



## THE FORMATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF UZBEK EPIC POETRY SCHOOLS

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### Abstract:

This article aims to provide information about numerous epic centers in our republic dozens of epic schools - which were identified through long-term scientific observations conducted by our folklorists. This research was carried out with the purpose of fully implementing the tasks outlined in various resolutions aimed at developing the art of bakhshi storytelling.

**Keywords:** Epic school, skill of bakhshis, repertoire, epic tradition, dastan, bakhshi.

### Introduction

Folk epics stand out for their thematic diversity, genre variety, and artistic excellence. The art of bakhshi also has ancient roots. This art is passed down from teacher to student, from generation to generation, directly through live oral performances. The special attention being paid to the art of bakhshi today holds immense significance. Fully restoring and developing the status of "Bakhshi" as an artist will lead to new spiritual heights. A fresh approach to the art of bakhshi has emerged in New Uzbekistan. In Uzbek folk epics, melody harmonizes with artistic words. One could even say that the melody defines the spirit of each epic and every song within it. It supports the entire work as a source of inspiration. A bakhshi is a poet, actor, musician, composer, and performer who considers the mindset of their listeners during the performance, strives to reflect the audience's inclinations, and creates improvisations in the process. Thus, the bakhshi holds great importance as a masterful creator who deeply understands the life of the people and brings to life their unique qualities through the heroes they sing about. Looking back at history, we see that bakhshis made significant contributions to the emergence and development of new Uzbek literature. The epics created by poets such as Fozil shoir, Ergash shoir, and Po'lkan shoir, along with their heroes, had a considerable impact on the development of new Uzbek literature.





Today, our folklorists have identified traditional epic storytelling schools existing throughout our republic, and significant research has been conducted to analyze their unique characteristics, the ideological and artistic features of the epics, as well as the poetic mastery of the bards.

The Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan No. PQ-405 dated December 25, 2023, "On Additional Measures for Developing the Protection, Scientific Study, and Promotion of Intangible Cultural Heritage", the Decree No. PF-3990 dated November 1, 2018, "On Holding the International Bakhshi Art Festival:", and the Decree No. PF-4320 dated May 14, 2019, "On Measures for Further Development of Bakhshi Art" as well as the Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan No. 304 dated April 26, 2018, "On Further Development and Improvement of Bakhshi and Epic Art", have outlined tasks aimed at ensuring the thorough study of the history of bakhshi and epic art, the works of bakhshi and epic performers, collecting oral folk heritage, fostering a love for bakhshi art in the hearts of the younger generation, and educating the youth in the spirit of courage, honesty, national and universal values, and high loyalty to the motherland and ancestral heritage. These have been identified as one of the most important tasks.

The performance of a dastan is an ancient epic tradition in folk oral poetry. Initially, works were created in the form of songs, which were sung without an instrument. In the 10th-11th centuries, dastans performed with the accompaniment of a dombra appeared. Examples of such dastans appeared among the ancient nomadic Turkic tribes living on the shores of the Caspian and Aral Seas. As the number of improvisers who created and performed epic dastans increased, the tradition of mentorship and discipleship began to develop. As a result, by the 15th-16th centuries, many schools of epic poetry had emerged. If the 17th-18th centuries were an important period of development in the development of epic poetry, then the 19th-20th centuries are its most prosperous period.

During this period, the repertoire of bakhshis included over 150 folk epics, which were performed by famous bakhshis such as Tilla kampir, Sul-ton kampir, Jolmon bakhshi, Bo'ron shoir, Jumanbulbul, Jossoq shoir, Khonimjon khalfa, Buvi shoir, Suyav bakhshi, Amin bakhshi, Yoldoshbulbul, Sul-tonmurod, Qurbonbek, Yo'ldosh shoir, Suyar shoir, and Sherna yuzboshi. Leading artists like Ergash Jumanbulbul o'g'li, Fozil Yo'ldosh ogli, Polkan, Islom shoir, Saidmurod Panoh ogli, Berdi bakhshi, Abdulla Nurali ogli, Umir shoir, Bola bakhshi, and Ahmad bakhshi, along with other contemporary bakhshis, continued this epic tradition.

