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Folk pedagogy and ethnic identity in Central Asian dastans: a comparative analysis of Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Karakalpak epics

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Abstract

This study examines the ethnic components of Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Karakalpak dastans and their role in the transmission of cultural values and folk pedagogy. The analysis is based on selected epic texts, including "Manas, "Alpamysh" and "Kyrk Kyz". The research employs content analysis and comparative analysis to identify key symbols, themes, and representations of ethnic identity across these traditions. The findings demonstrate that, despite differences in lifestyle and historical context, these epics share common pedagogical functions while preserving distinct ethnocultural features. The dastans transmit moral values, social norms, and collective memory through symbolic imagery and narrative structures. The study contributes to understanding the role of epic traditions as mechanisms of cultural continuity in Central Asia.

Keywords: dastans, ethnic identity, folk pedagogy, family values, mentoring.

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Componentes étnicos nos Dastans quirguizes, uzbeques e caracalpaques: uma análise histórica da representação da pedagogia popular

Resumo

Os componentes étnicos dos Dastans quirguizes, uzbeques e caracalpaques desempenham um papel importante na formação da identidade étnica e na preservação do patrimônio cultural dos povos da Ásia Central. Essas obras épicas não apenas registram eventos heroicos, mas também transmitem uma visão de mundo, valores e tradições que se desenvolveram ao longo dos séculos. Elas refletem as especificidades do estilo de vida, do cotidiano, dos costumes e das realidades históricas de sua época, atuando como um elemento importante da literatura popular oral. O objetivo deste estudo é analisar os elementos étnicos nos Dastans e examinar sua influência na educação e transmissão das tradições culturais. A base metodológica é a abordagem histórico-cultural, que permite identificar as semelhanças e diferenças entre os Dastans e determinar seu valor pedagógico e cultural. Dastans quirguizes, como o Manas, celebram os ideais de liberdade, heroísmo, vida nômade e unidade nacional. Eles enfatizam a importância da continuidade das gerações e a proteção de sua terra natal. As epopeias uzbeques, incluindo Alpamysh, focam em um estilo de vida sedentário, na importância dos valores familiares, na justiça e no coletivismo. Os Dastans caracalpaques, "Kyrk kyz", distinguem-se pela igualdade de gênero, refletindo as características das culturas seminômades e pesqueiras. Em todas as epopeias, o respeito pelos mais velhos, o trabalho árduo, a hospitalidade e a busca pela justiça permanecem fundamentais. Os Dastans preservam a memória histórica e desempenham funções educativas. Eles formam um senso de patriotismo, respeito pelas tradições, valores culturais e morais, e contribuem para a educação dos jovens no espírito de altos ideais.

Palavras-chave: Dastans, identidade étnica, pedagogia popular, valores familiares, mentoria.

1. Introduction

The relevance of the subject lies in the fact that the oral epic traditions of the Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Karakalpak peoples represented the most important cultural legacy, bearing central elements of ethnic identity. These Dastans served not only as a literary but also as a historical and cultural document, which captures ideas about the values of life, moral norms, and ethnic characteristics of each nation. The review of symbols and images embodying ethnic identity provided for a deeper understanding of the interaction of cultures and the reflection of ethnic realities in the artistic language of these works.

A brief overview of the ethnic components in the Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Karakalpak Dastans showed that each of these epics represents a unique image of the world based on folk pedagogy and historical memory. A historical analysis of the representation of folk pedagogy in the dastan of these peoples revealed common features and differences expressed in cultural and social structures. Kyrgyz epics such as Manas underlined the nomadic nature of life and the moral values associated with this way of life (Köçümkulkïzï, 2005). Uzbek Dastans such as Alpamysh focused on a settled rural and agrarian way of life, reflecting the social structure and values associated with agriculture and handicrafts (Alpamysh, 1982). Karakalpak Dastans, for example, "Kyrk Kyz", are distinguished by an emphasis on a semi-nomadic and fishing tradition, where collectivism and survival in difficult environmental conditions are central elements.

The selection of Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Karakalpak epic traditions for comparative analysis is particularly significant, as they represent three interconnected yet distinct cultural models within Central Asia. These traditions reflect different modes of life nomadic, settled agrarian, and semi-nomadic which shaped specific forms of social organisation, values, and pedagogical practices. At the same time, they share common Turkic roots, allowing for a balanced comparison between shared cultural foundations and unique ethnocultural expressions. Analysing these three traditions together makes it possible to more comprehensively understand how cultural identity in Central Asia is constructed through both unity and diversity.

Allambergenova (2019) researched the Karakalpak dastan "Edige" and "Shariyar", focusing on the typology of magical events and motifs, considered through the approaches of foreign scientists. The author has identified the features of the representation of ethnic components in the epic, stressing their connection with the historical and cultural context. The study highlighted the importance of Dastans as carriers of folk pedagogy and ethnocultural identity.

Anarbekova and Zulpueva (2024) conducted a comparative analysis of the Kyrgyz and Karakalpak epics, focusing on identifying their similarities and differences. The authors examined common motifs, plot structures, and ethnocultural components reflecting the interrelationship and uniqueness of the traditions of the two peoples. The study highlighted the role of the epic as an important source of historical memory and folk pedagogy, revealing its importance in the transformation of ethnic identity.

Asanbekova (2020) reviewed the need to apply elements of ethnopedagogy in teaching the Kyrgyz language. The author analysed how traditional pedagogical principles and national values can be integrated into the educational process to increase its effectiveness. The study highlighted the importance of ethnopedagogy as a tool for shaping students' linguistic and ethnocultural identity. Saticioğlu (2022) conducted a study on the legends of Kyrgyz folklore, paying attention to their structural and substantive features. The author analysed the main motifs, symbols, and the role of folklore works in preserving historical memory and ethnocultural identity. The paper stressed the importance of Kyrgyz legends as a pedagogical resource reflecting the values and traditions of the people.

