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ARTICLE

Gurughli: The Tajik Variety of the Epic of Köroğlu

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Abstract

The epic folk story of Köroğlu, popular among various Turkic peoples, was also widespread among the Tajiks of the upper Oxus valleys of southern Tajikistan and adjoining Badakhshān of northern Afghanistan. The Tajik versions of the story, known as Gurughli or Gurghuli, while sharing parts of the plot and outline with Köroğlu, are distinctly shaped by Tajik culture and Iranian national traditions in both form and content. This study explores various aspects of this oral tradition, including bards and their performances, the structure, plot, and themes of their repertoires, and the documentation history. This study also assesses scholarly views on the origins and development of Tajik Gurughli. The article is supplemented by five sample texts, selected to represent major cycles of the genre.[1]

Keywords: Tajik folklore; performing arts; Persian folk epics; romance literature; Turko-Tajik symbiosis; Kulāb; Badakhshān

The epic Gurughli, popular among the Tajiks of the upper Oxus (Amu Darya), was derived from Turkic sometime in modern history and remained a dominant folk genre well into the second half of the 20th century. It was most popular in rural Gharm and Kulāb in central and southern Tajikistan, as well as in adjoining Badakhshān in northeastern Afghanistan (Figure 1). Tajik Gurughli (Гӯрӯғлӣ, *Gŭrūğlī* in Tajik orthography), literally translates as "son of the grave" (from Persian *gōr* "grave" and Turkic *oğlu* "son of"), is more commonly known as Gurghuli (Гӯрғӯлӣ, *Gūrğūlī*), comprised of *gōr* "grave" and *ğul* "giant" (whence English ghoul).[2]

The Tajik Gurughli epic has likely been performed by rural bards since the late 18th century. Scholarly documentation of these performances began in the early 1930s, pioneered by Aleksandr N. Boldyrev and Iosif S. Braginskij. This documentation grew steadily until the 1960s, when it reached its most productive phase and Gurughli stories gained national fame in Soviet Tajikistan. At least fourteen variants were recorded, and several were transcribed, edited, and published in print. A compendium with Russian translation appeared in *Gurugli: Tadžikskij narodnyj èpos*, introduced and translated into Russian by I. S. Braginskij. Moscow: Nauka, 1987. The archives of the Rudaki Institute of Language and Literature at the Tajikistan Academy of Sciences are said to possess a rich audio collection of performances by various storytellers. The condition of these old audio tapes is unknown to me.

[1] This paper is an expanded version of an entry invited by the *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, which discontinued publication in 2023.

[2] The orthography employed in this paper consists of transliteration-cum-transcription of the Perso-Arabic script according to the journal's style, transliteration of the Tajik Cyrillic script, and transcription of the Kulābi dialect of Tajik.

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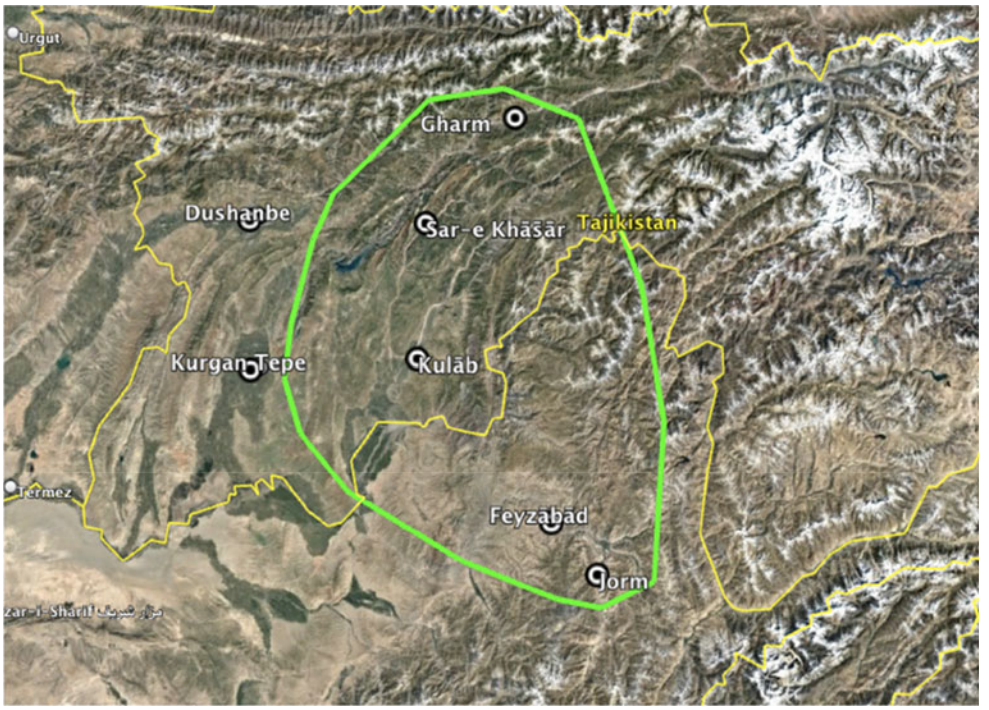

Figure 1. The geographic realm of Tajik Gurughli, which extends northward to the Zarafshān Valley, about which very little is known.

In Tajikistan, before the tradition of storytelling faded away, Gurughli singers were often itinerant, travelling from one settlement to another, to perform their repertoires. These performances were always accompanied by either the *dotār* or the *dambura*, long-necked lutes of the *tanbur* family. A typical recital would last several hours and was especially popular during the long winter nights, sometimes continuing until dawn for several nights in tandem until the bard's entire repertoire was exhausted. These performances took place in teahouses and, especially, during wedding or circumcision feasts upon invitation. The singer interacted with the audience and sang additional episodes when requested. On occasion, he would theatrically mimic the gestures and movements of heroes in battles. The art remained predominantly rural.

The expansion of mass media in Tajikistan brought Gurughli performances to the attention of urban dwellers, gradually leading to the art's recognition as a national treasure. Official recognition peaked at a nationwide recital competition (Festival-konkursi guruğlixonhoi Toǰikiston) in Dushanbe in 1969, which featured seventy minstrels of various ages and origins dressed in stripped robes and quilted skullcaps (Figure 2). During this time, Radio Dushanbe had a weekly program dedicated to *gūrūğlī-xoni* (Gurughli singing). Yet there is no evidence that the state ever became a patron of the bards or that Gurughli tales were adapted by modern preforming arts, as seen in the Azerbaijani opera *Köroğlu*, composed in 1932–36 by Üzeyir Hacıbäyli. In Tajikistan, the stories of the *Shahnama* had much higher national importance.

Across the border in Afghanistan, Gurughli is poorly studied and remains largely obscure outside Badakhshān. There was some scholarly attention during the late 1960s and 1970s, when the country became a hub for Western hippies, Peace Corps volunteers, and anthropologists. Ethnomusicologists Hiromi Sakata and Mark Slobin studied Gurughli as a genre of Badakhshāni music, and certain cycles were summarized in standard Persian prose by ʿEnāyatollāh Shahrāni in the periodicals *Fōlklōr* and *Lmar*. During the same period, Soviet

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Figure 2. Gurughli performers, Dushanbe 1969.
Source: Intangible Cultural Heritage in Tajikistan. From left (identified by the author): Zarif Šarifov, Teša Niyozov (facing the camera), Qurbonalī Raǰab (or Burhon Xalilov?), Haqnazar Kabūd, Azizbek Ziyoef, and Hikmat Rizo.

Tajik folklorists active in Afghanistan also published a piece from the Badakhshāni storyteller Ṣafar-Moḥammad (1972).

Performers

Gurughli reciters were semi-professional storyteller-musicians called *gūrūǧlī-xon*, *gūrūǧlī-guy*, or *gūyanda*. They were itinerant minstrels or bards (*hofiz*, *ḥāfeż*) who often performed other folk genres as well.[3] The narrators were typically peasants and artisans with little if any literacy, yet possessed with exceptional memories capable of retaining thousands of verses and captivating audiences for hours. Apprentices underwent rigorous training in vocal techniques, rhyming and improvisation skills, and musical harmonization. Novice bards enriched their repertoires through apprenticeships with master performers, accompanying them across different locales. Through these networks of mentorship, stories were orally transmitted, maintaining some level of consistency, at least over the half a century (1930s–1980s) of documentation in Tajikistan. However, variations emerged; for example, Hikmat Rizo and Haqnazar Kabūd stayed relatively faithful

[3] See the "Biography of a bard" section below.

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to their original teachings, whereas Qurbon Jˇalil and Qurbonalī Rajab made significant alterations due to their poetic inclinations.

Major narrative inconsistencies and alternative scenarios often arise from diverse transmission lines and storytellers' individual tastes and creative impulses. Each bard developed a unique imagination, style, and repertoire distinct in both form and content. Improvisation played a significant role, as bards had no fixed texts. They learned the basic elements of a story, including its plot structure, main characters, setting, motivation, and ending, and then improvised events and scenes during performances to fill the gaps, drawing from many episodes in their memory. Consequently, Hikmat Rizo's telling of the same story varied substantially in different recordings, as analyzed by Braginskij. Rizo maintained the sequence and connections in each cycle, but each time the story varied in execution, artistic framing, length, and motivation. As Braginskij aptly noted, the Gurughli singer was not merely a narrator of someone else's text, he was a creator, an "original poet."[4]

Most prominent bards of Tajikistan (Table 1) hailed from the southern province of Kulāb, with a nucleus in the mountainous valleys along the upper course of the rivers Qezelsu and Vakhsh.[5] A pioneer of the profession, Boboyunus Xudoydodzoda, is credited with passing on his Gurughli stories to twenty-five pupils, including Haqnazar Kabūd, Qurbonalī Raǰab, Sodiq Razzoq (Ṣādeq Razzāq), Mirzoali Hasanov (Mirzā-ᶜAli Ḥasanov), and Karim Mahmadov.[6] The Rudaki Institute in Dushanbe houses the repertoires of Qurbon Jˇalil, Xudoydodzoda, Hikmat Rizo, Odina Šakar (recorded in the 1940s), Qurbonalī Raǰab, Haqnazar Kabūd, and Talbi Zamir (recorded in the 1960s), among others.[7] As listed in Table 1, only a fraction of this recorded material has been transcribed and published (Figure 3). The civil war (1992–97) and collapse of Tajikistan's cultural institutions marked the end of traditional Gurughli performances, notwithstanding recent efforts to revitalize the tradition.

From historical Badakhshān, there are at least three documented singers: Ṣafar-Moḥammad, from Khānābād, in the present province of Kunduz, which borders Badakhshān province to the west; and Pahlavān Aṣil (Text 3) and Rajab-Moḥammad Jormi, from Upper Yaftal and Jorm respectively, along the upper Kokcha River, south of Faizabad, the capital of Badakhshān province. The Kolcha River flows north from the lofty Hindu Kush range, passing through the highland districts of Yamgān, Yaftal, and Jorm, which are situated only a few miles apart. No available study provides details on this secluded part of the world, where Naser Khosrow found refuge as a hermit in the last decades of his life.

Structure and performance

In the upper Oxus valleys, which serves as a focal point of Gurughli singers spanning Tajikistan and Afghanistan, these tales are invariably recounted in verse. In contrast, prose versions, like Uzbek versions, dominate the Zarafshān and Farghāna valleys of northern Tajikistan, where a Turko-Iranic symbiosis has shaped cultural expression for centuries.

[4] Iosif Samuilovič Braginskij, "Vvedenie" [Introduction], in *Gurugli: Tadžikskij narodnyj èpos*, ed. Iosif Samuilovič Braginskij (Moscow, Nauka, 1987), 16–20.

