

The Performance Mastery of Qahhor Bakhshi In the Uzbek Epic Tradition

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Received: 28 February 2025; **Accepted:** 29 March 2025; **Published:** 30 April 2025

Abstract: The article reveals the unique style of the Uzbek folk bakhshi Kahhor bakhshi Rakhimov in performing epics, the individual features of his modern repertoire, the manner of performance that distinguishes him from other bakhshi, the poetic aspects of his work as a continuer of the Sherabad school of epic poetry.

Keywords: Epic, folk, bakhshi, poetry, music, performance, dombra.

Introduction: The epic (doston) and the art of its performance constitute the principal and most highly specialized branch of Uzbek oral literature. The emergence and gradual development of this art are inseparably linked to the bakhshis' practice and activity. The epic is a lyric-epic poem-an artistic work of that genre-widely found in both Uzbek oral tradition and classical literature. In the epic, a particular event is narrated through lyric-epic imagery. It embraces life and reality on a grand scale, typically revolves around one or two central heroes, and features a large cast of characters. [1]

About two or three thousand years ago, the performers of the epic were given the title "bakhshi." The word "bakhshi" comes from the Mongolian and Buryat bakhsha (baghsha – "learned one," "teacher"), appears among Turkmens as baghshi, among Karakalpaks as baqsi, and in similar forms elsewhere. [2.2]

Bakhshichilik is a priceless art form that unites mastery of poetry, music, and performance. A bakhshi is the folk epic singer and storyteller who preserves terma (oral song-verse), ballads and epics-singing them from memory and transmitting them from generation to generation. With their sweet, silvery voice and the melodies flowing from their dombra, they involuntarily stir the human heart and set it moving. The size of a bakhshi's repertoire varies: those blessed with keen hearing, sharp intellect, natural talent, and an exceptional memory can recall dozens of epics by heart. According to experts, another group of bakhshis

lived as qalandar-dervishes, roaming from place to place singing religious and didactic epics in honor of Muslim saints.

Uzbek epic artistry stands among the most extraordinary cultural phenomena: the activities of bakhshis, the institutions of epic-singing schools, and the master-apprentice lineage have together ensured the survival and transmission of countless epic. Scholars have shown that this art embodies the rich, ancient traditions of our people's artistic thinking. Drawing on these time-honored customs, the art of bakhshichilik is delivered solo-through an intimate, inner vocal style accompanied by the dombra-and unfolds live in spontaneous, improvisational performance.

Born into the hereditary lineage of bakhshis, Qahhor bakhshi Rahimov-son of the celebrated Qodir bakhshi Rahimov-belongs to the distinguished circle of performers who have, from 1990 to 2025, ensured the living transmission and development of the epic-singing traditions of Surkhandarya and Kashkadarya. Qahhor bakhshi was born on 2 February 1957 in the village of Kho'jamahmud, Dehqonobod district, Kashkadarya region, into the beloved household of Qodir bakhshi Rahimov.

After completing secondary school in his village, he studied at the Faculty of Uzbek Philology at Karshi State University, where he received theoretical instruction in folklore-especially in the art of epic performance-from the eminent folklorist Abdumo'min Qahhorov. [3.5-6]

Descended from seven generations of bakhshis, Qahhor Bakhshi learned the secrets of this art from his father, Qodir bakhshi. He describes how his passion for bakhshichilik first awakened: "In our family, bakhshi gatherings were held at least two or three times a week. Because my father was a master bakhshi, performers would travel from Surkhandarya, Kashkadarya, and even Turkmenistan to our home. They'd listen to my father's singing until dawn, then take up the epic themselves. Villagers would fill our house as if it were an inn. My father's magical voice and the haunting melodies of his dombra absolutely mesmerized me. Watching his students and visiting bakhshis perform was spellbinding. Later, when I was alone at home, I'd pick up the dombra and try to recreate their performances-strumming the instrument and mimicking their songs. That's how my own style began to form."

All of the epics performed by Qahhor bakhshi are artistically mature and linguistically impeccable. The imagery he employs is always perfectly placed, and his use of hyperbole and similes is rendered with astonishing vividness-testimony to his verbal agility, enchanting improvisational gift, deep epic knowledge, and powerful memory. For these reasons, the epics and termas he sings captivate audiences with their popular appeal, emotional resonance, and engaging storytelling. Qahhor bakhshi's repertoire draws on a vast poetic well, rich in narrative motifs, epic traditions, set verses, and recurring refrains.