Kurambaeva (2023) explored the literary relationship between the Uzbek and Karakalpak peoples during the period of independence. The author assessed the mutual influence of cultural traditions, motifs, and plots that reflected national identity in literary works. The study highlighted the role of literature as a means of strengthening ethnic identity and mutual understanding between the peoples of the region.

Yusifova (2021) analysed the problems of scientific and pedagogical literature devoted to the educational aspects of heroic epics, focusing on their role in the formation of moral values. The study discovered methodological difficulties in researching the pedagogical elements of the epic and their impact on education. The author noted the lack of elaboration of comparative analyses linking the epic tradition with educational processes. An interdisciplinary approach, including linguistic, historical, and pedagogical aspects, was indicated as necessary for a deeper interpretation of the role of the epic in the public education system.

Mambetov (2020) investigated the history of the collection, publication, and examination of the Karakalpak dastan "Zhakhansha". The author reviewed the stages of documenting and analysing the epic, and the contribution of researchers to the preservation of this cultural heritage. The paper underlined the importance of dastan as a source of ethnopedagogic ideas and a reflection of historical events shaping the ethnic identity of the Karakalpaks. Oteniyazov (2023) investigated motifs and plots in Tatar, Kyrgyz, and Karakalpak folk tales, identifying common folklore elements reflecting ethnic traditions and educational functions. The author focuses on the interaction of cultures in the formation of folklore images and motifs, revealing the pedagogical importance of these works for the preservation of national identity.

The gaps in previous research lie in the lack of attention to the comparative analysis of ethnic identity expressed through folk pedagogy in the epics of these peoples. There is also a need for a deeper review of the specifics of the symbols used to convey ethnic values and traditions in these works. The purpose of the publication is to analyse ethnic identity in Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Karakalpak Dastans and determine the role of these epics in the preservation and transmission of cultural traditions. The following objectives are set to achieve this goal: identify key symbols and images reflecting ethnic identity in Dastans, examine the historical and cultural components associated with folk pedagogy in these works, determine the role of heroes and moral values embodying the cultural heritage of the respective peoples.

Accordingly, the study addresses the following research question: how are ethnic identity and folk pedagogy represented and transmitted in Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Karakalpak Dastans? It is hypothesised that, despite differences in lifestyle and historical context, these epics share common pedagogical functions while preserving distinct ethnocultural features specific to each tradition.

2. Materials and methods

The type of study can be described as a cultural analysis with elements of a comparative approach. The texts of the epics "Alpamysh: Uzbekskii narodnyi epos" (Alpamysh, 1982), "Kyrk Kyz" by Tarkovsky (1956), and "Edige" by Bazarov (2007), "The Kyrgyz Epic Manas" by Köçümkulkïzï (2005), which are the key works of the oral tradition of the Kyrgyz, Uzbeks, and Karakalpaks, respectively. Data collection was conducted in several stages, considering the diversity and completeness of the texts, as well as the authenticity of the sources. In the first stage, the texts of Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Karakalpak Dastans were selected. Special attention was paid to the authenticity of the texts, which was determined based on their compliance with traditional oral and written canons. The completeness of the text consisted in the presence of all the fundamental parts of the epic, and preserving the original structure, which reflects the culture and worldview of the people.

During the second stage, the data was systematised. Each epic was analysed separately, highlighting key themes such as family and social relations, rituals and traditions, symbolic images, and storylines that reflected both heroes and heroines. Special attention was paid to comparing the roles of men and women in the epic works of each country since the Karakalpaks, for example, have works where the main characters are heroines, which could also be typical for Uzbek and Kyrgyz Dastans. Thus, data collection provided a comprehensive analysis that allowed for the consideration of ethnic identity and cultural values within each tradition under study.

Sociocultural analysis was aimed at exploring the relationship between social structures and cultural values represented in the epics. Special attention was paid to the roles of women and men, and family relationships described in the texts. Cognitive analysis was used to review how epics reflect the mental models and worldviews of peoples.

Content analysis was used to identify key themes, symbols, and recurring motifs in the epics, including representations of lifestyle, values, and social structures. Comparative analysis was applied to examine similarities and differences between Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Karakalpak Dastans in terms of ethnic identity and folk pedagogy. Additionally, a historical-cultural approach was employed to interpret the epics within their broader historical and cultural contexts.

An interdisciplinary approach was used to interpret the results obtained. The results of the text analysis were correlated with historical, sociological, and ethnographic data. This enabled not only to identifying the specifics of the ethnic identity of each nation but also to understand how historical and environmental conditions influenced the formation of plots and images in Dastans.

3. Results

3.1 Ethnic identity in Dastans: structure, symbols and images

Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Karakalpak Dastans are rich in images of the traditional way of life, customs, and values inherent in the cultures of the peoples of Central Asia. Oral epics served both as artistic expression and cultural repositories, encapsulating the essence of the ethnic identity of the respective peoples. For the Kyrgyz, nomadic cattle breeding formed the basis of their identity, and this was reflected in such Dastans as Manas (Köçümkulkïzï, 2005). The epic revolves around themes of seasonal migration, clan alliances, and a pastoral lifestyle, emphasising the importance of land, livestock, and freedom. These elements occupied a central place in

the traditions of the Kyrgyz, for whom steppes and mountains are not just physical spaces, but sacred symbols of their existence. The epic describes in detail rituals such as the birth of foals, communal harvest celebrations, and livestock care, which provides a glimpse into the rhythms of nomadic life (Reichl, 2016a, Doszhan, 2023).

Uzbek Dastans, such as Alpamysh, presented a completely different but equally rich picture of cultural customs (Alpamysh, 1982). They emphasised the agrarian and urban lifestyle shaped by the fertile oases and trading centers. In these epics, irrigation canals, bustling bazaars, and walled cities became symbols of Uzbek identity, reflecting a history rooted in agriculture and commerce. The social structure depicted in the Dastans often repeated the real hierarchy: feudal rulers, skilled artisans, and peasants formed the basis of Uzbek society. Through descriptions of harvest festivals, traditional crafts, and communal pursuits, the epic preserved a vivid picture of life in a settled society.

