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ORAL STORYTELLING AND MYTH IN THE EPIC OF ALPAMYSH

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Abstract: This article looks at the Uzbek epic Alpamysh as a perfect example of how oral storytelling and mythology may come together. The epic came from the Turkic steppes in the 9th and 10th centuries and was an important cultural storehouse for Oghuz family patterns and moral norms. The bakhshi (bardic artists) made it possible for the story to be passed down by using formulaic poetry, musical accompaniment, and improvisation to dynamically reproduce it for each audience, making sure it would be remembered and relevant for millennia. The article contends that the epic's significant cultural influence stems from this amalgamation: its mythical archetypes and cosmic conflicts impart religious significance and exemplify heroic virtue, while its oral performance format serves as dynamic civic education. Finally, it looks at how Alpamysh was turned into written literature, which eventually became an important part of contemporary Uzbek national identity and a lasting emblem of cultural strength in the face of forces that want to make everything the same.

Keywords: Uzbek epic, Oral tradition, Turkic mythology, Bakhshi, Heroic archetype, Cultural identity, National heritage.

Introduction

The epic Alpamysh emerges from the long continuum of Central Asian oral poetry, its origins seemingly anchored in the archaic memory of the Turkic steppe, plausibly dating from the 9th or 10th century when Turkic sociopolitical identity was in formation. Features of the cycle encapsulate the kinship, ethical strictures, and disputes that shaped the nomadic Oghuz, progenitors of the contemporary Uzbek, Kazakh, and Karakalpak populations (Zhirmunsky, 1966). Central to the transmission and vitality of the epic are the bakhshi, bardic figures who operate beyond rote memorization. They occupy the nexus of performer and oral archivist, demonstrating virtuosity on the dutar and mastering impromptu composition alongside the recital of pre-composed verses. Each bakhshi secures a living corpus of epic, safeguarding multifarious plot variants, genealogies, and moral constructs that outlast the silent decades preceding the text's eventual inscription (Reichl, 2000). In the larger Turkic mytho-historical corpus, Alpamysh is, thus, a well-branching limb, participating in a tradition that threads from Anatolian plateaus across central Siberian tundras, demonstrating deeper interregional intertextualities rather than congenital isolation.

The corpus functions as a coherent cultural patrimony that consolidates a pan-Turkic worldview (Basgöz, 2008) by interweaving fundamental motifs and structural features with other canonical epic traditions, notably the Oghuz Book of Dede Korkut and the Kyrgyz

Manas. These components manifest as the prodigious nativity of the hero, the quest to rescue the abducted beloved, and the trials posed by antagonistic dīvs of monstrous proportions.

The epic Alpamysh exemplifies the core techniques of oral epic composition, which maximize both mnemonic utility and kinetic force. The poem displays pronounced repetition, a pronounced meter, and a dense stock of formulaic devices—recurring epithets (for instance, "lion-heroed Alpamysh"), standardized characterizations of champions, steeds, and conflicts, and analogous paradigmatic plot patterns. These formulaic elements are mnemonic loci, permitting the bakhshi to construct the narrative's vast architecture without sacrificing metrical constraint (Lord 1960). This controlled verse, moreover, is inseparably linked to instrumental accompaniment, typically the dutar or the kobyz. The resulting melodies punctuate the recitation, govern the tempo, and amplify the emotional impact of climactic incidents, thus transmuting the telling into an operatic tableau. Such performances are inherently dialogic: the performer calibrates the epic's length and emphasis in real-time, adapting, abridging, or expanding segments in response to audience reactions, and may improvise within the conventional framework to foreground regional motifs or topical preoccupations. Consequently, each transmission emerges not as a transcribed text but as a dynamic re-creation unique to its occasion.

Transmission across generations occurred not through archival records but within a rigorously structured system of apprenticeship, in which learners internalized elaborate melodic configurations, a vast repertoire of mnemonic schemes, and coherent, large-scale narrative cycles through prolonged listening, imitation, and active performance, securing the epic's continued life as a dynamic, orally cultivated tradition for many centuries (Reichl, 1992).

