

Typology Of Motifs In The Karakalpak And Kazakh Versions Of The Epic “Er Qosay”

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Abstract: The article examines the typology of motifs in the epic “Er Qosay” within the epic traditions of the Karakalpak and Kazakh peoples. The similarities in the typology of motifs in the versions of the two peoples are scientifically analyzed. The study highlights the close geographical proximity and long-standing interaction between the Karakalpak and Kazakh peoples, which has resulted in a strong interconnection of their national histories. It is demonstrated that shared historical experiences and similar events give rise to particular phenomena, which are subsequently embodied in artistic form within the epic. Since the epic was performed orally and individually by zhyrau (a traditional Kazakh epic poet-singer and oral historian) and zhyrshy (a folk epic singer and storyteller) storytellers of both peoples, the presence of personal and national characteristics is emphasized. The article also reveals the role of the leading motifs in the development of the epic’s plot.

Keywords: Heroic epic, epic creativity, zhyrau (a traditional Kazakh epic poet-singer and oral historian), typology, image, version, motif, plot.

Introduction: According to the available data, the national versions of the epic “Er Qosay” are primarily found among the Karakalpak, Kyrgyz, Kazakh, and Nogai peoples. The Karakalpak version of the epic was recorded in 1939 by S. Mäwlenov and Sh. Khozhaniyazov from the renowned Karakalpak zhyrau Qurmanbay Zhyrau Täjibaev (1876–1958). The versions of the epic “Er Qosay” among the Turkic peoples display notable similarities in content and motifs, including the identical names of the heroes (batyrs) and the epic’s central idea of defending the homeland. In particular, the narrative is characterized by the heroic deeds of a young warrior who avenges his father’s blood by defeating his enemies. Especially within the Kazakh tradition, the version of “Er Qosay” recorded by A. Khangeldin is close to the Karakalpak “Er Qosay” epic in terms of its content and plot structure [1, pp. 443–444]. In this article, we undertake a typological comparative analysis of the motif connections and distinctive features of the Kazakh “Er Qosay” epic in A. Khangeldin’s version and the Karakalpak version.

Zhyrau employ numerous folkloric plots and motifs in order to realize the main idea of the epic and to create the idealized image of epic heroes. Accordingly, the

creative talent and improvisational skill of the zhyrau are clearly manifested in the epic “Er Qosay”. For this reason, both similarities and differences in the plot of the Karakalpak and Kazakh versions of the epic are most noticeably reflected in the primary motifs and in the depiction of processes connected with the hero’s actions. Professor S. N. Azbelov writes: “The epic of every people is initially formed on the basis of collective memory closely connected with its national history” [2, p. 209]. Consequently, as Turkic peoples—particularly the Karakalpak and Kazakh—have lived in close geographical proximity and maintained long-standing interaction, their national histories have become closely intertwined. Therefore, it is a natural phenomenon that the epics of these peoples are interconnected and display typological similarities. E. M. Meletinsky notes: “The heroic epic is a historically concrete poetic form generated by specific socio-historical conditions and associated with a particular stage in the development of human culture” [3, p. 424]. Thus, similar historical experiences and events give rise to particular phenomena, which are subsequently transformed into artistic form within the epic tradition. The histories of the Karakalpak and Kazakh peoples contain many such similar circumstances, which are

also reflected in the versions of the epic “Er Qosay” found among both peoples.

