



A FIGURE AT THE CROSSROADS OF LEGEND AND REALITY: KORKYT ATA

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Abstract

Korkyt Ata is one of the most remarkable figures in the spiritual and cultural heritage of the Kazakh people, where legend and historical reality are closely intertwined. This article examines the legendary narratives surrounding Korkyt Ata's birth, his lifelong search for immortality, his philosophical worldview, the invention of the qyl-qobyz (bowed string instrument), and the circumstances of his death. Drawing upon both folklore and historical sources, the study highlights his invaluable contribution to Kazakh culture and philosophy. It demonstrates that through his music and wisdom, Korkyt Ata expressed the philosophical concept of eternal life and left an enduring spiritual legacy for future generations.

Keywords: Korkyt Ata, legend, historical reality, philosophy, eternal life, qobyz, Kazakh folklore, historical figure.

Introduction

Korkyt Ata occupies a unique place in the spiritual culture of the Kazakh people. He is remembered not only as a philosopher, composer, and musician but also as a mythical figure preserved in the collective memory of the nation. His life and legacy represent one of the clearest examples of the intersection between legend and historical truth. According to legend, when Korkyt was born, the sky suddenly darkened, violent storms swept across the land, and fear spread among the people. Witnessing these extraordinary events, the people believed that the newborn child possessed exceptional qualities and named him **Korkyt**, a name symbolizing both fear and extraordinary courage. This legend emphasizes that



Korkyt was regarded as an exceptional individual from the very beginning of his life.

The most significant historical source confirming Korkyt Ata's existence is the **Book of Dede Korkut** (Kitabi Dede Korkut). In this epic work, he is portrayed as a wise elder, philosopher, bard, spiritual leader, healer, and gifted musician. The book contains numerous sayings attributed to him, one of which states: "Where there is life, there is death; where there is existence, there is change. Nothing is eternal, and nothing remains unbroken forever. Everything eventually passes away and is forgotten. Only the good deeds performed during one's lifetime remain immortal".

This statement reflects Korkyt Ata's profound philosophical understanding of human existence and the meaning of life. Legends describe Korkyt Ata as a sage who deeply understood the relationship between life and death, the spiritual development of humanity, and harmony with nature. According to one legend, he dreamed that as long as he did not think about death, he would live forever. However, later the Angel of Death informed him that death was inevitable.

Korkyt Ata's life is closely associated with philosophical reflection and legendary narratives. It is said that his mother carried him in her womb for three years, experiencing labor pains only once each year. When he was finally born, the heavens darkened and a tremendous storm shook the entire land. Consequently, he was given the name **Korkyt**, which became a lasting symbol of fear transformed into courage and wisdom within the cultural memory of the Kazakh people.

Although surrounded by myths, Korkyt Ata is also recognized as a historical figure. The **Book of Dede Korkut** presents him as a wise counselor, philosopher, bard, spiritual leader, healer, and musician. The work explores his reflections on life and death, spiritual growth, and humanity's pursuit of happiness, illustrating the depth of his philosophical worldview.

One of Korkyt Ata's greatest achievements was the invention of the **qyl-qobyz**, one of the oldest bowed string instruments of the Turkic peoples. He was a highly skilled musician capable of mastering every musical instrument known in his time. However, he aspired to create a completely new instrument that could



express the sounds of nature, including the whispering wind, the flowing water, and the voices of animals and birds.

According to legend, Korkyt searched for suitable wood and eventually found a tall pine tree growing in a remote forest. After cutting it down, he carefully dried and shaped the wood over several days. During this period, he had a dream in which an angel instructed him to build a musical instrument using the leg bone of a six-year-old camel as its central support because of its exceptional strength and durability. The angel also advised him to make the resonating body from camel hide, the bridge from mountain goat horn, and the strings from the tail hair of a mature stallion. Following these instructions, Korkyt created the qyl-qobyz, an instrument that produced a unique, deep, and expressive sound unlike any other. The qyl-qobyz soon became renowned for its enchanting melodies. Through his music, Korkyt conveyed profound reflections on life and death, happiness and destiny, heroism and eternity. According to legend, whenever he played the qyl-qobyz, death itself temporarily ceased, allowing peace and harmony to prevail throughout the world. Nevertheless, fate eventually caught up with him. One day, while Korkyt was resting near the Syr Darya River, a small snake emerged from the water and bit him, bringing about his death. This legend symbolizes the ancient philosophical belief that no human being can ultimately escape mortality, regardless of wisdom or spiritual greatness.