Similarly, Karakalpak Dastans such as Kyrk Kyz (Tarkovsky, 1956) underscored the semi-nomadic and fishing traditions characteristic of the Aral Sea region. The interaction between humans and the environment, especially their dependence on rivers, reeds, and fertile plains, was a central theme. These Dastans celebrate community efforts such as fishing expeditions and the construction of yurts, and demonstrate shared values of cooperation and resilience.

Customs and traditions were not only described but also ritualised in the narratives, becoming an integral part of the storylines. For example, in the Kyrgyz epic Manas, the concept of "töre" (customary law) often regulated the actions of the main characters, Manas and his companions (Köçümkulkïzï, 2005). This principle was reflected in their loyalty to their oaths, respect for their elders, and respect for the traditions of hospitality that were central to their social lives. In Uzbek Alpamysh, the practice of mahallas (communal gatherings) has been repeatedly portrayed as a way to maintain social order. In one scene, Alpamysh was returning home and saw how his people had united to protect their lands, stressing the role of collective interaction and responsibility. "Kyrk Kyz" focused on the importance of collective survival strategies.

In all these epics, hospitality, respect for elders, and strong family ties are repeatedly emphasised, reflecting a common ethnic background. Wedding ceremonies, with their detailed matchmaking processes, dowry exchanges, and solemn celebrations, played a key role in epic texts, reflecting the importance of family and social ties. For example, in the Kyrgyz epic Manas, the matchmaking between Manas and Kanyk involved negotiations between families and trials for the groom, demonstrating his valour and worthiness. Funeral rites, such as the memorial rituals mentioned in the same epic, emphasised the importance of ancestral memory and the preservation of cultural traditions. Seasonal holidays such as Nauryz were also reflected in the plot, showing their meaning for the continuity of communal identity.

The heroes and symbols of the Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Karakalpak Dastans are carriers of ethnic identity, embodying virtues (Kravchuk et al., 2025, Koshbakova, 2022). The Kyrgyz hero Manas was portrayed as a valiant warrior and wise leader who devoted his life to the welfare of his people. His character embodied values such as bravery, loyalty, and respect for elders, which were the cornerstones of Kyrgyz society. In addition, his interaction with nature – the veneration of mountains and rivers – emphasised the deep connection of the Kyrgyz people with the nomadic environment.

The hero of the Uzbek dastan was Alpamysh, whose personality combined the traits of a warrior and a guardian of moral and social order. Alpamysh not only defended his community from external enemies but also embodied the Uzbek emphasis on harmony and collective well-being. Comparing him with Manas, the hero of the Kyrgyz epic, one can identify both common features and differences. Both heroes embody the ideals of heroism, courage, and devotion to their people. However, while Manas, in addition to his military exploits, focused on uniting disparate tribes in an effort to create a strong state, Alpamysh more often acted as a regulator of family and social ties, which emphasised the importance of community values in Uzbek culture. In addition, Manas was portrayed as a leader whose actions are aimed at strategically strengthening the unity of the people, while Alpamysh, remaining a defender and a warrior, is more focused on restoring justice in his personal and community life.

Symbolism played an important role in these Dastans, and various elements served as markers of ethnic identity. For example, horses were a recurring symbol in Kyrgyz epics, representing freedom, strength, and a nomadic spirit. In Karakalpak dastan, the characters reflected the features of a semi-nomadic lifestyle, where the emphasis is on collective survival and strategic adaptation. Symbols such as horses represented not only personal strength but also the importance of community efforts in overcoming difficulties.

In Uzbek Dastans, images of fertile lands and flowing canals reflected their agrarian roots, and in Karakalpak epics, rivers and reeds of the Aral Sea were often mentioned as symbols of sustenance and endurance. Sacred trees, mountains, and celestial bodies also occupied an important place, linking the struggles and victories of the heroes to a broader cosmological framework.

In Alpamysh dastan, the hero's victory was closely intertwined with the symbols of nature, where victory over the enemy often took place in sacred locations such as sacred trees or mountains, which emphasises not only the physical victory but also the connection with the spiritual and cosmological order of the world. These symbols became not only metaphors of strength and victory but also expressed harmony with nature, which made each victory substantial not only for the hero but also for the entire community. (Kolbaeva; Urdolotova, 2019).

The ethnic features and themes of Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Karakalpak Dastans have been shaped by centuries of historical influence, from migrations and conquests to cultural exchange with neighbouring civilisations (Tsyrfa, 2013, Ilieva, 2020). The turbulent history of Central Asia, marked by the rise and fall of empires, the spread of Islam, and the colonisation of tsarist Russia, was intricately woven into the fabric of these epics. Kyrgyz epics reflected the difficulties of maintaining a nomadic lifestyle in the face of external pressure. The recurring themes of tribal unity, resistance to invaders, and the sanctity of the steppe and mountains were the product of the Kyrgyz people's historical struggle for survival. For example, the epic Manas expressed the spirit of resistance to historical enemies such as the Mongols and the Oirats, while simultaneously celebrating the strong bond between the Kyrgyz people and their homeland (Köçümkulkïzï, 2005).

In the epic "Kyrk Kyz", ecological images played an important role in the development of the plot. The Amu Darya River not only served as a vital source of water and food resources for the heroes but also represented a physical barrier, overcoming which symbolised the trials and strength of the heroes. The reeds of the Aral Sea region were described as a shelter for the heroines in times of danger, which emphasised their connection with nature as an ally in the struggle for survival. However, these same natural elements could become a threat. River floods or difficult-to-navigate swampy areas made life difficult for the heroes, accentuating their resilience and ability to adapt. These historical influences not only enriched the content of the Dastans but also ensured their relevance as expressions of ethnic identity. Adapting to changing circumstances and preserving the core values, these epics retained their role as cornerstones of culture.

Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Karakalpak Dastans served as a deep expression of ethnic identity, reflecting the traditional way of life, customs, and values of their communities (Table 1). Through their characters, symbols, and narratives, these epics provided a vivid insight into the unique heritage of each group, while emphasising the common Turkic roots.