It should also be noted that since the epic was performed orally and individually by the zhyrau and storytellers of both peoples, it contains personal and national distinctions. These distinctions are reflected in the plot of the epic. As noted: “Any change in the composition of the plot, whether in terms of variation or version, occurs solely through the transformation of motifs” [4, p. 34]. The Karakalpak version of “Er Qosay” begins, following epic tradition, with information about the setting and time, and this i

/0987432qntroduction generates the motif-situation and actions of the epic. Professor Zh. Eshonqul writes: “...The plot of an epic work, of course, unfolds in a particular place or time, and the actions of the characters, undoubtedly, are realized through the operation of motives” [5, p. 134]. Indeed, in the Karakalpak version, the motif-situation and actions are illustrated through the narrative of the heroic deeds of the warriors of the “Ten Thousand Houses” Nogai: the heroes Ay Kökshe, Kün Kökshe, and Er Kökshe fight against the Kalmyk khan Abakhan. Ay Kökshe and Kün Kökshe die, Er Kökshe receives no assistance, and he must seek help from King Arshakhan. In contrast, the Kazakh version’s introduction does not provide information about the epic’s time or place; the narrative begins directly with a motif-situation. It recounts that in the era of the former Nogai, seven brothers—Er Bökshe, Nar Bökshe, Ädil Bökshe, Asqar Bökshe, and others—fought, six of them died at the hands of the Kalmyks’ Taqtabolat-Tasbolat, leaving only Er Bökshe alive. When this lone hero reaches the age of sixty, his wife gives birth to a child named Qosay, briefly presenting the motif of the hero’s birth. Indeed, the hero’s early deeds occupy a central place in the epic, as in every epic the narrative begins with the hero’s arrival into the world. The birth of an epic hero is usually associated with extraordinary, often mythological circumstances [6, p. 72]. However, in the Kazakh version, no supernatural or mythological elements accompany the hero’s birth; the motif is transformed and narrated concisely in accordance with real-life events. This motif indicates that the hero’s early life lays the foundation for his later heroic achievements. The motif depicting Er Qosay’s childhood and the narrative of his growth to face difficult circumstances illustrates his eventual triumph through bravery. In the Karakalpak version, similar depictions of the hero’s overcoming hardships through courage are present. However, the Karakalpak version does not include motifs depicting the hero’s birth or childhood.

In the Kazakh version, after the child’s birth, there is a

motif in which Er Bökshe plans to travel to Russia and consults with the Nogais, advising them to care for his child until he reaches six years of age—this motif is absent in the Karakalpak version. When the child reaches six, the narrative continues with the travel motif. In both versions, one of the most significant differences in the epic plot is reflected in the depiction of the hero’s departure on his journey. The journey motif is a central artistic element in heroic and lyric-epic epics, serving as a narrative device that is essential to the plot. It allows the epic to demonstrate the hero’s trials and the realization of the work’s ideological objectives through the hero’s actions and the deeds of the people supporting him. In “Er Qosay”, the journey motif exposes the hero to various dangerous obstacles—duels with local rulers, traveling alone through the Kalmyks’ countless troops, and encountering enemy intrigues—and enables the hero to overcome these challenges with the help of epic auxiliaries (ancestral spirits, spiritual leaders) and supportive figures (friends, horses). Through these trials, the hero achieves his goals through bravery, heroism, and intelligence. For example, Er Bökshe departs for Russia with five thousand troops. He personally selects the people who will join the journey and organizes the army himself. The motif of the hero’s leadership and strategic talent, characteristic of a national hero, is not present in the Karakalpak version. In contrast, in the Karakalpak version, Er Kökshe requests an army from the Nogai khan Arshakhan to travel to Russia. The motif of requesting military support also appears in the life of Er Qosay, Er Kökshe’s son, reflecting the hero’s duty and loyalty to his ruler. In the Kazakh version, there is no mention of a Nogai khan; in heroic epics, it is a standard convention that the hero serves as a ruler or representative of his people or community. This traditional epic structure has, however, undergone modifications in the Kazakh oral renditions.