The emergence of existing epic poetry schools in Uzbekistan as a direct result of socio-political life and audience demands is a natural phenomenon. This is also a





consequence of the antiquity and strength of our epic traditions, as well as the high level of talent, creativity, and improvisational abilities of the bakhshi (epic singers). The poetic schools of bakhshi emerged only after the demands of life and the social need for epic performances merged with talented epic singers. These schools continued ancient traditions and played a crucial role in the development of epic poetry and its elevation to a stage of perfection.

Academician T.Mirzayev noted that although bakhshi share commonalities and unity in terms of ideological orientation, class affiliation, broad repertoire unity, similarity of performance and melodies, and centuries-old traditions of dastan performance, they also differ from one another in the poetic approach, style, repertoire character, and performance methods characteristic of dastan performer groups. In other words, within the framework of a generalized, well-established epic tradition, there exist individual creative characteristics, approaches, styles, and teacher-student relationships specific to certain bakhshi or groups of bakhshi. To illustrate these differences, Khodi Zarif introduced the term “dastan (bakhshi) schools” in folklore studies and compiled a genealogy of representatives from the Bulungur and Kurgan dastan schools. Based on long-term expeditions and obtained materials, folklorists They note that there were bakhshi schools in places such as Bulungur, Kurgan, Nurata, Shakhrisabz, Narpay, Sherabad, Kamay, and Piskent.

Typically, special evenings were organized to listen to epics, and bakhshis (epic singers) who attended these evenings competed with each other, showcasing their talents, eloquence, and skill in playing musical instruments. The epic performance followed a strict order. The audience seated the bakhshi in the place of honor and gathered around him. The bakhshi tuned his dombra and addressed the audience with the “Nima aytay” (What should I sing?) introduction, then performed “Kunlarim” (My Days) and “Dombiram” (My Dombra) to capture the listeners' attention. During the performance, the bakhshi found suitable words for each image in the epic and made corresponding gestures. As he engaged the audience, his own enthusiasm grew. Talented epic singers could perform for two or three nights, or even for months. For example, Shernazar Berdinazar's son could sing an epic for seven consecutive nights. Some epics were so long that they required two or three nights of continuous performance. The storyteller usually paused at the most exciting part of the story, which further increased the audience's interest. Two or three bakhshis would attend epic evenings. In such cases, the epic singers would engage in friendly competition, testing each other's talents, eloquence, and musical mastery. The audience would then judge their performances. A bakhshi who failed to win the people's acclaim would leave the gathering.





The schools of epic poetry in Uzbekistan were well acquainted with each other's words and voices, and one school could criticize the “bedov” of another. Meetings of folk poets of different schools, poems of dastans have become a kind of test, mastery examination and poetry festival. As an example of this idea, let's cite the following notes by the folklorist M. Kushmakov.

“... Yoldoshbulbul said, “I'll stretch my legs”, and went outside. Then the poet Kurbonbek said: “Khidir aka, all of us sitting here are poets. What kind of poet is Yoldoshbulbul?” Khidir the poet replied without hesitation: The poet answered without delay:

Havoga qora qalin bulut chiqsa,  
Bulutlar mast bo'lib, novshar quyilsa,  
Har daradan sel kelsa,  
Tajanning daryosi mavj urib tohsa,  
Shunchalik toshar-da-yey,  
Yo'ldoshbulbuldan ortiq tosholmas.

