

# THE CONDITION OF ORAL TRADITIONS AND EPICS IN TAJIKISTAN AND EFFORTS TO SAFEGUARD THEM

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One can say without any overstatement that, during the several last years, the significance of one of UNESCO category 2 center, the International Information and Networking Center for Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Asia-Pacific Region under the auspices of UNESCO (ICHCAP), was essential in supporting the initiatives to safeguard the intangible cultural heritage in Tajikistan .

It is known that, after the adoption of the UNESCO Convention on intangible cultural heritage safeguarding (2003), a wave of initiatives and efforts to safeguard intangible cultural heritage covered Central Asia, because there had been a process of self-recognition and changing opinions on spiritual heritage after the collapse of the USSR.

According to article 2, point 2 of the Convention, this heritage includes:

- oral traditions and expression forms, including the language as the bearer of intangible cultural heritage;

- performance art;
- customs, ceremonies, and celebrates;
- ceremonies connected with nature and universe;
- knowledge and skills connected with traditional crafts

Each of these listed items represents a separate layer of heritage. The contemporary Tajik are closely connected with their intangible cultural heritage. It is necessary to note that, in modern Tajik society, the traditional mentality and the way of life occupy an important place. Therefore, one can note that in modern Tajik society, knowledge and skills connected with traditional crafts are still stable while customs, ceremonies, and rituals occupy an important place in everyday life of the society. The skills and the best experience connected with intangible cultural heritage are revered among the people. Moreover, one should note the significance of some kinds of intangible cultural heritage among young people.

However, it is impossible for us to say the same about the situation in traditional performance art. Unfortunately, the circle of the bearers and admirers of these performance arts are limited to the old generation.

Generally, owing to the cultural policy conducted by the government of the Republic of Tajikistan in the period of independence and, of course, to the deep studying of the essence of the Convention (2003) in modern Tajik society, the attitude toward native intangible cultural heritage has improved. To acquire traditional knowledge and the best experience of previous generations has become very important.

For example, the Tajik, like many other nations, have a traditional method of artistic creation, well-known under the name of *ustod-shogird* (teacher-pupil). Since ancient times, the method has been formed on the basis of traditional arts and crafts. Owing to the method, many kinds of artistic

creation exist today. This method is valuable in transferring traditional oral art.

Traditional oral art of the Tajik, like that of the other nations of Central Asia, has two branches: professional and folk arts. These branches make our traditional cultures original. In the Soviet period, a misunderstanding of the specificity of the region destroyed the traditional ustod-shogird system. Many kinds of art, including the oral, musical, performing, and other types, became secondary. With time the generation of connoisseurs of traditional oral art gradually disappeared, taking valuable knowledge and skills away. As a result, the traditional ustod-shogird system was on the verge of disappearance<sup>1</sup>.

Therefore, the Ministry of Culture supported an initiative to conduct the Festival ustod-shogird, where NGO 'Odam va Olam' took an important part in reviving it<sup>2</sup>. The Festival was unusual in its structure. It continued for one year. Teachers (ustods) and their pupils (shogirds) were selected from all over Tajikistan. The main criteria in selecting the teachers were their skill, their experience as a teacher (no fewer than 5 pupils) and their age (no older than 35 years). There were not many such ustods in Tajikistan. Therefore, the Festival couldn't cover all kinds of arts, crafts and performances. So, ustods and shogirds in traditional professional singing (classical maqoms and traditional falak) and crafts (jewelry and embroidery) were chosen.

The duties of ustods included the compilation of educational-methodical provision (EMP) on the type of ustod-shogird method. According to the educational-creative festival, some educational programmes were revived.

A syllabus on complex disciplines necessary for the ustod-shogird system was offered. On finishing the educational festival, the Ustod-Teacher Certificate was given. To ensure the continuation of the tradition, the materials of the festival were published as a guideline for introducing the

tradition into educational institutions<sup>3</sup>.