The motif depicting Er Qosay’s childhood is absent in the Karakalpak version. Despite such differences in motif typology, both versions maintain continuity in the plot and reveal the central idea in a similar manner. Accordingly, the plot of both versions continues with the hero’s journey motif, which highlights their heroic deeds. The idea of heroism is revealed primarily through the motif of bravery. For instance, the hero’s (Er Kökshe, Er Bökshe) act of bidding farewell to his family before departing for Russia, informing his troops of his intentions, and obtaining their consent serves as a characterizing motif that highlights his personal qualities. Through this motif, the hero’s love for his homeland, respect for his troops, affection for his spouse and child, and other human virtues are vividly

expressed. This characterizing motif complements the established motifs and further develops the plot. Another related motif is found in the farewell scene, where Er Kökshe's wife, Älewsha, is portrayed through a descriptive motif. In the Kazakh version, there is no corresponding motif depicting Er Bökshe's wife. Nevertheless, in both versions, the images of the hero, the young woman, and the Kalmyk rulers are rendered and developed through these characterizing motifs, which enhance the narrative and provide greater depth to the epic's portrayal of personalities.

In both versions, the motif of the horse's gallop is represented through action in the same way. Regardless of the destination, the hero's journey—his traveled path, the timing, the spatial expanse, and the distances covered—is realistically depicted through the movement motif and the galloping of the horse. The hero's extraordinary nature, his uniqueness, and his unparalleled strength are revealed through his individual actions, which are embodied in this action motif. In the epics, emphasizing the hero's bravery occupies a central position. In "Er Qosay", the hero (Er Kökshe, Er Bökshe) leaves his troops behind before entering Russian territory and proceeds alone, confronting the enemies personally, which introduces the motif of a surprise encounter. For example, in the Karakalpak version, on his journey Er Kökshe unexpectedly meets two Kalmyk commanders, kills them, and leads his horse to the Blood Ravine. There, before four hundred soldiers, he confronts the Kablanly commander, defeats him, and then returns to his troops. He deceives them by saying, "The Kalmyks have been defeated, only their wives and daughters remain; if you go, you will return with great spoils." This motif of deceiving the troops to test them also appears in the Karakalpak epic "Qoblan". In the Kazakh version, Er Bökshe similarly encounters four Kalmyk units unexpectedly, kills them, and the four horses flee, scattering among the larger Kalmyk forces. Er Bökshe pursues them alone, defeats countless Kalmyks, and upon returning to his troops, exaggerates his achievements and claims he has obtained a great amount of livestock.

Мен бир бөлек мал таптым,
Аламан тегин алсын, - деп,
Олжа болып қалсын, - деп,
Түн ишінде ылақтым,
Мен секилди бабайға,
Бес мың қабылан ересің,
Ертеңгі сәске болғанда,
Көп малдарды көресің [7.105].

(The narrator discovers a herd of animals, lets others

take it as free spoils sharing wealth with the crowd, throws it quietly at night with discretion, reflects on himself as a wise elder, reminds that great strength and followers will come, and by the next morning the abundance of livestock will be seen) [7, p. 105].

Thus, in the Kazakh version, there is a motif of deceiving the hero's troops. This motif motivates the soldiers with the promise that "you will return with great spoils," encouraging them to march toward Russia. Such a strategy of deception also appears in the Karakalpak epic "Qoblan", where Qoblan tricks forty young men following him into attacking the Köbikli commander. Additionally, the reconnaissance motif complements the plot by highlighting the hero's personal strength, bravery, and martial qualities, thereby emphasizing his heroic and warrior character.

In the plots of both versions, the action motif occupies a central position in the epic. Within this action, the Russian motif is depicted. The Russian motif is one of the stable and principal guiding motifs. It represents the climax of the epic, where the resolution of the conflict—through the hero's victory or defeat—is expected. In both versions, however, the plot is developed through the hero's triumph. The episode depicting the Russian adversary is rendered through the action motif, vividly portraying the bloody battle between the opposing sides. Professor Q. Maksetov notes: "In heroic epics, conflicts with the enemy and duels occupy a central and decisive position; they form the climax of the composition. Typically, the combat is described with particular intensity by the audience, referred to as the most passionate part by the zhyrau, and the zhyrau themselves narrate it with special vigor and dedication. Indeed, the listeners vividly imagine the opposing heroes and the spilled blood before their eyes. The theme of conflict is presented in various ways in Karakalpak heroic epics" [8, p. 143]. The composition of the epic "Er Qosay" revolves entirely around resistance to aggression, freedom, and justice. Within the Russian motif, events are depicted in all their detailed, minute, and realistic aspects, providing a lifelike and artistically vivid representation of the conflict.