Like a beaver emerging from great rivers, this poem is valuable in at least three aspects:

Firstly, it is a living witness to the fact that poets from different schools met each other, exchanging inspiration and skills, and testing each other's abilities. This is as much an evaluation that Khidir the poet gave to Yuldashbulbul as it is an evaluation that the Kashkadarya school gave to the Bulungur school. Thus, in Uzbekistan, there existed a unified epic poetry environment that lived and developed for several centuries, possessing mutual harmony and strong, life-giving traditions. Poets who were representatives of two schools, such as Islom shoir Nazar o'g'li, are yet another proof of this.

Furthermore, the ideological and artistic level of the Bulungur epic school was also high during that period, and it was possibly experiencing its peak of excellence. The high regard given to Yuldashbulbul, considered one of the bright representatives of this school, allows us to draw such a conclusion, as the poet Khidir undoubtedly spoke based on the strict, general standards of epic poetry of his time.

Moreover, this poem is the sole spiritual offspring left behind by the poet Khidir, one of the prominent epic poets of the Kashkadarya epic school. It demonstrates that Khidir's poetic potential was unparalleled. Indeed, this improvised poem is so wise, sensitive, noble, and well-crafted that it equally glorifies both the praised Yuldashbulbul and the praising poet Khidir.





The above example illustrates that bakhshi schools have a unique place in the history of epic storytelling and oral folklore of the Uzbek people. One of such epic storytelling schools that made Yoldoshbulbul a “nightingale” is the Bulungur school of epic poetry. As Professor Hodi Zarif, who was the first to identify the Kurgan and Bulungur schools of epic poetry in academic research, noted, the Bulungur school produced many renowned poets, including Muhammad shoir (18th century), Amin baxshi (second half of the 18th century - first half of the 20th century), Sul-tonmurod shoir (19th century), Qurbonbek shoir (19th century), Tovbuzar shoir (19th century), Chinni shoir (19th century), Bekmurod shoir (second half of the 19th century), Yo'ldosh Mulla Murod o'g'li (second half of the 19th century), Rahmonberdi shoir (19th century), Usta Dostyor (19th-20th centuries), Jo'ra shoir (19th-20th centuries), Fozil Yoldosh o'g'li (1872-1955), and many others.

Professor Hodi Zarif is a scientist who has collected and introduced into scientific practice valuable information about the Bulungur school, its literary environment, and poets. He partially provided information about Amin bakhshi, Chinni poet, Sul-tonmurod poet, and Yuldashbulbul.

The Bulungur epic school was distinguished by its ability to sing the epic “Alpomish”. The simple, high, highly traditional, relatively archaic style of heroic epic was considered the poetic path of these dastans. Other bakhshi came here and honed their skills.

Another major poetic school of Uzbek folklore is the Kurgan School of Dastans. Kurgan is an ancient village. Several bakhshi, who grew up in his bosom, demonstrated their unique abilities and abilities, and they left behind a rich spiritual legacy. The Kurgan school of epic poetry united bards who lived in the foothills of the mountains from Mangishtov to Nurata. One of the most talented representatives of the Kurgan school of epic poetry was Ergash Jumanbulbul o'g'li (1868-1937) and Polkan shoir (1874-1941), from whom epics such as “Alpamish”, “Yakka Akhmad”, “Aysuluv”, “Kuntugmish”, “Gorogly's Birth”, “Yunus Pari”, “Misqol Pari”, “Avazkhan” “Khasankhan” were recorded. In this school of epic poetry, dozens of epic poets worked, such as the ancestors of Ergash Jumanbulbul o'g'li, Sultan kampir, Tilla kampir, and Jodmon bakhshi.

In his monograph, M. Kushmakov notes that in folklore studies, alongside the Kurgan and Bulungur schools, there was also the Juma school of epic poetry.

“The poets of this school initially sang folk epics. Then they moved mainly to singing religious epics, became crazy, and scattered all over the place. The authors of the “Uzbek Folk Heroic Epic” mention Jura Devona and his student Tosh Devona, who belong to this group. They say that the last representative of the Juma school was a





dervish-kalantar and died in Samarkand. Rahmatulla vaguely remembers the poet Jo'ra banki, who belonged to the Juma school, Yusuf ogli. When he was a child, he saw that Jora was wandering like a madman and heard some of his songs”.

