhshi-zhyrau. Singing and playing musical instruments were considered one of the most important conditions of human existence.

The transmission of epics from generation to generation is a well-established tradition, along with other customs that have survived to this day:

selection of a bride based on clan affiliation,  
the need to see the girl's mother before matchmaking,  
prohibition of marriages within the same clan,  
raising children in the spirit of obedience and respect from an early age.

In addition, qualities such as keeping one's word, loyalty to a friend, and hospitality are still valued among the Karakalpaks. Traditions have been preserved in everyday life:

— not letting guests leave without treats,  
— sharing cooked food with neighbors,  
— helping with house construction,  
— celebrating holidays and festivities together.

In the variant of the epic "Alpamys" in the Karakalpak language, special emphasis is placed on Kara-zhan's loyalty to his friend.

Among other preserved traditions, the customs can be noted: the bow of the young bride in the new house, the performance of "Bet ashar" in poetic form, as well as respect for talented improvisers and zhyrau.

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