A bakhshi never performs the same epic identically, no matter how many times or in which venues he sings it. During the rendition, the dombra's melodies shift, the modes and ornamentation adjust to the audience and the context, the narrative may be sometimes condensed or sometimes extended, and the text is continuously reshaped by spontaneous improvisation. These variations are determined by the bakhshi's mood and the composition of his listeners. Yet, whether performing a terma or an epic, a bakhshi must rigorously uphold tradition, emphasizes Qahhor bakhshi Rahimov.

Qahhor bakhshi is by birth a noble soul and a true host-brave as Alpamish, broad-hearted as Gorugli, as cherished as Ravshanbek, and as devoted an artist as Avazbek. The extraordinary breadth of his memory reveals his status as a rare talent in every circle he enters.

Qahhor bakhshi is an exceptional artist-both a classically trained teacher-pedagogue and a spontaneous ("badihago'y") epic singer, as well as a poet. Several of his poetry collections have been published, and he is also a member of the Writers'

Union. Having achieved the rank of master artist, he possesses a unique gift and flair for performing both traditional and personal termas, and for composing new ones.

What sets Qahhor bakhshi apart from other bakhshis is that, before beginning any doston or terma, he always invokes the name of Allah and earnestly seeks His help. For example:

-“O friends, let me tell you but one tale,
May Allah in His mercy grant us grace.”

Secondly, the bakhshi sends blessings upon our Prophet Muhammad (s.a.v, peace be upon him).

Thirdly, he invokes the name of his mentor-his father Qodir bakhshi-understanding that before any performance he must, in spirit, seek his father's blessing and carry his guidance in his heart.

These three acts-invoking Allah, honoring the Prophet, and paying homage to his ancestral teacher-reflect Qahhor bakhshi's deep respect for the sacred lineage and his gratitude to those who have guided his art.

When beginning a traditional doston, he first plays a melody on the musical instrument “soz”, then in his opening remarks transitions to extolling his dombra. A true bakhshi cherishes his instrument-he nurtures and venerates it, regards it as sacred, and trusts that its divine tones lift the listeners' spirits, banish their weariness, and inspire hope for the day to come.

When a bakhshi sets out to perform an epic or terma, he concentrates his emotions, lends power to his voice, and reveals the full scope of his memory. Qahhor bakhshi's artistry is shown by his deep knowledge of the Sherobod

epic-singing school's founders' legacy, his personal interpretation of their material, his broad vision, and his profound scholarship. Moreover, both in the past and today, a bakhshi is judged by the unity of three elements-an engaging text, a pleasing melody, and a vibrant, expressive voice. Any performer who cannot sustain all three in harmony cannot be considered a fully accomplished, professional bakhshi.

Because of these three features, Qahhor bakhshi enjoys many admirers and packed audiences at every gathering. Yet, like all true artists, he remains never fully satisfied with his art. Thus he prays:

“Oh Allah, You gave me the mystic soz,
And a voice that captivates every heart.

At times I've moved people to tears, at times to laughter-

But why did You grant me so little intensity?”

Ever in pursuit of perfection, he continually strives to

deepen the very qualities he feels are still lacking. [4.323]

The influence of tradition was so strong that many singer-songwriters preferred not to flaunt their creativity. This attitude towards the epic prevailed in much earlier periods. [5.15] This approach to traditional epic methods had also taken firm root among the bakhshi of the southern oases. In considering oasis

epic-singing, it's important to emphasize that here the epic tradition has evolved while fully preserving its strong, ancient character and sustaining its artistic vitality in live performance. The bakhshi's relationship to the epic canon-in their master-apprentice bonds, the bakhshi's persona and his storytelling, tradition and art, collective and individual creativity, and the special attention they give to the aesthetic power of their instrument (the *so'z*) and the spoken word-forms the distinctive stylistic hallmark of the southern-oasis bakhshi schools.

