

THE ROLE OF THE BAKHSHI PERFORMING ART IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF UZBEK CULTURE

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Abstract

The art of *bakhshichilik*, as a unique form of oral epic performance, occupies a significant place in the cultural heritage of Uzbekistan and plays an important role in the development of national identity and spiritual values. This article examines the historical roots, evolution, and contemporary significance of the bakhshi tradition within Uzbek culture. Special attention is given to the role of bakhshi performers as custodians of folklore, transmitters of moral values, and contributors to the preservation of intangible cultural heritage.

The study also analyzes the transformation of bakhshichilik in the context of globalization and modernization, highlighting current efforts aimed at safeguarding and promoting this art form at both national and international levels. Furthermore, the article explores institutional support, including festivals, academic research, and cultural policies that contribute to the revitalization of bakhshi performance traditions. The findings suggest that bakhshichilik not only reflects the historical memory and worldview of the Uzbek people but also serves as an effective tool for strengthening cultural continuity and fostering intercultural dialogue.

Keywords

art, bakhshi (folk singer), jirtov (musical instrument), akyn (folk poet), Manas (epic), poet, ashik (minstrel), dastan (epic/legend), epic, folklore, tradition, customs and traditions, value.

It is well known that the preservation of the masterpieces of intangible cultural heritage created by the exceptionally rich artistic genius of our people—whose consciousness is deeply imbued with the ideals of goodness and creativity—as well as the revival of ancient traditions of folk artistic expression and the consistent development of national values, constitute the foundation of the spiritual and cultural advancement of our country.

In this regard, the Resolutions of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan No. PQ-3990 dated November 1, 2018, “On Holding the International Bakhshi Art Festival,” and No. PQ-5070 dated April 10, 2021, “On Additional Measures for the Preparation of the II International Bakhshi Art Festival and the Creation of Favorable Conditions for the Development of Bakhshi Art,” have opened broad opportunities for promoting unique folklore traditions that, refined like diamonds over centuries, have blossomed as symbols of hope in the spiritual world of the people. These resolutions have also contributed to conducting fundamental research on great epics such as “Alpomish,” “Gorogly,” “Kuntugmish,” and “Tahir and Zuhra,” collecting and publishing monuments of oral folk art, and further developing the creative activities of talented performers of folklore works – particularly bakhshis who have preserved living epic traditions to this day.

In the process of popularizing and widely promoting the art of bakhshi performance, significant steps have been taken, including the large-scale celebration of the millennium of the epic “Alpomish,” the construction of memorial complexes dedicated to outstanding bakhshis, and the establishment of the honorary title “People’s Bakhshi of the Republic of Uzbekistan.” These measures play an important role in further developing bakhshi art as a life-giving source of national culture, enhancing its significance within the national cultural and artistic system, and fostering in the younger generation a sense of national identity, devotion to the Motherland, and respect for historical heritage.

For the first time, it was decided to hold the International Bakhshi Art Festival in the city of Termez on a biennial basis. The first International Bakhshi Art Festival was held in Termez in 2019. Subsequently, the second festival took place in Nukus in 2021, the third in Gulistan in 2023, and the fourth in Khiva in 2025.

Bakhshi art, which represents a folk and timeless artistic tradition with a history spanning millennia, embodies the ancient history and culture of the people, primarily reflected in oral creativity – folklore, epics, and dastans. Through bakhshi performance, it serves as an invaluable source for understanding national identity, as well as for preserving and developing the unique cultural values and traditions of any nation.

In order to preserve and develop the distinctive performance styles of creative schools formed within the art of bakhshi performance, to revive and strengthen the “master-apprentice” tradition, and to support the creative and scientific activities of bakhshi-poets, folklore scholars, teachers, and specialists, a number of institutional measures have been implemented. These include the establishment of a Bakhshi School in the city of Termez, bakhshi art clubs within cultural centers across the republic, specialized bakhshi classes in children’s music and art schools,

as well as the creation of the Republican Center for Bakhshi Art and the Foundation for the Development of Bakhshi Art under its auspices.

As the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, emphasized: *“The art of bakhshi performance, which reflects the national identity of different peoples, their language and way of life, traditions and customs, is valuable to all of us as an integral part of universal culture.”*

The art of bakhshichilik has been transmitted from century to century through the dedicated efforts and creative thinking of outstanding bakhshi-poets and folklore scholars. A significant contribution to the scientific study and theoretical foundations of this art has been made by prominent figures such as Hamid Olimjon, as well as scholars including Hodi Zarif, Malik Murodov, Muzayyana Alaviya, Mansur Afzalov, Zubayda Husainova, To’ra Mirzaev, Abduolim Ergashev, Jalg’as Xushniyozov, Safarboy Ro’zimboev, Shomirza Turdimov, Mamatqul Jo’raev, Toshtemir Turdiev, and Jabbor Eshonqulov, whose contributions are truly invaluable.