Alpamysh manifests itself as a dense cultural archive, elevated beyond mere narrative by the mythic referents that saturate its fabric. The epic is composed of cosmic confrontations, divine mediation, and the archetypal journey of the hero—elements that infuse quotidian events with sacrosanct urgency. It consequently transcends the domain of observable action, functioning instead as a mythic self-authorization of the communal order within which it is situated, reaffirming ethical horizons, delineating spatial and temporal boundaries, and structuring the collective imagination of the cosmos (Campbell, 1949). The continued vibrancy of this power resides not in the text itself, but within the performative apparatus of the bakhshi. Enacted improvisations, modal song, and responsive exchanges with the audience transform the ancestral script into a living, momentary creation. By such means, Alpamysh is not merely transmitted, but re-collected, each iteration negotiating the hinterland between inherited norm and emergent need. The resultant aggregate of myth and orality thus transcends aesthetic gratification; it is no less than civic pedagogy instantiated. Communal ethics, ritual norms, and collective identity are mediated simultaneously through delight and instruction in heroism, fidelity, and justice. Within the cadences of the recital, listeners assimilate the past, perceive normative horizons, and experience the synchronization of generations with an abiding, living community.

Engaging with the past in this deliberate fashion can illuminate the present and, therefore, orient our understanding and decisions in contemporary circumstances (Reichl, 1992).

The Alpamysh epic has decisively shaped both Uzbek literary heritage and contemporary national self-consciousness by moving from an oral medium into the corpus of enduring written cultural patrimony. A generative watershed was reached in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when the distinguished Kazakh philologist Akhmet Zhavanov and the Uzbek versifier Hamid Alimjan laboriously translated the epic, enabling its wide-

circulation and incorporation into the canon of pre-modern Uzbek belles-lettres. From the moment of that operational shift, the Alpamysh narrative was no longer merely an episodic center of theatrical performativity; it was elevated into the archive of written Uzbek literature, where it continues incessantly to tutor and prod later authors and versifiers engaged in creative labour (Karimov, 1994). The epic's direct cultural weight has extended well beyond the domains of poetry and prose, serving in the broader cultural imaginary as a fount of contemporary Uzbek pride. The Soviet period, sui generis in its demand for a standardized ideology, providentially occasioned the epic's re-canonization; Alpamysh was marshaled to illustrate an heroic register in contradistinction to, and often in implicit contest with, the cultural disavowals attended by the state institution (Allworth, 1990). It has remained an implicit counterpoint to state authority, allowing the populace to envision, in its heroic personages, an enduring Uzbek past. Although the professional itinerant bakhshi, no longer a ubiquitous presence, has largely conceded to formats of popular audiovisual performance, Alpamysh continues to be dutifully restudied and performed on national commemorative occasions. The epic's mythical chimaeras, once dismissed as antiquarian residue, have been transvalued into exceedingly striking interlocutors of an extant cultural resilience.

Heritage myths and collective memory furnish an enduring substrate for the national story, weaving Uzbeks together across the tensions of modernization through a common past, a singular linguistic corpus, and the persistent resonance of martial and civic valor.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the Alpamysh epic emerges as a distinctive cultural masterpiece of Central Asia through the adroit fusion of fixed mythical elements and the fluid performative practices of oral tradition. This stylistic amalgamation, long stewarded by the itinerant bakhshi, constituted a principal instrument of cultural pedagogy, functioning beyond mere recreation to articulate a coherent cosmology, preserve historical record, and articulate ethical norms. The subsequent transcription of the epic into written form secured its status as an abiding emblem of Uzbek cultural heritage and a foundational pillar of modern Uzbek national consciousness. The heroic ethos and mythic resonance that infuse the Alpamysh narrative operate as both a consolidating civic myth and a source of profound patriotic sentiment, linking a distinguished historical consciousness to the political imagination of the present. Thus, the epic transcends mere narrative to become a dynamic archive of collective memory that articulates, sustains, and renews the national self.

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