



MILITARY VALUES AND THEIR HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE IN THE EPICS OF THE “KOROGLU” CYCLE

Muxtorjon Tolibboyev

PhD Researcher, Institute of History,

Academy of Sciences of Uzbekistan

ORCID ID: 0009-0007-3691-492X

muxtorjontolibboyev@gmail.com

Abstract

This article examines the role and significance of Uzbek folk epics in the study of military traditions and values. The research is based on a comparative analysis of samples of oral folk creativity alongside historical sources and scholarly literature. The study also evaluates epics as important historical and ethnographic sources for investigating military administration, weapons and armaments, the art of warfare, military games, medicine, and warfare in general. In particular, the social status of warriors and the specific role of marksmen within the system of military command are analyzed. The importance of warhorses in combat operations is illustrated through examples of the horses belonging to epic heroes. Furthermore, the wide scope of warfare tactics in Turan is examined through various military stratagems, including the tactics of night attacks and the so-called “wolf game.” Based on these examples, the study demonstrates that the military knowledge preserved in folk epics possesses significant historical value.

Keywords: Military affairs, epic, Koroglu, Chambil, Ghirat, “bedov”, marksman, Isfihon sword, “alp”, “ay bitigi”, “daftari mergan”, envoy, war drum (dobil), “kirovka”, shield.

Introduction

Oral folk creativity reflects the consciousness, culture, customs, and worldview of every nation and is closely connected with the historical development of the people. It embodies a community’s creative interpretation of historical events and processes, as well as its aspirations, hopes, and collective imagination. Uzbek folk epics represent some of the most valuable examples of oral tradition, preserving



the historical memory, cultural values, and customs of the people. In this regard, samples of oral literature – from the epic Oysuluv to the heroic songs about Namoz Botir – serve as important sources for studying the history of the Uzbek people [1:82–89].

These epics depict not only scenes of heroism and adventure but also portray the everyday life of the people, their rituals, and their military traditions and values. Military values, in turn, constitute a complex of customs and practices related to a people's combat experience, the organization of military forces, and the art of conducting warfare. Such traditions usually emerge as an integral part of a nation's historical experience and collective identity and are transmitted from generation to generation as a form of spiritual heritage.

MAIN PART

Uzbek folk epics are divided into several types and have been performed by bakhshis (traditional epic singers) for centuries. They are generally classified as heroic, battle (jangnoma), historical, romantic, and literary epics [2:81]. The epics of the Koroglu cycle, widespread across various regions of Uzbekistan, number more than seventy, and their systematic recording from oral performance began in 1926 [3:67]. These works constitute a large epic cycle in which a number of independent narratives united under the common name of Koroglu. Among them are such epics as The Birth of Koroglu, Avazkhan, Gulnor Pari, Ravshan, Gulqizoy, The Five Kings' Attack on Chambil, Malika Ayyor, Forty Young Men and Forty Maidens, Khidirali Elbegi, Bolkhuvon, Rayhon Arab, and Khushkeldi. These epics contain numerous references to military affairs and traditions, including information about military administration, the structure of the army, weapons and military attire, as well as combat strategies and stratagems and even elements of military medical knowledge. In the Koroglu epics, the land known as Chambil is described as a powerful military center. This can be seen, for instance, in the following passage from the epic Malika Ayyor: "Chambil is such a Chambil: a Chambil with sixty granaries, seventy armories, eighty reservoirs, and ninety cannon workshops. In the land of Chambil lives the mighty Koroglu, forty-six



commanders, and four and a half *lak** mounted warriors on swift bedov horses, among whom is the horse-master named Soqibulbul.” [4:3]

From this description, it is evident that the presence of seventy weapon depots in Koroglu’s state indicates a high level of military readiness and mobilization capacity. Such structures constituted the foundation of military power. The epic also provides information about relatively advanced weaponry: cannons were produced in ninety artillery workshops and used during military campaigns. The mention of artillery units demonstrates that artillery had reached a significant level of development among Turkic peoples.

The image of forty-six commanders also reflects the tradition of collective decision-making in military governance and the distribution of military responsibilities, suggesting the existence of a multi-tiered command system. Similarly, in the epic Avazkhan, it is noted that Koroglu assembled a large army consisting of ninety-six commanders and twenty-nine captains [5:303]. Within the military system of the state, alongside the regular army there also existed irregular forces, which were mobilized from among the population whenever necessary. Thus, the military power described in the epics reflects not only martial strength but also a well-organized administrative system and clearly defined military ranks.