Table 1. Comparative characteristics of symbols, values, and customs in the epics of the Kyrgyz, Karakalpaks, and Uzbeks

The epic	Symbols	Values	Basic customs and rituals	The symbolism of nature	Animal images	Natural phenomena/ household items
Alpamysh	Horses, bow, weapons	Courage, loyalty, protection of the community	Matchmaking rituals, trials for the groom, heroic battles	Mountains as a symbol of resilience, rivers as an obstacle or an ally	War horses are a symbol of speed and strength; camels – of trade	Tents, weapons, traditional hero costumes
Manas	Battle banners, yurts	Unity of the people, heroism, steadfastness	Initiation of warriors, traditional funeral rites	Mountain peaks symbolise the connection with the spiritual world; steppes – a battlefield	Eagles are a symbol of wisdom; horses – speed and reliability	Yurts, bonfires
Kyrk Kyz	Amulets, heroines' clothes	Women's courage, protection of the community	Rituals of joint survival, preparation for battle	Rivers are a shelter and a means of survival	Horses are a symbol of movement, livestock – sustaining life	Boats, reed shelters, heroines' weapons

Source: Compiled by the authors based on Shamakhay, Bozhbanbaev and Sarkulova (2024).

3.2 Folk pedagogy in epics: moral and educational aspects

The epics of the Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Karakalpak peoples went beyond simple narrative, being repositories of moral and educational traditions. These oral narratives were deeply rooted in the cultural space of Central Asia and reflected the values, ethics, and social structures of these communities. Folk pedagogy, which is a central aspect of these epics, manifested itself in the way they dealt with issues of character development, moral decision-making, and the upbringing of the younger generation. Through the portrayal of heroic figures, family relationships, and allegorical elements, these epics formulated a vision of personal and social virtue.

The heroes of the Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Karakalpak epics occupied a central place in shaping the moral worldview of the younger generation (Table 2). Figures such as Manas in Kyrgyz epics, Alpamysh in Uzbek traditions, and Edige in Karakalpak legends served as models of bravery, honour, and justice. These heroes embody the qualities most revered in their societies: dedication, loyalty to family and community, and courage in the face of insurmountable difficulties (Akmatov et al., 2023).

Table 2. Heroes and their images in Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Karakalpak Dastans

Dastan	Ethnic group	Hero	Description of the hero	The main features
Manas	Kyrgyz	Manas	The legendary hero, defender of the people, unifier of the Kyrgyz tribes	Bravery, wisdom, strength, dedication
Semetey	Kyrgyz	Semetey	The son of Manas, the successor of his work, the heir of heroic strength and valour	Courage, loyalty to traditions
Alpamysh	Uzbek	Alpamysh	A hero who protects his people from enemies and restores justice	Heroism, strength, loyalty
Edige	Karakalpak	Edige	A great commander and ruler, glorified in the epic as a defender of the people	Bravery, diplomatic skills

Source: Compiled by the authors based on Farzand (2023).

For example, the Kyrgyz epic about Manas not only talks about the physical heroism of the main character but also emphasises his deep sense of responsibility to his people. Manas was portrayed as a leader who sacrificed personal comfort for the common good, making him a role model among young listeners. The struggles he went through and the decisions he made served as lessons in perseverance, ethical leadership, and the importance of unity. Similarly, in the Uzbek epic Alpamysh, the main character was celebrated for his unwavering loyalty to his betrothed Barchin and his determination to rescue her from captivity. Alpamysh's actions demonstrated not only physical prowess but also the virtues of patience, loyalty, and moral purity. Similar qualities can be found in the heroes of other epics.

In the Kyrgyz Manas, the hero also represented loyalty, but his commitment is manifested not only in relationships with his family but also in protecting his people. Manas is not just a warrior, but a leader who sacrifices his personal interests for the common good. His patience and steadfastness manifested themselves in strategic decisions and the ability to unite people in the face of danger. In the Karakalpak "Kyrk Kyz", the heroines of the epic demonstrated loyalty to their people through devotion to duty and willingness to self-sacrifice. The main character, Gulaim, demonstrated a combination of personal virtue and collective spirit, leading her squad and fighting for common freedom (Akramova and Rustamova, 2021, Aliyeva, 2025). Her journey served as an example for the younger generation, teaching the importance of loyalty, courage, and justice. The Karakalpak epic "Edige" emphasised the duality of the aspects of heroism – strength in battle and wisdom in leadership (Bazarov, 2007, Tolibayev, 2021). The heroes of the Karakalpak epic often faced moral dilemmas when they had to choose between personal gain and the well-being of their community. These narratives encouraged listeners to prioritise collective well-being and old ethical principles even in the face of adversity.

The representation of female warriors in the Karakalpak epic "Kyrk Kyz" not only reflects historical and cultural conditions but also challenges conventional gender norms within Turkic traditions, where male heroism is typically dominant. The image of Gulaim and her companions demonstrates an alternative model of leadership based on collective responsibility, resilience, and strategic thinking. In a contemporary context, such portrayals can influence modern perceptions of gender roles by reinforcing the idea that leadership and heroism are not exclusively male attributes. This contributes to a re-evaluation of traditional gender stereotypes in Central Asian societies and highlights the potential of epic narratives to shape evolving social values.

An important factor influencing the content and educational function of the Karakalpak, Uzbek and Kyrgyz epics was historical development within the framework of different empires and cultural traditions (Zholmukhan et al., 2024, Kunanets et al., 2020). For example, the Karakalpaks, as part of the nomadic and settled peoples of Central Asia, were greatly influenced by large state entities, which affected the pedagogical values of their society (Kadirova, 2021). In the early period, when the Karakalpaks were part of the Turkic nomadic tribes, their educational practices focused on family and tribal traditions, military brotherhood, and survival skills, which were reflected in the images of brave warriors and wise elders in the epics. The era of the Mongol conquest and Timurid rule reinforced the elements of government and intertribal relations, and during the Soviet period and after independence, the theme of national identity and the preservation of traditional culture was even more pronounced in epic stories.

