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Historiographical sources of Karakalpak storytelling art

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Abstract. The article examines historical materials on the creative activity of the legendary figure "Korkyt Ata", who had a notable influence on the formation of the art of the Karakalpak zhyrau. It considers the significance of performing folk dastans on the kobyz, which was created by "Korkyt Ata" for the Turkic-speaking peoples. It describes the contribution of such outstanding masters of the "Nogaily" era as Soppasly Sypyra zhyrau, Dospambet zhyrau, Asan Kaygy, and Zhirenshe sheshen to the development of the Karakalpak zhyrau art. Comparing the historical periods of the development of the zhyrau art, the author shows the stages of the formation of its school. In conclusion, the article provides information about contemporary masters who are glorifying Karakalpak zhyrau art on a global level.

Keywords: zhyrau art; "Korkyt Ata"; "Nogaily" era; Soppasly Sypyra zhyrau; zhyrau school

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Историографические источники каракалпакского сказительского искусства

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Резюме. В статье исследуются исторические материалы о творческой деятельности легендарной личности «Коркыт Ата», оказавшей заметное влияние на формирование искусства каракалпакских жырау. Рассматривается значение исполнения народных дастанов на кобызе, созданном «Коркыт Ата» для тюркоязычных народов. Описывается вклад таких выдающихся мастеров эпохи «Ногайлы», как Соппаслы Сыпыра жырау, Доспамбет жырау, Асан Кайгы и Жиренше шешен в развитие каракалпакского искусства жырау. Сравнивая исторические периоды развития искусства жырау, автор показывает этапы формирования его школы. В заверше-

нии статьи представлена информация о современных мастерах, прославляющих каракалпакское искусство жырау на мировом уровне.

Ключевые слова: искусство жырау; «Коркыт Ата»; эпоха «Ногайлы»; Соппаслы Сыпыра жырау; школа жырау

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RESEARCH MATERIALS

In the course of the study of the Karakalpak folk epic, traditionally performed in a declamatory style to the accompaniment of kobyz melodies, its specific features have been identified, allowing for the reconstruction of the early stages of the formation of the art of storytelling. The research is primarily focused on studying scholarly sources that attest to the preservation by the Karakalpak people of both the ancient design of the kobyz and the archaic manner of performance up to the present day.

According to historical sources, the formation of the Karakalpak storytelling tradition is genetically linked to the activity of Korkyt Ata – a spiritual mentor and patron of kobyz performers, who, according to legends, lived in the 9th–11th centuries in the city of Yangikent on the banks of the Syr Darya. The theoretical basis of the research comprises the works of leading folklorist scholars (S. Bakhadirov, K. Palymbetov, V.M. Zhirmunsky, K. Aymbetov, A.N. Kononov, T. Adambayeva, N. Daukarayev, K. Makhsetov, M. Magauin), whose works have been subjected to critical analysis and used as representative source material.

SCIENTIFIC NOVELTY

The paper substantiates the proposition that Karakalpak instrumental and musical art originates from the sacralized power of the kobyz, personified in the figure of Korkyt Ata. It is the first time that the epics attributed to Korkyt Ata and legends associated with the history of the kobyz's creation are examined in a systematized form. With regard to the formation of the Karakalpak school of zhyrau, the findings confirm scholarly data on the creative activity of such representatives of the Nogai epic era as Soppasly Sypyra zhyrau, Zhirenshe sheshen, and Asan Kaygy. The article systematizes and lists the chronological periods in the evolution of the Karakalpak art of zhyrau, and characterizes the key figures of this school. The most significant conclusion concerns the activity of the 20th-century zhyrau, who made a decisive contribution to popularizing Karakalpak national art and folk music on a global scale.

RESEARCH RESULTS

In the process of evaluating the activity of the zhyrau, the author characterizes their unique performing abilities, which consist in the mental assimilation and reproduction from memory of a significant corpus of epic texts. The poetic lines created by the zhyrau are interpreted in the work as historical-philosophical sources that represent the tragic experience and sufferings of the peoples of the past. The analysis of the activities of Zhumabay zhyrau Bazarov, as well as Kiyas zhyrau Kairatdinov – whose performing mastery contributed to the recognition of Karakalpak zhyrau art in the global cultural space – allows us to draw a conclusion about the successive connection between generations (teacher–student) and about the functioning of the zhyrau school in the contemporary temporal context.