Academician T. Mirzaev also mentioned the Juma school of epic poetry in his research.

The Nurata epic school includes bakhshi who grew up in the territory from the northern foothills of Karatau along the Kyzylkum to the Kyzyltepa and Kanimekh districts of the Bukhara region. Representatives of this school - Saidmurod Panoh ogli (1858-1945) and Bekmurod Juraboy ogli (1878-1956) - recorded a very small number of epics, such as “Odilkhan”, “Alpomish” “Gorogly's Goal to the Crimea”, “Avaz's Arz”, “Malika Ayyor”, “Kholbeka” (“Kuntugmish”).

Academician T. Mirzayev notes that “the Kurgan dastanists also had a significant influence on the enrichment of the composition of the Nurata dastan school, particularly its epic repertoire”. However, the bookish style, in a certain sense, characteristic of the Kurgan dastans, has not been mastered, and the main place is occupied by ancient epic folk poetry. The fact that the famous Karakalpak zhyrau Nurabulla zhyrau (1858-1922), Kurbanbay zhyrau (1878-1958) came to Nurata (in their own words, to Bukhara) and increased their knowledge and skills in epic poetry, as Khodi Zarif and Kalli Ayimbetov thought, it is correct to connect them not with the bakhshi of Kurgan, but with the Nurata school of epic poetry, because they studied with representatives of this school.

Therefore, the Nurata school of storytelling is a unique point where the traditions of Uzbek, Kazakh, and Karakalpak epic poetry influenced each other and merged in a unique way, a detailed study of which allows one to look at even earlier stages of the stage development of epic poetry.

Another epic center that existed in the 19th century was the Shakhrisabz epic school. Some features of this school are preserved in the work and repertoire of Abdulla Nurali ogly (1874-1957), one of the leading dastanists of our time. Bakhshi of this school are distinguished by the fact that they sing the dostans in a cheerful, upbeat spirit, and their melodies are pleasant.

Several bakhshi have grown up in the past in Narpay and its surroundings. Ernazar the poet (teacher of Islam the poet), Tokhtamysh, Rajab (grandfather of Islam the poet), Abduholiq the bakhshi, Islam the poet, Nurman the son of Abduvoy are such bakhshi. Representatives of this school were more popular in the vicinity of Kattakurgan, Narpay, Jom, Kagan, Mubarek, and Karshi. The poet Islam wrote epics even in the vicinity of Alat and Karakul. However, very little material has been collected about the representatives of this school. The poems “Orzigul”, “Sohibkiran”,





“Erali and Sherali”, “Kuntugmish”, “Tahir and Zuhra”, “Zulfizar and Avazkhan”, “Gulihromon”, “Khirmon Dali” were recorded from the son of the poet Islam Nazar, who sang about thirty dastans.

The work of many bakhshi living in the south of Uzbekistan is connected to the Sherabad epic school. The influence of the Sherabad epic school was widespread in the Surkhandarya and Kashkadarya oases, as well as in Southern Tajikistan.

The Sherabad school of epic poetry unites many bakhshi, such as Kasimkor, Sherna Beknazar ugli, Mardonakul Avliyoqul ugli, Umir Safar ugli, Normurod bakhshi, Ahmad bakhshi, Nurali Boymat ugli, Mamadravim yuzboshi, Yusuf Utagan ugli, Eshkobil bakhshi, Buribay Akhmedov, Kadyr Rakhimov. Representatives of this school recorded many dastans from the series “Alpomish”, “Oyparcha”, “Yusuf and Ahmad”, “Yozi and Zebo” and “Gorogly”, as well as songs “Kelinoy”. A number of dastans from the repertoire of representatives of this school, such as “Oltin qaboq”, “Malla Savdogar”, “Zayidkul”, “Ollonazar Olchinbek” “Oychinor” are not found in other parts of Uzbekistan. Also, relatively complete versions of the epic “Shahidnoma” dedicated to the last days of Gorogli's life and his disappearance, were recorded from representatives of this school.