[5] For Kulāb, see Habib Borjian, "Kulāb," *Encyclopædia Iranica*, online edition, July 20, 2005, https://iranicaonline.org/articles/kulab.

[6] Habib Borjian, "Ḵodāydādzāda," *Encyclopædia Iranica*, vol. XVII, fasc. 3 (2023): 302–303; *Èntsiklopediyai adabiyot va san'ati Toǰik* (*EAST*), Vol. 1, 110–113; *Èntsiklopediyai sovietii Toǰik* (*EST*) , Vol. 8, 34–35, 326, 380, 383. See Text 2 for an excerpt from Boboyunus Xudoydodzoda.

[7] *Gurugli: Tadžikskij narodnyj èpos*, (1987), 671–685.

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Table 1. Performers and Documentation

Name		Dates	Provenance	Recorded and published repertoire
Hikmat Rizo	Ḥekmat Reżā	1894–1990	Āb-e garm, upper Vakhsh	34 bands, 50,648 couplets[8]
Talbī Zamir	Talbi Żamir	1913–	Khovaling, northern Kulāb	28 bands, 35,500 couplets
Haqnazar Kabūd	Ḥaqnaẓar Kabud	1917–1987	Vāseʿ, southern Kulāb	30 bands, 30,000 couplets [9]
Odina Šakar	Ādina Shakar	1888–	Dasht-e Jum, Kulāb	10 bands, 27,117 couplets[10]
Qurbonalī Raǰab	Qorbān-ʿAli Rajab	1925–2018	Baljovān, northern Kulāb	30 bands, 30,000 couplets[11]
Mirzošoh Sang	Mirzāshāh Sang	1914–	Baljovān, northern Kulāb	1,000 couplets, part of a band (unpublished)
Saidali Saqqo/Soqī	Sayyed-ʿAli Saqqā/Sāqi	1900–	Kulāb	3 bands, 4,711 couplets (unpublished)
Safar	Ṣafar		Gharm	70 couplets[12]
Qurbon J̌alil	Qorbān Jalil	ca. 1886–1946	Yāvān, upper Vakhsh	9 bands, 4,000 couplets[13]
Boboyunus Xudoydodzoda	Bābā-Yunos Khodāydādzāda	ca. 1870/75–1945	Baljovān, northern Kulāb Vakhsh	2 bands, 994 couplets[14]
Rauf	Ra'uf	?–1958	Varzāb	52 couplets[15]
Qurbon Safar	Qorbān Ṣafar	1905–35	Baljovān, northern Kulāb	prose
Maǰid Šarifov	Majid Sharifov	1910–	Matchin, upper Zarafshān Valley	prose[16]
Ṣafar-Moḥammad			Khānābād, Kunduz, Afgh.	212 couplets[17]
Palawan Asil	Pahlavān Aṣil		Yaftal, Badakhshān, Afgh.	30 couplets[18]
Rajab-Moḥammad Jormi		1920–	Jorm, Badakhshān, Afgh.	36 bands[19]

[8] 9 bands, 2,904 couplets in *Gurugli: Tadžikskij narodnyj èpos* (1987).
[9] 7 bands, 10,000 couplets in *Gūrūğlī: Dostoni bahoduroni Čambuli maston*, Vol. 3, 1976.
[10] Excerpts in Odina Šakar, 2007.
[11] 12 bands, 14,000 couplets in *Gūrūğlī: Dostoni bahoduroni Čambuli maston*, Vols. 1 and 2, 1962-63.
[12] Safar, 1940.
[13] In *Gūrūğlī: Èposi xalqii toǰik, edited by M. Miršakar and Lutfullo Buzurgzoda,* 10–240 (1941); *Gūrūğlī (Porča az èposi xalqii toǰik)*, edited M. Miršakar, 7–62 (1942); selected 2,893 couplets in *Gurugli: Tadžikskij narodnyj èpos* (1987).
[14] In *Gurugli: Tadžikskij narodnyj èpos* (1987); excerpts in Xudoydodzoda, *Še'r va dostonho*. Edited by L. Buzurgzoda and Suhaylī J̌avharizoda, 25–80; Xudoydodzoda, "J̌angi Avaz bo pahlavoni Salmonšoh — Govdoršoh." In *Surudhoi Boboyunus*, edited by B. Rahimzoda and Ya. Nal'skij, 148–152 (1951).
[15] In Boldyrev, 1934, 1939.
[16] In Šarifov, 1960.
[17] In Ṣafar-Moḥammad, 1972.
[18] In Sakata, 1983a.
[19] Summary in Qāsemi, 2011: 25-34.

Figure 3. The front cover of *Gūrūḡlī*: *Dostoni bahoduroni Čambuli maston,* Vol. 1, 1962. Narrated by Qurbonalī Raǰab, transcribed by M. Xolov and Q. Hisomov, and edited by Q. Hisomov and R. Amonov, Dushanbe: Našriyoti davlatii Toǰikiston.

Each mastersinger possessed a distinct repertoire, with up to fifty identified among various Tajik Gurughli bards.[20] A typical Gurughli repertoire consists of several "cycles," known in Tajik as *band* or *šoxa* (*shākha*; analogous to Azerbaijani *qowl* or *majles*). A cycle is also referred to as *doston* (*dāstān*), signifying its broader reach in Central Asia folk literature. While each *band* stands independently, they are loosely interconnected within the broader repertoire.

A typical *band* consists of up to 2,000 couplets (*beyt*s), delivered in full over eight to ten hours, though it can be condensed into three to four hours depending on the audience.[21] Each *band* is divided into episodes (*bāb*s) marked by a new melody, poetic meter, and syllabic prosody, ending with the utterance *hī... hī... hī...* (Texts 3 and 5). To adjust the meter, syllabic elision and expansion are permitted, and the insertion of meaningless utterances is common (shown underlined in Text 3). Couplets are loosely rhymed, with predominant tale-rhyme *-on/-ān,* and an abundance of *-or/-ār, -o/-ā*, and *-ar*. These "easy" rhymes are attributed to the need for improvising a large number of verses.[22]

The language of the performance, while Tajik, adopts a vernacular tone, particularly in the dialect of Kulāb.[23] But there is more: one can detect a kind of koine specific to local folk literature, characterized by recurring words and phrases such as the polysemic stem

[20] Braginskij, "Vvedenie."

[21] Hisomov, "Gurūḡlī" for a count in the works of Qurbonalī Raǰab, see the Biography of a bard the section.

[22] Vohid M. Asrorī and Raǰab Amonov, "Èposi qahramonī" [Heroic epic], in *Fol'klori Toǰik* (Dushanbe: Doniš 1980), 60; cf. Braginskij, "Vvedenie," 44; Judith M. Wilks, "Aspects of the Koroglu destan: Chodzko and beyond" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1995), 190–191.

[23] Habib Borjian, "Distinctive features of the Tajik Dialect of Kulāb," *Nartamongæ* 19 (2024): 193-212.

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xam(b)-, "to get off or down, dismount, go, come, gather."[24] Turkic words are paramount in the stories, especially in pastoralist contexts, reflecting a cross-language Sprachbund governing the region's oral literature. In the process of memorizing an enormous number of verses and improvising many more during a recital, the fluidity of pronunciation is prioritized over the soundness of expression to achieve a well-rounded performance. Formulaic similes and conventional expressions, typical of popular storytelling, punctuate all repertoires, with each bard incorporating personalized clichés throughout his performance.[25] Furthermore, literary Persian words and phrases, albeit modified and disregarding the prosodic meters of classical Persian, enrich the narration. Proverbs, parables, and lyrical songs further embellish the tale.[26]

The singers typically employ a distinctive vocal style characterized by tense, guttural intonations, reminiscent of Altaic *bakhshi*s of Inner Asia. To maintain the guttural voice, the singer drinks milk or takes ghee during breaks.[27] The musical accompaniment, broadly categorized as *falak*, aligns with the prevalent folk song style in the upper Oxus region.[28] Together, narration and music render a Gurughli performance an auditory experience, best appreciated through listening rather than silent reading. Consequently, published Gurughli cycles, while informative, lack the immersive impact of live performances, although familiar readers can still derive enjoyment from them.

The plot and theme

Summarizing the entirety of Tajik Gurughli cycles presents a challenge due to their varied number and content. Central to all versions is the frame-story set in the utopian city of Chambul, often referred to as Chambul-e Mastān, or the city of euphoric revelers, where heroes and beauties live in harmony. Ruled by Gurughli Solṭān (Shāh and Shāhanshāh in some versions), whose synthetic name *Gūr-ūğlī* translates to "son of the grave," due to his miraculous birth during his mother's burial (see Text 1), Chambul thrives under his just and wise leadership. Gurughli delights in the music, dance, and courtly ceremonies characterizing the blissful life in Chambul. However, Gurughli's prowess in battle often takes a backseat, with the defense of Chambul from external threats left to a group of warriors (*bahādorān*), mostly relatives of Gurughli.[29] The chief hero of Chambul is Avaz Khan/Shah, Gurughli's adopted or biological son in various renditions, who leads the knightly adventures, with his sons Nur-ʿAli and Shir-ʿAli (see Text 5) prominently featured. While these three generations mark the chronology of most repertoires, the great-grandsons Shirafkan and Ja(hā)ngir also join the rank of heroes in certain versions.

The antagonists, or sworn enemies (*doshmanān*) of Chambul, typically include foreign invaders, above all Reyḥān-ʿArab, but also Tork-e Baghlānshāh, Qaflānshāh (or Qatlānshāh), Ārmān, Landahur, and Torāb. Periodically, Chambul faces siege, sometimes aided by internal traitors, leading to its temporary fall and the capture of its heroes. Attacks and counterattacks, kidnappings and counter-kidnappings, trickery, and negotiations form the bulk of the plot. Ultimately, good triumphs over evil, Chambul is restored, and minstrels celebrate its heroes

[24] Texts 1, 3, and 4. See also Habib Borjian, "Distinctive features of the Tajik Dialect of Kulāb," *Nartamongæ* 19 (2024): 193-212.

[25] Compare *pansad gul* and *haštod duxtar* in Text 4, lines 9 and 10, with Text 5, line 7.

[26] As in the prelude to Text 3.

[27] Marhabo Mirkamolova, "Mavqei èposi 'Gūrūğlī' dar fol'klori Laqy-Ūzbekoni rayonhoi ǰanubii Toǰikiston" [The position "Gurughli" in the folklore of Uzbek Laqay of southern districts of Tajikistan] (PhD diss., Tajikistan Science Academy, 1971), 104.

[28] Mark Slobin, *Music in the Culture of Northern Afghanistan* (Tucson: Viking Fund Publications in Anthropology, 1976), 124; Hiromi Lorraine Sakata, *Music in the Mind: The Concepts of Music and Musician in Afghanistan* (Kent: Kent State University 1983), 57. Mark Slobin (1970: 102) identified a similar musical tradition between the Tajiks straddling the borders of Afghanistan and Tajikistan.

[29] Amonov, *Očerki èǰodiyoti*, 111.