Throughout his life, Korkyt Ata sought the secret of eternal life. He travelled across the four corners of the world, hoping to discover a place where death did not exist. Everywhere he went, however, he encountered the same reality: every living being is destined to die.

Realizing that physical immortality was impossible, Korkyt eventually returned to his homeland in the Syr Darya region. There he came to understand that true immortality is achieved not through the body but through spiritual heritage, creativity, and art. This realization became the foundation of his philosophical worldview.

Approximately twenty musical compositions attributed to Korkyt Ata have survived to the present day. These works demonstrate that he was not merely a musician but also a profound thinker whose artistic legacy embodies the wisdom of the Kazakh people. His music reflects the harmony between humanity and



nature while encouraging listeners to contemplate the meaning of existence, destiny, and eternity.

For Korkyt Ata, the qyl-qobyz was far more than a musical instrument. It served as a philosophical symbol through which he expressed his understanding of human life, the inevitability of death, and the eternal power of spiritual values. Consequently, his musical heritage continues to occupy an important place in the cultural and philosophical traditions of the Kazakh people.

Korkyt Ata is a remarkable figure in whom legend and historical reality converge. He is remembered not only as a gifted musician and bard but also as an outstanding philosopher, sage, and symbol of the spiritual wisdom of the Kazakh people. The legends surrounding his birth are themselves extraordinary. According to folklore, the sky darkened, violent storms swept across the land, and people were overwhelmed with fear. Because of these unusual events, the child was named **Korkyt**, a name that came to symbolize both fear and extraordinary spiritual strength. Although legendary in nature, these narratives emphasize the exceptional significance attributed to his personality. Throughout his life, Korkyt Ata sought to overcome death and discover the secret of eternal life. He traveled to the four corners of the world in search of immortality, believing that somewhere there might exist a place beyond the reach of death. However, every place he visited reminded him that death is an inseparable part of human existence. This journey ultimately led him to the realization that physical immortality is unattainable.

The philosophical ideas developed by Korkyt Ata profoundly enrich humanity's understanding of time, space, nature, and the relationship between life and death. At the center of his worldview lies the spiritual development of the individual, love for life, and the belief that good deeds performed during one's lifetime remain eternal in the memory of future generations. His philosophy emphasizes that genuine immortality is achieved through moral values, creativity, and service to society rather than through the preservation of the human body.

Through the invention of the qyl-qobyz, Korkyt Ata made an invaluable contribution not only to music but also to philosophical thought. The sound of the qyl-qobyz became a symbolic language through which he expressed reflections on life and death, destiny and happiness, courage and eternity. According to



legend, whenever Korkyt played his instrument, death itself temporarily ceased. Although symbolic, this narrative illustrates the immense spiritual power attributed to art in the traditional worldview of the Kazakh people. It reflects the enduring belief that artistic creation possesses the ability to transcend the limitations of time and preserve human memory across generations.

Korkyt Ata's ideas and actions had a lasting influence on the spiritual culture and national consciousness of the Kazakh people. His legacy inspired moral education, encouraged philosophical reflection, and shaped people's understanding of life and human values. In folklore, he represents wisdom, courage, devotion to art, and a profound awareness of the relationship between life and death. Therefore, Korkyt Ata has been remembered not merely as a musician or storyteller but as a timeless symbol of spiritual wisdom and universal human values.

Even today, his philosophical ideas remain highly relevant. They encourage people to reflect on the meaning of life, the transformative power of art, and the limitless potential of the human spirit. His cultural heritage continues to inspire scholars, musicians, philosophers, and future generations, confirming that genuine immortality lies in the lasting influence of one's ideas and creative achievements.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, Korkyt Ata represents the harmonious convergence of legend and historical reality, art and philosophy, life and death, and humanity's eternal search for spiritual perfection. Through his philosophical worldview, musical creativity, and enduring cultural legacy, he secured an everlasting place in the history of Kazakh civilization.

Rather than portraying immortality as the endless continuation of physical life, Korkyt Ata demonstrated that true eternity is achieved through wisdom, artistic creativity, moral values, and service to humanity. His invention of the qyl-qobyz and the philosophical ideas expressed through its melodies continue to inspire generations, preserving his name in the collective memory of the Kazakh people.



Today, Korkyt Ata remains one of the most influential figures in Turkic cultural heritage. His music, philosophical reflections, and legendary image continue to symbolize the eternal relationship between humanity, nature, and spiritual values. Consequently, his legacy serves as a timeless source of inspiration and an invaluable component of the cultural and intellectual heritage of Kazakhstan.

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