

BASED ON THE RESULTS OF AN ETHNOGRAPHIC EXPEDITION: FIELD OBSERVATIONS ON THE KHIVA HALFAS

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Abstract

This article is based on field observations conducted during an independently organized ethnographic expedition by the author in the Khiva region of the Republic of Uzbekistan in 2023–2024. The study draws upon field materials directly recorded from informants and provides insight into the traditional cultural practices of the Khiva halfas.

The aim of the study is to scientifically analyze the cultural and social roles of female performers known as the Khiva halfas, along with their heritage and traditional practices. Relying on field data, the article delineates the Khiva halfas' place in communal life through their song and dance performances, with particular emphasis on their ritual functions during family ceremonies (weddings, circumcision rites). The art of halfa is examined not only as an element of oral heritage but also as a phenomenon that affirms the active cultural role of women in society. As examples, the article references prominent halfas from the early 20th century to the 2000s—such as Onabibi Otakozieva (Ojiza), her disciples Oyibibi Matyokubova and her daughter Nodira Bogbekova—as well as musical ensembles like the harmonica players' group. This phenomenon demonstrates the distinct role of women as transmitters of cultural heritage in society and includes an analysis of the master-apprentice tradition, performance-based training, and mechanisms for preserving the folk repertoire. The study concludes with findings on the transformation of the halfa tradition, its continued vitality among contemporary generations, and the significance of this heritage. The article employs methods from folklore studies and ethnographic field observation, as well as content analysis to interpret the structure, thematic content, and poetic elements of the collected song texts.

Keywords: Khiva city, halfas, ethnographic expedition, oral heritage, female musical tradition

ПО РЕЗУЛЬТАТАМ ЭТНОГРАФИЧЕСКОЙ ЭКСПЕДИЦИИ: ПОЛЕВЫЕ НАБЛЮДЕНИЯ ЗА ХИВИНСКИМИ ХАЛФАС

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Аннотация

Статья основана на полевых наблюдениях, проведенных во время самостоятельно организованной автором этнографической экспедиции в Хивинский регион Республики Узбекистан в 2023–2024 годах. Исследование основано на полевых материалах, полученных непосредственно от информантов, и дает представление о традиционных культурных практиках хивинских халф.

Цель исследования — научный анализ культурной и социальной роли женщин-исполнительниц, известных как хивинские халфы, а также их наследия и традиционных практик. Опираясь на полевые данные, статья определяет место хивинских халф в общественной жизни через их песенно-танцевальные выступления, с особым

акцентом на их ритуальные функции во время семейных церемоний (свадьбы, обряды обрезания). Искусство халфы рассматривается не только как элемент устного наследия, но и как феномен, подтверждающий активную культурную роль женщин в обществе. В качестве примеров в статье приводятся выдающиеся исполнительницы халфы с начала XX века до 2000-х годов, такие как Онабиби Отакозиева (Оджиза), её ученицы Ойибиби Матёкубова и её дочь Нодира Богбекова, а также музыкальные ансамбли, такие как группа гармонистов. Этот феномен демонстрирует особую роль женщин как носителей культурного наследия в обществе и включает анализ традиции мастер-ученик, исполнительского обучения и механизмов сохранения народного репертуара. Исследование завершается выводами о трансформации традиции халфы, её сохраняющейся жизнеспособности среди современных поколений и значении этого наследия. В статье используются методы фольклористики и этнографических полевых наблюдений, а также контент-анализ для интерпретации структуры, тематического содержания и поэтических элементов собранных песенных текстов.

Ключевые слова: город Хива, халфас, этнографическая экспедиция, устное наследие, женская музыкальная традиция

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Introduction

One of the cultural and historical heritages of Central Asia is the art of halfa in the Khorezm region, particularly the halfa institution that developed among women. This view has its own historical significance, social function, and cultural continuity, constitutes a separate subject within ethnographic science. The “art of halfa” is classified as a form of folkloric genre. The term “halfa” is derived from Arabic and conveys the meanings “literate,” “knowledgeable,” and “mentor”. As noted in historical sources, the halfa tradition appeared in Khorezm at the end of the 19th century. Its first performer and founder was Khonimjan, the daughter of Halfa Said Ahmad. Since 1895, she performed halfa songs while playing musical instruments at wedding ceremonies in the Khorezm region. First, these songs were performed by women known as sozanda (female singers), accompanied by the doira and accordion [13].

