

# EPIC TRADITIONS IN TURKMENISTAN: THE TURKMEN EPIC ART OF ‘GOROGLY’

GELDIMYRAT MUHAMMEDOV

National Institute of Manuscripts of Academy of Sciences of Turkmenistan

The Turkmenistan intangible cultural property comprises five domains that are summarised below:

1. Oral expressions - oral folklore
2. Traditions, customs and people's beliefs
3. Traditional performing arts
4. Traditional craftsmanship
5. Traditional knowledge

Epics are included in the ‘oral traditions’ section. By now more than 10 elements have been identified in this field, including such epics as *Gorogly*, *Shasenem and Garip*, *Zokhre and Takhir*, *Khuyrlukga and Khemra*, *Sayatly Khemra*, *Asly Kerem*, *Arzy-Gambar*, *Khatamnama*, *Warka-Gulsha*, *Kasym oglan*, *Melike-Dilaram*, *Nejep oglan* and *Tulum Hoja*. *Gorogly* occupies a special position among the abovementioned range of epics.

People that bear, practise and pass this heritage are called by the Turkmen people *Dessanchy bagshy*, - that is, epic performers specialised in *Gorogly*.

In Turkmenistan *Dessanchy bagshy*, each with their own distinctive narrative techniques, have developed in 2 welayats (regions) - Dashoguz and Lebap. The element is also available in the neighbouring countries, such as

Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Iran, being also found throughout the world in territories, where Turkmen ethnic groups have lived since ancient times.

The Turkmen epic *Gorogly* has more than 50 different versions (legends). The aspiration of the Turkmen people for happy life, unification, freedom and justice are reflected in the epic. Bravery, honesty, patriotism, friendship, tolerance, fairness and forthrightness are glorified in the epic.

The entire storytelling includes the range of legendary achievements by ancient hero *Gorogly* and his 40 *Dzhigits*, recording all major events in the traditional lives of Turkmen. The people's conceptions of and attitude to their past, present and future were reflected in the epic.

*Gorogly* is a genre of oral epic, where prose and poetry alternate and where the prosaic parts narrate about the heroes behaviours and happenings they find themselves involved in, while the poetic part reveals their feelings.

*Gorogly* is an outstanding creation and an oral encyclopaedia of the Turkmen people, which still remains an inexhaustible source feeding their cultural psychology, national character, mentality, creative capacity and artistic skills.

It is a combination of narrative, singing, vocal improvisation and musical composition, including theatrical dramatic elements. It is usually performed by *Dessanchy bagshy*, who is characterised by unusual memory, outstanding musical skills and talents and an ability to tell stories to the accompaniment of traditional musical instruments, such as *dutar* (a two-stringed instrument played by plucking) and *gyjak* (a fiddle-like Turkmen musical instrument). *Bagshy's* narration, signing of different melodies from the poetic parts and his mastery in playing *the dutar*, as well as his ability to improvise are in close intercommunication and form a whole content.

The people's conceptions of and attitude to their past, present and future were reflected in the epic.

Experienced *Dessanchy bagshy* is the bearer of the epic, who practises the narration of *Gorogly*. The master selects the youngest epic learners and teaches them. The epic learners who are interested in epics must have diligence, good memory, imaginative minds, abilities in playing the *dutar*, be gifted, have a pleasant voice and a strong wish to learn epic telling for a long time (up to 5-10 years) under the master's guidance and supervision.

Guided by the master, the learner enriches his repertoire, at the same time improving and polishing his own performing art and skills. In addition, he learns the moral and ethical norms in performing epics. The master blesses the learner in front of the public after he has passed his exam and received positive estimates, which entitle him to perform epics independently for an audience and teach young learners.

The master passes his knowledge to his learners through teaching and providing them with access to documented sources in different formats (printed versions, audios and videos).

People learn *Gorogly* at special events, where *Dessanchy bagsy* performs *dessans* as well as from different documented sources of related social institutions.

The passing of skills (playing the *dutar*, narrating, signing, improvisation, theatrical elements) is an integral part of *Gorogly*. The skills are acquired through special training, when they are practiced together with the master for 5-10 years at no charge. It ensures constant flow between the younger generation and the old to close the skills gap.

The Turkmen National conservatory, State school of culture and arts and specialised musical schools at the *velayats* develop the learners' skills in playing *the dutar* before they enter on the epic learning.

The epic *Gorogly* has a wide social function in Turkmen communities. Reflexive knowledge of communities associated with emotions relating to meanings and values originating from the epics becomes a basis for social relations and ties connecting individuals or groups and determining their future actions to promote interaction and activation of social networks.

Through the epics, Turkmens learn, enjoy and pass their common historical and social values to younger generations as a social tool to hand down rich knowledge and values, which strengthen the awareness of national identity, national pride and national unity among the Turkmens.

The epics also play an important role for Turkmens in the upbringing of young people; particularly it refers to diligence, accuracy of thinking, loving of their history, culture, homeland and people of Turkmenistan and respect other nations and cultures.

In the epos, the features of behaviour of the Turkmens, such as humanness, wisdom, generosity, hospitality, tolerance, leadership, fearlessness, open-heartedness, patriotism, respect for elders, cheerfulness, musical talent, keeping and redeem a promise, faithfulness to the people and friends, love for homeland and nature, social behaviour, mentality and diligence have been disclosed.

Knowledge and skills related to the epics such as narration, traditional music, performing art, Turkmen language, poetry, traditional customs, traditional knowledge (including *Akhal-Teke* horses breeding, hunting etc.), traditional life style evolved during the millennium are determined as an indicator of cultural identity of the Turkmen.

Therefore the epic is considered a moral and ethical code of mentality and identity of the Turkmen nation in the period of globalisation.

The viability of the element has been ensured by the enthusiasm of epic masters through the teaching of interested learners in the past. The learners

polished their skills at gatherings, such as wedding ceremonies, competition among *bagshy* (epic singers) etc.

The Dessanchy bagshy is one of the main promoters of *Gorogly*. Recognised epic masters try to teach and pass the element to prospective learners in the manner inherited from their ancestors. It testifies to the viability *Gorogly* at present and in the future. It is important to organise regularly national and religious holidays, celebrations, commemorations and cultural festivals, both national and international, to ensure the viability of the element today. The existing *Bagshylar oyi* (houses of bagshy) in each province, where epic masters exchange their experience by monthly gathering together as well as audio and video recording studios and TV and Radio broadcasting companies also contribute a lot to the maintenance and dissemination of the element among potential learners.

Moreover, the audience interested in the study of the dessan, international and domestic scholars, students and learners is gradually increasing (expanding) year by year, which is another example of the epic's viability.