Korkyt Ata as an archetypal figure in the genesis of the art of the kobyz and zhyrau

Among the Karakalpak people, performers of folk epics who reproduce them from memory on the kobyz are called "zhyrau". Performing extensive epic poems, the zhyrau possess unique characteristics, distinguished by their mastery of melody, rhythm, and vocal technique. The zhyrau are performers of folk epics consisting of 15,000–25,000 lines of songs, set to kobyz melodies (Bakhadirova, 2017, p. 68). The Karakalpak people have preserved the kobyz created by Korkyt Ata in its ancient form and with the same manner of performance to the present day.

According to scholars, Korkyt Ata, considered the patron of the art of the zhyrau, was born between the 8th and 11th centuries in Jankent, the capital of the Oghuz, in the land of Bayata, and lived on the banks of the Syr Darya [1, p. 615–616]. Thus, in historical sources concerning Korkyt Ata, he is recognized to have been a wise singer, the father of spiritual storytellers, and the first inventor of the kobyz, a musical instrument of the Turkic-speaking peoples (Palymbetov, 2010, p. 69).

According to the fundamental study by V. M. Zhirmunsky ("Turkic Heroic Epic," Leningrad, 1974), Korkyt Ata appears in the Turkic epic tradition as the patron of the kobyz, an improviser, and a mentor of the zhyrau. In the book "Korkyt Ata," the term *uzan* is interpreted as "folk singer" who performed songs about Oghuz batyrs (Salar-Kazan, Derse-khan, Bamsi-Beyrek, etc.) (Zhirmunsky, 1974, p. 535). The kobyz of Korkyt Ata was endowed with a sacred function: according to a legend, its sound reconciled warring brothers (Sekrek and Ekrek), which testifies to the social-regulatory role of music in archaic society.

Of particular interest is the legend of the creation of the kobyz, recorded by K. Aymbetov from Yesemurat zhyrau. It represents the process of making the instrument as the result of a "recipe" overheard from demons (devils): the use of dry elm, camel calf skin, horsehair, and the sap of certain plants (Aymbetov, 1988, p. 73). K. Palymbetov rightly notes that the attribution of this

knowledge to demonic forces serves the function of sacralizing the craft and elevating the person of Korkyt Ata as a chosen one from above; otherwise, his status as a miracle-worker would have been lost (Palymbetov, 2010, p. 116).

In the Karakalpak version, recorded in 1965 by K. Mambetov from Dauletmurat, Korkyt Ata appears as the creator of the kobyz and the first melody ("Nar iydiren"), which arose from compassion for a camel calf (Palymbetov, 2010, pp. 108–109). These diverse legends, circulating among different Turkic peoples, confirm not only Korkyt Ata's inventiveness, but also his status as a spiritual mentor of the zhyrau, an optimist, and a long-liver, which coincides with the data provided by A. N. Kononov regarding Korkyt's service as a vizier under three khans (based on Abulgazi's "Shajarayi Tarakima") (Kononov, 1958, p. 57).

Periodization and main representatives of the Karakalpak school of zhyrau

The process of formation of the Karakalpak school of zhyrau can be divided into several historical stages:

- **Ancient period (up to the 14th century)** – the Korkyt Ata era, reflected in the book "Kitabi dedam Korkut."

- **Classical period (14th–15th centuries)** – the period of formation of a stable performing tradition, associated with the activity of Soppasly Sypyra zhyrau, who is considered the founder of the Karakalpak school. His name is recorded in the folklore of the Kazakhs, Bashkirs, Tatars, and Nogais; he was an advisor to Khan Tokhtamysh and a performer of the Nogai epic (Adambaeva, 1991, p. 5; Daukarayev, 1961, p. 12; Maksetov, 1983, p. 11). M. Magauin notes that Sypyra appears in the epics ("Er Targyn," "Teleagis," "Kuba-gul") as a wise old man instructing khans (Magauin, 1968, pp. 9–10). His tolgau contain criticism of rulers and sympathy for common people, which confirms the social function of the zhyrau.

- **Nogai period (15th–16th centuries)** – the work of Koztugan and Dospambet zhyrau, who were not only singers but also military commanders. Dospambet, offended by Khan Ormambet, founded a separate city and died in battle with the Kalmyks; his terme-tolgau have been preserved among the peoples of the Volga region (Bakhadirova, 2017, p. 81). During the same period, the gradual separation of the Karakalpaks from the Nogai political community takes place.

