

# The Representation Of Folk Heroes In The Epic “Er Qosay”

Bekbauliev Quwandiq Oskinbaevich

Karakalpak Branch of the Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Karakalpak Research Institute of Humanities, Nukus,  
Republic of Karakalpakstan, Republic of Uzbekistan

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**Abstract:** The article discusses the epic heritage of the Karakalpak people, focusing on the epic “Er Qosay.” It analyzes the creation of ideal heroic figures within the epic. “Er Qosay” is classified as a heroic epic, and its composition and epic events are scientifically examined as being based on the plots from the period of the Nogai tribes in the 14th–16th centuries. The epic heroes, Er Kokshe and Er Qosay, are given detailed scholarly descriptions, showing how they are depicted as embodiments of heroism in the people's ideals. The idea of defending the homeland is revealed through the images of these two heroes. The depiction of Er Qosay as a folk hero demonstrates his patriotism, pursuit of equality, and justice, which is artistically portrayed through realistic representations of his conflicts with enemies.

**Keywords:** Heroic epic, Nogai, epic hero, batyr (warrior), idea, plot, image, motif.

**Introduction:** In the epic tradition of the Karakalpak people, the “Er Qosay” epic holds a special place. The epic was recorded in the last century, specifically in 1940, from the Karakalpak folk bard Qurbanbay Tajibaev (1876–1958). This version was published in Volume XVII [1] and Volume 20 [2] of the “Karakalpak Folklore” multi-volume collection. Today, we only have this version recorded from Qurbanbay Tajibaev. Among the Kazakh people, the epic exists in separate variants under the titles “Er Qosay,” “Er Kokshe,” “Kokshe Batyr,” and “Er Qosay, Son of Kokshe.” In the Kyrgyz epic “Manas,” the heroic images of Er Qosay and Er Kokshe are also depicted, participating as folk heroes in the narrative. According to historical data, from the second half of the 13th century, the Golden Horde experienced increased invasions, internal conflicts, and disputes, leading to the fragmentation of its constituent tribes. One such division occurred at the end of the 12th century when one of the Golden Horde's military leaders, the commander of a thousand, Nogai, separated from the Mangyt tribes under his control, and these tribes became known as the “Nogais.” Scholar N. Daukaraev writes: “After the

fall of the Golden Horde, in the 14th–16th centuries, many tribal groups formed their own communities. This union was called the ‘Nogai.’ During this period, it is known that the ancestors of the present-day Karakalpaks were part of the political tribal unions of the Nogais” [3.189]. Due to the raids of the Kalmyk invaders, these Nogai unions, along with other peoples including the Karakalpaks, were forced to migrate from the banks of the Volga and Ural rivers. The historical and socio-political events that occurred in the life of the people—the resistance of the Nogai unions against the Kalmyks, traces of the union's collapse, invasions, forced migrations, and conflicts with external enemies—found artistic expression in the content of the “Er Qosay” epic.

Professor I. Sagitov writes: “The Karakalpak heroic epic can serve as a model of how historical events are uniquely reflected in folklore. Similar to the Kazakh heroic songs, most of the Karakalpak epic poems are based on the historical legends of the Nogai Horde in the 14th–16th centuries. In the Karakalpak epics, the deeds of the “Orda heroes” of the Nogai period, such as Edige, Er Shora, Er Qosay, Er Kokshe, and others, are

narrated" [4.51]. In fact, the scholars mentioned—Edige, Er Shora, Er Qosay, and Er Kokshe—lived during the era of the Nogais and were real historical figures. Among the Turkic peoples, separate epics were created to depict the heroic images and feats of each of these historical personalities.

"Er Qosay" is a heroic epic by genre, and its composition and epic events are based on the plots from the era of the Nogai Horde. The main heroic characters in the epic are the images of Er Kokshe and Er Qosay, who are depicted as ideals of heroism among the people and play a central role in shaping the epic's main idea. The idea of defending the homeland is revealed through the images of these two heroes. In both heroes' depictions, their actions of going to war and fighting enemies are presented in similar ways. The patriotic nature of both heroes is shown in their dialogue when they ask the Khan of their land—that is, the Nogai Khan Arshakhan—for military assistance. The heroes' courage and determination are conveyed through their interactions with the Khan. For example:"

Er Kokshe:

Ызғытайын қалмақ дүнья-малларын,  
Қайғырмайын патшасының жанларын,  
Әрман менен келдим сениң алдыңа,  
Еки мың әскер бер күшейсин қалым [1.184].