Historically, the military structures of Turkic peoples were organized on a collective basis, and each rank within this system possessed its own specific responsibilities. This hierarchical structure functioned from the highest to the lowest levels, and even the most elite warriors were recorded in special registers. Just as marksmen (snipers) hold particular importance in modern military systems, epics likewise emphasize their significance. In the epic Malika Ayyor, it is noted: “Asad the marksman drew his feathered bow, while Shodmon the marksman fired his “*ashrafi*” rifle. Both of them were listed in the “*daftari mergan*” of Chambil (famous marksmen known and officially recorded by everyone)” [4:17].

In this passage, the weapons and marksmen of two different historical periods appear together. Epics, transmitted orally from generation to generation over centuries, absorb elements from each era, and thus this episode reflects weaponry

* lak – one hundred thousand; four and a half lak – four hundred and fifty thousand.



belonging to different historical stages. At the same time, the expression “*daftari mergan*” indicates that marksmen were not merely military fighters but individuals who also possessed a recognized social status within their community. The marksmen recorded in such registers were acknowledged warriors of the people who, in addition to military service, functioned as defenders of their society.

In the history of Turkic peoples, marksmen held a special position. During the period of the Turkic Khaganate, the military excellence of each warrior was individually evaluated, and distinguished fighters were granted the titles alp or alpagu. Skilled marksmen could also attain the status of alp. The renowned scholar Mahmud al-Kashgari, in his work “*Dīwān Lughat al-Turk*”, mentions a register used to record distinguished soldiers, referring to it as the “*ay bitigi*” [6:76]. The existence of such registers indicates that the military administration of the state was organized in a systematic manner.

This system continued in later periods as well, including in the military administration of the Khiva Khanate. Within the khanate’s army there was a group of marksmen known as shamkholchi, who played a decisive role during military engagements. These marksmen were distributed according to masjidqavm (in the Khiva Khanate, neighborhoods or small administrative units were referred to as *masjidqavm – M.T.*). For example, three marksmen were mobilized from the Masjid Qoshtepa Nayman community, three from the Masjid Usta Kholmuhammad community, and similar numbers from other mosque communities, with the total number of marksmen in these units amounting to approximately twenty-five individuals [7:62].

The system of military training depicted in the epics is not limited to the activities of marksmen alone but is also expressed through cavalry training and military games. In the Koroglu epics, descriptions of military exercises such as horseback riding and wrestling are presented. For example, in one passage it is stated: “Brave young warrior, you did not allow yourself to be defeated on horseback, nor were you thrown in wrestling” [3:69]. Particularly significant is the fact that the hero personally prepares his horse, which reflects the warrior’s sense of responsibility for military campaigns and combat actions [8:94]. Special attention was also given to the selection of horses. Well-bred and strong horses were referred to as bedov [9:146]. Weak horses were not used in military campaigns; rather, they



were described as “*yobi**” or crippled horses and were believed to bring misfortune in battle.

In the epics, Koroglu’s horse Girkok (Girok) is depicted with remarkable artistic mastery [10:436]. Warhorses are portrayed as understanding the language of their riders and even communicating with them. They warn their masters of various dangers and, if the hero is wounded, they carry him away from the battlefield without allowing anyone else to capture him [11:101]. Horses also held particular importance during pre-battle military inspections.

Among the military games frequently mentioned in oral tradition is the game known as “Oltin Qoboq” (Golden Gourd). This game is significant because it combines a warrior’s horsemanship with skill in archery. Traditionally, during festivals such as Navruz, harvest celebrations, circumcision ceremonies, and wedding festivities, a gourd containing coins was hung from the top of a tall pole, and participants attempted to shoot the target from a distance of fifty to sixty paces. The game tested young men’s horsemanship, agility, marksmanship, and their ability to strike any target with precision [12:5].

In the historical work Baburnama by Zahiriddin Muhammad Babur, this game is referred to as “Oltin qovoq”, and it is noted as one of the important exercises used in military training [13:135]. Within the Koroglu epic cycle there also exists a separate epic titled Oltin Qoboq, which has been performed in different versions by bakhshis such as Mardonqul Avliyoqul o‘g‘li, Ro‘zimbek Murodov, Umir shoir Safar o‘g‘li, and Chori Umirov. In the version performed by Mardonqul Avliyoqul o‘g‘li, the following lines are recorded:

*G‘ayrat minan Avazxon,
Qaboqni qildi nishona.
Oyday qib Avaz yuzini,
O‘ynatdi Layli bo‘zini.
Otini o‘ynatib Avazxon,
Oltin qoboqni choqladi....
Ot yugurishida o‘q otdi.
Avazxonning otgan o‘qi
Oltin qoboqni bo‘lib ketdi [12:17].*

* not purebred



During the Shaybanid period, this game was also conducted as one of the principal competitions within military inspections [14:98]. Such games not only enhanced the military skills of warriors but also served as a form of practical combat training for horses.