- **18th–19th centuries** – the era of Zhiyen Togay uly. The latter captured the historical events of the Karakalpaks' migration to the lower reaches of the Syr Darya. His legacy includes poems and terme ("Poskan el," "Kobyz tolgavy," etc.) (Karimov, 1981, pp. 3–5). Zhiyen also participated in preserving the epics "Alpamysh" and "Kyrk kyz" and transmitting them to his students, including Kholmurat zhyrau (Zhapakov, Mambetov, Sultanov, Karimov, 1983, p. 73).

- **20th century** – a period of flourishing, represented by a galaxy of zhyrau: Nurabulla (1862–1922), Yesemurat (1893–1980), Kiyas (1903–1974),

Kurbanbay, Shankay, Oteniyaz, and others (Aymbetov, 1988, pp. 79–91). Nurabulla zhyrau established his own school, having trained 24 students, including his son Yesemurat, who from the age of 16 inherited the repertoire of the dastans "Koblan," "Alpamys," and "Edige" (Sagitov, 1986, p. 94). Kiyas zhyrau Khairatdinov recorded over 24 melodies on magnetic tape and performed at international congresses (Moscow, Tashkent, the 25th International Congress of Orientalists) (Adambaeva, 1991, p. 27).

- **Second half of the 20th – early 21st century** – the activity of Zhumabay Bazarov (1927–2006), a student of Yesemurat. He mastered the performance of the dastans "Edige" (7 days), "Koblan" (7 days), "Sharyar" (3 days), and numerous terme; he actively toured in Czechoslovakia, Germany, and the United States, participated in scholarly conferences, and was recorded by Professors K. Reichl and E. Lauze-Zirtahel (Esenbay Yermanov, 2000, p. 32; Alymov, Adambaeva, 2012, p. 80). In 2000, he was awarded the title "People's Bakhshy of the Republic of Uzbekistan."

- **Modern period (post-Soviet)** – the revival of the tradition. Represented by performers such as Bakbergen Syrymbetov (a student of Kiyas, laureate of international competitions in Almaty, Kashkadarya, Seoul, Cannes, and Amsterdam), Bakhtiyar Yesemuratov (ensemble director, Honored Artist of Karakalpakstan), Zhanibek Piyazov (winner of the "Kelezhak ovazi," "Asrlar sadosi," and "Interfolk" competitions in St. Petersburg), and others (Dosymbetova, 2011, pp. 6–7).

Social status and functions of the zhyrau

Historical sources testify to the high position of the zhyrau at the courts of rulers. Marco Polo noted that in Central Asia, singers sat next to sovereigns and enjoyed complete freedom (Bakhadirova, 2017, p. 81). The zhyrau not only sang of heroic deeds but also acted as advisors, military commanders (like Koztugan and Dospambet), and critics of authority, which is vividly manifested in Sypyra's tolgau: he denounced khans for neglecting orphans and widows.

In Karakalpak culture, kobyz performers (zhyrau) and bakhshi singers existed side by side, but the zhyrau are considered a more ancient tradition. According to R. Kosbergenov, the bakhshi, who performed to the accompaniment of the gidjak, appeared later (Kosbergenov, 1970, pp. 65–66). Researcher N. Daukarayev identifies two independent schools: that of Soppasly Sypyra zhyrau and that of Zhiyen Togay (Daukarayev, 1959, p. 25).

Continuity was ensured through apprenticeship: Nurabulla taught Yesemurat, Yesemurat taught Zhumabay Bazarov and others; Kiyas taught Zhaksylyk and Bakbergen Syrymbetov. In the 20th century, there were more than a hundred known zhyrau (Kosbergenov, 1970, p. 67). Currently, the Karakalpak art of the kobyz and tolgau is recognized at the international level: recordings of dastans have been published in German and English, and performances are showcased at festivals in Europe and Asia.

CONCLUSION

The art of zhyrau performance, which originated with Korkyt Ata, possesses its own school and history, and continues to serve as a wellspring of Karakalpak national musical art. Indeed, Karakalpak national music, represented, among other forms, by the storyteller-zhyrau, continues amazing the world today. The unbroken chain of continuity, documented in legends, historical chronicles, field recordings, and modern festivals, confirms that the institution of the zhyrau has not only retained its significance but has also assumed new forms of existence within the global cultural landscape. The preservation and study of this heritage remains a crucial task for philologists, musicologists, and historians, as it encodes the worldview, ethical, and aesthetic values of the Turkic peoples over more than a millennium.

Conflict of interests

The author declares no relevant conflict of interests.

Конфликт интересов

Автор заявляет об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

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