Uzbek oral folk art represents an immense and invaluable treasury, serving as a foundation for educating society in the spirit of humanism, patriotism, diligence, devotion to family values, courage, bravery, and fidelity in love.

As a masterpiece of oral tradition, the art of bakhshichilik – combining poetic creativity, instrumental performance, and vocal mastery – is known by various names such as *bakhshi, jirov, aqyn, manaschi, shoir, and ashiiq*.

The rich and multifaceted artistic traditions of our people have been preserved and developed through the living performance of great epics refined over centuries. In this process, improvisational bakhshis, possessing exceptional epic memory, have played a crucial role in transmitting these works from generation to generation. The epics and lyrical compositions performed by bakhshis embody such values as patriotism, sincerity, nobility, humanism, deep love for the homeland, and loyalty.

Through their words and music, bakhshis convey the moral teachings of ancestors, contributing significantly to the education of younger generations in the spirit of high spiritual values. Their repertoire glorifies devotion to the Motherland, unity of the people, diligence, honor, dignity, and pride. Indeed, folk epics reflect the spiritual worldview of our ancestors, their unique way of life, social realities, and noble ideals associated with courage, patriotism, heroism, freedom, and independence.

Bakhshis differ from one another in terms of their epic knowledge, memory, the composition of their repertoire, the distinctiveness of master-apprentice traditions, performance techniques, and artistic mastery. For this reason, various

schools of epic storytelling (*dostonchilik*) have developed across different regions of the country, each characterized by its own set of epic traditions, pedagogical lineages, creative styles, and performance practices. In folklore studies, the epic creativity of folk bakhshis is commonly classified into the Bulungur, Qo'rg'on, Nurota, Shahrisabz, Narpay, Sherobod, Qamay, Piskent, and Khorezm schools of epic performance. Each of these schools has produced numerous distinguished bakhshi-poets.

The founder of Uzbek folklore studies, collector of oral folk literature, Honored Scientist of Uzbekistan, Doctor of Philology, and Professor Hodi Zarif wrote scholarly works on the творчество of such prominent bakhshis as Ergash Jumanbulbul o'g'li, Fozil Yo'ldosh o'g'li, Nurmon Abduvov o'g'li, Abdulla Nurali o'g'li, Xolyor Abdukarim o'g'li, Ahmad bakhshi Matnazar o'g'li, and Bola bakhshi. This was particularly emphasized by the folklorist, Doctor of Philology, Professor To'ra Mirzaev.

The scientific research of To'ra Mirzaev has been devoted to the study of folk epics and the epic repertoire of bakhshis. Notably, he facilitated the publication of the Uzbek heroic epic "*Alpomish*" in German in Germany. His books and articles have been published in many countries, including Russia, Germany, Turkey, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan.

The scholarly work of folklorist, Honored Scientist of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Doctor of Philology, and Professor Malik Murodov is devoted to the epic traditions of the *dostonchilik* schools of southern Uzbekistan and the distinctive features of contemporary historical-folkloric processes. His works, such as "*In Search of Creative Masterpieces*" (1967) and "*Drops from the Source*" (1984), address theoretical issues of epic storytelling traditions.

Bakhshis not only perform traditional epics and lyrical compositions learned from their masters but also create new works based on personal experiences and events occurring in their surroundings. In doing so, they transform real-life occurrences into poetic form, producing new epic works, often in the genre of *terma*. Traditional *termas* encompass themes such as moral instruction, ethics, compassion, family, love, the horse, musical instruments, poetic expression, and the life of the bakhshi. Contemporary *termas*, in turn, reflect current events and realities of the time in which modern bakhshis live.

Research on Uzbek bakhshi art has been theoretically analyzed based on sources from ancient and medieval periods, materials from the Soviet era, studies from the years of independence, as well as the works of foreign researchers.

In this context, it is evident that Uzbek national culture and art possess a rich and ancient history. The formation of the book "*Avesta*" during the second

millennium BCE and the first quarter of the first millennium BCE confirms the existence of unique written historical sources reflecting the social life and spiritual world of our distant ancestors.

Researcher Sh. Boborahimov, in his work *"The Art of Bakhshi Performance in the History of Surkhandarya,"* emphasizes the importance of ancient and medieval sources in the study of Uzbek oral folk art, including Turkic inscriptions, Sogdian writings, the epic *"Alpomish,"* and the work of Abu Rayhan al-Biruni *"Monuments of Past Generations."*

In Uzbekistan, consistent efforts are being made to preserve, utilize, promote, and study the rich intangible cultural heritage created through the vast artistic thinking of our ancestors. As a result, all necessary conditions have been established for the preservation and development of bakhshi traditions. In particular, many bakhshis belonging to the Shahrissabz and Sherobod schools of epic performance in the Kashkadarya and Surkhandarya regions continue to preserve ancient performance traditions, while also mentoring talented young performers.