(I came before you with longing, not worrying about the Kalmyk's wealth or the king's life, asking for two thousand soldiers to strengthen my forces).

Er Qosay:

Сайлап миндим ханым дейип әреби ат,  
Балам дейип бердің бизге марапат,  
Душпанымнан алатуғын қаным бар.  
Маған бергил сансыз әскер, күш-құжат [1.212].

(I rode proudly on my horse, received a reward from you as my child, and asked for countless soldiers and strength to defeat my enemies).

In the epic's plot, the hero's going before the Khan is carried out as an epic convention, because in order to ride against the Kalmyk enemies, the hero must take supporting troops with him. In the composition of the epic, dialogue forms involving two or three people appear very frequently. In these dialogues, the goals of the hero or other characters and their distinctive traits

are revealed. Moreover, the development of the next events and the resolution of the plot are almost entirely unfolded through these dialogues.

Essentially, in the compositional structure of the epic, the epic images of two heroes are depicted. In the first narrative line, the epic biography and heroic deeds of Er Kōkşe are described, while in the second line, the epic image of Er Qosay is portrayed. These two images are presented consistently and sequentially, meaning that the heroic deeds of the warrior father (Er Kōkşe) are continued by his son, Er Qosay. The epic seems intended to recount the historical genealogy of several generations of heroes. Episodes such as the battles of the Nogai heroes Ai Kōkşe, Kūn Kōkşe, and Er Kōkşe with the Kalmyks, and the deaths of Ai Kōkşe and Kūn Kōkşe in battle without receiving aid, are described briefly, yet these short details set the stage for the development of the epic plot. The epic image of Er Kōkşe is portrayed as a fighter for national freedom and for the blood of his ancestors. In the plot, attention is particularly given to depicting his heroism through domestic life details, such as his interactions with his family (e.g., his wife), which also illustrate his bravery in battle. The duel between Er Kōkşe and the warrior Qablanly, his solitary combat against thousands of enemy soldiers, and the depiction of the Nogai troops beside him as cowardly, for example:

Көкше деген бұл батыр,  
Көп душпанның ишінде,  
Жалғыз өзи қалады,  
Ноғайларға қарасаң,  
Батырға өлим оңай деп,  
Қашпақ бизге қолай деп,  
Қалса қалсын Көкше деп,  
Ноғайлылар саады» [1.192].

(Kōkşe, the hero, stands alone among many enemies, and his bravery frightens the Nogais who hope he would flee).

Through the episode in which the others abandon Er Kōkşe and flee, the heroic traits in the image of Er Kōkşe are highlighted. He kills the Kalmyk warriors named Aida, Qayda, and Bayla. To exaggerate the heroism of the warrior, the narrator employs a traditional technique found in heroic epics: the soldiers accompanying the hero are depicted as cowardly. The

events conclude with the death of Er K  k  . The deaths of the Nogai heroes in the epic reflect the historical reality of battles with the Kalmyks. Academician T. Mirzaev writes: ‘...epics are created in a certain historical, economic, and social context. However, they continue to be told in later periods. Therefore, every economic and social era leaves its mark, more or less, on them.’ Indeed, the social conditions of each era are reflected from the very beginning of the epic, and this influence is noticeable throughout. After the death of Er K  k  , the plot continues with the image of Er Qosay. Thus, the sequence of heroes is Ay K  k  , K  n K  k   – Er K  k   – Er Qosay. The third generation of heroes, represented by Er Qosay, continues the struggle for freedom against the Kalmyks. The epic hero and his purpose are shaped around the people’s welfare, and his ideological struggles hold a certain aesthetic significance.

In the epic, there is no information about the parents of Ay K  k  , K  n K  k  , or Er K  k  ; nothing is said about them. However, the epic mentions the imagined figures in Er K  k  ’s family: his wife   lew  , his twelve-year-old son Er Qosay, and his sixty-three-year-old grandfather   od  r. Events that took place in Er K  k  ’s life are sometimes repeated in Er Qosay’s life with certain variations. The epic’s plot is narrated with realistic depictions of everyday life. The relationships between father, son, and mother are portrayed as exceptionally warm and affectionate. This is clearly illustrated through the life of a single family. For example, Er Qosay holds a feast for the people in honor of his father who died in battle. Through the image of Er Qosay, the epic depicts the Turkic tradition of offering food for the spirit of the deceased. Scholar U. Qoraboev cites ethnologists’ views, writing: ‘Ancient peoples believed that totem animals exist not in this world, but in another world – the world of supernatural powers, gods, and spirits. They considered totems as intermediaries linking humans and divine forces, and they worshiped them.’ As we can see, such religious beliefs originating from ancient times are preserved in the epic ‘Er Qosay.’