Thus, the “art of halfa” is understood as the activity of an educated woman who provides religious instruction and guidance. These women could read religious books and could know religious rituals ledgeable in religion, could rule ceremonies within the community, and were regarded as spiritual figures who brought enlightenment to the people. At the same time, they were creative artists who composed songs, guided the younger generation, performed their own works, and skillfully fulfilled the cultural and aesthetic needs of women.

The relevance of the study lies in the fact that this phenomenon has survived to the present day and is often understood not only as an element of oral tradition, but also as a women's cultural roles and spiritual leadership in society. The activities of the halfas are closely linked to the transmission of cultural heritage, aesthetic education, the master-apprentice tradition, the preservation of religious and ritual songs, and the art of performance.

The purpose of the article The aim of the article is to analyze according to a scholarly analysis of the structure, social role, and processes of transformation of the halfa tradition, based on field observations conducted during the ethnographic expedition in Khiva. The object of the

study is the cultural activity of the Khiva halfas, the subject - their repertoire, methods of transmission, and social functions. The research analyzes interviews with prominent local halfas and their apprentices, photographic and audio materials, as well as observations based on the regional folk repertoire.

Research Methods

Several methods were employed in the collection and analysis of ethnographic materials for this article. First and foremost, the ethnographic field observation method played a central role. In 2023–2024 of the Republic of Uzbekistan in the Khorezm region, within the framework of an independently conducted expedition of data were gathered through direct observation of the traditional singing practices of the halfas, their repertoires, and their cultural role in society. This was achieved through immersion in the cultural environment and close interaction with tradition bearers. Second, the oral history method was employed, involving interviews with informants of various ages—particularly elderly women. These interviews provided valuable insights into the historical roots of the halfa tradition and the specific features of its transmission across generations. This method enabled the reconstruction of cultural heritage through vivid personal recollections.

Third, content analysis was applied to interpret the structure, thematic content, and poetic elements of the collected song texts. Through this method, the thematic scope, rhetorical structure, system of imagery, and artistic features of the halfa songs were examined. In addition, the comparative-historical method was used to identify similarities and differences between the halfa tradition in Khorezm and the traditional poetic heritage of women in other regions. This, in turn, allowed for a clearer understanding of halfa art as a distinctive cultural phenomenon. As a result, the application of a comprehensive set of research methods enabled a deeper exploration of the gendered, aesthetic, and social functions of the halfa tradition.

Main Part: The halfa tradition, an integral part of Khorezm's folk song heritage, has long been transmitted orally from generation to generation, evolving through the master-apprentice system and steadily developing over time. This art form is distinguished by its uniqueness and is not found in other regions of Uzbekistan. Therefore, it has been preserved and passed down as a tradition to future generations without alteration. With the aim of meeting representatives of this cultural tradition, a field trip was to the Khorezm region [Uzbek: Xorazm viloyati] from April 14 to April 25, 2023, together with my student Kaddamov Gayrat.

After two days of travel, we arrived in the historical center of Khorezm—the city of Khiva—we stayed of Kalandarov Kaddam-ata's place. Kaddam-ata's wife Davletova Bekposha [12], shared



with us the history of the halfa tradition in the Khorezm region, as well as stories about Onabibi Otajonova [(Ojiza), 1899–1952], a renowned halfa still remembered in local oral tradition, and her apprentice, Oybbibi Matyokubova (born in 1936).

In Khorezm, the term halfa is primarily used in two meanings: first, to refer to female religious figures (otinbibi) who read sacred texts and guide people during mawlid and mourning ceremonies; and second, to denote cultural performers who sing melodies

and songs, performing the cultural and spiritual needs of women [9, 3]. If we expand on the religious connotation of the first group of halfas, the term “mawlid” (Arabic: mawlid, مولد) refers to a religious ceremony in Islamic culture that commemorates and praises the birth of the Prophet Muhammad. The word “mawlid” in Arabic literally means “birth” or “day of birth” [6]. Thus, in its first meaning, mawlid translates as “to give birth” or “to be born”; the second meaning is “the time of birth”, and the third is “the place of birth” [8]. In the Muslim world, the ceremonial celebration known as “Mawlid Bayram” (holiday) is also widely recognized. Most often, “otinbibis”—women with Islamic education who have studied in madrasas or received religious instruction from a mentor, and who teach religion to women, recite the Qur'an, and conduct religious rituals such as mawlid, mourning and blessings—perform these recitations in a melodic form during women's gatherings, aiming to enlighten, to console and promote unity among the community. The field materials that we collected, however, concern the second group of “halfas” mentioned above—those who perform melodies and songs and serve as cultural figures performing the cultural and spiritual needs of women.

