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FOLKLORISM, HISTORICAL MEMORY, AND NATIONAL IDENTITY IN DZHUBATKAN MURATBAEV'S HISTORICAL NOVEL DIGIRIQ

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examines how folklorism functions in Dzhubatkan Muratbaev's historical novel Digiriq. Rather than attempting an exhaustive inventory of every folklore element in the novel, the study analyzes two representative passages: Sasik biy's appeal for political unity and the embedded legend of Korkyt Ata, Balgali Dawlen, and Karmakchi Ata. Drawing on Karakalpak scholarship on the relationship between folklore and written literature, as well as contemporary approaches to folklorism and cultural memory, the analysis combines close textual reading with folkloristic and structural-semantic interpretation. The findings show that Sasik biy is constructed through an epic-like model of the wise communal leader, whereas the Karmakchi Ata episode functions as an etiological naming legend shaped by mythopoetic motifs. In both cases, folklore is transformed into a narrative resource rather than inserted as decorative ethnographic material. It supports characterization, encodes communal ethics, preserves culturally meaningful memory, and mediates between historical narration and the people's remembered past. The study distinguishes literary historical memory from documentary historical verification and therefore does not claim to establish the factual accuracy of the legends represented in the novel. Its contribution lies in a focused functional analysis of how Muratbaev recontextualizes oral-traditional forms within Karakalpak historical prose.

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Introduction

The relationship between folklore and written literature is especially consequential in historical fiction because the past enters the literary text through more than documentary information. It is also mediated through legends, inherited narratives, collective values, customary knowledge, and culturally recognizable modes of characterization. In this sense, folklore is not merely background material: when a writer reworks oral-traditional forms, those forms can influence plot, character construction, ethical evaluation, and the representation of historical memory. The concept of *folklorism* is useful for describing this process. Turayeva (2024) treats folklorism as the literary and artistic adaptation of folklore elements such as plots, motifs, and images, emphasizing that the concept concerns transformation and creative reuse rather than mechanical reproduction (p. 825).

Karakalpak folkloristics has long emphasized the social and historical embeddedness of oral tradition. Aimbetov (1977) argues that folklore is created and continually reworked by the people across

generations and therefore reflects the worldview, spiritual needs, and lived experience of different periods (p. 4). This understanding is important for literary analysis because it positions folklore as a changing cultural repertoire rather than a fixed archive. When folklore enters a novel, it has already passed through processes of transmission and reinterpretation; the literary text becomes another site in which inherited material is selected, reshaped, and assigned new functions.

The connection between folklore and literary national character is also central to Maqsetov's (1975) work on Karakalpak literature. Maqsetov identifies folklore as an indispensable source through which literature may intensify culturally specific features and deepen artistic meaning (p. 3). Such an approach helps explain why historical prose frequently draws on legends, proverbial thought, traditional ethical models, and oral modes of remembering. The presence of such material, however, is analytically meaningful only when its function in the new literary context is demonstrated.

Research on Karakalpak poetry has documented this creative interaction in detail. Bekbergenova (1995), for example, examines folk-poetic traditions in twentieth-century Karakalpak poetry and stresses the textual presence and artistic role of folklore-derived devices (p. 123). More recent scholarship likewise distinguishes different modes of assimilating and stylizing folklorism in the poetry of Ibrayim Yusupov (Ayimbetova, 2022). These studies are significant because they shift attention from the simple question of whether folklore is present to the more productive question of how it is artistically transformed.

Karakalpak prose has also been studied from this perspective. Begmuratova (2019) addresses folklorisms in Karakalpak novels of the independence period and argues that prose writers may stylize the formal, generic, or ideological features of folklore for literary purposes. The present article builds on that broader line of research but narrows the unit of analysis to one historical novel and to two particularly revealing mechanisms: the folkloric construction of a historical leader and the embedding of an etiological legend within historical narration. This narrower design avoids claiming an exhaustive classification of all folklore elements in the novel and instead permits closer attention to textual function.

Dzhubatkan Muratbaev's *Digiriq* is a productive text for such an inquiry because the novel connects the representation of historical figures and places with culturally transmitted narratives. The revised study therefore asks two questions: (1) How are oral-traditional models recontextualized in the selected passages of *Digiriq*? (2) What artistic functions do these folkloric elements perform in characterization, historical memory, and the articulation of culturally marked values? The article uses the term *cultural memory* in a limited literary sense: the socially transmitted remembrance through which communities connect narratives of the past with shared identity. This usage is consistent with Assmann's (2011) account of cultural memory as a form of socially sustained remembrance that can extend beyond individual experience and participate in the formation of group identity.