Valuable information about eloquent bakhshis who created and performed epics such as *"Alpomish," "Gorogly," "Kuntugmish,"* and *"Orzigul,"* as well as about master bakhshis who lived and worked in the Kashkadarya and Surkhandarya regions and the young bakhshi-poets preserving their epic traditions, is presented in *The Book of Uzbek Bakhshis, Volume I* (a reference work on bakhshis of Kashkadarya and Surkhandarya regions). This publication is intended for cultural workers, teachers, students, researchers of Uzbek epic traditions, and a broad readership interested in the творчество of Uzbek bakhshis.

Although the names of representatives of the Sherobod, Shahrissabz, Chiroqchi, and Boysun epic schools of the 18th to early 20th centuries are known, the lack of comprehensive information about their lives and repertoires necessitates further scholarly research in this field.

In order to further develop the art of bakhshi performance and systematically address existing challenges, it is essential to restore and strengthen the creative schools and the "master-apprentice" traditions formed within this field.

A broader study of the lives and творчество of Uzbek bakhshis, the distinctive features of the epic schools to which they belong, the preservation of master-apprentice traditions, the enrichment of the epic repertoire of contemporary young bakhshis, and the reflection of the great achievements of the independence period in their performances will contribute significantly to the wider promotion of bakhshi art.

The Resolution of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan No. PQ-4320 dated May 14, 2019, "On Measures for the Further Development of the Art of Bakhshi Performance," defined key tasks for the Republican Center for Bakhshi Art. These include supporting the creative and scientific activities of bakhshi-poets, folklore scholars, and specialists; establishing bakhshi clubs; creating broad opportunities for bakhshi творчество; ensuring their regular participation in festive events; strengthening international cooperation; promoting bakhshi art; and expanding audio and video recordings of folklore works.

Currently, bakhshi classes have been established in 82 children's music and art schools, and bakhshi art clubs operate in 12 cultural centers across the republic. Educational programs in "Bakhshi Performance and Epic Art" have been introduced at the Yunus Rajabi National Institute of Uzbek Music Art and at the Nukus branch of the Uzbekistan State Institute of Arts and Culture. As a result of reforms in the education system, 750 students have received training as amateurs, while 137 students have obtained higher education in the field of bakhshi art.

At present, the Department of Epic Performance operates at the Yunus Rajabi National Institute of Uzbek Music Art, a Bakhshi School functions in Termez, a specialized school of opera and bakhshi art operates in Nukus, and folklore classes are active in children's music and art schools throughout the country.

To date, several elements of Uzbekistan's cultural heritage have been inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, including "Shashmaqom" (2008), the "Cultural Space of Boysun District" (2008), "Katta Ashula" (2009), "Askiya" (2014), "Palov Culture and Traditions" (2016), "Navruz" (2016), the Khorezm dance "Lazgi" (2019), and the "Art of Miniature" (2020). The Margilan Crafts Development Center – Adras and Atlas weaving traditions – was included in the Register of Good Safeguarding Practices (2017).

At the 16th session of the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage held in Paris, the "Art of Bakhshi Performance" was inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2022.

During this session, L. Volanska, Chair of the Evaluation Committee that submitted the nomination to the Intergovernmental Committee, emphasized that the "Art of Bakhshi Performance" represents a unique historical and cultural heritage of the Uzbek and Karakalpak peoples. This art form is based on epics, examples of folk creativity, legends, and myths that convey messages of patriotism, love, friendship, and unity. "The creative nature of an element belonging to multiple ethnic groups ensures respect for creativity and cultural diversity."

The Republican competition of bakhshi-poets, oqins, and jirovs, held as part of the International Bakhshi Art Festival, plays a significant role in discovering many young bakhshis who continue the ancient tradition of epic performance. Programs and broadcasts dedicated to the lives and work of bakhshis on Uzbekistan's national television and radio channels contribute to popularizing enduring epics – treasures of epic thought – among the general public.

There is a well-known Uzbek proverb: “A people with a bakhshi is a people with fortune.” Indeed, bakhshis, through their unique creative genius, have enriched our immortal epics with vital ideas, instilling the noble values of our priceless artistic heritage into the hearts of the younger generation. By honoring these bakhshis, preserving their spiritual legacy, and celebrating their enduring traditions, the future of our nation is illuminated and secure.

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