In 1965, the book *Khorezm Folk Songs*, compiled by J. Kabulniyazov in Tashkent and were published the first seven songs by Halfa Ojiza and four songs by Halfa Anash and presented to readers for [7]. This became a valuable resource for researchers in the field of folklore. After J. Kabulniyazov's work, great interest increased in the Khorezm halfas' folklore. Academic dissertations specifically focused on the tradition of halfachilik were also defended. [3]. In the second chapter of Ruzimbayev's dissertation titled “Ideological and Artistic Features of Uzbek Folk Songs of the Khorezm Oasis”, the songs of Onajon Sabirova and Onabibi Otajonova–Ojiza, halfas, are analyzed. [4]. Additionally, Ojiza Halfa's songs “Hurshidi jahon galdı” and “Tuninay” were included in Volume 9 of *Uzbek Folk Music*. [5, 12].

Let us turn to the biography of Onabibi Otajonova (Ojiza) (1899–1952)



One of the most well-known among all the khalfas in Khorezm, recognized for her soft voice, original songs, and mastery in singing, was Onabibi Otajonova. She was born in 1899 in the village of Kattabog, located in the Khiva region, into a poor family. Her father, known as Polvonmurodvoy (Palban Muratbay – A.V.), worked as a miller in a rice warehouse. At the age of 2 or 3, Onabibi contracted smallpox and lost her eyesight. When their daughter was about seven years old, the family moved to the city of Khiva. Worrying about his daughter who had become disabled at a young age, her father decided to apprentice her to Bibijon Khalfa from Gandimyan in order to help her acquire a profession. Bibijon learned to understand the meaning of religious songs and the secrets of Sharia from her father, Qosim

Devon. At the same time, she studied the art of speech from Khudaybergen Mukhrean and Komil Devoni, who lived in the same village [13].

Onabibi Otajonova was a diligent and intelligent girl, known for her deeply expressive and melodious voice. Starting from the age of 10–12, she memorized and performed folk songs as well as ghazals by Navoi, Mashrab, and Ogahiy in public. She composed her own melodies, performed her songs herself, and was able to move people with both sorrow and joy. Despite her blindness, she earned great respect among the people and became known by the pseudonym “Ozhiza Khalfa.” She deepened her knowledge and refined her skills in the khalfa art by learning from prominent female khalfas in Khiva, such as Khonim Suvchi and

Onajon Sobirova. She passed on her art to the younger generation as a cultural heritage and continued the tradition [9, 7].

The most of Onabibi Otajonova's songs were not recorded directly from her, there are several changes in their content. The last variations were transcribed based on her mentors' recollections, her repertoire includes a wide variety of genres. Especially in the songs dedicated to her peers, she praised her girl friends' active and diligent labor during the cotton harvest. In general, the content of her songs widely reflects themes of love, politeness, humanity and purity. For example, we can mention such works as "Uyalaman", "Targuncha", "Galmedi-galmedi" [9], "Muboraklar bulgay", "Arka kizlar", "Khosh galdingizlar", "Sangar" and "Ulgincha sizni derman" [2]. She also performed the epics "Oshiq Garib va Shokhsanam", "Asil va Karam", "Oshiq Albond" [9], "Oshiq Mahmud" and "Gurugli" with great skill and depth [2].

"As an example from the epic "Oshiq Garib va Shokhsanam", we can cite the song "Ovozning seni" ("Your Voice"):

<i>Халк узи еткизган азиз меҳмоним,</i>	<i>You, the dear guest sent by the people,</i>
<i>Болама ўхшайди овозинг сени.</i>	<i>When I hear your voice, I see my son.</i>
<i>Тез хабарин бергил чикмасдан жоним,</i>	<i>Send message quickly, before my soul departs,</i>
<i>Ўғлима ўхшайди овозинг сени.</i>	<i>When I hear your voice, I see my son.</i>
<i>Болама ўхшайди нолишинг сени [2]</i>	<i>Even your weeping sounds like my child's</i>

In these lines, the mother speaks about her son, who had spent seven years in hardship, finally returns home upon hearing of his beloved Shokhsanam's wedding. So when he sings the song "Bir yör savdosina tushtimda galdim" ("I dreamed of the desire for a beloved and came"), hearing his voice, his mother asks: "Are you my son, or my son's friend?" After that, the song "Balama okshoyt üñüñ senin" ("Your voice sounds like my son's") was composed [2]. As for the main plot of the epic, Garib is a humble but kind-hearted young man who was deeply in love. He falls in love for Shokhsanam, a beautiful girl from a wealthy family, but faced numerous difficulties. Through the epic, it is reflected in the people's consciousness that love between the rich and the poor faces significant obstacles, and that overcoming them requires strong moral courage.