Materials and Method

The primary material is Muratbaev's 1991 edition of *Digiriq* published by Qaraqalpaqstan. The analysis is qualitative and interpretive. It does not attempt a quantitative inventory of every proverb, custom, genealogical reference, or folklore motif in the novel. Instead, it uses purposive textual sampling to examine two extended passages already central to the manuscript's argument: Sasik biy's speech concerning political fragmentation and collective unity (Muratbaev, 1991, p. 78), and the legend connecting Korkyt Ata, Balgali Dawlen, and the name Karmakchi Ata (p. 158). These passages were selected because they represent two distinct forms of folkloric mediation: character-based epic stylization and an embedded etiological narrative.

The analysis proceeds in four interpretive stages. First, close reading identifies the lexical, narrative, and evaluative features through which the passages acquire a folkloric character. Second, folkloristic analysis classifies the relevant mechanism - for example, heroic or wise-leader stylization, etiological explanation, and mythopoetic motif. Third, structural-semantic analysis considers how the folklore element is integrated into characterization, narrative causality, and thematic organization. Fourth, the findings are

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contextualized in relation to Karakalpak scholarship on folklore-literature interaction (Aimbetov, 1977; Begmuratova, 2019; Maqsetov, 1975) and broader work on folklorism and cultural memory (Assmann, 2011; Turayeva, 2024).

A historical-comparative method is deliberately not claimed in the revised design because the present evidence does not include archival documents, chronicle sources, or multiple historical versions against which the novel could be tested. Accordingly, references to "historical memory" concern the literary representation of remembered history rather than verification of historical fact. This distinction is essential: a legend can be culturally and artistically significant even when the study does not establish its documentary accuracy.

The English translations of the two Karakalpak passages were revised from the author's draft translations for semantic clarity and academic readability. Proper names are retained as names and are not translated lexically; thus, Sasik biy remains a proper name rather than being rendered through the ordinary lexical meaning of "sasik." Spellings of recurring names and terms are standardized within the article, whereas titles in the reference list preserve the orthography of the cited sources.

Results

Folkloric Construction of Sasik Biy

The first passage constructs Sasik biy through a mode of characterization that resembles the wise communal leader of oral-traditional narrative. Muratbaev places the character's authority not primarily in military power or private ambition but in his ability to interpret collective danger and formulate a unifying response. Sasik biy reflects on rivalry among regional rulers and the vulnerability produced by political fragmentation:

They treated the fate of the people like a toy, waging war against one another and driving many people from their ancestral lands. The rulers of Samarkand, Shash, Andijan, Bukhara, Urgench, and Turkestan intensified their rivalries. External enemies could take advantage of this and bring still more suffering. Therefore, he repeatedly advised: "Let us bring our people together; let us unite and become one nation." (Muratbaev, 1991, p. 78; author's translation)

Several features of the passage are important. First, the speech is organized around collective rather than individual categories: the people, ancestral land, external danger, unity, and a shared future. Second, Sasik biy is presented as a figure who reads political disorder in moral and communal terms. His authority derives from foresight and responsibility. Third, the culminating appeal to "unite and become one nation" gives the speech an aphoristic, orally memorable quality. These features elevate the character beyond an ordinary participant in political events and align him with a traditional model in which wisdom is demonstrated by counsel offered for the survival of the community.

The folkloric effect does not require Muratbaev to reproduce a specific epic episode word for word. Rather, the novel stylizes a recognizable narrative function: the leader as wise adviser whose speech interprets crisis for the collective. This is a form of transformation rather than direct borrowing. The historical figure remains situated in a prose narrative, but his characterization is strengthened by an oral-traditional ethical model. In this way, folklorism operates at the level of characterization and value: it tells the reader not only what Sasik biy says, but also how his role in the moral imagination of the community should be understood.

The passage also clarifies the relationship between national identity and folklore in the novel. "National identity" here should not be treated as an abstract or essential quality. It is textualized through specific values: attachment to ancestral land, concern for collective survival, resistance to fragmentation, and responsibility for future generations. Sasik biy becomes a carrier of these values because the narrative frames his political counsel in a culturally resonant mode of communal wisdom.

