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## THE STAGES OF FORMATION OF UZBEK EPOS STUDIES

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### Abstract

This article provides an in-depth analysis of the formation and developmental stages of Uzbek epic studies as an independent scholarly field. It examines the theoretical views of representatives of the Jadid movement in the early twentieth century, in particular Abdurauf Fitrat and Vadud Mahmud, on epic studies. The article substantiates that Fitrat's division of literature into "written" and "folk literature," as well as his introduction of the criterion of "eloquence" in evaluating epics, laid a conceptual foundation for the discipline. Furthermore, it highlights the practical significance of the first folklore expeditions of the 1920s–1930s conducted under the leadership of Go'zi Olim Yunusov and Hodi Zarifov. These expeditions played a crucial role in preserving the nation's epic heritage by introducing the methodology of directly recording baxshi performances without alteration. The study also emphasizes that in the period of independence, epic studies have been reinterpreted on the basis of new scholarly criteria—namely, nationality, historicity, and spiritual heritage.

**Keywords:** Epic studies, folklore studies, Jadid movement, folklore expedition, baxshi traditions, V.V. Radlov, Abdurauf Fitrat, Hodi Zarifov, Go'zi Olim Yunusov, the epic Alpomish, national identity, "eloquence", oral performance.

### Introduction

Uzbek folk oral creativity, particularly epic genres, represents a unique phenomenon that embodies the centuries-old historical memory, mentality, and aesthetic worldview of the people. The development of epic genres, their formation in heroic, romantic, and historical directions, as well as the organic



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evolution of baxshi (epic reciters) traditions, constitutes one of the crucial tasks facing contemporary folklore studies.

After Uzbekistan attained independence, the perception of folk oral creativity, especially epic traditions, underwent fundamental change. Previously interpreted through the lens of Soviet ideology, epic works came to be re-evaluated as expressions of national identity, historical memory, and spiritual heritage. This process also found reflection in state cultural policy. One of the earliest significant steps in this regard was the celebration of the 1000th anniversary of the epic Alpomish.

In the context of the “New Uzbekistan,” special attention has been given to the study and promotion of folk oral creativity, including the preservation and development of baxshi art. As President Sh. M. Mirziyoyev has emphasized: “If we do not join together today to preserve this unique art, then, unfortunately, it will be too late; future generations and history will not forgive us” [1]. Indeed, alongside the epics of other Turkic peoples, the Uzbek epic heritage, with its profound reflection of national development paradigms in the independence era, remains a pressing subject of investigation in folklore scholarship.

Furthermore, scholarly literature since independence has increasingly highlighted the socio-spiritual significance of the epic tradition. As T. Mirzayev observes, through epics the worldview, aspirations, social ideals, moral-ethical standards, and pursuit of virtue of the people are vividly expressed. This study, therefore, aims to examine the Uzbek epic heritage in light of its development principles and characteristics during the independence period.

### **Literature Review and Methodology**

This study analyzes the socio-cultural and scholarly factors that stimulated the emergence of Uzbek epic studies (eposshunoslik) as an independent academic field. The developmental trajectory of Uzbek epic research is conditionally divided into stages, with each stage’s distinctive features, achievements, and shortcomings elucidated. The research draws upon the scholarly legacy of figures such as Abdurauf Fitrat, Vadud Mahmud, G‘ozi Olim Yunusov, and Hodi Zarifov. The first written documentation of Uzbek oral folklore dates back to the second half of the nineteenth century, during the ethnographic expeditions of V.V.



Radlov. In the third volume of his work *Proben der Volksliteratur der türkischen Stämme* (“Die Sarten”), Radlov published fairy tales, proverbs, and epic narratives collected from the Uzbek people, presented in both Uzbek and German. These materials represent an important initial stage in the formation of Uzbek epic studies, serving as an early scholarly model of transferring oral creativity into written form. The process initiated by Radlov was systematically continued in the 1920s–1940s by Hodi Zarif and V.M. Zhirmunsky.

