



Article

"Alpomish" Epic – the Historical Roots of Uzbek Folkloristics

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Abstract: In the epic "Alpomish," the central plot of heroic epics revolves around the warrior's struggle and heroic deeds for the sake of his motherland and his honor. The hero defeats the enemy forces or their strongest warriors *alps*. This victory serves as a foundation for tribes to unite around the hero and creates the basis for statehood. The hero is an embodiment of immense power, courage, and bravery. He possesses a strength capable of deciding the fate of an entire nation or army. Through his character, the might of the Uzbek people is manifested. All of these attributes are personified in the image of Alpomish.

Keywords: "Alpomish" and World Epics, Epic Versions and Variants, Text of the Epic, Evolution of the Alpomish Character, Interpretations of the Characters Barchin, Qaldirg'och and Boychibor, Artistic Devices in the Work

1. Introduction

The epic "Alpomish" is the crown jewel of the heroic epics of the Turkic peoples. There are more than 40 recorded versions of the epic performed by Uzbek bards, *baxshis*, and detailed information about most of them can be found in Tura Mirzaev's monograph titled "*Uzbek Variants of the 'Alpomish' Epic*." Among these variants, the version narrated by Fozil Yuldosh Ugli and recorded by Mahmud Zarifov in 1928 is recognized as the most artistically perfect. While the work was previously published in abridged forms several times, Hodi Zarif and Tura Mirzaev prepared a complete edition, which was published in 1998.

For centuries, "Alpomish" has been passed down orally from generation to generation from the depths of ancient history, guiding the people toward goodness, helping them understand their identity, and fostering both spiritual and physical maturity. In all its aspects, this epic is as great as world-renowned epics such as the *Odyssey*, the *Iliad*, *Manas*, the *Mahabharata*, the *Shahnameh*, the *Song of the Nibelungs*, and the *Book of Dede Korkut*.

The figure of Alpomish exists in various forms not only in Uzbek oral folk art but also among other Turkic peoples, as well as in the folklore of neighboring Tajiks and local Arabs. This character has undergone evolutionary development across the heroic epics of Turkic peoples. Specifically, he is interpreted as *Alpomis* among Kazakhs, *Alpamsha* among Tatars and Bashkirs, *Alip Manash* among Altayans, *Manas* among Kyrgyz, *Alp Bamsi* among Oghuz, and *Alpmush* among Hungarians.

Although the current variants of the Uzbek "Alpomish" are thought to have emerged about a thousand years ago, there are theories that its initial archaic plot is much older. The final revision of the great Greek epic, the *Odyssey*, is dated to 600 BC. According to Academician V. Zhirmunsky, the plot of Odysseus's return in the Greek *Odyssey* is connected to the Central Asian *Alpomish* plot. The *Odyssey* and *Alpomish*—especially the Kungrat version—are so similar that attributing their resemblance to mere coincidence

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would be incorrect. Both *Alpomish* and the *Odyssey* trace their roots back to an ancient, common "Eastern" fairy-tale plot. Based on the *Odyssey*, the Eastern version of the "husband's return" event can be dated back to at least the 7th century BC. Some sources even hypothesize that the Epic of Gilgamesh, written in Sumerian, considered the oldest writing system, is an ancient variant of the *Alpomish* epic.

As noted, versions of the "Alpomish" epic exist not only in Central Asia but also among Turkic-speaking peoples in the Altai, Siberia, East Turkestan, the Caucasus, and Asia Minor. Certain factors contributed to the spread of this plot over such a vast territory; primarily, it is rooted in the fact that Turkic peoples inhabited these expansive regions in the distant past and migrated across great distances. Such activity fostered not only economic but also cultural relationships among Turkic peoples, allowing oral folk art to pass from mouth to mouth among neighboring tribes and take shape at various levels. One of the most archaic versions of the plot exists in the Altai tale *Alip-Manash*; however, unlike the Uzbek *Alpomish*, this plot did not undergo the same evolution and remained at the level of a folk tale.

It is important to clarify that Altai, Tatar, and Bashkir variants should not be viewed as the direct foundations for the Uzbek, Karakalpak, and Kazakh versions. Rather, the necessity lies in identifying the "ancestral plot" and observing the evolution of different versions based on that common root. It seems the Oghuz tribes living in the lower reaches of the Sirdarya in ancient times were well-acquainted with this "ancestral plot." As Kipchak tribes moved westward and the Oguz tribes shifted toward the Caucasus, Asia Minor, and Europe, the core *Alpomish* story traveled with them. This eventually gave rise to the epic "Bamsi Bayrak" in the *Book of Dede Korkut*, which is the closest work to the "Alpomish" epic. In Asia Minor, this figure also found a place in Anatolian folk tales. Interestingly, an epic related to the *Alpomish* character also exists among modern Hungarians, where the hero Attila is referred to by a second name: Almush.