In the song 'Arka kizlar' Flirty Girls:

<i>Арка кизлар чакконлашиб галинлар,</i>	<i>Flirty Girls, gather and come together,</i>
<i>Гўрали бу тўйни томошасини.</i>	<i>Be the spectators of this beautiful wedding.</i>
<i>Бу тўйларда яхши хизмат атинлар,</i>	<i>Serve well at these wedding celebrations,</i>
<i>Гўрали бу тўйни томошасини,</i>	<i>Be the spectators of this beautiful wedding,</i>
<i>Хамма гўрсин тўйни томошасини [2, 18].</i>	<i>Let everyone witness the joy and splendor of the celebration.</i>

These lines are considered one of the traditional performances of "halfa" women, representatives of Khorezm Uzbek women's folklore, typically performed during weddings and cultural events. These verses are regarded as one of the traditional compositions performed by halfa women—representatives of Khorezm Uzbek women's folklore—during weddings and cultural ceremonies.

Through appealing to graceful and modest young women, the song emphasizes the active participation of women in organizing traditional festive ceremonies, their cultural responsibilities, and communal unity. It calls upon girls and women to take part in such celebrations, to enhance the beauty of the event, and to serve as exemplary contributors to public cultural life. The song reflects themes of diligence, responsibility, and social duty, with the central idea being to provide the audience with aesthetic enjoyment.

The songs of the Khorezm khalfas are interwoven with epics, folk songs, and love lyrics, forming a distinct thematic genre. The creative work of Onabibi Otajonova, known by the pseudonym “Ojiza,” is distinguished by this genre-based diversity.



She mentored a number of talented apprentices, including Poshsha Matchonova, Nazira Sobirova, Anabibi Jumaniyozova, Ullubibi Boyjonova and Rovtiya Akhmedova. In 1923, she participated in the Village Exhibition in Moscow. "From 1928 to 1938, she worked in the Workshop for the Blind in Khiva (UPM – Ūrtacha Paydali Mehnat, meaning ‘Moderately Productive Labor’), which was a Soviet-era artisanal production

cooperative established for the unemployed or people with disabilities". Special conditions were created for blind citizens — she worked as an artistic director. From 1938 to 1952, she worked first in the city of Khiva, and later in the collective and state farm theater in the Khorezm region.

The fact that her songs are still remembered and sung among the people today it was confirmed by Davronbek Atabayev, the head of the Khiva Puppet Theater [10].

Inspired by Ojiza Khalfa’s songs, we recorded firsthand the art of her daughter, Oyibibi Matyokubova Polvanovna—a Khiva resident born in 1936 who has continued the halfa tradition—at the age of eighty-seven. She recalled that during the soviet union, while working from morning till the evening in the kolkhoz, her talent developed as she sang in the cotton fields and played the doira. She also noted that she had given birth to and raised nine children, and her husband, AbduSharif Bagbekov, did not allow her to perform publicly. Only after she turned 55 he gave permission her to sing. Even at the age of 87, she still performs traditional wedding songs such as “jar-jar” and



“lullabies” at celebrations. She mentioned that her daughter, Nodira Bogbekova, was now continuing the “halfachilik” (halfa) tradition [13].

Эң кызыгы биз Каддам ата жана Гайрат үчөөбүз барганда, замандашы Каддам ата менен баарлашып, жаштык кезиндеги окуяларды эстешип, ырдап дагы, бийлеп дагы бергени болду. The most remarkable moment was when the three of us — Kaddam Ata, Gayrat, and me — visited her, and she joyfully remembered about her youth with her peer Kaddam Ata, even singing and dancing together.