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through their tambour performances. The narratives also feature comic characters such as Ḥasan Bahādor, whose origins trace back to folktales such as Kal Ḥasan and Divāna Ḥoseyni, according to Raǰab Amonov.[30]

Women play significant roles in the stories. When not hunting or defending their homeland, heroes pursue beauties from distant lands. The sought-after girl is typically a princess or of noble birth, the fame of whose beauty has reached Chambul, or a fairy (*parizād*) imprisoned in the talisman of a demon (*div*). Seduction dynamics vary, initiated by either party. While heroes attract girls with their agility, strength, or flirtatious language, it is more often the woman who first reveals herself, luring the hero into a challenge to win her (as in Text 3). For instance, Gurughli's wife, Shirmāh, originally a *parizād*, entices the young champion into conquering her homeland and claiming her hand. In every case, elopement marks the culmination of the quest. The narratives are rich with descriptions of banquets and feasts where heroes are entertained by scores of graceful dancers and served by the master musician (*sāqi*), depicted in Texts 4 and 5. Hedonism pervades the tales of Chambul-e Mastān.[31]

While the overarching theme pits good against evil, shades of gray are found in characters such as Gurughli himself, who transitions from a revered warrior in his youth to a vulnerable king.[32] In one version, Gurughli's decision to yield to Tork-e Baghlānshāh's demand to hand over his son Avaz Khan in chains highlights Gurughli's weakness – reminiscent of Goshtāsp, Esfandiār, and Rostam in the *Shahnama*.[33] There are other ambiguous characters with both good and evil features. Chambul leaders Aḥmad Khan and Yusof Khan, Gurughli's maternal uncles in certain cycles, are envious of Avaz Khan and occasionally go as far as colluding with the enemy. "Treason is implanted in their aristocratic blood," according to the Soviet Tajik folklorist Raǰab Amonov.[34]

Supernatural elements add vivid colors to the narrative. The very wives of Gurughli, Shirmāh and Āǧa-Yunos/Nus, who are conflated in some versions are fairies from the legendary Mount Qāf. Avaz possesses a winged steed. Characters transform into animals or plants such as doves, falcons, ducks, and even roses.[35] The bards skillfully invoke mythical creatures such as *gāv-māhi*, a mythical cow standing on the back of a giant fish and carrying the earth on its horns:

ay sado-y tavl-i Nuralixon,	[hearing] the sound of Nur-ʿAli Khan's drum,
šero band šud, xurso gurezon,	the lions were alarmed, the bears on the run;
govmoī dar tag-i bahr-i kalon,	the cow-fish in the bottom of the vast sea
dar šinokunī zad on zamon.[36]	began swimming promptly.

These elements enrich the narrative, weaving a tapestry of wonder and mysticism that aligns with the traditional lore and epic themes of Persian literature.

Geographical spaces in the Tajik Gurughli have largely gone unnoticed in scholarship. The Turkmen grasslands often serve as the backdrop for the local pastoralist economy

[30] Amonov, "Sarsuxan," 21–22.

[31] Soviet Tajik scholars, writing for the socially conservative Tajik reader, justified the illicit passion present in the stories in terms of the role that mutual love, vis-à-vis arranged marriage, could play in matrimony and the formation of thriving family units. See Amonov, "Sarsuxan"; Hisomov, "Gurūḡlī."

[32] Braginskij, "Vvedenie."

[33] Still, the arch-hero Avaz Khan's loyalty never strays from his sovereign. See Amonov, "Sarsuxan," 22–23; Wilks, "Aspects of the Koroglu destan: Chodzko and beyond," 163–164.

[34] Amonov, "Sarsuxan," 23.

[35] On the role of supernatural elements, see Judith Wilks, "Aspects of the Koroglu destan: Chodzko and PhD diss, University of Chicago, 1995," 166–178.

[36] *Gūrūḡlī: Dostoni bahoduroni Čambuli maston*, Vol. 2, 1963, 55.

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(Text 1), betraying the borrowed nature of the stories. Within the repertoire of each bard, one finds scores and hundreds of toponyms, many of which are fictitious, though most are real. The selection of these toponyms is often random, sometimes disrupting the natural flow of the narrative (Text 2, line 21). Nonetheless, certain place names appear frequently, allowing for a rough cyclic pattern to be deduced from the texts: Turkestan (Text 3, lines 27, 33), apparently the greater Balkh region, along with Sistān, i.e., the Helmand basin, are encountered in introductory episodes.[37] Mount Qāf (Qafqāz, the Caucasus) is the abode of the fairy wife of Gurughli. His hero son, Avaz, who is highly ambulant and frequently engaged in military excursions, predominantly acts in Sistān. One of the many beauties Avaz seeks is the princess of Gholghola, a folk name given to archaeological ruins in both Sistān and Bāmiān. Avaz also undertakes a long quest to Zangebār to win the love of its princess. During the third generation of Chambul heroes, Yemen becomes a center of events, marking another far-reaching locality in the storytellers' imaginations.[38] This rough sketch can be greatly refined in a future systematic study.

The stories in Tajik Gurughli are linear and open-ended, often lacking internal cohesion. Cycles and episodes are loosely strung together, with no flashbacks to previous events, creating a narrative flow that prioritizes action over introspection. The emotional depth is minimal; the characters' inner lives are revealed solely through their actions rather than their thoughts, hopes, or worries. Romantic affairs, a staple of popular romances, frequently unfold without expressing the inner feelings of either party. This absence of psychological insight in Tajik Gurughli is not surprising, as it draws its expressive style from medieval literature,[39] contrasting with modern fiction, which delves deeply into characters' psyches.

From Köroğlu to Tajik Gūrūğlī

The multiethnic Köroğlu/Gurughli tales have long drawn the attention of scholars of folk literature, particularly comparativists tracing the origins and transmission of epic cycles in a vast geographical expanse. The exact origins of the legend are obscure. What is certain is that the oral traditions developed in early modern times, based on historical events, among Turkish speakers of Azerbaijan, the Caucasus, and Anatolia, as Köroğlu ("son of the blind"), thence travelled eastward to Turkmen tribes, who call it Görogly ("son of grave"), and was eventually adopted by Uzbeks as Göroğly and by Tajiks as Gūrūğlī or Gūrğūlī. There is also a consensus regarding major differences in form and content between western and eastern versions, which also differ in name: *kōr* "blind" versus *gōr* "grave," both Persian words. The Caspian Sea serves as a rough boundary between these two groups.

Judith Wilks's seminal study compares three versions: Azerbaijani, Turkmen, and Tajik.[40] As a fundamental criterion distinguishing the versions of the stories, she focuses on the occupation of the hero Köroğlu, which transforms from a bandit in the Azerbaijani version to a kingly character in the Turkmen and Tajik versions. She suggests that the Turkmen version played a major role in the stories' eastward transition by absorbing significant elements of the Persian epic tradition, while the Tajik version best reflects Persian influence.[41]

Soviet scholars, examining literature through a class-based sociopolitical lens, identified the Tajik Gurughli as a reinterpretation of the story by a settled, feudal society, in contrast to the tribal Turkic context. Braginskij portrayed Chambul as an idealized, just, and orderly kingdom,

[37] For the definition of Turkestan in early modern history, see Slobin, *Music in the Culture of Northern Afghanistan*, 17–18.

[38] See more on this below, in the "Position in Persian literature" section.

[39] See William L. Hanaway, "Formal Elements in the Persian Popular Romances," *Review of National Literatures* 2, no. 1 (1971).

[40] Wilks's references to the Tajik version are solely based on the 20 *bands* published in *Gurugli: Tadžikskij narodnyj èpos* (1987).

[41] Judith M. Wilks, "The Persianization of Köroğlu: Banditry and Royalty in Three Versions of the Köroğlu *Destan*," *Asian Folklore Studies* 60, no. 2 (2001): 313.

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favored by peasants.[42] Czech Iranist Jiří Cejpek, in his essay on Iranian folk literature, underscored the differences between the western and eastern versions, concluding that while Köroğlu's followers in the Azerbaijani version are adventurers rebelling against an unsympathetic society, the Uzbek and Tajik versions depict a feudal and unromantic entourage.[43]

The relationship between the Uzbek and Tajik versions of the Gurughli epic is poorly studied. The Uzbek version, Göroğly, shares its name and plot outline with the Tajik version: Chambul (from Azeri Çenlibel "misty slopes") is the capital city; Gurughli is born in his mother's grave; he adopts Avaz, son of a butcher; the arch-enemy is Rayḥān-ʿArab; and there are repeating motifs of kidnapping women and stealing horses. Cejpek found little contrast between the Uzbek and Tajik versions, except that the latter is nearly exclusively in verse, in line with Persian epics.[44] However, other scholars have observed significant differences between the Turkic and Tajik versions. Folklorists Chadwick and Zhirmunsky highlight the unique characteristics of the Tajik Gurughli in both form and content, viewing it as a national creation of the Tajik people with only loose connections to the Turkic versions.[45] Wilks suggests that "in the creation of the Tajik version, the Uzbek influence hardly goes beyond providing the characters" names; it is much less important than the powerful influence of the Persian epic tradition in the region."[46]

The Uzbek Göroğly was popular not only in Uzbekistan but also among the outlying Laqay tribe in the Kulāb province of Tajikistan.[47] There is a consensus that the Tajik villagers of highland Kulāb adopted the Gurughli from the semi-nomadic Uzbek Laqay, who established themselves in the region from the 18th century and are distributed in the southern plains of Kulāb.[48] However, an overlooked study by Marhabo Mirkamolova suggests that the process of acculturation may have been in the opposite direction. The Laqay version holds a unique position between the Uzbekistani and Tajik versions. First and foremost, Laqay Göroğly is entirely in verse, suggesting its derivation from or assimilation with the Tajik version.[49] Even in later times, Laqay Göroğly was further influenced by Tajik due to national radio and television broadcasting, and while the art was in the decline in Uzbekistan, it prospered among the Laqay.[50] In terms of performance practices, Mirkamolova finds that Laqay and Tajik practices were quite similar.[51] Regarding the stories' form and content, she notes their general agreement but highlights certain differences, the most eye-catching being

[42] Iosif Samuilovič Braginskij, "Unsurhoi èǰodiyoti badeii xalq dar osori xattii qadim va asrimiyonagii toǰik" [Elements of folk literature in old and medieval Tajik manuscripts], *Sadoi Šarq*, no. 3 (1955): 98–108; Braginskij, "Vvedenie," 21–27; cf. Amonov, *Očerki èǰodiyoti*, 96–98.

[43] Jiří Cejpek, "Iranian Folk Literature," in *History of Iranian Literature,* eds. J. Rypka et al. (Dordrecht, 1968), 637–638. Some generalizations of the Tajik version in Cejpek's analysis seem untenable, as only limited published material existed when the earlier Czeck edition of the volume was published in 1961.

[44] Cejpek, "Iranian Folk Literature," 637–638.

[45] Nora K. Chadwick and Victor M. Zhirmunsky, *Oral Epics of Central Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

[46] Wilks, "The Persianization of Köroğlu: Banditry and Royalty in Three Versions of the Köroğlu *Destan*," 313.

[47] For an Uzbekistani collection, see Mamatqul Joʻrayev, ed., *Goʻroʻgʻli dostonlar* (Tashkent: Choʻlpon, 2017). For the Uzbek tradition in northern Afghanistan, see Rémy Dor, *Nourali ou les aventures lyriques d'un héros épique: orature d'Asie intérieure – épisodes du cycle de Goroghli dans la tradition özbek d'URSS et d'Afghanistan* (Paris: INALCO, 1991).

[48] Raǰab Amonov, *Očerki èǰodiyoti dahanakii Kūlob: dar asosi materialhoi fol'klori Sari Xosor* [Sketch of the oral literature of Kulāb based on folklore materials from Sar-e Khāsār] (Dushanbe: Našriyoti davlatii Toǰikiston, 1963); Qamariddin Hisomov, "Gurūğlī," in *Èntsiklopediyai adabiyot va san'ati Toǰik* I (Dushanbe: Sarredaktsiyai Èntsiklopediyai Sovetii Tojik, 1980), 377–378; Bel'kis Xalilovna Karmyševa, *Uzbeki-lokajcy Južnogo Tadžikistana* [The Uzbek-Laqays of southern Tajikistan] (Stalinabad, Našriyoti davlatii Toǰikiston, 1954); *Atlas Tadžikskoj SSR* (Dushanbe and Moscow, 1968), 120–121; Habib Borjian, "Kulāb," *Encyclopædia Iranica*, online edition, July 20, 2005, https://iranicaonline.org/articles/kulab. According to Slobin, *Music in the Culture of Northern Afghanistan*, 79, the Laqay/Loqai also lived in Afghanistan's Badakhshān as a minority. For the process of symbiosis between Uzbeks and Tajiks in the upper Vakhsh valley, see Amonov, *Očerki èǰodiyoti*, 74–80.