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The Karmakchi Ata Legend as an Etiological Naming Narrative

The second passage uses a different folkloric mechanism. Muratbaev inserts a legend associated with Korkyt Ata and the fisherman Balgali Dawlen into the historical-geographical world of *Digiriq*. The narrative combines a recognizable place, an extraordinary musical motif, an ethic of generosity, and an explanation of how Dawlen came to be remembered as Karmakchi Ata:

Some legends say that this is the place where Korkyt Ata, after fleeing death for forty years, finally died. In the mornings and evenings, when Korkyt Ata went to the riverbank to play the kobyz, the old fisherman Balgali Dawlen also came to the river and cast his lines. When the fish heard the pleasant sound of Korkyt Ata's kobyz, resounding in a thousand joyful and sorrowful melodies, they gathered near the place where he sat. ... Dawlen distributed the fish among orphans, elderly people, and anyone who wanted some, taking home only enough for one meal. From those days, the old man's name Dawlen was forgotten, and he came to be called Karmakchi Ata. (Muratbaev, 1991, p. 158; author's translation)

The clearest generic function of the passage is etiological: the narrative explains the emergence of a remembered name. More precisely, it is an etiological naming legend rather than a strictly toponymic origin legend, because the explicit outcome is the renaming of Balgali Dawlen as Karmakchi Ata. The surrounding geography anchors the story in local space, but the narrative endpoint concerns the person's remembered designation. This distinction makes the folkloristic classification more precise.

The episode also contains a mythopoetic motif in the fish gathering to the sound of Korkyt Ata's kobyz. The novel does not present this event as a claim requiring empirical verification. Within the legend, extraordinary causality expresses the cultural power attributed to music and to the figure of Korkyt Ata. The kobyz is therefore more than an instrument in the scene: it becomes a narrative sign of a cultural order in which music can affect nature, memory, and human relationships.

Balgali Dawlen's conduct adds a second layer of meaning. He does not hoard the abundant catch generated within the marvelous logic of the legend; he distributes it to orphans, elderly people, and others, keeping only enough for his immediate household. The legend therefore links naming with ethical memory. Karmakchi Ata is remembered not simply because he fishes, but because the story associates his identity with generosity and communal responsibility. Folklorism here preserves an evaluative memory: the past is transmitted through a narrative that explains which qualities are worthy of remembrance.

This combination of geography, extraordinary motif, naming, and ethical evaluation demonstrates how folklore mediates historical space in the novel. Muratbaev does not treat place as a neutral coordinate. The landscape is narratively populated by remembered figures and stories. As a result, historical prose becomes a meeting point between chronological narration and culturally inherited memory. This supports Assmann's (2011) broader observation that cultural memory links transmitted representations of the past with group identity, while the novel gives that process a specifically Karakalpak literary form.

Functional Synthesis of the Two Cases

The two passages use different folklore forms, but they perform related artistic work. Sasik biy is shaped through a stylized wise-leader model; the Karmakchi Ata episode is organized as an etiological legend with mythopoetic and ethical motifs. In both instances, folklore transforms the meaning of historical material by connecting it to communal values. Table 1 summarizes the principal mechanisms identified in the analysis.

Table 1

Principal Folkloric Mechanisms and Their Narrative Functions in the Selected Passages

Folkloric mechanism	Textual manifestation	Principal narrative function
Wise-leader / epic stylization	Sasik biy interprets fragmentation as danger and calls for collective unity.	Constructs moral-political authority through communal wisdom and responsibility.
Etiological naming legend	Balgali Dawlen becomes remembered as Karmakchi Ata.	Explains a remembered name and embeds local memory in narrative.

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Mythopoetic musical motif	Fish gather to the sound of Korkyt Ata's kobyz.	Represents the extraordinary cultural power attributed to music and inherited tradition.
Communal ethical motif	Dawlen distributes the catch to orphans, elderly people, and others.	Encodes generosity and social responsibility as qualities worthy of remembrance.

Note. The table summarizes functions demonstrated by the two analyzed passages; it is not an exhaustive inventory of all folklore elements in the novel.

The synthesis also clarifies why it is more accurate to describe these elements as functional components of the novel than as decorative "national color." The folkloric material changes how characters and places are interpreted. It supplies models of authority, explains remembered names, intensifies the symbolic value of music, and makes ethical behavior part of the novel's historical imagination. The result is a form of historical prose in which the remembered past is represented through both event and inherited narrative.

Discussion

Folklore as Transformation Rather Than Repetition

The findings support the long-standing Karakalpak view that folklore is a major source of written literature while also demonstrating the need to analyze the mode of transformation. Maqsetov (1975) emphasizes folklore's capacity to strengthen culturally specific features of literary art, and Aimbetov (1977) stresses that folklore itself is reworked in transmission. Muratbaev's practice can be understood at the intersection of these propositions: inherited cultural material enters the historical novel after being reorganized according to the demands of prose characterization and narration.