2. Materials and Methods

There is no definitive consensus regarding the earliest performer of the "Alpomish" epic. Fozil Yuldosh ugli's mentor's mentor, Yuldoshbulbul, studied the art of storytelling under Muhammad Shoir, who lived and created in the second half of the 18th century. This suggests that the current Uzbek version of "Alpomish" was already being performed during that period. According to the famous Karakalpak bard *Jirov* Qurbonboy (1876–1958), the first performer of the "Alpomish" epic was Jiyen-jirov, who lived in the 18th century.

Plots involving Bamsi-*Alpomish*, which existed among the Oghuz, have somehow not been preserved in modern Turkmen folklore. This may be explained by the emergence of the "Goro'g'li" cycle of epics in oral folk art, which gained immense popularity among the people. However, Abulgazi Bahodirkhon, in his work written in 1660–1661, dedicated to the history of the Oghuz tribes (particularly the Turkmen people), provided significant historical context regarding these traditions.

The history of collecting, publishing, and studying the variants of the "Alpomish" epic has been inconsistent and has undergone various complex processes. Detailed information on this subject is provided in the preface written by Tura Mirzaev for the complete edition of the "Alpomish" epic published in 1998.

3. Results dan Discussion

Initial research and analysis of the epic during the Soviet era began to reveal that this literary monument possessed profound spiritual roots and ancient significance. This realization did not align with the interests of the ruling ideology and the totalitarian regime. Consequently, by the early 1950s, specific attacks were organized against "Alpomish." In several articles, authors such as A. Abdunabiev and A. Stepanov labeled

the epic "reactionary" and declared it "anti-people." On March 28 and 31, 1952, a discussion of the "Alpomish" epic was held at the Uzbekistan Writers' Union. In this debate, conducted entirely in Russian, the epic was utterly condemned. A speaker named Stanishevskiy stated, "To be honest, this is a slander against the Uzbek people. It is a smear on the face of the Uzbek people. Such a work could only benefit enemies in portraying the Uzbek people slanderously." However, this view met with silent or active resistance from other Uzbek intellectuals.

It is no coincidence that the "Alpomish" epic and its researchers faced such intense opposition. Regarding the significance of the epos, Hamid Olimjon wrote in the preface to the 1939 edition, recorded from Fozil Yuldosh Ugli:

"In terms of language, 'Alpomish' reflects the entire richness and color of the Uzbek language. The epic demonstrates how succulent, concise, and perfect the Uzbek folk language is for expressing its own life. It contains everything from the most common everyday words to military terminology that may be unfamiliar to us but is essential to know. Terms related to livestock breeding are limitless. We did not know these, and in our ignorance, we used to weave false myths about the poverty of the Uzbek language. 'Alpomish' contains many words of practical importance for our current literary and journalistic language. Finally, 'Alpomish' is of great importance for our writers as well..." Interestingly, in that same preface, Hamid Olimjon noted that the archenemies of the Uzbek people had hindered the emergence of "Alpomish" and similar valuable folk creations; however, he could not have imagined that the same situation would repeat itself 14 years later. Ultimately, these slander-based discussions only served to elevate the prestige of the epic—which is essentially an enemy of slavery and tyranny—and further intensified the people's interest in it.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the epic "Alpomish" is not only a unique masterpiece of Uzbek oral folk art but also a monumental spiritual heritage that unites the culture and historical roots of the Turkic peoples. Refined over centuries through the mastery of bards, *baxshis*, the epic has preserved its ancient archaic layers while becoming a powerful source for promoting national identity and patriotic ideals. The fact that its genesis shares a lineage with the world's most famous epics, such as the *Odyssey* and *Gilgamesh*, defines its universal significance.

The ideological pressures of the Soviet era and attempts to condemn the epic as "reactionary" failed due to the scientific courage of Uzbek intellectuals and the people's boundless respect for this work. Thanks to the efforts of prominent figures such as Fozil Yuldosh Ugli, Hodi Zarif, and Tura Mirzaev, the most perfect variants of the epic were preserved and deeply researched. The international celebration of the 1,000th anniversary of "Alpomish" during the years of independence, along with its translation into dozens of foreign languages, proved that it occupies a worthy place in the treasury of world culture. Today, the figure of Alpomish remains a symbol of national bravery, family loyalty, and the unity of the people, retaining its historical importance in educating future generations in the spirit of high spirituality.

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