[49] Mirkamolova, "Mavqei èposi 'Gūrūğlī' dar fol'klori Laqy-Ūzbekoni rayonhoi ǰanubii Toǰikiston," 152–153.

[50] Ibid., 68.

[51] Ibid., 99–108.

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the central role of Gurughli in battles, even in old age, in the Laqay (and Uzbekistani) versions, as opposed to his minor heroic role in the Tajik version.[52]

The Laqay version suggests that the differences between various ethnic renditions of Gurughli are less about ethnolinguistic distinctions and more about geographical distribution. This raises the question of why the Tajik Gurughli emerged in the upper Oxus region rather than in the Fergana Valley in northern Tajikistan, where the Uzbekization of Tajiks has been far more intense. A clue to this question might be found in Mark Slobin's seminal study on the ethnomusical traditions of Central Asia. Slobin divides the region into five broad Uzbek-Tajik musical zones, demonstrating that the upper Oxus area exhibits a high degree of acculturation between these two ethnic groups in terms of musical tradition.[53] Although Slobin does not discuss Tajik Gurughli in detail, it is plausible that a similar close correlation existed between Uzbeks and Tajiks regarding this specific musical genre.

All these observations notwithstanding, we remain in the dark about the exact relationship between the Laqay and Uzbekistani versions. How did the Tajiks acquire their Gurughli tales if not from the Laqay Uzbeks? Would it be too conjectural to propose this two-step scenario: first, Tajiks learned the art from the Laqay, and then the Laqay relearned it from Tajiks in verse form? Alternatively, did the Tajiks learn this oral tradition from Uzbeks living on the left banks of the Oxus? Is there a possibility that the Tajik version was initially acquired from the Turkmen nomads of Afghanistan and then spread across the Oxus into Kulāb? Are there such shared features between the Turkmen and Tajik versions that rule out the putative intermediary role of Uzbek? A rigorous comparative study among the Turkmen, Uzbek, and Tajik versions is needed to clarify these questions, though the language barrier makes this challenging.

The influence of Soviet ideology on the Gurughli stories published in Tajikistan has largely gone unnoticed in scholarship. Compared to the limited data available from Badakhshān in northern Afghanistan, the infrequency of religious elements in Soviet versions stands out.[54] This absence could have resulted from performers' own self-censorship or editorial deletions in published texts.[55] Another notable difference is the sociopolitical overtone present in Soviet versions. Themes such as social justice, the toiling masses (*xalqi kambaġal*), and oppressive kings were likely influenced by contemporaneous ideology.[56] The sample below is the concluding verse of an episode in which the singer alludes to Tajiks as a heroic people.

ba maqsad rasid Avazxon,	Avaz Khan reached his destination,
šumo-yam, hama ahl-i javonon!	and so [may] you, all the youth!
Hikmat Rizo in hikoyat-a, dusto,	Hikmat Rizo [shared] this tale, oh friends,
dar bora-i guzašta-i xalq-i pahlavon,	of yore of the heroic people,
nasl-i davr-i peš ay asl-i Tojikon,	the former generation, of true Tajiks.
šumo-yam [burasen] ba maqsad-aton.[57]	May you too reach your destination.

It may be concluded that Soviet society and culture imposed a superstratum on the *dāstān* genre, especially that of Gurughli in Tajikistan.

[52] Ibid., 80–82.

[53] Slobin, *Music in the Culture of Northern Afghanistan*, 78–88, 121–126.

[54] For example, see the introductory notes to Text 1 below, where the pregnancy of Helāl, caused by a saintly gaze, remains unmentioned in the Soviet version.

[55] However, religious phrases such as *omin olloh akbar* appear in *Gurugli: Tadžikskij narodnyj èpos* (1987), 119 (line 42), 155 (line 5), which was published during the last years of the Soviet Union.

[56] See also Borjian, "Ḵodāydādzāda."

[57] *Gurugli: Tadžikskij narodnyj èpos* (1987), 138 (lines 73–78). The brackets are original.

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Persian elements

Even before reaching the Tajiks, the oral stories contained many Persian elements. In the Azerbaijani Köroğlu, to say the least, personal names such as Rowshan (Köroğlu's real name) and his wives Negār and Parizād are distinctly Persian compared to the future eastern versions. As the stories were transmitted, more Persian elements were absorbed into the eastern versions, as previously noted. This is unsurprising, as both the original Azerbaijani version and other Turkic versions developed within the Persianate literary domain, which stretched from Anatolia to India. Given the limited knowledge of interethnic developments, only the Tajik version can be commented on with certainty. It is only natural that the Tajik version, while retaining a nomadic pastural background, added recollections from the Persian literary past.

Researchers have identified numerous pre-existing subjects, images, characters, and motifs in classical Persian literature, with the *Shahnama* standing out as a significant source. The *Shahnama* serves as a crucial point of reference for two primary reasons: it is an early and influential work that has shaped many subsequent literary creations, and it is widely read by scholars.

A remarkable parallel is the archetypal father-son battle between Avaz and Nur-ʿAli, who do not recognize each other, which resembles the confrontation between Rostam and Sohrāb, although the Gurughli version lacks a tragic end. However, as Wilks points out, the presence of this motif in Gurughli may not be due to the *Shahnama* influence, although it very well could be, in light of other parallels.[58] This judgement can hold for other parallels as well, such as the fairy living in Mount Qāf who leaves Avaz a braid of her hair to burn when he is in trouble, akin to the *Shahnama* myth of Simorgh and Zāl. The battle between Zarrina (daughter of Soghdun Shah) and Avaz mirrors that of the heroine Gordāfarid and Sohrāb. The game of polo (*chowgān*) is replaced by *bozkashi*.

In the wobbly geography of the Gurughli tales, Zangebār evokes Zaranj/Sistān, the abode of the Sistāni cycle in the all-Iranian national epic.[59] Zangebār's arch-hero, Ruyin-tan, carries the epithet of the *Shahnama*'s brazen-bodied Esfandiār, who dies in battle with Rostam in Sistān. Avaz Khan singing under the wall of the royal castle where the princess of Gholghola (near Sistān) resides recalls a well-known episode in the story of Zāl and Rudāba. Nur-ʿAli's adventurous quest to Yemen to kill a giant lion parallels Rostam's Seven Ordeals in his long campaign to slay the White Demon in Māzandarān, a mythical land sometimes associated with Yemen. Yemen also recalls Hāmāvarān during Kay Kāvus's reign in Iranian national history.

Many other parallels can be evoked from the *Shahnama* as well as Persian secondary epics and popular romances (see below), reflecting how folklore freely draws from formal literature. Specific similes include Simorgh, Div-e Sefid, Rakhsh, and of course Rostam:

az Guloim šud pisar, nom-aš dodand Avazxon	From Gol-āim came a boy; they named him Avaz Khan.
šakl-i Avaz — šakl-i Rustam-i doston.[60]	The form of Avaz [was] like the form of Rostam of legends.

[58] Wilks, "Aspects of the Koroglu destan: Chodzko and beyond," 164.

[59] Zangebār (Zanzibar and adjoining islands) plays a significant role in the popular romance literature of medieval Persia, as discussed below. The historical background includes a migration of Persian merchants and sailors around the 10th to 15th centuries, contributing to the mixed ancestry of the local "Shirazi" people. This mixed ancestry is substantiated by a recent genetic study, see Brielle et al., "Entwined African and Asian genetic roots of medieval peoples of the Swahili coast," *Nature* 615 (2023): 866–873. This historical interaction has also led to the legend of a Persian prince marrying a Swahili princess.

[60] *Gurugli: Tadžikskij narodnyj èpos* (1978), 58 (lines 24–25). In this version by Qurbon Jˇalil, Avaz was born to Gol-āim, the daughter of Khunkhʷār Pādeshāh, who had been kidnapped by and married to Karim Qaṣṣāb. While still young, Avaz was kidnapped and adopted by Gurughli.

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However, these similes and metaphors are not as numerous as one might expect. In Gurughli repertoires, there is likely no mention of Sām, Zāl, Żaḥḥāk, Kāva, Fereydun, Sohrāb, Giv, Gudarz, Pashang, Bizhan, Manizha, Rudāba, Sudāba, Tahmina, and many others who would serve well as allegories. Is this because the *Shahnama* was not well known in rural Transoxiana or because the Tajik Gurughli, being relatively young, had not matured enough to draw in the old heroes of Persian literature?

A younger generation of Tajik academics continued to show interest in the study of Gurughli cycles, especially as classical Persian literature became more accessible in Tajikistan from the 1960s. Having examined Persian romance works, these academics drew parallel patterns with Tajik Gurughli, even if some of the motifs are universal rather than specifically Iranian. More concrete thematic similarities have been identified by Sobira Aminova, who likens Avaz Khan to Pahlavān ʿEvaż in ʿObeyd Zākāni's *Resāla-ye delgoshāy* and associates Gurughli with *gheyb-zād* ("hidden born") in the 15th-century *divān* of ʿAbdollāh Hātefi Kharagerdi.[61] Fayzalī Murodov found *gur-zād* and *pur-e gur* in archaic Tajik folklore.[62]

Position in Persian literature

The Tajik Gurughli is classified by Russian scholars as a "folk epic" (*narodnyj èpos*) or "oral epic" (*ustnyj èpos*) and by Tajik scholars as a "popular epic" (*èposi xalqī*), "heroic epic" (*èposi qahramonī*), or "tale of heroes" (*dostoni bahoduron*).[63] Indeed, heroic deeds constitute a good part of the Gurughli tales. Detailed accounts of numerous battles, including those involving heroines such as Zarrina and Qarakuz, reinforce the epic nature of these stories. The composition in verse, extensive length, and cyclic nature of the repertoires all align with the epic genre. However, there are challenges in this rigid classification; strictly speaking, the Gurughli story does not meet the criteria of Persian epics due to its lack of meter, formal language, discourse, and imagery, features outlined by William Hanway in his study of secondary Persian epics *Garshāsp-nāma, Kush-nāma, Sām-nāma,* and *Borzu-nāma*.[64] Judith Wilks posits that neither the western nor eastern groups of Köroğlu stories should be considered epics by conventional Western standards, but both should be viewed as *dāstān*s, a native term for long stories.[65]

It may be more relevant to assess the Tajik Gurughli within the Persian popular romance genre, which generally evolved from the earlier epic genre. Hanaway, in another study, outlines the characteristics of the Persian romances *Dārāb-nāma, Eskandar-nāma, Firuzshāh-nāmā, Qessa-ye Hamza,* and *Samak-e ʿayyār*, all of which were originally transmitted orally before later being written down: "The Persian popular romances are heroic tales, focused on one individual and recounting his exploits both military and romantic."[66] The Tajik Gurughli aligns closely with the formal characteristics and narrative elements of this genre, including the use of informal language to make the story accessible to a broader audience. There are also shared antagonist names such as Landahur, Qatlān, and Ashqar. Notably, female names in the Gurughli reflect the taste of the popular and formal romances of Nezami and Fakhroddin Asʿad Gorgāni. Examples include Shirmāh (Gurughli's wife),[67] Kherman-gol

[61] Sobria Aminova, "Boz'yoft," *Sadoi Šarq*, no. 3 (1968): 125–133.