Such attention to this method is conditioned by the fact that this method provides many oral traditions with vitality. A good knowledge of the method guarantees a successful revival of one or other kind of traditional oral art.

In Tajikistan, the traditions of oral art form a more variable and considerable part of the intangible cultural heritage. As a genre, this oral folk art includes fairy tales, proverbs, riddles, songs, rubai, lullabies, stories, oaths, anecdotes, cries, aphorisms, traditional songs, rapid speeches, *askiya* and many others.

The documentation of the intangible cultural heritage has advanced recently. Special and purposeful work on safeguarding intangible cultural heritage has been conducted with the support of the government of Tajikistan. Among many efforts undertaken by the government, we should note the establishment of two official festivals devoted to the main phenomena of Tajik traditional music - *Shashmaqom Day* (since 12 May 2000) and *Falak Day* (since 10 October 2007). The festivals were established by a special decree from the president of Tajikistan. Such measures taken by the president of the country himself to safeguard through the official glorification and cultivation of high spirituality of the Tajik people is an unprecedented and unique step. Many special state programmes on the development of intangible cultural heritage in the modern society were accepted by the government of Tajikistan<sup>4</sup>.

In safeguarding the intangible cultural heritage of Tajikistan we would like to note the significance of collaboration with ICHCAP. From the first days of the activity of the organization, Tajikistan was represented (according to the recommendation of the Ministry of Culture and National Commission for UNESCO in Tajikistan) by NGO *Odam va Olam*. Within

the framework of the projects supported by ICHCAP, NGO *Odam va Olam* did important work collaborating with the Ministry of Culture. A number of instructive documents were formed and optimal ways of inventorying intangible cultural heritage were found<sup>5</sup>.

Several versions of questionnaires were preliminarily elaborated to collect the different kinds of folklore.

The first version included the name, genre, performer's name, information on the performer (age, sex, nationality, and contacts), residence, date (language, text, audio/video material); then all versions of accessible texts were recorded. Further, the questionnaire could be continued with textual records from other performers from other places (points 9-12). Information on available literature and data of experts concluded the questionnaire (point 15: *abed*)<sup>6</sup>:

Questionnaire on the kind of oral folk art (folklore)

### **Version 1**

Code

1. Name:
2. Genre/kind:
3. Performers of versions:
  - a) Name, surname, family name:
  - b) Date of birth:
  - c) Sex:
  - d) Nationality of performer:
  - e) Address:
  - f) Contacts:
4. Place of existence:
5. Date of the first record:

6. Language:
7. Text (written):
8. Records (audio/video):
9. Versions:
10. Date of the second record:
11. Place of records:
12. Texts of versions:
13. Information on performers of versions:
14. Additional information:
15. Other data:
  - a) Historical:
  - b) Used literature:
  - c) New study:
  - d) From whom information was recorded:
16. Inventory author

In the second version, information on a genre (point 2), source of art (point 3), and place of existence (connection with some ceremony is meant) (point 4) have been included.

Nevertheless, every time real practice concretises, corrects, and improves the questionnaire. Today, the last version of the questionnaire consists of 19 points and includes the following questions<sup>7</sup>:

#### CODE

1. Name:
2. Place of existence:
3. History of origin:
4. Currently existent versions (texts):
5. Total number of versions (historical and current):

6. Terminology:
7. Personalities of epics (commonality and difference in versions):
8. Performers of versions:
  - a) Name, surname, family name:
  - b) Date of birth:
  - c) Nationality of performer:
  - d) Address:
  - e) Contacts:
9. Availability of art / family schools of epics:
10. Form of performance (wordy, musical, dramatised)
11. Records (audio/video/written):
12. Photos:
13. Available literature:
14. Texts of versions:
  - a) wordy:
  - b) musical:
  - c) description of dramatised text (dress, manner of performance and actions are described):
15. From whom the information was written:
16. Date:
17. Author of inventory:
18. Location of questionnaire:
19. Contacts of the compiler of questionnaire (physical/juridical person)

Epic stories form a considerable part of folklore. One can name folklore and written sources as sources of epic stories. Epic stories were collected in written sources since the most ancient times and Middle Ages, which became popular as literary pieces (in genres *doslon*, *hamosa*, *qissa*); now, in folklore,

epic stories develop more in the genres of *dostons* and *qissa* existing in many versions.