Similar processes were observed among the Uzbek people, where pedagogical values were shaped by both nomadic and settled traditions, as well as Islamic spirituality. Before the Mongol invasions, the Uzbeks developed crafts, writing and science, highly valued respect for elders and observance of the norms of Islam. Under Timur and his descendants, the cult of education and spirituality acquired special meaning, reflected in epic plots praising heroic rulers, wise mentors, and saints.

During the Soviet period, the subject of work ethics and collectivism came to the fore, but in the post-Soviet period, interest in historical epics that demonstrated national identity and spiritual values was revived.

The Kyrgyz, like the Karakalpaks, maintained a nomadic lifestyle, which is reflected in the key motifs of the epic "Manas" and other Dastans (Köçümkulkïzï, 2005). In the early periods, the emphasis was on survival, battles, and military qualities, and with the adoption of Islam in the epics, attention to moral norms, justice, and respect for elders increased. The Mongol influence and later historical stages gave the Kyrgyz epic tradition a combination of military heroism and religious and moral aspects.

Thus, historical conditions and the change of political eras directly influenced the formation of epic traditions and pedagogical values reflected in them among the Karakalpaks, Uzbeks, and Kyrgyz. The epics not only conveyed knowledge about family traditions, martial arts, and social norms but also absorbed the ideas of Islamic morality, statehood, and collectivism (Sotvoldievich, 2021).

The family occupied a sacred place in the Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Karakalpak epics, being the basis of moral and ethical education (Zhanabergenova; Kairbekov, 2024, Zhalalova, 2022). Parents, especially mothers, played a crucial role in shaping the values and worldview of the younger generation. Mothers were often portrayed as the emotional backbone of the family, giving wisdom, support, and moral guidance. In the Kyrgyz epic Manas, Manas' mother, Chyyyrdy, was portrayed as a figure of great strength and wisdom. Her advice often guided Manas at critical moments, reminding him of his duties and responsibilities. Similarly, in Uzbek epics, mothers were often depicted as the main source of emotional stability, inspiring their children with a sense of purpose and moral purity. Through their words and actions, these maternal figures emphasised virtues such as compassion, devotion, and humility (Gümüş; Nasırambekova, 2024).

Fathers, on the other hand, were often portrayed as embodying discipline, strength, and the transmission of cultural traditions. They had high hopes for their children, especially their sons, instilling in them the importance of bravery, honour, and respect for their elders. In the epic Manas, the transfer of wisdom and skills from father to son is reflected in the episode where Manas' father, Zhakyp, instructed him, "Do not live only for yourself, my son, but think about your people. May your strength be a shield for the weak, and your wisdom a guiding light" (Köçümkulkïzï, 2005). The fathers passed on the wisdom of their ancestors and skills such as horseback riding, archery, and fighting, which were necessary for survival in harsh conditions.

In addition to the family, mentors and elders played a crucial role in the upbringing of the younger generation in these epics. These figures, often depicted as sages, warriors, or spiritual leaders, served as guardians of cultural and moral knowledge. Their instructions became indispensable in the hero's journey, representing the transmission of wisdom from one generation to another. In the Kyrgyz epic tradition, mentors such as Bakai, a wise elder who gave advice to Manas, served as an example of the importance of advice and foresight (Aitalieva; Kulalieva; Sartbekova, 2024). Bakai's role went beyond tactical advice; he served as a moral compass, reminding Manas of his responsibilities to his people and the importance of unity and justice. These relationships stressed the value of mentoring as a pedagogical tool, when the experience and wisdom of the elder served as a guide for the younger generation.

In the Uzbek epic Alpamysh, an important mentor role was played by Alpamysh's father, Baybura, who raised his son in the spirit of bravery and loyalty. For example, he said: "Being a defender of your kind is your sacred duty. Do not lose your honour for better or for worse". This instruction became a guide for Alpamysh in his struggle to save Barchin and preserve family values. In the Karakalpak epic "Kyrk Kyz", Gulaim, the main character and leader of forty girls, played the role of mentor. She both taught her companions martial arts and inspired them to unity and mutual assistance.

One of the episodes emphasised her mentoring role, "We are strong as long as we are united. May every action you take be for the benefit of the people". This point illustrates the importance of teamwork and wise leadership in overcoming difficulties (Reichl, 2016b).

The use of symbolism and allegories was a distinctive feature of the Kyrgyz, Uzbek and Karakalpak epics, which turned these narratives into tools of moral and educational learning. Symbolic elements such as animals, landscapes, and supernatural phenomena often carried deep moral and ethical meanings. In the Kyrgyz epics, mountains and rivers were endowed with symbolic meaning. The mountains represented the steadfastness and fortitude – the qualities that the heroes had to follow in their travels.

Animals also played an important allegorical role in these epics. The eagle, a recurring motif in Kyrgyz and Karakalpak legends, symbolised freedom, vigilance, and spiritual strength. Revered for their strength and survival instinct, wolves often represented loyalty and courage. These allegorical elements served as the basis for teaching abstract moral concepts in an accessible and memorable way. In Uzbek epics, the relationship between a hero and his horse often symbolised trust, loyalty, and mutual support, reinforcing the value of a strong relationship in overcoming life's difficulties. These allegories enriched the narratives, making them not only entertaining but also deeply instructive.

The battles depicted in the epics between good and evil or between competing moral principles served as powerful allegories of the struggles that had to be faced in real life. These conflicts often emphasised the triumph of virtues such as honesty, courage, and perseverance over vices such as greed, cowardice, and betrayal. For example, in Manas, the hero's battles with external enemies symbolised an internal struggle to adhere to ethical principles in the face of adversity. These allegories encouraged listeners to reflect on their own actions and decisions, showing the importance of maintaining integrity and moral purity.