[62] Fayzalī Murodov, "Qurbonalī Raǰab," in *Èntsiklopediyai sovetii Toǰik*, Vol. 8 (Dushanbe: Sarredaktsiyai Èntsiklopediyai Sovetii Tojik, 1986), 326; Fayzalī Murodov, "Korni narodnogo èposa 'Gurguli': Gajbzoda, Puri Gur, Gurzoda" [Roots of the folk epic *Gurghuli*: Gheybzāda, Pur-e gur, Gurzāda], *Izvestiya Akademii Nauk Respubliki Tadžikistan: Seriya filologiya i vostokovedenie* (2010): 69–76.

[63] Lately, *hamosa,* in Dilšod Rahimī, *Hamosai "Gūrğulī" va šinoxti on* [The Gurughli epic and its study] (Dushanbe: Aržang, 2019).

[64] William L. Hanaway, "The Iranian Epics," in *Heroic Epic and Saga,* ed. F. J. Oinas, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 76–98.

[65] Wilks, "Aspects of the Koroglu destan: Chodzko and beyond," 45

[66] William L. Hanaway, "Formal Elements in the Persian Popular Romances," *Review of National Literatures* 2, no. 1 (1971): 141.

[67] Tajik *Šir-moh* "milky moon"; cf. *Šer-ali* 'lion ʿAli'.

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(Reyhān's daughter in Text 1 and Avaz's daughter in Text 5), Gol-āim (Avaz's mother as well as one of his wives), Qeymatgol-māh, Zarnegār-pari, Golbahār-pari (princesses of Sarandib),[68] Nownehāl (princess of Zangebār), and Golchehra (in Jomri's version). There is also a few Turkmen names such as Āga Yunos or Āganus (Gurughli's wife) and Qarakuz (Avaz's wife in Text 5).

While the Tajik Gurughli shares many features with Persian heroic and romantic traditions, it also possesses unique elements. The underlying herder society is evident in its pastoralism, nomadic camps, tents, shepherds, khans, begs, and frequent themes of horse racing (*bozkashi*), horse theft, and elopement, which are rare or absent in formal Persian literature.

Profound differences emerge in performance. Surviving Persian epic and romance literature is not only written but also orally transmitted. Until recently, professional storytellers – called *naqqāl*s, *shamāyel-gardān*s, and *Shāhnāma-khʷān*s – moved from place to place, gathering crowds in streets, markets, and coffeehouses. However, two major differences in performance are notable: the urban audience of the *naqqāl*s versus the rural setting of Gurughli bards, and the fact that while *naqqāl*s told their stories in prose, Gurughli was performed in verse with musical accompaniment, which is otherwise nonexistent in contemporary Persian culture. The glottal voice used in performances, common among Altaic peoples, also sounds unfamiliar to Iranian-speaking rural and urban communities of the Iranian Plateau. While there were pre-Islamic bards called *gōsān*s, only their name has reached us. Tajik Gurughli performance is most comparable to those of Azerbaijani *ashiq*s who also sing Köroğlu, from which the Tajik Gurughli originates. In historical terms, the Turkification of Transoxiana is comparable to that of Azerbaijan since the early modern era.

Therefore, Tajik Gurughli does not fit neatly into any well-known Persianate tradition. It represents a distinctive form of folklore that thrived for a relatively short period in a remote fringe of the Plateau. This unique blend of heroic and romantic elements, combined with its pastoral and nomadic themes, sets it apart from the more urban and prose-centered Persian popular traditions.

Going beyond Persian, I cannot help but draw a brief comparison between the Tajik Gurughli and the Ossetic Nart epic, another Iranian literary tradition with which I am currently engaged. There are numerous parallels between the two oral traditions, including a cyclic structure with three generations of heroes acting within a pastoralist economy, as well as certain aspects in themes, narrative structures, and cultural contexts. However, what makes the Nart saga enduring is its roots in Ossetic culture. The Narts are deeply embedded in Scytho-Alanic Iranian mythology and reflect the social structure of prehistoric Indo-European society. This deep cultural connection has kept the Narts very much alive among the Ossetians, who associate the stories and heroes with local monuments and cherish this literary tradition by creating sculptures, cartoons, and animations of the stories. In contrast, the Tajik Gurughli, despite its rich narrative, had a relatively short lifespan and has now almost fallen into oblivion. Unlike the Nart saga, the Gurughli epic lacks the same depth of cultural integration and contemporary representation, contributing to its decline in prominence.

Biography of a bard

Perhaps the most prominent minstrel of the Gurughli cycles is Qurbonalī Raǰab.[69] Born in 1925, he attended school up to the fifth grade in his native village of Pārvār, located in the highland district of Sar-e Khāsār on the northern fringes of Tajikistan's Kulāb province. In his youth, Qurbonalī experienced a typical life as a Soviet Tajik villager, working as a

[68] *Gurugli: Tadžikskij narodnyj èpos* (1987), 332.

[69] This biography is based on Hisomov's preface to *Gurūglī* 1963, 5–8; *Èntsiklopediyai sovetii Toǰik*, vol. 2, 1980, 182; *Gurugli: Tadžikskij narodnyj èpos* (1987); M. Ne'matov, S. Asadulloev, and R. Tošmatov, eds., *Fol'klori Toǰik (xrestomatiya)* (Dushanbe, 1989); Jˇūrabek Mu'min, "Hikmati hofiz hamčun šoir," *Jˇavononi Toǰikiston*, no. 44 (2014): 7; and recent Tajik periodicals available online.

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Figure 4. USSR postal stamp, 1990 (illustrated by I. Martynova), devoted to Gurughli: "The Tajik national epic verse brings together some 40 works. In it are exploits of epic heroes, the establishment of the 'golden' land Chambul, personification of national utopian ideas about society, justice, and abundance."

farmer in the *kolkhoz* until he was drafted into World War II. After spending twenty-two days on the front lines, his right hand was wounded and he was allowed to return to his village. In 1949, following the Soviet policy of forced migration, the inhabitants of Pārvār and neighboring villages were relocated to the cotton collective farms in the Vakhsh basin of Kurgan Tepe province.[70] Qurbonalī eventually managed to free himself from *kolkhoz* duties and settled in the town of Kulāb, where he earned a living as a musician. Despite his official Soviet surname, Raǰabov, he remained known as Qurbonalī Raǰab in Tajikistan's artistic and literary circles.

Sar-e Khāsār was a stronghold of Gurughli singers, and Qurbonalī was exposed to the art from an early age. He acquired singing and rhyming abilities from his mother, Jānāna, a *hofiz* ("singer") who performed regularly in female circles. An impressive event in his artistic life was a Gurughli performance by the eminent minstrel Xudoydodzoda at a wedding ceremony in Pārvār. This inspired novice Qurbonalī to memorize two Gurughli *band*s and excel in improvisation with his *dotār* (Figure 5). To become a professional bard required great effort, and Qurbonalī further enriched his repertoire by apprenticing under other senior bards, Šarifi Šex, Šerali Alimov, Murodi Sang, Mahmarasul Šarif, and Haqnzar Kabūd. Through these internships, Qurbonalī developed his own characteristic style. He had a keen appetite for composing verses, which allowed his repertoire to evolve significantly beyond what he learned from his masters. During his professional career, Qurbonalī would often commemorate his teachers by informing his audience of the master who taught him the cycle he was performing that night.[71] Qurbonalī held the highest regard for Xudoydodzoda, Šukurmast (Shokurmast), and Haqnazar Xol (Kholov).

In a 1950 expedition to Pārvār, the Tajik folklorist Raǰab Amonov recorded samples of Qurbonalī's repertoire. Ten years later, the singer traveled to Dushanbe at the invitation of the Tajikistan Academy of Sciences, where eighteen cycles (*band*s or *dāstān*s) of his Gurughli repertoire were documented, totaling approximately 30,000 couplets or 60,000 lines. Of these, twelve cycles were transcribed in Cyrillic Tajik by Xolov and Hisomov and published under Amonov's supervision as *Gūrūḡlī: Dostoni bahoduroni Čambuli maston* in two volumes, with a special edition for the blind.[72] This publication ranks Qurbonalī as the

[70] Habib Borjian, "Kurgan Tepe," *Encyclopædia Iranica*, online edition, July 27, 2005, iranicaonline.org/articles/kurgan-tepe.

[71] E.g., *Yunus gufta bud, hast dar yodam ...* (*Guruḡlī: Dostoni bahoduroni Čambuli maston*, Vol. 1 (1962), 45), referring to Boboyunus Xudoydodzoda *Še'r va dostonho*. Edited by L. Buzurgzoda and Suhaylī J̌avharizoda, 25–80.

[72] *Gūrūḡlī: Dostoni bahoduroni Čambuli maston* [Gurughli. The cycle of the heroes of Chambul of Mastān], Vols. 1 and 2. Narrated by Qurbonalī Raǰab, transcribed by M. Xolov and Q. Hisomov, and edited by Q. Hisomov and R. Amonov, Dushanbe: Našriyoti davlatii Toǰikiston (1962-63); excerpted in Ne'matov et al., *Fol'klori Toǰik*.

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Figure 5. Qurbonalī Raǰab. Courtesy of Yusufī, "Dostoni umri gurughlisaro."

most published Tajik Gurughli singer. The length of the published cycles varies between 360–1,940 couplets (with an average of 1,130 couplets per cycle), totaling 13,500 couplets in my calculation. Possessing an enormous wealth of orally transmitted folk literature, Qurbonalī Raǰab ranked second, after Hikmat Rizo, senior by age, among seventy minstrels who performed in a national recital competition in Dushanbe in 1969.

Although Qurbonalī's heritage is his precious Gurughli repertoire, he was a masterful singer of other epic *dāstān*s, folkloric quatrains, and *ghazal*s. He composed many folk poems, mostly comic and satirical (*hajv*) about interesting events he witnessed. He also showed an interest in rhyming pieces meshed with Soviet ideology; for instance, he wrote *Šūriši Vose'* (Shuresh-e Vāseʿ), in the epic genre of *dāstān*, to pay homage to the glorified peasant riot against the Amir of Bukhara.[73] Thus, one must weigh the extent to which Qurbonalī's published Gurughli repertoire was influenced by Soviet dogma. His work was published in the local periodical *Haqiqati Kūlob*, various collections, or separately: *Taronai dil* (Tarāna-ye del; 1976), *Surūdi zamin* (Sorud-e zamin, 1982), *Šaršara: Maǰmūi še'ru dostonho* (Majmuʿ-e sheʿr o dāstānhā, 1986), *Fayzi zamin* (Feyż-e zamin, with Sattor Šokirzoda, 1991), *Dili firorī* (Del-e farāri, with Odian Mirak, 1996).[74] Despite his pro-Soviet works, Qurbonalī was not as decorated with medals as one might expect. He pursued his profession in his later years (Figure 5), long after the heyday of *gūrūǧlī-xoni* had passed. He died on October 10, 2018, in the city of Kulāb at the age of ninety-three.

Conclusion

Our understanding of the Tajik Gurughli owes much to its documentation during the Soviet era in Tajikistan. Without the intervention of Russian scholars, we might know as little about the Tajik Gurughli as we do about its counterpart on the Afghan side of the Oxus, which received only minimal study when on the verge of extinction. Comprehensive recording,

[73] On this uprising, see Wolfgang Holzwarth, "Die Geschichte vom Aufstand des *Vose'*: Vom Theaterstück zur Verserzählung und Oper," in *The Written and the Spoken in Central Asia Mündlichkeit und Schriftlichkeit in Zentralasien: Festschrift for Ingeborg Baldauf*, ed. Redkollegiia (Potsdam: Edition Tethys, 2021), 83–129.

