

The Folklore of Khorezm and Its Historical Roots

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Abstract

Understanding folklore from an epistemological perspective requires a multidisciplinary approach that extends beyond just linguistic theories to include the historical, anthropological, and sociocultural development of human thought. This paper explores the origins, structural types, and evolutionary path of Uzbek folklore, with a special emphasis on the Khorezm region. By integrating historical chronicles from ancient scholars like Al-Biruni and Herodotus, archaeological discoveries from the Khorezm civilization, and ethnographic data ranging from early rituals to the 19th century, this research traces the lineage of traditional oral and performative arts. The results reveal how primitive hunting mimicry and Zoroastrian fire rituals transformed into the Lazgi dance and later into the highly formalized street theater (maskharaboz and kizikchi) of the 18th and 19th centuries. The study concludes that the combination of music, dance, and oral storytelling in Khorezm formed the foundation for today's modern Central Asian oral musical drama.

Keywords: Khorezmian folklore, ethnomusicology, oral traditions, proto-theater, Zoroastrian rituals, Lazgi, traditional folk theater, cultural anthropology.

1. Introduction

Uzbek folklore is an age-old, complex oral tradition that acts as a rich repository of philosophical, social, and spiritual beliefs of historical communities. It reflects the daily lives, perspectives, existential challenges, and successes of ancestral groups, offering an essential perspective on how regional identities have developed over time [1].

A key ontological trait of folkloric creation is its collective authorship and fluid timeline. Unlike formal literature, folklore lacks a single identifiable creator, and its precise origin dates cannot be empirically confirmed. It results from long-standing, collective oral transmission—passed down from generation to generation and from master (ustoz) to apprentice (shogird). As renowned literary critic V.G. Belinsky pointed out, in folklore, "there are no famous names; its author is always the people" [2]. Belinsky highlighted that no one knows who composed these simple, unadorned songs that truthfully mirror the internal and external lives of youthful tribes; these artifacts persist through time, evolving naturally with each new generation.

Literature Review

The organized collection, categorization, and publication of Uzbek folklore artifacts started in the second half of the 19th century, mainly through the pioneering ethnographic

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works of H. Vambery and N.P. Ostroumov. Nevertheless, the formal, institutionalized, and comprehensive documentation of folklore officially began in 1919. The early phase of modern Uzbek folkloristics, marked by a new systematic approach, is generally dated between 1918 and 1925 [3].

The earliest known efforts to record Turkic folklore happened in the 11th century. The most important surviving primary source is Mahmud al-Kashgari's *Dīwān Lughāt al-Turk* (Compendium of the Languages of the Turks). Al-Kashgari recorded labor songs, seasonal rituals, legends, proverbs, and their socio-linguistic contexts, grouping them under the poetic term *qoshugh* (ode or poem). This influential linguistic work remains a key foundation for understanding the historical continuity of Turkic oral traditions [4].

2. Research Method

This study uses a qualitative, interdisciplinary approach. Key methods involve systematic categorization, historical-comparative analysis, and combining archaeological and textual historical data. The research follows the principle of historical objectivity by triangulating ancient chronicles, ethnographic records, and material culture artifacts to logically reconstruct the development of Khorezmian performing arts.

3. Results and Discussion

The Socio-Pedagogical Aspects of Folk Music

Uzbek folk art serves as an essential ideological and aesthetic tool for nurturing both historical awareness and national identity. "Music has historically evolved since ancient times as both folk and professional genres within an oral tradition. Folk music encompasses various forms such as *lapar*, *terma*, *yalla*, and songs—including ritual, domestic, labor, game, dance, lyrical, and didactic types—while Uzbek professional music's oral tradition features genres like epic (*doston*), grand song (*katta ashula*), *maqom*, and instrumental pieces" [5]. Therefore, integrating folk music heritage into modern public consciousness is a vital social goal for promoting moral and cultural growth [6, 7].

Extensive pedagogical research shows that the folkloric repertoire has great educational potential. Examining folk songs reveals that they embody the highest ideals of "folk wisdom." Their lyrics are rich with moral philosophy, patriotism, and behavioral ethics like modesty (*hayo*), courtesy (*andisha*), and respect, which are key to the national identity [8].

From an ethnomusicological viewpoint, Uzbek folk singing can be divided into two main categories depending on the setting in which it is performed:

Context-Bound (Situational) Songs: These are performed exclusively during particular times, events, or circumstances. This includes family ritual songs such as *Yor-yor* for weddings, labor chants, lullabies (*Alla*), and seasonal festival tunes.

Context-Free (Non-Situational) Songs: These can be performed anytime and anywhere. This category encompasses *lapar*, *yalla*, instrumental melodies, and lyrical songs that explore universal human themes and exhibit higher general complexity [9].

The Khorezmian Epic Tradition.

The Khorezm region boasts a highly distinctive and ancient epic tradition that has developed over thousands of years. These epics, known as *dostons*, have been refined through centuries of virtuosic oral recitations by traditional bards called *bakhshis*. They represent the peak of Khorezmian literary heritage. Notable classical epics preserved in this

local tradition include Avazxon, Bozirgon, Sayodxon, Hamro, Korakuzoyim, Gulruh Pari, Shobahrom, Zavriyo, Oshiq Garib, Shohsanam, Yusup Ahmad, and Qirq Ming [10].