In the management of troops during battles and military campaigns, military standards (*tugh*) were used, under which the army assembled, and a special rank was established for the bearer of the banner [15:27]. In some cases, the term *alam* also appears instead of *tugh*, and during wartime the protection of the banner was regarded as a matter of primary importance.

The epics also reflect nearly all types of military weapons that existed historically, including bows and arrows, spears, swords, shields, cannons, and firearms. The presence of such a diverse set of weapons indicates that these epics, transmitted orally over centuries, were enriched and refined as they passed from generation to generation. Military weapons are portrayed not only as instruments of combat but also as symbolic elements representing the martial power of the people.

Military heroes are typically depicted as fully armed, with the sword always at their side. In some epics, the double-edged “*dudama*” sword is highly praised [9:6], while in others particular emphasis is placed on the strength of the Isfahan sword [16:117]. Among the peoples of the East, swords forged from Isfahan steel – similar to the renowned Damascus blades – were especially famous [17:104].

When the battle readiness of Koroglu is described in the epics, he is often portrayed holding the Isfahan sword in his hand. For example, in the epic Koroglu’s Journey to Darband, the *bakhshi* sings: “From the Qizilbash came ten horsemen and ten foot soldiers to Chambilbel, crying ‘Strike! Strike! Cut! Cut!’ as they plundered the shepherds. Then Koroglubek took the Isfahan sword, placed an arrow upon his bow, loosened the reins of *Giro*t, and turned against the enemy. In but a short moment he struck them down and laid them all upon the ground.”

The sword traditionally symbolizes bravery and valor. It represents the hero’s strength, his struggle for justice, and his victories on the battlefield. Another important aspect emphasized in the epics is the defensive equipment used by warriors. Protective items such as helmets, shields, armor, and *kirovka* are described as essential for safeguarding the warrior, and it is stressed that entering battle without such equipment was strictly forbidden.



*Yigit piri hazrati Dovud,
Oq kiravka, oltin sovut,
Kiymanlar nomard bo'lsin,
Dushmanlarning murdasini,
Uymaganlar nomard bo'lsin [4:42].*

Protecting the body from injury during warfare was considered extremely important. In the martial traditions of the Uzbek people, wearing military attire and armor was not merely a necessity for a warrior but also a military and social obligation. In Uzbek folk epics, weapons and military equipment are portrayed not only as instruments of combat but also as symbolic representations of national values, heroism, and the spiritual strength of the people. At the same time, arms and armor reflect not only military power but also the high level of craftsmanship and practical military knowledge possessed by the people.

DISCUSSION

When referring to descriptions of battles, it should first be acknowledged that strategically important geographical locations were always of great significance for military forces. For this reason, the occupation of mountains and hills by the enemy was regarded as a serious disadvantage. In the epics, information about military confrontations is usually presented mainly in terms of their beginnings and outcomes. Military campaigns were conducted according to strict rules and regulations, and it became customary to send a message to the enemy through envoys before initiating battle. For example, this tradition is clearly reflected in the episode describing the invasion of Shohdorkhan into the land of the Yomut. The ruler of the Yomut people, Odilkhan, sends a letter to the enemy through an envoy and states: "If rulers do not send envoys and seek a path to reconciliation before starting a war, but instead launch a direct attack, it is considered disrespectful"[16:7].

Thus, the epics demonstrate that military actions were expected to be conducted in accordance with the culture of warfare and with proper observance of diplomatic customs. The concept of the inviolability of envoys also occupies a special place in these narratives. This idea is vividly illustrated in the epic Gulnor Pari. In this story, Koroglu, while traveling to India, stops in the lands of



Afghanistan. The Afghan ruler Abdi Otaliq, assuming that an enemy has arrived in his territory, gathers his army and sends two envoys to Koroglu to clarify the situation. This episode shows that diplomatic relations and the etiquette of envoyship were regarded as an integral part of military culture.

*Yuraklardan ketgan na qayg 'u-g 'amsiz,
Qiya tog 'da sildiragan bodomsiz,
Elchiga o 'lim yo 'q hargiz, podshohim.
Do 'sti dushmanlikni, mehmonlar ayting,
Rost ayting, qanday changi odamsiz?
Otaliq amriman keldim, podshohim.*

Sending an envoy provided the enemy with an opportunity to reach a compromise and, at the same time, demonstrated respect for the institution of diplomacy. In Samandar Termizi's work *Dastur al-Muluk*, it is emphasized that an envoy must show respect to both sides: on the one hand, he must honor the glory and sovereign dignity of his own ruler, and on the other, he must take into account the intentions and honor of the opposing side [18:31].