*Сойи сабаб билан бу туйга галдим,
Юбаринг мани ўзим билган йулима,
Богчали саройда бир кизни гурдим.
Юбаринг мани узим билган йулима,
Бошланг мани арка кизни туйина*

*I came to this wedding in love with you,
Let me go my own way.
In a gardened palace, I saw a girl,
Let me go my own way.
Begin the wedding of the Arka girl!*

*Карчигаидин қойиб утинг хар ёна,
Хасратингдан булдим дали девона.
Энди одом булажаки гумона,
Юбаринг мани узим билган йулима.
Бошланг мани арка кизни туйина.*

*You shone like a star, you set my heart on fire,
From longing, I even lost my mind.
Now he can no longer be called human,
Let me go my own way.
Begin the wedding of the Arka girl!*

Nodira Bogbekova was born in 1976 in the village of Eski Kiyot, in the city of Khiva. Her mother, Oyibibi Matyokubova, entrusted her to the People's Artist of Uzbekistan and master khalfa Gaukharhonim Rakhimova as a disciple, she began learning to play the harmonium and gradually earned recognition as a renowned khalfa performer in public circles. At the age of 12, in 1988, she began performing with her peers as a young khalfa in the “Garmonchi Girls” ensemble led by Gaukharhonim Rakhimova, giving concerts for cotton workers. In this environment, her talent was gained, just like her mother's.

After graduating from the Khiva Pedagogical College in 1995, Nodira Bogbekova began her professional career as a music director at the Khiva City Department of Culture, where she has continued to work to this day.

Nodira Khalfa has learned and continued the artistic traditions of renowned halfas Ojiza and Anash, as well as gained experience from her skilled mentors Amina Kuryozova and Nazira Boyjonova [1].



For example, she learned the song "Tuyina" by Onabibi Otajonova (Ojiza) from her mother, Oyibibi Matyokubova, and continues to perform it to this day.

Дустлар бу дунёни поёни булмас,
 Ёниб айтган сузни ёлғони булмас.
 Туйларда юрганни армони булмас,
 Юбаринг мани узим билган йулима.
 Бошланг мани Арка кизни туйина.

*Friends, this world has no end,
 Words spoken from the heart are never false.
 There is no regret for those who attend weddings,
 Let me go my own way.
 Begin the wedding of the Arka girl!*

Мани ухлади дап гап буришдила,
 Олтин кумуш бариб олдоб кочдила.
 Азонда туриб гулгун шароб ичдилар,
 Юбаринг мани узим билган йулима.
 Бошланг мани Арка кизни туйина.

*They gossiped the word that I had fallen asleep,
 Deceiving me, they left with gold and silver.
 Early in the morning they woke up and drank wine gayly,
 Let me go my own way.
 Begin the wedding of the Arka girl!*

Умримни утирдим сухбат соз билан,
 Жонимни уртайди киноя суз билан.
 Хижронда колибман сандин ёр билан,
 Юбаринг мани ўзим билган йулима.
 Бошланг мани Арка кизни туйина [11].

*I spent my life in talking and speaking,
 Your playful words set my soul on fire.
 Now, parted from you, I remain in longing,
 Let me go on the path I choose for myself.
 Begin the wedding of the Arka girl [11].*

These songs hold an important place in the folk culture of Khiva and have been preserved in the collective memory of the people to this day. New generations of halfas continue to perform these songs even now.

Conclusion

Based on the ethnographic expedition and field observations conducted, the historical, cultural, and social significance of the halfa tradition in Khorezm has been thoroughly analyzed from a scholarly perspective. The study revealed that halfalar—exceptional female performers—played a significant role in the spiritual, aesthetic, and ritual life of their communities. Their artistic expression is valued not only as a form of oral heritage but also as a manifestation of women's cultural leadership and a mechanism for the transmission of tradition.

The song heritage passed down through generations by Onabibi Otajonova (Ozhiza) and her disciples—especially works such as "Arka Kyzdar" and "Tuyina"—has been regarded as an example of the preservation and transformation of folk culture. This phenomenon illustrates the active cultural engagement of women in the Khiva region and serves as an important mechanism for transmitting repertoires and traditional forms to younger generations through the master-apprentice tradition.

As a result of the research, the transformational processes of the khalfa tradition, its continued vitality have been clearly identified among the present generation, and its distinct role within Uzbek women's folklore. The khalfa tradition serves as an important source for preserving and studying the cultural diversity of Central Asia. Today, the khalfachilik art form, without losing its social significance, is undergoing processes of revival and requires further study and support within cultural and academic contexts.

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