"Individual heroes in Karakalpak heroic epics gather all their strength into themselves" [8, p. 147], as noted by Q. Maksetov. In the epic "Er Qosay", all strength is likewise concentrated in the hero alone. During the conflict with the Russians, his accompanying troops flee, leaving the hero to face the enemy alone. The flight of the troops is emphasized through the action motif. For example, in the Karakalpak version:

Ноғайларды қарасаң,
Батырға өлим оңай деп,

Қашпақ бизге қолай деп,
Қалса қалсын Көкше деп,
Ноғайлылар сасады,
Еңбекшил қала қайда деп,
Аллалап ноғай қашады,
Көргеннің ақылын алады,
Ер Көкшедей батырың,
Жау ишінде қалады [9.192].

(The passage teaches that a true hero stands firm while others flee, showing courage, strength, and resilience. Cowardice leads to fear and retreat, while bravery earns respect and leaves a lasting example for both friends and enemies. It emphasizes the values of heroism, wisdom, and leadership in Kazakh epic tradition). [9, p. 192]

In the Kazakh version, this episode is narrated concisely in prose. For example, “Then the hero looked back and saw that five thousand enemy troops had stopped, but they were fleeing in disarray. Seeing this, Bökshe became angry and charged at the enemy” [7, p. 107]. The motif of the hero’s troops abandoning him is also repeated in the life of Er Qosay. The difference is that Er Qosay’s beloved (Qansulyw, Aleukesh) pretends to make a vow to the troops, gaining their trust, and then returns it. The motif of the hero’s beloved deceiving the troops to create an obstacle allows the narrative to highlight Er Qosay’s personal character and his heroism while facing the enemy alone.

One of the principal guiding motifs in heroic epics is the motif of single combat. In all epics, duels occur between heroes. In “Er Qosay”, Er Kökshe fights the Kablanly commander; in the Karakalpak version, Er Qosay duels the Kablanly and Karakhan commanders; in the Kazakh version, the hero fights Tasbolat, Taktabolat, and Karaman. Regarding the role and significance of this motif in heroic epics, Professor Q. Maksetov writes: “In heroic epics, duels frequently occur between heroes during conflicts. The duel is a distinctive form of combat in heroic epics. A hero’s victory in a duel is equivalent to victory over the enemy’s entire army. Duels are often depicted toward the end of the conflict or at its decisive moments” [8, p. 147]. The duel motif within the conflict motif allows the plot to reach its resolution.

In the epic “Er Qosay”, after the Nogai heroes Er Kökshe and Er Bökshe are killed in battle against the Kalmyks, their eldest son, the heroic child Er Qosay, continues his father’s struggle. The plot of the epic then focuses on depicting Er Qosay’s heroic life. In the composition of the epic, the depiction of two heroes’ life stories—where the father dies and the child continues the battle

against the enemy—is a common typological feature in many heroic epics. This motif can also be observed in epics such as “Qoblan”, “Er Ziywar”, and “Manas”.

The motif of a hero coming of age alone, characteristic of epics, is present in “Er Qosay”. In the Karakalpak version, Er Qosay is twelve years old when his father departs for the Russian campaign, while in the Kazakh version he is six. The epic gives special attention to the motif of the hero becoming an orphan at an early age. Similarly, the Karakalpak epic “Bozughlan” devotes considerable space to depicting the motif of a child losing his father and becoming an orphan.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the similarity of motifs in the Karakalpak and Kazakh versions of “Er Qosay” stems from the long-standing cultural and historical connections between the two peoples and the oral performance practices of the zhyrau and singers. Differences arise from variations in customs, traditional practices, lifestyle, and specific national features in storytelling and performance.

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