Thus, the Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Karakalpak epics were not just historical or cultural artefacts, but educational texts that continued to shape the moral and ethical worldview of their audience. Through the exemplary lives of the heroes, the nurturing role of parents, and the wisdom of mentors, these epics provided a comprehensive framework for moral and educational development. The use of symbolism and allegories further enriched these narratives, making them accessible and memorable for all generations. Together, these elements ensured that the values and lessons embedded in these epics remained relevant, contributing to the formation of a sense of identity, responsibility, and ethical purpose among the younger generation.

These works served as a kind of encyclopaedia of folk pedagogy, through which generations learned key lessons and inspiration. These elements remain insufficiently examined in previous research, particularly in terms of systematic comparative analysis across different epic traditions.

These works, deeply rooted in the cultural context of Central Asia, formed ideas about social norms, family principles and rules of behaviour. Folk pedagogy, reflected in the epics, paid attention to issues of personal development, moral choice and the upbringing of children through the images of heroes, family relationships, and mentoring of elders. The wise advice of mothers, the disciplinary upbringing of fathers, as well as the instructions of elders, formed the basis for upbringing. Such episodes emphasised the importance of subordination, respect for elders, and continuity of traditions. In addition, allegories and symbolism of nature, as well as interaction with animals, played an important role in fostering ecological awareness. The heroes of the epics showed how important it is to live in harmony with nature and observe its laws. Thus, the epics of peoples represented a unique source of educational traditions, contributing to the formation of collective values and moral guidelines. These works required further examination with an emphasis on their pedagogical aspects, including methods of education and knowledge transfer within the family and social structure.

3.3 Comparative analysis of Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Karakalpak Dastans

The oral epic traditions of the Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Karakalpak peoples, embodied in their Dastans, represented a deep cultural heritage. Each tradition was a unique narrative structure that combined common motives of heroism, ethics, and spiritual values, while at the same time embodying the unique ethnic characteristics of these Central Asian cultures. The comparative analysis emphasised the commonalities and differences of ethnic components, considered the features of folk pedagogy in each cultural context, and examined how these ethnic and pedagogical ideas have been transformed in modern interpretations.

Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Karakalpak Dastans reflected a common cultural and historical context rooted in the nomadic and semi-nomadic lifestyle of Central Asia. Common features included motives, which often raised themes of heroism, loyalty, protection of ancestral lands, and moral purity. These themes illustrated a common Central Asian ethos shaped by the challenges of surviving in harsh landscapes and preserving collective identity (Table 3).

Mythological elements in all three traditions included: divine intervention, prophetic dreams, and supernatural beings that emphasised a common cosmological worldview. In all Dastans, ethnic identity was glorified through the description of traditional outfits, rituals, and social structures. For example, Kyrgyz "Manas", Uzbek "Alpamysh", and Karakalpak "Kyrk Kyz" depicted the daily life, spiritual practices, and communal gatherings of their respective cultures.

Despite the similarities, there were also individual ethnic components. Kyrgyz Dastans emphasised the prowess of the nomads, focusing on horse wars and vast pastoral landscapes. Uzbek epics were created under the influence of a settled agricultural lifestyle and included themes of trade, urban culture, and political consolidation. In the Karakalpak epic "Kyrk Kyz", the Amu Darya River symbolised both the source of life and the natural barrier that the heroes overcame in their trials. In one episode, the river becomes a decisive obstacle. "When forty girls reached the shores of the Amu Darya, the stormy waters threatened to engulf them.

Gulaim raised her hand and, turning to the spirit of the river, urged her to calm down. The current weakened, and the girls were able to cross, saving their strength for the upcoming battle". This fragment emphasised the close connection of the Karakalpak people with nature, where the river acts not only as a physical obstacle but also as a test of perseverance and the ability to interact with the outside world.

Table 3. Comparative analysis of Manas, Alpamysh, and Kyrk Kyz Dastans

Aspect	Manas	Alpamysh	Kyrk kyz
Main topic	The unity of the people, the defence of the motherland, the fight against external enemies	The struggle for honour, love, and justice	Women's leadership, homeland defence, independence
The central character	Manas is a hero, a symbol of unity and strength of the Kyrgyz people	Alpamysh is a warrior hero, a fighter for love and justice	Gulaim is the leader of 40 female warriors
The role of the heroines	Support of heroes (Aychurok, Kanykey), keepers of traditions	Barchin is a loyal and brave companion of the hero	Gulaim and her companions are the main characters, the organisers of the defence
Storylines	Fighting against external enemies, uniting tribes, protecting the people	The return of the hero, battles with enemies, trials, and a wedding	Organisation of defence against enemies, the collective struggle of girls
Religious motives	Islam and shamanism (ancestral spirits, prayers)	Islam (trust in God, moral lessons)	Islam, belief in spiritual fortitude
The image of the enemy	External invaders (Kalmyks, Chinese), a threat to the homeland	Enemies oppressing the hero and his people	External invaders threatening the freedom and land of the Karakalpaks
Values	Unity, courage, loyalty to traditions, and protection of the native land	Honour, love, justice, devotion	Freedom, resilience, women's solidarity
Elements of nature	Mountain landscapes, rivers, pastures	Plains, fertile lands	Steppes, deserts, rivers
The narrative form	A large-scale epic narrative transmitted orally in poetic form	An epic with romantic and heroic elements in poetic form	An epic with an emphasis on female heroism in a poetic form
Hero's formation	Trials, inheritance of heroic traditions	Personal trials, the struggle for love	Collective resilience, leadership skills
Unique features	Covers the life of several generations, a large scale of the plot	Combining heroism with romantic lines	A unique epic where the central role is given to female characters

Source: Compiled by the authors based on Farzand (2023).

Folk pedagogy, deeply rooted in Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Karakalpak Dastans, served as a means of transferring moral values, life skills, and cultural legacy. Kyrgyz Dastans highlighted virtues such as bravery, loyalty, and collective responsibility. The epic "Manas", for example, served as a moral guideline, taught the younger generation unity, respect for elders, and the preservation of cultural identity. Pedagogical elements often manifested themselves in dialogues between characters and the actions of heroic personalities.