Thus, the act of sending an envoy is interpreted as a diplomatic measure and simultaneously as a prerequisite for initiating war in a morally legitimate manner. In the epics, harming an envoy is considered a crime and may serve as a direct cause for the outbreak of war. This reflects the deeply rooted idea in the epic worldview of the people that even warfare possesses its own ethical code. During military engagements, the use of various combat methods and military stratagems also indicates the high level of the people's military knowledge. For instance, the beginning of a battle was usually announced by the beating of war drums, and this military instrument is portrayed as having great importance.

Zumrad dobil ildi egar qoshiga,
Qirq qubballi yugan soldi boshiga,
Qatag 'on peshvotlar urdi to 'shiga,
Olqorday o 'ynatib chin bedov otni,
Olib keldi Xasanxonning qoshiga [5:303].*

* a circular war drum fastened to the saddle, beaten during battle; war drum.



The high importance of the war drum on the battlefield can be understood from the descriptions given to it in the epics. War drums (dobil) are portrayed with qualities such as steel and emerald-like gold and are often depicted hanging beside the saddle. This imagery suggests that the warriors were always in a state of high combat readiness.

Moreover, military knowledge concerning the methods of warfare is reflected in the battle scenes described in the epics. During Koroglu's journey to the land of Hind, he engages in battle with the ruler Toy Hindi and, in the course of events, forms a friendship with his chief minister, Simin. In order to distinguish the minister and his supporters on the battlefield, Koroglu teaches them a military stratagem:

*Simin jo 'ra o 'zing joyingga borgin,
Tong otmayin lashkar ichinda turgin,
Bir nasihat shuldir senga jon do 'stim,
Urush bo 'lsa otning yolini o 'rgin!
Ot yoli o 'rilganga tig ' solmang,
Zinhor ishingizda ehtiyot bo 'ling [15:184]!*

Thus, he emphasizes that during warfare it is necessary to distinguish allies from enemies, even advising that a tuft cut from a horse's mane should be tied to the flanks of the elephants as a distinctive sign. In another epic episode, when Koroglu's elite force of five thousand warriors gains the upper hand in battle against the invading "Qizilbash", the enemy resorts to a stratagem and begins to retreat. Despite Koroglu's warning, "Do not pursue those who flee," his warriors nevertheless continue to chase the invading army.

*Balki, dushman yo 'lda pusib yotgandir,
Jo 'rttaganda oldi qochib ketgandir,
Bularning bu ishi yaxshi bo 'lmadi,
Balki, xunxorliklar firib etgandir.
Bo 'lmasa barchasi nobud bo 'ladi,
qizilbosh qo 'shini o 'rab oladi,
Shuytib bormoqligim zarur do 'stlarim,
Gar bormasam qo 'lga tushib qoladi [19:180].*

The use of such stratagems in warfare within the region of Turan dates back to ancient times. In antiquity, the Saka tribes often initiated battles through the use



of extended ambush maneuvers, encircling the enemy, deliberate retreats, and sudden counterattacks [20:75]. Among Turkic peoples, this tactic became widely known as the “wolf strategy” (bo‘ri o‘yini), and it was employed in military confrontations for many centuries. Through such stratagems, warriors gained psychological superiority from the very beginning of battle, thereby creating favorable conditions for victory.

This tactic was also used during the Shaybanid period. In his work *Abdullanama*, Hafiz Tanish al-Bukhari provides a detailed account of such practices. Referring to the well-known hadith, “War is deception,” he describes how a group of soldiers was placed in ambush while a number of renowned champions were sent forward to confront the enemy. After engaging in brief combat, they deliberately retreated. Believing they had achieved victory, the enemy cavalry pursued them, only to fall into the prepared ambush [21:146]. This demonstrates that the military stratagems described in the epics are not merely fictional elements but rather reflections of military knowledge accumulated over centuries.