Qahhor Bakhshi Rahimov's epic repertoire includes over eighty memorized dastans, among which are:

Alpomish, Kuntug'mish, Bo'takoz, Zevarkhan, Sahibkiran, Jarhunmaston, Mallasavdogar, The Birth of Go'ro'gly, Zaydinoy, Yunuspari, Gulnorpari, Misqolpari, Zulfizar, Avazkhan's Bringing, Father's Prayer, Hasankhan, Khushkeldi, Nurali, Juzum's Bringing of the Eye, Avazkhan's Becoming a Slave, Kaytmaspolvan, Nurali and Five Hundred Mulabachcha, Gulshanpari, The Sale of Giro, Avazningarazi, Khandalli, Go'ro'gly's Journey, Yusuf and Ahmad, Shahidnama, Allonazar Olchinbek, Oyparcha, Sheryurak Madikhan, Kaysardev, Beva Barchin, Yodgor, Malikai ayor, Zarnigor, Zayidkul, Erali and Sherali, Alomon and Karamon, Orzigul, Intizor, Chambilkamali, Sanam Gavhar, Mozandara, Altinkobok, Oynobodpari, Suluvkhan, Hasankulbar's marriage, Shokhdorkhan, Yusufbek, Muradkhan, Rustamkhan, Bolkhuvon, Kirq Kasamyod, Aisuluv, Oytumsa, Balogardon, Hasan-Husan, Boloyim, Nurali and Semurg, Nurali and old Ahmed, Shirin and Sugar, Kunduz and Yulduz, Tarki Badakhshan, Saqibulbul, Oychinor, Kelinoy, Vamiq and Uzro, Bahrom and Gulandom, Goroglu and Bozorgan, Temur and Bayazid, Makhtumkuli, Navoi in Samarkand, Ahmed Yasavi, Kaldirgoch, Kadir Bakhshi, Tillosaman, Sadoqat, Kungiro, Istiqlol, Ravshankhan, Gupponoy, Yazi and Zebo, Guloh.

He also performs the great religious epics "Yusuf va Zulayho", "Tohir va Zuhro", and "Ibrohim Adham". In addition to his memorized canon of over 80 dastans, Qahhor Bakhshi has composed nearly 1,000 *termas*-traditional and contemporary songs-demonstrating both his prodigious memory and his creative mastery

of Uzbek epic and folk art.

If we assume that each of the sixty epics in Qahhor bakhshi's repertoire averages 7,000–8,000 lines, that alone amounts to some 420,000–480,000 verses. Even without counting his *termas*, it's astounding that a single performer can carry nearly half a million lines in his memory. No team of four specialists across different arts could match that feat-and yet one man does. His very mastery amazes listeners, and it is this wonder that makes them cherish, honor, and draw inspiration from their singer. [4.324]

Qahhor bakhshi's skill is that he was able to artistically summarize the feelings, views, and thoughts of a historical figure (*momosi*) to the level of the pain and experiences of all mothers and women who have lost their children untimely. [4.335]

Qahhor bakhshi, as an unparalleled creative artist and true innovator among bakhshis, has composed original epics such as "Guloh," "Ahmad Yassaviy," "Navoiy in Samarkand," "Maxtumquli," "Temur and Bayezid," "Qaldirg'och," "Beva Barchin," "The Epic of Qodir bakhshi," "Tillo Saman," "Sadoqat," "Qo'ng'iro, and "Istiqlol." These works represent his contribution to enriching the universal epic repertoire through a singular, individual vision.

Individuality (from Latin *individuum*, "indivisible") denotes the unique, non-repeatable qualities that belong to a specific thing, event, person, or living creature. Defined by its particular traits, individuality stands in contrast to generality (the universal). Emphasizing the specific over the common, this principle is also a hallmark of the Romantic worldview.

Over the years, Qahhor bakhshi's epic performances have been committed to print in book form, with titles such as "Yodgor" (1999), "Ahmad Yassaviy" (2004), "Qo'ng'iro" (2004), "the Epic of Qodir Bakhshi" (2019), "Ollanazar Olchinbek" (2020), "Yozi and Zebo" (2023), Maxtumquli (2021), "Go'ro'g'lining safari" (2022), "Mallasavdogar" (2022) and "Qirg Qasamyod" (2024).

Between 2014 and 2023, Qahhor bakhshi brought out a remarkable sequence of works: his poetry collections-from Mangulik Javohirlari in 2014 and Samodan tomgan tomchilar a year later to Quralay in 2018, and then Tong Yulduzi, Ko'hna karvon sadolari and Bulbul navolari in 2022-demonstrate his lyrical mastery, while his 2017 essay Yashinga Aylangan Chaqmoq and the memoir-style volume Ellar va Yo'llar, published in 2023 to commemorate forty-five years of memories and counsel, reveal his reflective depth. Meanwhile, In Turkiye his Sherobod-school interpretation of Alpomish in 2017 and followed it with his rendition of Temur va Boyazid in 2019 were published.