Ritualistic Origins: Tracing the evolution from primitive hunting practices to early forms of proto-theater.

The origins of performative arts in ancient Khorezm can be traced back to primitive hunting rituals. In early human societies, "hunting games" played a vital role, occurring both before and after hunts. Pre-hunt rituals served as essential training and psychological preparation, with hunters wearing animal masks and skins to imitate the gait and sounds of their prey as they practiced approaching targets. This ritualistic imitation not only functioned as a survival training for the youth but also sparked the earliest forms of pantomime and theatrical imitation [11].

Post-hunt celebrations depended on success; bringing back prey prevented community starvation. This led to the first communal feasts, featuring rhythmic movements, dances, and primitive music. Conscious labor underpins tradition, and repeating labor-based activities as rituals fostered early theatrical and musical arts development [12].

Zoroastrianism and Archaeological Evidence of Performance

As societies in Khorezm transitioned from primitive to complex agricultural civilizations, their worship shifted from natural forces to fire-worship, forming the ideological basis of Zoroastrianism [13]. Early hunters began performing magical rites around large hearths, venerating the sacred fire to ensure the community's prosperity. Archaeologist S.P. Tolstov, examining the Kelteminar culture, observed that in the area near their dwellings, "communal customs were performed, and ritual dances were executed" [14].

Further archaeological expeditions led by Tolstov yielded profound material evidence of an advanced performative culture during the slave-owning socio-economic period. Discoveries near Koi-Krylgan-Kala (4th–3rd centuries BCE) and Toprak-Kala (3rd century CE) unearthed terracotta theatrical masks, frescoes of female harpists, hourglass-shaped double drums, and fragments depicting a hall of masked dancers. Tolstov hypothesized that these mass masked dances were dedicated to the life, struggles, and death of the mythical goddess Mina [15].

The Origin and History of the Lazgi Dance

The theory about the goddess Mina is strongly supported by historical textual records. In his important work "Chronology of Ancient Nations", the renowned encyclopedist Abu Rayhan al-Biruni described the ancient Khorezmian ritual called the "Night of Mina." Biruni states: "Mina was a woman from their kings and nobles, who left the palace at night while intoxicated, dressed in silk. It was spring. She fell asleep outside the palace... and the cold that night struck and killed her". The Khorezmians later turned this incident into a legend, performing chants, burning incense to prevent evil spirits, and holding large ritual dances in her memory.

Ancient Greek historians further illuminate the performative vigor of the region's inhabitants. Herodotus, known as the father of history, documented that the Massagetae tribes living along the Araxes (Amu Darya) river would "light bonfires at night, become intoxicated by the scent of plants, and dance and sing around the fire until it extinguished". Similarly, Strabo detailed the martial attire of the Massagetae, noting their use of gold belts, armbands, and bronze axes during combat.

Ethnographer T. Kilichev compellingly argues that these historical accounts directly parallel the modern Khorezmian Lazgi dance. The Lazgi, often performed around winter fires

at weddings, retains distinct elements of primitive martial dances and the heroic pathos of ancient Khorezmians, strongly suggesting an unbroken cultural continuum from antiquity to the present.

The Development of Khorezmian Folk Theater During the 18th and 19th Centuries

By the 18th and 19th centuries, Khorezm experienced a significant renaissance in music and theatrical arts. Muhammad Khoksor's manuscript *Muntahabal lugat* indicates a vast diversity of melodies (*nagma*) and songs (*surud*) in the region. The historical chronicle *Riyoz-ud-daula* explicitly records that during a royal wedding hosted by Olloqulixon in 1835, performances by musicians and comedians (*masxaraboz*) evoked profound laughter and joy among the guests.

Russian travelers' observations highlight the formalization of these arts.

Nikolay Muravyev (1819-1820) documented a lively domestic theater scene in Khiva, where hired performers sang, played instruments, told epics of ancient heroes, and provided entertainment during long night sessions.

Abrasimov (1846-1855) observed elaborate variety shows at Muhammad Aminxon's court. He watched performances on a dedicated stage (*supa*), including musical ensembles, puppet theaters, female dancers, tightrope walkers, and vocalists (*hofiz*).

During Mukhammad Rakhimxon II (Feruz)'s reign (1865-1910), a poet and composer himself, Khiva's theatrical scene thrived. Feruz supported musicians, poets, singers, and comedic actors, bringing them together in his capital.

Crucially, the folk theater extended beyond the royal court. Street theater (*kizikchi*) emerged as a powerful sociological tool. Utilizing sharp, improvisational satire, actors boldly critiqued societal vices, mocking greedy landowners, corrupt judges (*qozi*), and hypocritical officials. These performances resonated deeply with the common populace, transforming the theater into an arena for sociopolitical commentary.

4. Conclusion

Analysis of Khorezmian folklore shows it as a vibrant, performative system, not just old texts. Its unique folk theater depends on masks and blends dialogue with acrobatics, illusion, and sharp socio-political satire. These specific local features require dedicated, detailed academic research.

Moreover, the *masxaraboz* and *kizikchi* skillfully and actively drew from a rich collection of folk music, song, and dance. These artistic elements served not just as decorative background but as the main means of shaping character and progressing the story. In the end, this ancient blend of oral storytelling, rhythmic dance, and music became the essential catalyst for the creation and formalization of Central Asia's unique oral musical drama genre..

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