The Kamai dastan school united bakhshi who grew up in the Kamashi, Dekhkanabad, and Gozor districts of Kashkadarya and adjacent lands.

In the second half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, talented bards such as Mulla Kholnazar, Oynazar, Jura Bakhshi, Tulakshair, Shamir, and Elmurod Kur were born. Mullah Kholnazar was especially renowned.

We have two epics by T. Mirzayev, “The Youth of Nurali” and “Khanimoy”, which allow us to describe the “Kamay” epic school. These dastans are not known in other parts of Uzbekistan, even to the barhayot bakhshi living in Kamai. Therefore, he notes that in the repertoire of Kamai's dastans, alongside Uzbek folk dastans, there were also unique works that stood out from them”.

T.Mirzaev notes that the version of the “Alpomish” epic, recorded by Abdulla Alaviy in 1926 from Berdi bakhshi (Berdiyoy Pirimqul o'g'li), who lived in the village of Evalak, Piskent district, indicates that there was also a school of epic poetry that had formed in the vicinity of Piskent and Ohangaron in the past.

“Unfortunately, the names of the representatives of the Piskent epic school have been forgotten, as folklore works began in this district much later. Materials on the biography of Berdi Bakhshi and his teachers were also not collected in time. This extreme limitation of the material does not allow us to draw comprehensive conclusions. This, of course, creates some difficulties in evaluating the Piskent epic school as an independent poetic school, in illuminating its unique ideological, artistic,



and local features. However, from a typological point of view, single, single examples are sometimes sufficient for scientifically sound reasoning. In our opinion, the “Alpamish” dastan, recorded from Berdi Bakhshi, is such a well-founded material.

Despite the fact that Berdi Bakhshi's epic “Alpamish” fully preserves the ancient motifs and ideas characteristic of the heroic epic, its content is consistent and similar to other variants, it is close to romantic epics in terms of artistic form, in which the simple, high, somewhat archaic style of the heroic epic “Alpamish” sung by Fazil Yuldash o'g'ly is not preserved. Since the lyrical direction occupied such a central place in the heroic epic, it can be assumed that the Piskent school of poetry had a poetic style close to the bakhshi of Kurgan”.

Uzbek-Lakai bakhshi living in southern Tajikistan also have their own characteristics in terms of repertoire and artistic imagery. In the 19th century, a great storyteller called Kunduz Soqi lived here. He is famous for singing the dastans “Gorogly” The old people said: “The beaver used to sing the dastans “Gorogly” as 120 kings. Even so, in his last branch, Yunus pari tells the story: “Bedoston passed, my prince”, he wept.

In addition to the “Gorogly” cycle among the Uzbeks of Southern Tajikistan, epics such as “Alpomish”, “Yusuf and Ahmad”, “Tahir and Zuhra”, “Oyparcha”, “Yozi and Zebo” are also quite common. At the same time, the bakhshi who lived and live here sang dastans such as ‘Kuktemir’ “Gulmirza”, “Bedil and Shodmon”, “Oykelin”.

Another of the main distinguishing features of epic schools is the level of professionalism. In the artistic text of the repertoire of the bakhshi of the Khorezm epic school, improvisation does not play the main role, that is, the text does not give a literal variant, it does not change from bakhshi to bakhshi, but the melody dominates it, in other words, the bakhshi's skill and improvisational ability are manifested in the melody and beautiful performance.