Throughout the epic, the actions of   od  r, the grandfather of Er Qosay, are central. He is depicted as a close friend, a wise advisor, and a warrior who assists in battles against the Russians. In fact, he even appears as a leading figure. For example, during a night ambush

by the Kalmyks, he identifies himself as Er Qosay and is captured, demonstrating true friendship and loyalty to the hero. At the same time, this reflects historical realities of certain periods, since friends or companions of warriors often sacrificed themselves or were captured to protect their ruler or commander—a common occurrence of that era. Thus, epic supporting characters are important not merely for their own actions, but for their role in carrying out the poet’s intended purpose within the epic’s idea. Therefore, understanding each character’s duties in the narrative and their place in the plot is crucial for grasping the epic’s main ideological goal. The main hero experiences many trials throughout the story. In certain parts, supporting characters (  od  r,   lew  , Er Aman) provide essential guidance or assistance, enabling the hero to achieve his goals. Despite having different tasks at various points in the plot, the supporting characters complement the events and play a major role in realizing the epic’s central ideas. Consequently, the relationships between the hero and the supporting characters create necessary moments in the plot and facilitate the unfolding of certain motifs. For example, the story shows   od  r’s loyal friendship to the hero. Later, when Er Qosay sets out to rescue   od  r from the Russians, this action reflects the relationship between the hero and the supporting character, which in turn gives rise to the Russian-related motif in the plot.

The poet presents Er Qosay’s heroism in the Russian campaign with various techniques, making it vividly realistic and artistic in the listener’s imagination. The aspects of Er Qosay’s character—his patriotism, sense of equality, and justice—are highlighted after he achieves victory over the opposing enemies Abakhan, Taqtapolat, and Zawı  . Following this, the shepherd   piw  y is elevated to the throne by the Kalmyks as a ruler, reflecting the people’s longstanding wishes, desires, and intentions within the epic. The motif of raising a shepherd to kingship also appears in the “Alpamis” epic, where the shepherd   shim is installed as king by the Kalmyk ruler Taishakhan. This is natural because the poet presents the epic as a medium through which the people’s wishes and aspirations are realized, positioning himself as their singer and representative.

Er Qosay achieves victory over the Kalmyks almost entirely by his own strength. Therefore, Professor S.

Bahadirova notes: "Here we see the tradition in heroic epics of idealizing the hero's power, placing his heroism in the foremost position. To emphasize the hero's bravery, instead of showing him fighting alongside his army, the epic depicts him defeating thousands of enemies alone—this is one of the distinctive features of heroic epics. This tradition is preserved in both the Karakalpak and Kazakh versions of the 'Er Qosay' epic, forming an essential plot motif" [7.184]. However, in any era, the hero's actions reflect the wishes, views, and values of the audience, particularly equality and justice. The poet's attitude toward the hero and other characters is also evident. For example, when Er Qosay requests auxiliary troops, the poet presents Arshakhan's unfavorable character through the lines: "He approved the words said, Arshakhan, laughing and striking, the cruel one, thus letting this man's life be determined by the nobles," where the phrase "cruel one" conveys his negative portrayal.

In the epic, the female characters Abakhan's daughter Gulayim and Arshakhan's daughter Gulsim are depicted only episodically. Neither Gulayim nor Gulsim's struggle for love is emphasized; they appear indifferent to their fate and love. This is because the primary focus of the epic is on illustrating Er Qosay's heroism and his campaigns against the Kalmyks. The hero's courage and bravery are tested not in a single battle but across several battles. Such a tradition is also found in the epics Qoblan, Maspasha, and Er Ziywar. The epic introduces multiple antagonistic characters who challenge the hero and try to obstruct his path. These include Abakhan, Taktapolat, Qablanly, Karakhan, Zawyk, and Arshakhan. By portraying these opposing forces, the plot becomes richer, more complete, and interwoven. At the same time, the singular heroic image of the ideal warrior is created, revealing the central ideological direction of the epic.

In short, the epic consistently conveys Er Qosay's selfless devotion to his people and his patriotic actions throughout the story. The bard artistically portrays the hero's spirit of loyalty to his people through all his movements, psychological states, and thoughts and feelings.

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