[74] For *Haqiqati Kūlob*, see Borjian 2003. Examples of other various collections include, the collected volume (with anonymous editors) entitled *Šoironi xalqī* [Shāʿerān-e khalqi; Folk Poets] (Dushanbe: Našriyoti davlatii Toǰikiston, 1970).

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written documentation, and scholarly research on the Gurughli only began in the 1930s. Consequently, the full scope of the Gurughli epic and its various cycles remains uncertain. It is likely that some versions have already been lost to history in the non-literate society that originally produced these tales. This situation may be reflective of other local genres within the Persian cultural domain that have similarly been buried in history without leaving substantial traces.

While Tajik and Russian publications are crucial to our understanding, only a portion of the collected Tajik repertoires has been published in print (see Table 1). To my knowledge, also very few audio recordings have been released. Scholarly attention was concentrated during Tajikistan's prosperous half-century period from the 1930s to the 1980s, but the outbreak of civil war (1992–97) in independent Tajikistan abruptly halted scholarly interest; an interest not yet revived with the same enthusiasm or rigor as in the Soviet era.

Performance of the Gurughli epic, originally rooted in the Kulāb province, was popularized through radio broadcasts and evolved into a national art form in Tajikistan. However, the civil war and subsequent collapse of the nation's cultural institutions led to a sudden decline in the art's prominence. Ever since, the Gurughli epic has fallen into obscurity, with little hope for its revival or preservation in the near future.

Sample Texts

The excerpts below are from the renowned Kulābi bards Qurbon Jˇalil (Text 1), Xudoydodzoda (Text 2), Qurbonalī Raǰab (Texts 4 and 5), and Badakhshāni singer Pahlavān Aṣil (Text 3). These excerpts include key motifs of the Gurughli tales: the miraculous birth of Gurughli, the future king of Chambul; the heroic deeds of the arch-hero Avaz Khan; his elopements with noble girls; and vivid descriptions of Chambul during its prosperous and joyous times.

The texts' transcriptions differ significantly. Text 3 is my direct transcription from the available audiotape, while other texts are Roman transliterations of published Cyrillic Tajik texts, with hyphens added to mark essential morphemes for ease of reading. These published texts are not precise transcriptions of audio recordings: Kulābi-specific sounds, such as *ı* and *w*, are normalized into standard Tajik phonology, and some contractions and elisions are repaired to make the texts accessible to the general Tajik reader. The texts have been abridged by the editors using ellipses and further shortened by me using brackets "[...]."

Text 1. The birth of Gurughli[75]

Qurbon Jˇalil was born in the village Khochak, in the district of Yāvān on the upper Vakhsh Valley, in Qurgan Tepe. In the 1920s, he worked as a laborer in Samarkand, Bukhara, and Qoqand. He worked in the *kolkhoz* from 1935 and became a folk singer, standing out as one of the earliest published Gurughli singers (see Table 1), published in the early 1940s and in *Gurugli: Tadžikskij narodnyj èpos* in 1987. Other works of his include *Kūli Hasan*, *Čaman*, and *Gašti namoyon* on the themes of social progress. Details of his biography remain scarce.[76] Sources vary on his birth, ranging from 1870 to 1886, and his death is similarly recorded between 1946 and 1957.

The following selected excerpts are from the introductory episode titled "Dostoni Rayhonarab podšoh, az modar omadani Gūrūḡlī ba dunyo, va bino mondani Čambuli Maston." This episode introduces two pivotal characters with significant roles throughout future cycles. It features the formidable King Reyḥān-ᶜArab, later an enemy of Chambul,

[75] Singer: Qurbon Jˇalil. Source: *Gurugli: Tadžikskij narodnyj èpos* (1987), 47–51 (*band* I, comprising 230 couplets).
[76] *Èntsiklopediyai sovetii Toǰik*, Vol. 8, Dushanbe: Sarredaktsiyai Èntsiklopediyai Sovetii Tojik, 1986, 326.

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and Aḥmad Khan, a Turkmen tribal chieftain who rises to prominence after his nephew, Gurughli, founds the city of Chambul.

Reyḥān learns about Helāl, Aḥmad Khan's beautiful sister, and demands her hand in marriage. Aḥmad, unable to resist, agrees with much hesitation and requests a high bride price, which the king fulfills. An elaborate wedding ceremony is arranged, but Helāl, unhappy with the arrangement, flees into the desert, where she gives birth and subsequently dies. Aḥmad then marries his daughter to Reyḥān.

Aḥmad Khan owns a mare gifted to him by Reyḥān. One day, while grazing, the mare's hoof sinks into a grave, revealing a newborn orphan. The mare nurses the baby briefly. Herders report the situation to Aḥmad Khan, who brings the baby to his pavilion and hosts a banquet. An elder, chosen by the guests, names the child Gurughli, recognizing that the baby was found in Aḥmad Khan's sister's grave.

A notable variation between the Kulābi and Badakhshāni versions of the tale lies in the explanation of Helāl's pregnancy. In Qurbon Jˇalil's published narration, Helāl's pregnancy remains unexplained (lines 55–61 below). According to Rajab Moḥammad Jormi's Badakhshāni narrative, Māh-e Helāl, sister of Aḥmad Khan, is sitting by his castle door when a passing *pir* (holy man) causes her to become pregnant with just a look. Fearing her brother's wrath, she prays for death and later gives birth in her grave to Gurughli, who is nourished daily by a horse on divine instruction.[77]

	Rayhonarab bud podšoh-i kalon,	Reyḥān-ʿArab was a great king,
	hukmronī mekard ba ǰahon,	who ruled over the world,
	qiz-u qirqin došt čandinta oyǰon,	He had several beautiful slave-girls and maids.
	Xirmangul guftagī duxtar došt — moh-i ǰon,	He had a daughter named Kherman-gol – the moon of the soul.
(5)	*tilismgar došt sehrxon,*	He had a sorcerer who recited spells,
	qur'azan došt, qur'a mezad; mekard bayon	and an astrologer who would cast lots and reveal things,
	xoh dust medid, xoh dušman,	sometimes he would see friend, sometimes enemies,
	dar Rayhon mekard bayon.	he would reveal this to Reyḥān.
	qur'a zad, did xalq-i Turkmanon,	He cast lots and saw the Turkmen people,
(10)	*obodi-šon dar tuqa-i Naiston.*	who dwelled in the reed-marsh of Neyestān:
	Ahmad korfarmo ast, dar xalq-i Turkmanon,	Aḥmad is the ruler of the Turkmen people,
	arbob ast — amal-i kalon.	He is a lord — with great wealth. […]
	Dalla guftagī zan došt Ahmadxon,	He had a wife named Dalla
	duxtar došt moh-i tobon,	and a daughter like the shining moon.
(15)	*az xas došt kappaho-i kalon,*	He had large reed huts.
	Hilol nom došt yak xuhar,	He had a sister named Helāl,
	az husn-aš olam munavvar.	whose beauty illuminated the world. […]
	šunid inro Rayhonarab — podšoh-i kalon.	Reyḥān-ʿArab the great king heard of this. […]
	yak tilismgar kardand ravon,	They sent off a clairvoyant;

[77] This Jomri version is similar to that of Laqay, as described in Mirkamolova, "Mavqei èposi 'Gūrūǧlī' dar fol'klori Laqy-Ūzbekoni rayonhoi ǰanubii Toǰikiston," 69.

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(20)	*omad ba bodiya-i Ahmadxon,*	he came to Aḥmad Khan's camp,
	ba surat-i bobo šud u sehrxon,	pretending to be an old man.
	ob talbid "bobo-i notavon".	The "feeble man" asked for water.
	hukm kard Dalla zan-i Ahmadxon,	Dalla, Aḥmad Khan's wife, ordered,
	ob badast Hilol šud ravon.	and Helāl carried water.
(25)	*surat-aš kašid-u girift sehrxon.*	The clairvoyant quickly drew her portrait,
	ob noxurda šud ravon.	and without finishing his water, he left.
	xamid ba šahr-i Rayhon,	He returned to the land of Reyḥān
	surat-i hilol-a dod naišon.	and showed Helāl's portrait.
	surat-a did Rayhon:	Seeing the portrait, Reyḥān said,
(30)	*"xuruǰ mekunam,— guft,— bolo-i šahr-i Ahmadxon"…*	"I will wage war on Aḥmad Khan's land."
	haftod pahlavon kard ravon,	He sent seventy warriors,
	xamidand ba šahr-i Ahmadxon.	who came to Aḥmad Khan's land. […]
	qalon andoxt Ahmadxon,	Aḥmad Khan set a bride price:
	ǰurī andoxt, čand ḡulom,	He asked for many slaves,
(35)	*gusfand andoxt bo čupon,*	flocks of sheep with shepherds,
	gala andoht bo galabon.	and herds [of horses] with herdsmen.
	haftod palavon-a kard ravon,	Seventy warriors were sent back;
	ba Rayhonarab dodan xat-a nišon,	they showed Aḥmad's letter to Reyḥān-ʿArab.
	u talab-i Ahmad-a kard ravon.	Reyḥān fulfilled Aḥmad's demands.
(40)	*Ahmad dar gala andoxt čil galabon,*	Aḥmad assigned forty herdsmen to the herds
	dar gusfand andoxt čupon…	and entrusted the sheep to shepherds.
	tuy-a xamond Rayhon,	Reyḥān organized the feast
	ba bolo-i šahr-i Ahmadxon.	in the land of Aḥmad Khan. […]
	ba buzkaš buz dodand dar maydon,	For the *bozkashi* contest, a goat [carcass] was sent to the field,
(45)	*la'lī burdand dar maydon,*	and carried dishes to the spectators.
	ondand korfarmo-i Turkmanon.	The Turkmen leaders gathered.
	šustand sar-u ru-i Hilol-a časpon.	They quickly washed Helāl
	Hilol-a mondand bino,	and beautified her.
	šab šud xuftan guzaro,	Evening came the *ʿišāʾ* [prayer] passed.
(50)	*libos-oš-a pušond Ahmadxon:*	Aḥmad Khan dressed her:
	"girya nakun,— guft,— xuhar-i ǰon.	"Don't cry," he said, "dear sister,
	tu-ra mediham ba Rayhon,	I am marrying you off to Reyḥān,
	libos-at parča šohī,	your dress – silk fabric,
	xurok-at az qand-u nabot-i arzon"…	your food – sugar and sweets."
(55)	*"ba man yoft našud,— guft Hilol,— yak bača-i Musulmon,*	"How could there not be a Muslim youth for me," Helāl said,