In Khorezm, the famous singer of the 19th century, Suyav Bakhshi, who skillfully sang folk dastans in Turkmen and Uzbek, who belonged to the Turkmen branch of novdir, is revered as a teacher of bakhshi. The outstanding Uzbek dastan writer Otajon Bakhshi (1962-1921) was brought up by this master and artist. Ahmad Matnazar o'g'lu from Mangit (1895-1938) was one of the most talented, talented students of Otajon Bakhshi, who would rise to the level of a teacher in the future. In turn, Ahmad bakhshi Bekjon Vois o'g'li (1905-1942), Kuchkar Madamin o'g'li (1896-1954), Tangibergan Turamurod o'g'li (1905-1941), Khujamurod Jumaniyoz o'g'li (1914-1941), Madrahim Nematullaev (1915-1941), Khudoybergai Utagan o'g'li (1901), Jumaboy Khudoybergan o'g'li (1909) produced many students.

The second renowned singer in Khorezm, the People's Dastanist of Uzbekistan (1938) is the Bala Bakhshi (Abdunazar Abdullaev) (1904). Abdunazar, who was passionate





about art from a young age, was called “Bola bakhshi” because he sang among children until he was ten years old, and at the age of eleven he entered the circle of adults.

The heroic epic “Alpamish” is not found in the repertoire of Khorezmian dastans, on the contrary, almost all romantic and social-domestic dastans from the repertoire of Khorezmian bakhshi are absent in other parts of our republic. Dastans such as “Oshik Garib and Shahsanam”, “Oshik Makhmud”, “Oshik Oydin” “Oshik Alvand”, “Sayodhon and Khamro”, “Khurliko and Hamro”, “Tahir and Zuhra”, “Layli and Majnun”, “Sanobar”, “Kumri”, “Durapsha”, “Yusuf and Ahmad”, “Tulumbi” are widely disseminated in Khorezm and occupy a firm place in the repertoire of bakhshi and khalfas.

In the past, there was not one, but several schools of epic poetry in the Ferghana Valley. Folklorist M. Murodov and literary critic O. Kholmiraev expressed a number of opinions about the Kulbuqan school of epic poetry.

In conclusion, we would like to cite the following opinions of the folklorist and journalist M. Kushmakov. The predecessors of the Uzbek folk poets who became famous in the 20th century took the most individual aspects of their creativity with them to the ground; but their genius, like the sun's rays, moved to the work of later poets, such as life. The followers stopped them. The succession of a student to a teacher is like the succession of a child to a parent. The child is a continuation of the parent and at the same time a new person. By the way, a copy of a certain dastan performed by a certain poet is often a unique literary event. However, they are united by a literary environment that manifests itself in ideologically and artistically stable features. Therefore, it is clear that the cultural level of the dastan school and the environment of its listeners was a factor that guided the spiritual essence and mastery of the dastan”.

Dastans sung by bakhshi who joined or studied in dastan schools differ from “school-witted” bakhshi's repertoire in such fundamental issues of dastan composition as attitude towards tradition, individual artistry, singing-performance art, and, in particular, the ideological and artistic features of the dastans. Therefore, singing epics in schools with strong tradition and consistency was more responsible than in other places. This situation did not fail to influence the growth of the talent and skills of the bakhshi, the ideological and artistic perfection of the dastans.

“The essence of this literary school-literary circle lies in... - wrote Gafur Ghulam, - he educates students, works old epics, creates new ones, competes with each other for who can sing better... They were testing each other. Some poems were judged to be well, perfect, beautiful, and they tried to study and popularize them. Even the teachers of the other school, the teachers of the second school, listened and evaluated their art”.





Dastanic schools, as one of the cultural centers of their time, became a factor in calling the people to spiritual unity. The roots of these epic schools are in this motherland, and the source is in this mother people. Its development shows that the external and internal life of the people is increasingly being absorbed into the essence of the epics, and artistic thinking is gradually developing. As a result of the transmission of dastans from language to language, from generation to generation, they were refined by each bakhshi: tradition took root, national character became brighter, the relationship between oral folk art and reality strengthened, for over time, the people's worldview became clearer, their life experience increased, and their spiritual world deepened.

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