The pedagogical orientation of the Uzbek epics was to foster justice, wisdom, and perseverance. Alpamysh was an example of the balance between physical strength and intellectual acuity, representing a hero who won not only in battle but also through strategic thinking and moral fortitude. These tales reflected the values of a community-oriented society, stressing harmony and the importance of ethical leadership (Kalandarova; Temurova, 2024). Karakalpak oral traditions often demonstrated the relationship between people and the environment. In "Kyrk Kyz", the female heroines of the epic embodied resilience and resourcefulness, challenging traditional gender roles.

Modern interpretations of Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Karakalpak Dastans have demonstrated the evolution of these traditions in response to modern realities. In the 21st century, these epics have been actively adapted in educational programmes, cultural festivals, and artistic productions. For example, the Kyrgyz epic "Manas" is incorporated into school curricula and national cultural initiatives aimed at strengthening identity and cultural literacy (Aitalieva; Kulalieva; Sartbekova, 2024). In addition, epic traditions are represented in contemporary artistic forms, including theatre and musical productions inspired by "Manas" and its related narratives (Gümüş; Nasırambekova, 2024). These examples demonstrate the continued relevance and reinterpretation of dastans in modern cultural contexts.

The heroic ideals in Dastan were reinterpreted to solve modern problems such as national unity, cultural preservation, and social justice.

In Kyrgyzstan, the epic Manas was often celebrated as a unifying narrative for the country's various ethnic groups. Elements of folk pedagogy were included in school curricula for the development of cultural literacy. These adaptations preserved the moral and ethical teachings of the original epics, making them accessible to younger generations. Modern adaptations of the Dastans in literature, theatre, and cinema indicate the enduring relevance of their themes.

At the same time, the preservation of oral epic traditions faces significant challenges in the digital age. The transition from oral performance to digital formats — including recorded performances, social media content, and educational platforms — changes not only the form but also the perception of these epics. While digitalisation increases accessibility for younger generations, it may also lead to the simplification of complex narratives and the loss of performative elements such as improvisation and audience interaction.

Contemporary adaptations of Dastans for younger audiences often involve visualisation, shortened narrative forms, and integration into school curricula. These transformations make epic traditions more accessible and engaging; however, they also raise questions about the authenticity of transmission and the preservation of deeper cultural meanings. Thus, the modern reinterpretation of Dastans represents a balance between cultural preservation and adaptation, directly influencing how cultural values and collective memory are transmitted in contemporary Central Asian societies.

4. Discussion

A critical analysis of the results showed that the Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Karakalpak Dastans performed a dual function: on the one hand, they preserved ethnic identity and cultural legacy, and on the other, they served as a tool for moral education and pedagogical influence. The importance of these epics lies in their ability to combine artistic, historical, and pedagogical elements, conveying key ethical principles and collective values through heroic images, symbolism, and allegories. Each epic integrated the unique features of its ethnic group, whether it was the nomadic independence

of the Kyrgyz, the agrarian resilience of the Uzbeks, or the ecological adaptation of the Karakalpaks in the context of common Turkic traditions. This underlined their role as repositories of collective memory and a platform for broadcasting experiences designed to educate future generations, while maintaining dynamism and relevance in a changing cultural landscape.

A study by Auyesbayeva and Akimova (2024) focused on the typological similarities and differences between the versions of the epic "Edige Batyr" among different Turkic peoples, focusing on the transformation of plots under the influence of historical and cultural conditions. Thereby, the analysis of Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Karakalpak Dastans identified a broader ethnographic and pedagogical perspective, concentrating on the description of traditional lifestyles, social structures, and moral values. One of the main similarities was the use of symbols as carriers of ethnic identity. In the Edige Batyr and the Dastans of the Kyrgyz, Uzbeks, and Karakalpaks, the symbolism of animals, natural objects, and heroes served as an important tool for transmitting cultural values. Both approaches emphasised the importance of epics as guardians of folk pedagogy, however, they differed in accents when interpreting ethnic components and educational aspects. However, in the paper of P. Auyesbayeva and T. Akimova, more attention is paid to the processes of adapting these symbols in different versions of the epic, while Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Karakalpak Dastans demonstrated how the symbols consolidated unique aspects of ethnic identity.

In Edige Batyr, the educational aspects were viewed primarily through the prism of the heroic qualities of the main character and his role in strengthening social justice. On the contrary, Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Karakalpak epics emphasised family and community values, including the participation of mentors, parents, and elders in shaping the characters' worldview. Thus, despite the general purpose of studying folk pedagogy and ethnic representation, the study by Auyesbayeva and Akimova (2024) and an analysis of Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Karakalpak Dastans offered complementary perspectives that deepen understanding of the cultural heritage of the Turkic peoples.

Ergeshova (2021) focused on educational practices in traditional Kyrgyz families, paying attention to the age-related characteristics of upbringing and moral aspects related to lifestyle. By comparison, the analysed Dastans, "Manas", "Alpamysh", and "Kyrk Kyz", along with the depiction of heroism, also present elements of folk pedagogy related to moral education and family traditions. Features of heroic upbringing in the study by K. Ergeshova and Dastans shared the same desire to cultivate such virtues in the younger generation as honesty, loyalty, and responsibility. Unlike K. Ergeshova, who focused on family structures, Dastans integrate these elements more deeply into the socio-cultural fabric, demonstrating the influence of external historical factors on upbringing.

Isakov (2022) noted the importance of depicting childhood and upbringing in novels, emphasising the educational role of parents and elders. At the same time, this study focused on the broader picture of folk pedagogy, where, in addition to education through family relationships, the role of community, symbolism, and moral lessons through heroic epics is also accentuated. Both studies agreed that Dastans performed an educational function. However, in the study by Isakov (2022), childhood was considered in the context of rituals and parenting, while this analysis focused on the moral and ethical aspects of folk pedagogy, conveyed through the images of heroes.

