

## The Musical Narration of Jiraw History

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**Abstract.** Jiraw tradition is one of the oldest forms of oral cultural heritage of the Karakalpak people, holding an important position in the development of literature, music, and national cultural identity. This art form emerged during the early period of nomadic society and functioned as a medium for preserving history, moral values, legends, and heroic epics. This study aims to analyze the origins, development, characteristics, and socio-cultural role of jiraw art in Karakalpak society. The research employs a descriptive qualitative method with a library research approach through the analysis of scientific sources, manuscripts, and relevant literature related to the history of jiraw, qobiz, and the figure of Qorqit ata. The findings indicate that jiraw performers function not only as reciters of oral literary works but also as creators, guardians of collective memory, and transmitters of cultural values. The qobiz, as the main instrument in the jiraw tradition, possesses symbolic value closely connected to the spiritual and cultural history of Turkic peoples. In the context of modernization, the jiraw tradition faces challenges in preservation; therefore, support from society and cultural policies is essential to maintain its sustainability as a symbol of Karakalpak national identity.

**Keywords:** jiraw tradition, Karakalpak, oral culture, qobiz, Qorqit ata, cultural heritage.



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## INTRODUCTION

When discussing traditional Karakalpak arts, it is impossible to overlook jiraw, baqsi, and qissaxan traditions, which represent some of the oldest artistic forms that have existed since the early formation of society. These artistic traditions emerged from the needs of nomadic communities to preserve historical knowledge, cultural values, and collective experiences through oral transmission. Due to the high mobility of nomadic life and unstable socio-political conditions, the development of written literature among

ordinary people was limited, making oral traditions the primary means of preserving and transmitting knowledge.

Within this context, jiraw performers occupied a central position in Karakalpak culture. They not only performed *dástans*, *terme*, and *tolǵaws* but also composed works that documented historical events, social struggles, and the worldview of the people. Thus, jiraw became both cultural figures and social educators within their communities. The *qobız*, as the principal musical instrument accompanying jiraw performances, further strengthened the unique identity of this artistic tradition.

Historically, the jiraw tradition has deep roots across Turkic cultures and is closely associated with the legendary figure of *Qorqit ata*, who is regarded as the spiritual patron of the *qobız* and an important cultural figure in oral musical traditions. However, in the era of globalization and modernization, the continuity of jiraw tradition faces serious challenges, including declining interest among younger generations and the limited regeneration of performers. Therefore, studying the history and cultural significance of jiraw tradition is crucial for supporting the preservation of Karakalpak intangible cultural heritage.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative method using a library research approach. The data were collected from academic books, journal articles, historical manuscripts, and written sources related to jiraw tradition, *qobız*, and the figure of *Qorqit ata*.

Data collection techniques included identifying, classifying, and documenting relevant literature connected to the research topic. The collected data were analyzed using content analysis to examine the historical development of jiraw tradition, its socio-cultural functions, and the values embodied within this art form.

The stages of data analysis consisted of data reduction, data presentation, interpretation, and conclusion drawing. In addition, a historical approach was applied to investigate the relationship between the development of jiraw art and the socio-cultural conditions of Karakalpak society throughout different historical periods.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

When discussing the national musical and artistic heritage of the Karakalpak people, it is impossible not to address directly the traditions of jiraw, *baqsı*, and *qıssaxan* arts. These artistic forms are regarded as some of the earliest cultural traditions that emerged in ancient times and have preserved their value and significance up to the present day as important components of our cultural heritage.

Traditionally, the Karakalpaks were a nomadic pastoral people who frequently migrated from one place to another, changing their settlements according to seasonal and environmental conditions. They commonly inhabited vast open steppes and riverbanks rich in water resources. However, the people were also often exposed to attacks and invasions by external enemies. Under such unstable conditions, the development of written literature among ordinary people was nearly impossible. Nevertheless, within the community there were individuals with strong memory and intellectual capacity who memorized stories and events they had heard and retold them to others, thereby laying the foundation for the formation and development of oral literature.

In this regard, it is not without reason that *Shokan Walikhanov* referred to the Karakalpaks as the first singers of the steppe. Living in the vast plains and engaging in

pastoral life, the people played instruments such as the *dutar* and *qobız*, performing folk wisdom, legends, myths, and epics they had inherited through oral transmission. Thus, oral literary works occupy a significant place in the artistic literature of the Karakalpak people.

Among those who made the earliest and greatest contributions to the creation, preservation, and development of oral literature were representatives of the *jiraw* tradition. Compared to *baqsı* art, *jiraw* tradition is considered to have emerged much earlier. In his book *Xalıq Danalıǵı* (“Wisdom of the People”), Qallı Ayımbetov notes that *jiraw* art predates *baqsıs*, *qıssaxans*, and poets.

*Jiraw* performers traditionally play melodies on the *qobız* instrument and perform songs in a distinctive vocal style characterized by a guttural and resonant voice, produced by constricting the throat. This vocal style is called *jır*, from which the term *jiraw* is derived.