Generally, today the epic stories of the Tajik exist in these two versions. Religious epic stories in the context of Islamic culture exist in the genres of *naʼt* and *maddoh*.

As kinds of intangible cultural heritage, they generated its own storytelling performance art. Some of them have also theatrical characters. And these kinds of performance art are known now under the names of *dostlonsuroi*, *qis,sagui*, *hamosagui*, *naikhoni*, *maddohkhoni*.

In today's culture of the Tajik, one can note two kinds of epic stories: aboriginal Tajik epics (with Iranian origins) and adopted ones. The aboriginal Tajik epic stories, which, on the one hand, have been perpetuated in literature and, on the other hand, in folklore, develop in three versions: wordy, musical, and dramatised; the adopted ones, however, develop only in folklore, predominantly in the form of singing.

However, one should say that the adopted epics have got a new life in the Tajik's culture. *Gurugli* and *Alpomysh* belong to the group of adopted epic stories. First of all, this novelty concerns language.

As a rule, both *Gurugli* and *Alpomysh* are performed in Tajik. Of course, the epic *Gurugli* is more popular<sup>8</sup>. In the works on the Tajik folklore, there is opinion that the correct pronunciation of '*Gurugli*' is *Gurguli* (The Tajik: 'an athlete from a grave')<sup>9</sup>. In Turkic languages, this word means 'the son of a grave'. The following novelty in Tajik culture concerns the change of the main hero's name. In the Tajik version, he is *Avaz*, not *Gurugli*.

However, the manner of guttural singing has been generally preserved. Certainly, this guttural singing is not equal to the original one. The guttural singing is not specific to Tajik singing arts at all. As for the melodies of this epic, they are based on Tajik rhythms and melodic nuances. It is known



that rhythm and melody's nuances are directly connected with the words of a text.

The epic *Gurugli* exists in the modern Tajik culture in the vocal version only. The popularity of the epic indicates that several generations of guruglikhons - performers of this epic have been brought up in a Tajik society. Among them there are well-known Khikmat Rizo, Azizbek Ziyoyev (Varzob district), and Shef-Sulton (Sari Hosor). Guruglikhon akai Shef Sulton has composed several dostons about the military commanders of the 1990's civil war in Tajikistan. These dostons became favorite and popular among people. Having renewed the text, he used previous melodies from Guruglidostons.

*Alpomysh* is less popular among the Tajik. It is known from the available records of fieldwork that it exists in the form of fairy tales and fragments.

In the context of the aboriginal Tajik epics that originated in the antique and medieval periods, the singing and telling traditions, such as *shohnomakhoni*, *Barzunomakhoni*, *Rusiamnomakhoni*, and *Suhrobnomakhoni* remain increasingly popular and didactical *qissahoi bobogi*<sup>10</sup> and many lyrical epic stories have been preserved up to now. They also exist in three versions - in words, music, and theatre.

Many of today's narrators prefer the mixed form of performance.

One should note that *Gurugli* is sung to the accompaniment of two little stringed musical instruments *dutor/dumbra*<sup>11</sup>. In other kinds of epic stories different Tajik folk musical instruments can be used. This question also needs detailed study.

The choice of the theme of an epic as a special theme of today's forum by ICHCAP is timely and expedient. For Tajikistan this theme is very important today.

Many aspects concerning the epic stories remain unstudied in the Tajik

study of literature, musicology and culturology.

The epic of any nation is memory, favorite figures and plots, and one can say and think they are probably quite numerous on the Silk Road. To revive those rich traditions will enrich the spirituality of modern society. The community subjects and images will always assist in keeping friendship and unity between peoples.

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