The early twentieth-century Jadid movement played a crucial role in shaping Uzbek epic studies. Under the leadership of Abdurauf Fitrat, the Chig‘atoy Gurungi literary circle launched efforts to collect the oral cultural heritage of the Uzbek people. In his book *O‘zbek adabiyoti namunalari* (“Samples of Uzbek Literature”), Fitrat divided literature into “written” and “folk literature” (*el adabiyoti*). From the perspective of form and style, he classified epics into two groups, considering those created within the oral *baxshi* tradition—such as *Alpomish*—to be “*fasih*,” i.e., vivid and authentic to the spoken vernacular. Fitrat’s views demonstrated that oral texts could lose their authenticity when transcribed, thereby laying a significant theoretical foundation for textual criticism.

The Jadid critic Vadud Mahmud also made substantial contributions to folkloristics. He emphasized that the true “owner” of folk literature is the people themselves, and his division of literature into “folk literature” (*el adabiyoti*) and “written literature” provided impetus for the establishment of folkloristics as an independent scholarly discipline.

The folkloristic expeditions launched in the 1920s were of exceptional importance for preserving Uzbek oral epics from extinction. Dedicated scholars such as G‘ozi Olim Yunusov and Hodi Zarifov pioneered the methodology of recording Uzbek folklore directly from *baxshi* performers during live performance, without any alterations. This approach initiated a shift from viewing folklore as a static text to perceiving it as a dynamic act of performance. Zarifov’s arduous fieldwork and his establishment of deep human connections with performers (for example, with the poet *Po‘lkan shoir*) illustrate the immense complexity of this work and the selfless dedication it required.



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## Results and Discussion

The formation of Uzbek epic studies (eposshunoslik) can be divided into two interrelated stages:

1. **The Jadid Period (early 20th century).** During this stage, the epic tradition was elevated from being regarded as a mere ideological “pastime” to being recognized as a source of national pride and identity. Abdurauf Fitrat and Vadud Mahmud established the theoretical foundations of folklore research, introducing scholarly criteria such as *fasihlik* (“eloquence”) as a marker of authenticity. Their approaches emphasized that oral epics like *Alpomish* represent the living voice of the people and should be valued as vital expressions of cultural and historical consciousness.

2. **The Expedition Period (1920s–1930s).** In this stage, G‘ozi Olim Yunusov and Hodi Zarifov applied theoretical principles in practice by systematically collecting epic samples. They preserved the spiritual heritage of the Uzbek people by recording the repertoires of *baxshi* performers directly, without alterations. As a result of their dedication, unique epic texts such as *Alpomish* and *Yusuf va Ahmad*, performed by celebrated *baxshi* like Fozil Yo‘ldosh o‘g‘li, Po‘lkan shoir, and Ergash Jumanbulbul o‘g‘li, were incorporated into the scholarly corpus. Hodi Zarif later recalled that his relationship with these elder performers went far beyond formal research: “I became very close, almost like family. I called them Ergash ota, Fozil ota, and they called me their son.” Such deep bonds of mutual trust enabled the *baxshi* to share not only their rarest texts but also their artistic secrets with the young scholar. This illustrates a key methodological principle: in fieldwork, genuine human connection and mutual respect often prove more effective than any technical device.

The pioneering folklorists Yunusov, Zarifov, and Mahmud Zarifov also recognized that the performance of an epic is not a mechanical reproduction, but a creative act in which the *baxshi* recreates the work anew with each performance. They sought to understand the performer’s creative mastery, observing improvisation and artistic skill as central to the vitality of the tradition.

In the **Independence Period**, Uzbek epic studies entered a new stage, grounded in national and scholarly principles. The focus expanded beyond preservation to include detailed investigation of epic poetics, structural features, performance



schools, and the creative individuality of baxshi. This modern stage situates epics not only as cultural heritage but also as dynamic artistic systems reflecting the values, aesthetics, and identity of the Uzbek people.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the emergence of Uzbek epic studies (eposshunoslik) as an independent scholarly discipline is the logical outcome of the theoretical foundations laid by the Jadid intellectuals in the early twentieth century and the practical efforts of devoted folklorists during the expeditions of the 1920s and 1930s. These pioneers elevated the epic tradition from a marginal cultural phenomenon to the level of a source of national pride and identity.

Today, Uzbek epic studies continue to follow the path charted by these enlighteners, whose views must be regarded not only as historical contributions but also as enduring methodological guidelines that have not lost their relevance. Thanks to their tireless work, the epic heritage of the Uzbek people—formed over many centuries—has been preserved and transmitted to contemporary generations, ensuring the continuity of cultural memory and identity.

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