In the lexicon of Turkic languages, Mahmud al-Kashgari recorded the terms *qoshǵu* and *yır* (*jır*), treating them as synonyms of poetic expression or song. He explained *yır* broadly as song, *ghazal*, or *maqam* melody, indicating its wide semantic usage. At that time, the term *kók* was also used to denote singing or musical performance.

The terms *jiraw* and *jır* are also found in the works of many historical figures, demonstrating that the *jiraw* tradition has existed since ancient times. The word *jiraw* appears in the epic *Gul va Navruz* by the famous Uzbek poet Lutfi (1411), as well as in the works of the classical Uzbek poet Alisher Navoi.

Kazakh oral literature scholar E. Ismailov also wrote that in Kazakh oral literature, *jiraw* appears to be one of the oldest forms of poetic expression, and the term undoubtedly derives from the root *jır*—to sing or recite poetry.

It is well established that *jiraw* tradition emerged in very early periods among the peoples of Central Asia. Among Turkic-speaking communities, performers of heroic epics and didactic poetic forms accompanied by *qobız* were once referred to as *wzan*, meaning wise poet or leading bard.

Today, *jiraw* is often understood merely as a performer of works composed by others using the *qobız*. However, according to ancient traditions, this interpretation is incomplete. Historically, *jiraws* not only performed but also composed and transmitted their own epics and poetic works. Therefore, ancient *jiraws* should be recognized not merely as performers, but also as talented creators and authors of many literary works, although the authorship of some works remains unknown due to historical circumstances.

The principal instrument of *jiraws* is the *qobız*. Historical evidence indicates that the *qobız* is one of the oldest instruments, known not only among the Karakalpaks but also in other cultures. For example, among Ukrainians, a similar instrument and performer tradition exists under the name *kobzar*, referring to singers and poets who express sorrow and longing through music.

There are many legends concerning the origin of the *qobız*. According to traditional narratives, Qorqyt Ata is regarded as the spiritual patron and originator of the *qobız*. Folklore recounts that Qorqıt Ata long sought to create the perfect instrument and, inspired by mystical guidance, eventually crafted the *qobız* from specific natural materials, producing an instrument capable of generating profound and expressive melodies.

Within Karakalpak *jiraw* tradition and among Turkic peoples more broadly, the name of Qorqıt Ata is widely revered. Numerous legends about him circulate among the people, and his legacy exists not only in oral but also in written form. In 1906, scholar A.

N. Samoylovich collected manuscripts among the Karakalpaks, including one titled Qorqit Baxadur, further demonstrating the historical depth of Qorqit-related traditions.

According to historical sources and genealogical accounts, Qorqit Ata was a real historical figure who lived approximately between the 8th and 11th centuries along the Syr Darya region. He is described as a philosopher, sage, renowned jiraw, poet, and community leader respected by both Oghuz and Kipchak peoples.

Although the etymology of the name "Qorqit" remains debated, various scholars have proposed interpretations linking it to concepts such as wisdom, blessing, spiritual authority, or reverence.

Today, jiraw tradition is often considered a uniquely preserved element of Karakalpak culture. However, its survival to the present day has not been easy and is supported by numerous historical facts. Since jiraw art is now largely preserved only among the Karakalpaks, it is essential to protect and support this tradition with great care. This responsibility should not rest solely on current jiraw performers, but should involve society as a whole and even be elevated to the level of state cultural policy.

The qobiz is a cultural mirror of the Karakalpak people. Through the performance of terme, tolgaw, and epics, it conveys information about the people's history, daily life, culture, literature, and artistic worldview. Just as every nation proudly presents its own music, instruments, and cultural traditions, the Karakalpak people take pride in their qobiz and dutar.

Beyond musical instruments, the Karakalpak people possess many material and intangible cultural treasures. However, in this discussion, particular attention is given to the jiraw tradition, which currently faces the risk of decline and disappearance if not properly preserved and revitalized.

## CONCLUSION

The jiraw tradition is an oral cultural heritage possessing significant historical, artistic, and identity values for the Karakalpak people. This tradition developed during the early nomadic period as a means of preserving history, legends, moral teachings, and oral literary works.

Jiraw performers functioned not merely as reciters but also as creators, transmitters of knowledge, and guardians of collective cultural memory. The existence of the qobiz as the primary instrument demonstrates the close connection between music, spirituality, and the historical development of Turkic societies, particularly through the legacy of Qorqit ata.

In the modern era, the jiraw tradition faces serious challenges, particularly the lack of regeneration and decreasing public attention. Therefore, preserving this art form requires cultural education, institutional support, scientific documentation, and government policies aimed at safeguarding intangible cultural heritage. Through these efforts, the jiraw tradition can continue to survive and be transmitted to future generations as a symbol of Karakalpak cultural identity.

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