This result is also consistent with contemporary definitions of folklorism that focus on adaptation rather than copying (Turayeva, 2024). Sasik biy is not presented through the literal insertion of an epic tale; instead, an epic-like ethical role is transferred to a historical character. Likewise, the Karmakchi Ata narrative retains the recognizable structure of a legend while being embedded in a larger historical novel. In both cases, the important analytical question is not whether the source is "folklore" in isolation but what happens to the folklore form once it becomes part of the novel.

The analysis extends observations made primarily in relation to Karakalpak poetry. Bekbergenova (1995) and Ayimbetova (2022) show that folklore-derived forms and devices can be assimilated, stylized, and given new artistic functions in poetic texts. The present findings demonstrate an analogous process in prose, but the novel offers different structural possibilities: folklore can be attached to the construction of a historical character, inserted as an embedded narrative, or used to connect geography with cultural memory. This supports Begmuratova's (2019) broader argument that folklorism in the Karakalpak novel may be realized through the stylization of formal and ideological features rather than through simple reproduction of complete oral genres.

Historical Memory and Cultural Identity

The revised analysis also requires a more precise understanding of historical memory. The novel's legend of Karmakchi Ata should not be treated as equivalent to documentary history. Its significance lies in the way a community can remember the past through meaningful narrative. The story binds place, music, moral behavior, and naming into a form that can be transmitted. In Assmann's (2011) terms, cultural memory depends on socially maintained representations that connect past and identity; Muratbaev's novel literaryizes such a process by incorporating a remembered legend into written historical prose.

This distinction strengthens rather than weakens the historical-literary argument. If folklore is treated as a factual source without qualification, the analysis risks confusing cultural significance with historical verification. If it is treated merely as fiction, however, its role in collective memory is overlooked. The more defensible position is that the novel stages an interaction between historical narration and remembered tradition. Folklore contributes a culturally meaningful interpretation of the past, while the novel gives that interpretation a new written form.

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A similar point applies to the concept of national identity. The selected passages do not provide a comprehensive definition of Karakalpak identity, nor should two scenes be made to carry such a claim. They do, however, articulate culturally marked values that the narrative associates with collective continuity: unity in the face of fragmentation, attachment to ancestral space, reverence for inherited cultural figures, generosity toward vulnerable members of the community, and the preservation of names through story. It is through these concrete values - rather than through an undefined notion of "national spirit" - that the analyzed folklorisms contribute to identity in the novel.

Limitations

The study has three principal limitations. First, it is a focused qualitative analysis of two representative passages and therefore does not claim to classify every instance of folklorism in *Digiriq*. A full monographic study could extend the corpus to proverbs, phraseological units, genealogical narratives, customs, blessings and curses, and other ethnographic details. Second, the study analyzes the literary representation of historical memory but does not compare the novel with archival records or independent historical sources. Third, the English quotations depend on authorial translation from Karakalpak; although the translations have been revised for clarity, future publication could benefit from review by an additional specialist in literary translation.

Conclusion

The analysis demonstrates that folklorism in Dzhubatkan Muratbaev's *Digiriq* functions as an integral narrative resource in the selected passages. Sasik biy is constructed through a stylized model of communal wisdom that transforms political counsel into a culturally resonant form of leadership. The Karmakchi Ata episode operates as an etiological naming legend in which Korkyt Ata's kobyz, the marvelous gathering of fish, and Balgali Dawlen's generosity combine to preserve an ethically charged memory of person and place. These are different mechanisms, but both connect historical prose to oral-traditional ways of interpreting the past.

The study therefore answers its research questions in functional terms. Muratbaev recontextualizes oral-traditional material through character stylization and embedded legend, and these mechanisms contribute to characterization, collective memory, communal ethics, and culturally marked identity. Folklore is not merely decorative material surrounding historical events; it influences the meanings through which those events, figures, and places are remembered in the novel.

The contribution of the study is deliberately specific. It does not claim the first or exhaustive analysis of folklorism in Karakalpak prose. Instead, it offers a close functional account of two mechanisms in *Digiriq* and thereby provides a more precise basis for future comparative work. Subsequent research can expand this approach across the full novel and compare Muratbaev's use of folklore with other Karakalpak and Turkic historical novels, particularly in relation to genealogy, proverbial discourse, ritual practices, and competing forms of historical memory.

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