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	šab ba man šu mešud, ruz ba šumo ḡulom?"…	"one who would be my husband at night and your slave during the day."
	duzdid aql-i Ahmadxon,	Helāl tricked Aḥmad Khan,
	gurext Hilol dar čul-i kalon…	and escaped into the vast desert. […]
	Hilol gašt kard čul-u biobon,	Helāl wandered in wastelands.
(60)	*az gušnagī ne hang-aš mond, ne darmon,*	From hunger, she was left with no strength.
	ba haq supurd dod-u ǰon…	She gave up her soul to God.
	murda-ra yoft šuturbon,	A camel driver found her body
	ovard murda-ra ba šahr-i Ahmadxon,	and brought it to Aḥmad Khan's land. […]
	murda-ra gurondand ba guriston.	They buried her in the cemetery,
(65)	*ba ušturbon dod sarupo-i kalon…*	and he rewarded the camel driver with a rich garment.
	qir-e došt Rayhon,	Reyḥān had a horse,
	čil gaz medavid ba osmon,	who would jump up forty yards;
	modar-i hamon qir-a dod ba Ahmad-xon.	he gave the mother of that steed to Aḥmad Khan.
	galabon došt — čil ǰavon,	[Aḥmad Khan] had forty young herders;
(70)	*gala-ro hay kardand ba ob čand galabon,*	some herders drove the flock into the stream
	sum-i baytal raft dar gur šud nihon,	The mare's hoof sank into [a nearby] grave
	baytal did ḡilmonak saḡir — aǰab ǰavon,	she saw a newborn orphan, incredibly young.
	mehr-i baytal aftid hamčunon:	The mare was driven by affection, [thinking]:
	"šir az sina-i oča-š qoq šuda-st,	"His mother's breast has run dry of milk;
(75)	*saḡira gušna monda-ast dar guriston."*	the orphan is left hungry in the graveyard."
	saḡira-ra baytal makkond dar guriston:	The mare suckled the baby in the graveyard
	az zaxm-i dandon-i saḡira baytal šud pust-u ustuxon.	and was injured by the sharp teeth of the baby.
	miroxurho aftidand dar vahm-i ǰon,	[Having noticed,] the horse trainers were scared to death;
	maslihat kardand hama-šon:	they discussed the matter:
(80)	*"xabar barem,— guftand,— dar Ahmad-xon"…*	"We will bring news," they said, "to Aḥmad Khan." […]
	burdand-aš ba xirgoh, ba peš-i Ahmad-xon.	They took the baby to Aḥmad Khan's camp.
	Ahmad did aǰab zebo-yu xušru ǰavon.	Aḥmad saw the good-looking youth.
	tuy-a peš girift Ahmad-xon,	He arranged a feast,
	ḡun kard ahl-i xurd-u kalon.	gathered the young and the old.
(85)	*saḡir-a ovardand dar bayn-i xurd-u kalon,*	The orphan was brought among the guests.
	"nom moned,— guft,— farzandi mo-ra xurd-u kalon?"	"Give my child a name," said Aḥmad Khan.
	yak kuhansol bud piramard-i notavon,	There was a frail old man;
	iǰozat dar hamon dodand mardumon.	he was elected by the crowd.

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	"ƀadar-i in,— guft,— či nom dorad?"	"His father," he said, "What is his name?"
(90)	*"ƀadar nadorad,"— guftand mardumon.*	"He has no father," the people said.
	"modar-aš kist?"— guft mūysafed-i kalon.	"Who is his mother?" said the old man.
	"in-ro yoftand az gur-i xohar-i [78] *Ahmad-xon."*	"They found him in the grave of Aḥmad Khan's sister."
	"in nom-i xud ba xud došta-ast,— guft,— yoron,	"So he already has a natural name," he said. "O friends,
	nom-aš monem,— guft,— Gurūġli-sulton."	let us call him Gurughli Solṭān."
(95)	*duo karda xestand xurd-u kalon,*	The young and the old all prayed and stood up;
	har kas ba ǰo-š šud ravon…	everybody went to his own place…

Text 2. The battle of Avaz with Gāvdār[79]

This excerpt is from the episode titled "Jˇangi Avaz bo pahlavoni Salmon Podšoh — Govdoršoh." The singer Xudoydodzoda stands out among Gurughli bards as a master of narrating heroic battles, clearly influenced by the conventional battle descriptions in Persian literature: a full portrayal of the hero's horse and armor, the beating of drums, and a detailed account of the single combat.[80]

The young Avaz, Gurughli's son, prepares for battle with the daring Gāvdār Shah, who has encroached on the grazing lands of Chambul. Receiving his father's blessing and the people's support, Avaz dons his armor and rides out, accompanied by the roar of drums. Encountering eighty fighters, he boldly confronts them, dismissing their taunts and demands a match. Avaz asserts his identity and strength, promising to defeat Gāvdār Shah without resorting to gifts or tricks.

In the ensuing battle, Avaz and Gāvdār clash with enormous force, shaking the earth with their might. Avaz remains resilient, defending against the challenger's powerful blows. Ultimately, Avaz's skill and strength prevail. Admiring his valor, Gāvdār acknowledges defeat and offers to ally with the heroes of Chambul. Avaz accepts.

	ba'd avaz gašta kard nigo,	Then Avaz turned and looked,
	ġayratdor-ay bača-i šo.	the brave son of the king:
	"ma-ra bite ata duo,	"Bless me, father!
	Govdoršo omaday dar mulk-i mo,	Gāvdār Shah has come to our land,
(5)	*ǰoy giriftay dar sahro,*	He has settled in the fields;
	omaday ki kunad ġazo,	he has come to fight.
	burom ba ǰang-i Govdoršo".	I should go fight with Gāvdār Shah."
	"avzol namekunī dar kamar?"	"Don't you equip yourself with weapons?"
	"avzol-am tayyor-ay,— guft,— ƀadar.	"My arms are ready, father," he replied.
(10)	*ǰoma-i mašruh ǰeva-i marmar,*	"An expensive robe and marble armor,

[78] Cf. *xuhar* in line 16 and 51, above.

[79] Singer: Boboyunus Xudoydodzoda. Source: Boboyunus Xudoydodzoda, "Jˇangi Avaz bo pahlavoni Salmonšoh — Govdoršoh," in *Surudhoi Boboyunus*, eds. B. Rahimzoda and Ya. Nal'skij (Stalinabad, 1951), 148–152; reprinted in *Gurugli: Tadžikskij narodnyj èpos* (1987), 214–217 (*Band* X, 79 couplets).

[80] See Borjian, "K̲odāydādzāda, Encyclopedia Iranica Vol. XVII, fasc 3, 3 (2023) 302-93."; Hanaway, "Formal Elements in the Persian Popular Romances," 153–154.

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	dar pušt doram,— guft pisar,—	I carry on my back," said the son,
	pešom-da sang-i marmar.	"A marble cuirass on my chest,
	dubulğa-i haštarxa dorum,	an eight-sided helmet,
	lağat kardum man dar sar".	I put it on my head."
(15)	*ba'd az ota-š giriftak,*	Then he received from his father
	ay hama-i odamo dod duo.	and from all the people [a parting] blessing.
	berun baromad Avaz,	Avaz went out,
	savor šud bolo-i čorpo.	and mounted the quadruped.
	gurras-i tavl baland šudak,	[While] drums roared,
(20)	*baromad kuča-i Čambul-i šo.*	he set off from royal Chambul. […]
	baromad dar doğiston	He headed to the branding field[81] […]
	ba'd Govdoršo savor šud.	Then Gāvdār Shah jumped on his horse.
	gurumbast-i tavl, mega,	The roar of battle drums – so they say –
	misl-i tandur-i bahor šud.	sounded like thunder on a spring day.
(25)	*har du zurovar, mega,*	Both strong men – so they say –
	dar kamarband tayyor šud…	grasped each other by the belts.
	ay sabab-i zuri-i har-do-š,	From the strength of both,
	zamin misl-i šudgor šud.	the earth turned to a plowed field.
	Govdoršo zarb-e dodak,	Gāvdār struck a blow;
(30)	*ov ay čašm-oš ǰubor šud.*	tears flowed from [Avaz's] eyes in streams.
	ba'd ay haminǰa gaštak,	Then, turning around,
	gardond tir-i paykon-a.	he turned to arrows;
	haždah tir zadak, mega,	they say he released eighteen arrows
	bača-i Ğurutlisulton-a.	at the son of Gurughli Solṭān.
(35)	*šof ay miyon-aš kašid,*	He drew the sword from its sheath
	zad Avaz-i pahlavon-a,	and struck the mighty Avaz.
	Govdoršo gurz-a bardošt,	Gāvdār Shah raised [his] mace;
	Avaz medorad sipar.	Avaz defending with a shield.
	hamčunon zarb-e zadak,	Such a blow struck
(40)	*Govdoršo šuda ba qaxr.*	Gāvdār Shah, in rage,
	qatra-qatra ay čašmo-i Avaz ovo meša ǰar.	[that] tears roll down in drops from Avaz's eyes.
	zarb-i gurz-i digar zad,	He blew again with the mace.
	xun ay bini-i Avaz,	Blood from Avaz's nose
	šora dodak-u sar kard.	gushed like a fountain. […]
(45)	*zamin savz-u surx šudak,*	The ground turned green and red;
	to buǰulaka šišt ǰanvar…	the horse sank into the ground up to its hocks.

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Text 3. Avaz meeting Khāl Pari[82]

The singer of this episode, Pahlavān Aṣil, whose biography and other songs are unknown to me, was reportedly from the Yaftal settlement of "Surun," a place I have been unable to identify.

The text transcription is from an audio recording, with filler sounds underlined. Some words in this text are obscure to me, as the vanishing Persian dialects of the Kokcha Valley in Badakhshān have yet to be studied.

The episode starts with a quatrain (*chārbeyti*) in the form of a classical Persian *robāʿi*; singing a didactic prelude is typical in Gurughli stories.[83] This episode of an unknown cycle depicts an elopement with erotic overtones. The champion, Avaz Khan, son of Gurughli (here Gōrḡoli), rides his horse Qir into the market at night. He sees a slender coquette sitting alone in a shop. Struck by her beauty, he learns she is Khāl Pari, sister of Aḥmad Khan and daughter of the vizier of "Turkestan." Avaz approaches her, praises her beauty, and questions her solitary presence. Khāl Pari, who has been waiting for him, greets him. Avaz Khan lifts her onto his horse and they ride off to the Turkmen bazaar.

(1)	*ā bublbul ba watan taxt-i ā Sulaymān xoštar ay*	The nightingale in the homeland is happier [than having] Solomon's throne.
	xār-o-xā-y watan zi lā-i rayhān xoštar ay	The thorns of the homeland are sweeter than basil.
	ya Yusuf ki ba Misr pādišāhi mēkarday	Joseph who once ruled Egypt,
	ya sad kāški gadā mēšod o kan'ān xoštar ay	had a hundred regrets, happier a beggar in Canaan.
	hī… hī… hī…	Hi… hi… hi…
(5)	*yak šab-am bibud-o nim-i-šab*	One night, perhaps at midnight,
	xuftanā bibud-o wo dād šab	it might have been evening [prayer],
	Awaz-xān bača-y Gōr°ḡli sultān	Avaz Khan, son of Gurughli Solṭān,
	asp-i Qīr bibi zēr-i pāšna	Mounted on his horse Qir.
	təfang am dāray-ay dar šāna	His rifle slung over his shoulder;
(10)	*nayza-hi gəldār-am das-əš nā*[84]	the decorated spear in his hand;
	ar porra-y tanpasa-y guš-əš nā	jeweled earrings in his ear;
	kākəlhā-y zarr-am gardan-əš nā	his golden locks falling on his shoulders.
	xambid-o hār ru-i bāzār na	He dismounted in the bazaar.
	šaw hama mali bud nū bāǰa	It was nine o'clock in the night.
(15)	*gəzar kard dar rasta-i bāzār na*	He passed along the bazaar passage.
	nazar kard-o dar lab-i dukān	He looked [and saw] at the shop:
	šišta yak nāzik dixtar-ē wi nāzyān	There was sitting a slender coquette,
	xəd-əš tanhā šišta-ya dar dukān	sitting alone in the shop.
	har də rux dāra māh-i āsmān	She had both cheeks like the moon in the sky,

[82] Singer: Pahlavān Asil. Recorded in Feyżābād, 1972; transcribed supplement to Sakata, *Music in the Mind: The Concepts of Music and Musician in Afghanistan* (ex. 33: "Gorgholi," Palawan Asil, voice and dambura).