As a successor to the Sherobod epic-singing school and endowed with a vibrant, enchanting voice, Qahhor bakhshi keeps the master-apprentice tradition alive and rigorously honors the ancient performance customs-ensuring that the art of doston recitation is preserved and carried forward. Whenever a poetic school takes root in a region, it naturally produces a leading master and scores of disciples or specialists, sustaining the unbroken lineage of teacher and student. [6.27]

It's important to note that the Sherobod epic-singing school's bakhshi carry forward a deep aesthetic reverence for their masters and forebears, and this respect is woven into every aspect of their epic performance. Folklorist A.Ergashev, in his study of this tradition, has analyzed how a bakhshi's artistry and the audience's spiritual journey become intertwined, striving to give a scholarly foundation to what is essentially a living, communal experience.

Qahhor bakhshi himself has taken his craft around the world-appearing at festivals, competitions, and scholarly gatherings across many countries. In 1992, he toured the United States, where he gave twelve concert performances, sharing the magic of the Sherobod school on an international stage.

He has given concerts in England, Ireland, Moscow, Tbilisi and Istanbul, and toured all the Central Asian republics on his creative journeys. At the 7th International Festival in Azerbaijan, some 170 bakhshis from Turkic nations took part; fifteen were chosen as laureates, among them Qahhor Bakhshi. In 2001, he was honored with the title "People's Bakhshi of Uzbekistan."

Journalist Arslon Eshmurod reflects, "I've read Qahhor bakhshi's three epics-Yodgor, Ahmad Yassaviy, and Qo'ng'iro't-and it wasn't like reading a poem at all, but as if I were watching a film, utterly absorbed in the story." Professor Zaif Walter, a Turkologist at the University of Philadelphia, offered the same appraisal in New York. "I thank Allah that I chose Qahhor bakhshi among all Uzbek performers," he said, "for he was able to reveal the divine art of the Uzbek people in one of the world's great nations."

Qahhor bakhshi, singing epics and termas, gives life to the deep depths of history, encourages listeners to identify with their own distant thoughts, to remember their ancestors, and their soul roots. While Qahhor bakhshi is embodied before our eyes as an innovative creator and skilled performer, his greatest achievement is the creation of the epic "Makhtumkuli" about historical figures, in particular, the creator of a great religious movement, a saint, and a saint, and his ability to show this figure in the epic and sing it with

enthusiasm.

In composing his epic "Maxtumquli," Qahhor bakhshi drew on the rich tapestry of Turkmen and Uzbek lore-legends, memoirs, and scholarly historical works about the poet-while also recalling the vivid accounts his father, Qodir bakhshi, had shared. Combining these sources with his own epic sensibility, he crafted them into a powerful, unified narrative. [7.5]

What distinguishes a master bakhshi from the rest is his remarkable command of emotion and spontaneity: he can transition seamlessly from exhilarating intensity to tranquil stillness, shift from sorrow to playful humor, and even address the audience directly and unexpectedly. In short, he places special emphasis on improvisation, weaving it into every element of the performance. A true bakhshi can modify even the most time-honored lines and epic clichés within a doston-though such extemporaneous variations are rare and typically involve only subtle alterations of words or affixes. [8.92]

In conclusion, Qahhor bakhshi is a truly singular artist. He serves as a bridge between past and present-an alumnus of a great school who has gone on to found his own-sustaining the lineage of bakhshis and making a major contribution to the cultural heritage of the Turkic world. He has trained over thirty disciples, five of whom have been honored with the title "People's bakhshi of Uzbekistan."

Today, our republic's state and legal strategy-aimed at broadly promoting the art of bakhshichilik across the Turkic world, fostering creative exchange among bakhshis in Turkic-speaking countries, honoring master bakhshis with due respect, documenting exemplary performances, and preserving them for future generations-deserves special recognition. This policy is carried out directly by committed artists such as Qahhor bakhshi.

The art of bakhshi, which embodies the national identity of our people, their ancient history and language, their way of life, traditions and customs, and is recognized as an integral part of universal culture, is being preserved through the work of our outstanding folklorists and artists like Qahhor bakhshi, who sing epics, folk tales, lapars, and aytsuvs with their selfless work and creative thinking.

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