Descriptions of battles also contain references to orderliness on the battlefield and aspects of military medical practice. For example, once a battle had ended, the conclusion of combat was announced by beating drums, after which—according to established agreements—time was granted to remove the dead and the wounded from the battlefield. The epics also contain certain instructions regarding the treatment of wounded soldiers. In the epic *Malika Ayyor*, for instance, when Avazkhan is injured, marksmen prepare a medicinal ointment by mixing turtle eggs, bear herb (*mehrigiyoh*, a traditional medicinal herb – *M.T.*), and wolf fat, which is then applied to the warrior’s wounds [4:51]. Such descriptions reflect the ability to employ rapid and nature-based remedies for treating injuries on the battlefield. These healing practices did not arise spontaneously but indicate the presence of established medical knowledge. In *The Canon of Medicine*, Abu Ali ibn Sina also discusses the beneficial properties of turtle eggs [22:481]. The lifestyle of warriors required them to possess a range of practical knowledge and skills, suggesting that the people also possessed a certain level of military-medical expertise.



CONCLUSION

Uzbek folk epics occupy a significant place in the study of the nation's unique history, culture, and military traditions. These epics not only narrate heroic events and legendary figures but also illuminate the people's martial customs, the art of warfare, and the systems of military organization and command. The battle scenes depicted in the epics, along with descriptions of military attire, weapons, and the processes occurring before and after combat, provide valuable insights for a deeper understanding of the national military culture.

Military traditions play an important role in preserving national values such as heroism, patriotism, and loyalty. Through these narratives, it becomes evident that throughout history the Uzbek people have highly valued the spirit of bravery, the defense of their homeland, and collective unity. Thus, Uzbek folk epics serve as an important source for preserving military traditions and transmitting knowledge about them to future generations.

REFERENCES

1. Аширов А. Халқ оғзаки ижодининг тарихий манба ўлароқ қимматига доир. // Ўзбекистон тарихи. 2024-йил 1-сон.
2. Murodova M. Folklor va etnografiya. – Toshkent: Aloqachi, 2008.
3. Норбўтаев П. Жанубий Ўзбекистон аҳолиси этник хусусиятларининг халқ дostonларида акс этиши. т.ф.д учун дисс... Термиз, 2021.
4. Malika аyyop. “Go‘ro‘gli” dostonlari turkumidan. – Toshkent: Ilm-ziyozakovat, 2019.
5. Avazxon. “Go‘ro‘gli” dostonlari turkumidan. – Toshkent, Oltin qalam, 1967.
6. Маҳмуд Кошғарий. Девону луғотит турк. – Тошкент, 1960. I том.
7. Gulboyev N. Xiva хonligida harbiy ish tarixi (XVIII asrning ikkinchi yarmi — 1920 y.). Tarix fanlari falsafa doktori uchun diss... Toshkent, 2024.
8. Gulqizoy. “Go‘ro‘gli” dostonlari turkumidan. – Toshkent: Oltin qalam, 2024.
9. Ravshan. “Go‘ro‘gli” dostonlari turkumidan. – Toshkent: Zukko kitobxon, 2021.
10. Хушкелди. J.33. Ўзбек халқ ижодиёти ёдгорликлари. – Тошкент: Renaissance press, 2024.
11. Ashirov A. O‘zbek xalq turmush tarzi va og‘zaki ijodida ot kulti // Uzbekistan: Language and culture. 2023-yil 1-son.



12. Олтин қобоқ (достонлар). Ж. 39. Халқ ижоди ёдгорликлари. – Тошкент: “Renessans press”, 2024.
13. Заҳириддин Муҳаммад Бобур. Бобурнома. – Тошкент: Шарқ, 2002.
14. Azizov A. Ot bilan bog'liq milliy o'yinlar tarixi va madaniyati // Madaniyatshunoslik va nomoddiy madaniy meros ilmiy-tadqiqot instituti. 2025. 1-son.
15. Gulnor pari. doston. – Toshkent: Oltin qalam, 2023.
16. Go'ro'g'lining tug'ilishi. doston. – Toshkent: Ilm-ziyo-zakovati, 2021. – 208 bet.
17. Esonov Z, Nabiyev M. Qo'qon xonligi qurolsozligi tarixidan // Central Asian Research journal for Interdisciplinary studies. 2022-yil 2-son.
18. Samandar Termiziy. Hukmdornoma. – Toshkent: Yangi asr avlodi, 2024.
19. Besh podshoning Chambilga yov bo'lishi. – Toshkent: Oltin qalam, 2024.
20. Rajabov R. Qadimgi sharq harbiy san'ati. – Toshkent: Yangi asr avlodi, 2018.
21. Ҳофиз Таниш ал-Бухорий. – Абдуллонома. 1-китоб. Тошкент: Шарқ, 1999.
22. Абу Али ибн Сино. Тиб қонунлари. 4-китоб. – Тошкент: Фан, 1980.