[83] Amonov, *Očerki èǰodiyoti*, 87.

[84] In this and the next two lines, *nā* seems to be a contraction of the past participle *nehāda* "laid, placed." So the phrases refer to various objects held in his hand, set on his ear, and laying on his neck.

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(20)	*mēsuza ba misl-i čərāğān*	burning like lanterns.
	Awaz-xān did-ə māndə hayrān	Avaz Khan saw and was struck.
	þas gardāndə ǰəlaw-i Qir-a	He turned back the rein of Qir.
	"bigrəm," goft, "az i sūrat xabar"	"I should learn more of this situation," he said.
	þas āmad-ə̲ dar lab-i dukān	He came back to the front of the shop
(25)	*nazar kard Xāl-þari-h̲i nāzyān*	and looked at gorgeous Khāl Pari,
	xuwar-i we̲y wazir Ahmadxān	the sister of Vizier Aḥmad Khan,
	a̲ wazir dəxtar-i Turkestān	the daughter of the vizier of Turkestan,
	tanhā šišta dar lab-i dukān	sitting alone in front of the shop –
	har də rux-əš mahtāb-i āsmān	both cheeks like moonshine of the sky.
(30)	*Awaz-xān did-ə kard xanda*	Avaz Khan saw and smiled;
	"āfarin-ə̲" guft, "ay kabutar!	"Bravo, O pigeon," he said.
	ya̲ sarxel-i nu-nim lak xāna	"The head of 9.5 thousand households,
	ā̲ xān dəxtar-i Tərkestān	daughter of the khan of Turkestan,
	či mēkni, halā ǰān-i zinda	what are you doing, oh my dear,
(35)	*taʾa̲nhā šištai dukān na*	sitting alone in the shop,
	də rəx-at kardai māh-i āsmān	two cheeks like the moon in the sky.
	dar mēti wo̲ kədām musəlmān?	Which Muslim are you misleading?
	či ǰawāb mēti ya̲ āxirat na?"	How will you account for this on Judgment Day?"
	hī… hī… hī…	Hi… hi… hi…
(40)	*Xāl-þari a̲ šənid in gaþ-a*	Khāl Pari heard this talk.
	šərang-aš ay ǰā ǰənbid i dəxtar	Suddenly (?) the girl moved from her place.
	ganahā xam zad ru-i sina-š na	All her jewelry fell upon her breast.
	salām dād i dəxtar Awaz-a	The girl greeted Avaz. […]
	"þahan ša bəsnami dukān na	[She said:] "I sat (?) every night in this shop [waiting for you]
(45)	*na hay ǰən tarsidəm na az dēw…"*	I did not fear jinn or div."
	Awaz am šənid in gaþ-a	Avaz heard this talk.
	ba zērhā-y əbru wa̲ kard xanda	He smiled under the eyebrows (!).
	xam kard qāmat-i þahləwāni-ra	He bent his wrestler's frame.
	ay bāzu i nāzik wardāšta	He lifted her by her delicate arm.
(50)	*þartāft-əš way-way dar qančəğa*	He threw her on his horse.
	þas gardānd ǰilaw-i asþ-i Qir-a	He turned the rein of his horse Qir
	rāst šəd bāzār-e Turkman ay	and set out from the Turkmen bazaar.
	hī… hī… hī…	Hi… hi… hi…

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Text 4. The utopian city of Chambul[85]

The master-bard Qurbonalī Raǰab possessed a rare talent for depicting banquets and ceremonies, where dance and music flourished, and the joys of eating and drinking were celebrated in a utopian city devoid of illness, crime, cruelty, and all that makes life miserable. In this episode, he glorifies idyllic Chambul, with its verdant fields and blooming gardens on a radiant day. Numerous beauties grace the scene as the festivities commence at dawn. Avaz sits on the throne, accompanied by his great uncle Aḥmad Khan. Always present at Chambul ceremonial events is the court musician Sāqi Baba, a title that also applies to the storytelling bard himself. This shared title encourages the audience to envision the bard within the story, thereby enhancing the vividness of the recited narrative. Note textual clichés, such as line 6 in this text with line 7 of Text 5.

	dar in davra, e ǰir-u barno,	In this era, O the old and the young,
	doston kunum, hamat guš bundo.	I relate a story; you pay heed all.
	tu bušnav, e bobo-y ǰir-um,	You listen, O my old grandpa.
	sifat-a ay Čambul megirum.	I begin my account from [the city of] Chambul.
(5)	*yag ǰugoy ruz-ay dam-i suhar,*	Early in the morning near dawn,
	xuršed-i olam bud munavvar.	the sun of the universe was in shine.
	dar gurd-i Čambul, e birodar,	Around Chambul, O brother,
	šukuftay sebargaho-i tar.	has bloomed fresh groundcover.
	ǰansad gul har guruh yagdigar,	Five hundred roses in assortments -
(10)	*dar ǰuyho-y gul hay haštod duxtar.*	in the flower streams are eighty girls.
	salomči xambiday ǰeš-i mo,	The seneschal came down to us;
	čil durman[86] *xambidu Ahmad bo,*	forty leagues he came together with Aḥmad.
	Avaz ham xambid kokul-tillo,	Avaz the golden locks came down as well
	ru-i taxt šišt Soqī Bobo.	and sat on the throne [with] Sāqi Baba.
(15)	*hama yoro šištan bar-ba-bar,*	All friends sat side by side;
	dustarxon davidak dar suhar.	the tablecloth is spread at dawn.
	ba'd ay xurdan-i nun-u ham ob,	Having had bread and water too,
	ba'd ay xurdan-i ham six-kavob,	having eaten kebab on skewers,
	sulton Soqi-ra kardak nigo	the sultan looked at Sāqi […]

Text 5. A musical festivity[87]

This episode narrates a royal reception in Chambul, a town where night seamlessly turns to daybreak, with envoys embracing fairies and friends saluting the town's ruler. The arch-hero of Chambul, Avaz Khan, arrives with forty attendants, all graciously greeting his father, Gurughli the king. Avaz and his heroine wife, Qarakuz, the princess of Sarandib, now have two sons, Nur-ʿAli and Shir-ʿAli, and two daughters, Kherman-gol and Chaman-gol. The tablecloth is spread wide with grilled lamb kebab, tea-serving girls, and various cuisines.

[85] Singer: Qurbonalī Raǰab. Source: *Gūrūǧlī: Dostoni bahoduroni Čambuli maston*, Vol. 1 (*Band* VI: 367).
[86] Of an obscure root, *durman* can be related to Durmen, an Uzbek tribe of southern Tajikistan.
[87] Singer: Qurbonalī Raǰab. Source: *Gūrūǧlī: Dostoni bahoduroni Čambuli maston*, vol. 1 (*Band* I: 80–82).

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The ruler commands the master of ceremonies, Sāqi Baba, to sing. Joyfully, Sāqi plays the golden lute with thirty-two musical modes, entertaining the audience by making them laugh and cry. The tambur, joined by drums, intoxicates the attendants, while dancers move and pigeons coo. Chambul, a fairies' abode, is renowned for its happiness and sincerity.

	yak doston kunum—ey birodar!	I tell a story, O brother!
	ay obodi-i Čambul nom šar.	Of a town by the name of Chambul.
	har yak šav mešid dam-i suhar	Every night would turn to daybreak
	har yak šotir bud ƥari dar ƥar.	each envoy hugging a fairy.
(5)	*dusto medidī dar ƥeš-i bar*	You would see friends with you
	salom medodan hokim-i šar.	saluting the ruler of the town.
	ƥansad gul bud-u haštod duxtar	Five hundred roses were [there] and eighty girls.
	Avaz meomad-u čil navkar.	Avaz would come with forty attendants.
	ay Avaz bud—ǰura!—du ƥisar	Avaz was gifted – O pal! – with two sons
(10)	*ay hamu Qarakuz-i duxtar.*	from that very girl [named] Qarakuz.
	Avaz—ey dust!—farzanddor šiday	Avaz – my friend! – has become a father;
	ay farzand in dam-da čor šiday:	his children have now become four:
	duta-š duxtar-ay, dut-aš ƥisar.	two girls and two boys.
	bugum num-i u duxtaro-ra:	Should I say the names of the girls:
(15)	*Xirmangul, Čamangul num dora.*	Kherman-gol and Chaman-gol their names are.
	bugum num-i ƥisaro agar,	If I must say the names of the boys:
	kalon-iš Nurali-ay ƥisar,	the older one is Nur-ʿAli the boy,
	maydahak-iš Šerali-y kokul-zar.	the younger one Shir-ʿAli the with golden locks.
	qati ƥadar doim meoyan,	Along with their father they always come,
(20)	*salom su-i šar meoyan.*	saluting they approach the town.
	dar sulton har-du-on xuš-kalom,	They both greet the sultan graciously
	har ƥugoh ruz-da metan salom.	in the morning of every day.
	ƥartoftagi-ay ham dustarxon:	The tablecloth is already spread wide:
	ay yag sun bini barra-i buryon,	On one side you see the grilled lamb kebab,
(25)	*ay yag sun duxtaro-y čoy-davon,*	on one side the tea-serving girls,
	ay yag sun bini ham šulyon.	on another side the cuisine.
	amir Soqi-ra medod farmon:	The ruler would command the toastmaster:
	"tambur-a bugir—Bobo! — buxon!"	"Take the lute – Baba – sing!"
	"ba farmon tayyor bud Bobo-ton;	"Your Baba was just awaiting the command,"
(30)	*xub šiday," meguft, "amir-um!*	he would reply, "How wonderful would it be, my king,
	dar-i darbor-ut ma bumburum.	if [I stayed] in your court [until] I died.
	har gaƥ-e ki buguy, megirum."	I will hold to whatever word you say."
	megira Bobo tambur-i zar,	The minstrel takes the golden lute:
	si-vu-du gušak-ay bar-ba-bar,	thirty-two musical modes, in sequence,

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(35)	*ay si-vu-du nāgma mekuna sar.*	he begins with the thirty-two melodies.
	si-vu-du gušak metovona,	He spins together the thirty-two modes.
	ǰur mekuna-vu ba'd mexona,	Having made it ready, he begins to sing
	ahl-i davra-ra mexandona.	and brings the audience to laughter.
	goh šurin ġaribi mexona.	Sometimes he sings nostalgic modes,
(40)	*alamdor-a goh meguryona.*	on occasion he brings the griever to tears.
	girifta farmon-i sulton-a,	Having received the order of the sultan,
	ba zavq-i ǰur-ǰuš bo mexona.	he goes on singing with much exultation.
	avǰ-i borur-a mexezona,	He raises the hero to the climax,
	beġayrat xok-i tar memona.	leaving the coward low on the ground.
(45)	*dar xondan-i Soqī qalandar*	In the singing of Sāqi, the bard
	mast mešidak čilta navkar,	forty attendants would get drunk,
	inčunin mast bud kull-i duxtar.	so were all the girls as well.
	ay yag sun, bozi mekad zebo,	On the one side coquettes were dancing,
	ay yag sun doyra medod sado.	on another came the thrum of the drum.
(50)	*farrast-i numol bud zi-i sar.*	The flap of the fichu decorated (?) the head.
	ay yag sun humba-i kabutar.	From one side cooing of pigeons.
	dar u Čambul-i pari-xona	In that Chambul – the fairies' abode
	huzur-e bud aǰab yagona.	how wonderful a sincerity there!
	qissa-i Čambul-i Beg Sulton-a	The story of the Chambul of Gurughli –
(55)	*xurrami-š-a hama medona.*	its happiness everyone knows.
	hī… hī… hī…	Hi… hi… hi…

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