Nzamatdinova (2020) examined the use of comparisons with bird names in Karakalpak Dastans, which, in turn, focused on the symbolism of nature as an important element of cultural identity. Conversely, this study focused on a broader range of ethnic aspects in Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Karakalpak Dastans, including lifestyle, moral values, and folk pedagogy. Both studies emphasised the importance of nature and symbolism in the epics, but the difference lies in the approach: the study of D.K. Nzamatdinova concentrated on specific symbols, whereas this one focused on educational and moral aspects through the characters' images and their interaction with society. In turn, the paper of K. Nzamatdinova analysed the influence of fauna, the results of this study on Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Karakalpak Dastans indicated the role of broader cultural and social structures in folk pedagogy, such as family and elders, which allowed emphasising the multilayered educational impact of Dastans.

Sapayeva (2024) conducted a comparative analysis of Central Asian and European epics with an emphasis on cultural and historical aspects related to identity and moral values. Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Karakalpak Dastans emphasised the heroes' connection with nature. Natural symbols such as mountains, rivers, and steppes played a vital role in underlining the interaction between humans and the environment. Whereas the paper of Sapayeva (2024), who stressed universal moral values, this study examined local cultural elements and their ritualised expressions, revealing the specific features of each tradition. The representation of gender roles was also considered an important aspect. Sapayeva (2024) discussed the role of women in European epics, where they inspired heroes, whereas in Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Karakalpak Dastans, women played an active role. Themes of fate and higher powers, characteristic of Western epics, are also reflected in the work of Sapayeva. However, in the Central Asian Dastans, these motives acquired the context of the struggle for ancestral lands, as in Manas. These aspects were investigated from an ethnographic and anthropological standpoint, uncovering the syncretism of mythology and reality. The pedagogical function of the Dastans was another key focus. B.R. Sapayeva discussed universal moral lessons, while this analysis concentrated on folk pedagogy expressed in heroic actions. Thus, the studies complemented each other, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of epic traditions. The paper of B.R. Sapayeva highlighted universal aspects, and this analysis underscores local features, their importance for the cultures of Central Asia, which deepens the understanding of their contribution to the world heritage.

Comparing the results of the current study and the findings of Sayfulina, Askerbekkyzy and Faizullina (2020). Both studies focused on the meaning of ethnic identity, viewing it through the prism of mythological and educational elements, but differed in accents and methods of analysis. Sayfulina, Askerbekkyzy and Faizullina (2020) analysed mythological structures and symbolic images characteristic of the Turkic epics in more detail.

The authors paid special attention to cosmological and sacred aspects, such as the connection of the characters with higher powers, natural elements, and archetypal plots. In contrast, the study of dastans focuses on folk pedagogy and the educational role of heroes. A special place was occupied by moral lessons conveyed through the actions and dialogues of the characters. The comparative analysis also showed differences in the interpretation of family values. Sayfulina, Askerbekkyzy and Faizullina (2020). viewed family relations through the symbolism of family ties and their sacred importance, whereas Dastans research focused on the practical aspects of conveying moral lessons through the interaction of characters with family members. The mythopoeic emphasis of Sayfulina, Askerbekkyzy and Faizullina (2020) allowed identifying universal archetypes connecting epics with other world traditions, while the study on Dastans revealed their practical pedagogical value, especially in the context of modern challenges. This diversity of views has reinforced the notion of the role of epic heritage in shaping cultural identity and intergenerational connection.

Tolibayev (2021) evaluates the perception of toponyms in the Karakalpak epics, which demonstrates the influence of geographical and cultural elements on the formation of ideas about their native land and ethnic identity. From another perspective, the research conducted within the framework of this paper focused on the folk pedagogy of Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Karakalpak Dastans, emphasising the moral and educational aspects of epic traditions. Both studies determined the connection of ethnic components with folk identity, stressing the importance of historical and cultural factors in the formation of epic narratives. The main similarity between the studies was the emphasis on ethnic elements as fundamental aspects determining the uniqueness and originality of cultural traditions. However, Tolibayev (2021) focused on toponymic features, which were interpreted as a means of expressing national identity. Therewith, the examination of Dastans paid more attention to the educational role of epics, considering them as a source of transmission of moral values, cultural traditions, and pedagogical lessons.

Thus, the differences between the approaches determined the specifics of exploring ethnic identity through various prisms of epic traditions.

5. Conclusions

This study demonstrated that Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Karakalpak Dastans serve as key carriers of ethnic identity and folk pedagogy in Central Asia. The main argument is that, despite differences in lifestyle and historical context, these epic traditions perform similar educational functions while preserving distinct ethnocultural features.

The comparative analysis showed that Dastans transmit moral values, social norms, and collective memory through symbolic images, heroic narratives, and cultural practices. At the same time, each tradition reflects specific cultural models nomadic, agrarian, and semi-nomadic which shape unique representations of identity.

Thus, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how epic traditions function as mechanisms of cultural continuity and transformation in Central Asian societies.

The study has several limitations. First, the analysis is based on selected published versions of the epics, including "Manas", "Alpamysh" and "Kyrk Kyz", which may not fully reflect the variability of oral performances and regional versions. Second, the reliance on translated and edited texts limits the ability to capture original linguistic nuances and performative elements such as improvisation and audience interaction. In addition, the availability of recent comparative studies on ethnopedagogical aspects of Central Asian epics remains limited, which constrains the depth of theoretical contextualisation.

For further research, it is necessary to expand the analysis of the epics, accounting for modern changes in the cultural traditions of these peoples. A possible direction may be to evaluate the role of epic texts in educating the younger generation in the context of globalisation and their use in educational programmes. It is also worth paying attention to a more detailed consideration of the role of female characters and their influence on gender norms in various ethnic groups of Central Asia.

The expansion of comparative analysis with the epics of other Turkic peoples seems promising for a deeper understanding of the cultural interrelationships of the region. Additionally, the use of epics in contemporary art, literature, cinema, and educational initiatives to strengthen cultural identity and intercultural dialogue can be explored.

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