

BARPY ALYKULOV AS A CULTURAL PHENOMENON: THE ROLE OF HIS WORK IN PRESERVING AND DEVELOPING KYRGYZ NATIONAL IDENTITY

Abdykulov Ulanbek Amanbayevich¹

¹International University named after K.Sh. Toktomamatov, Kyrgyzstan

Abstract

This article explores the cultural and historical significance of Barpy Alykulov (1884–1949), a prominent Kyrgyz akyn (folk poet and improviser), as a key figure in preserving and developing Kyrgyz national identity. Drawing upon his poetic works and mastery of aitysh — the traditional Kyrgyz form of poetic improvisation — the study analyzes how Barpy's creative legacy reflected social injustice, love for homeland, and collective memory during a period of profound transformation in early 20th-century Central Asia. His poetry is presented not only as an artistic expression but also as a vehicle for social critique, national unity, and cultural continuity. The article further highlights the relevance of Barpy's work in contemporary Kyrgyz society, particularly in educational and cultural practices, and emphasizes the importance of safeguarding such heritage for future generations.

Keywords: Barpy Alykulov, Kyrgyz culture, national identity, aitysh, oral tradition

БАРПЫ АЛЫКУЛОВ КАК КУЛЬТУРНЫЙ ФЕНОМЕН: РОЛЬ ЕГО ТВОРЧЕСТВА В СОХРАНЕНИИ И РАЗВИТИИ КЫРГЫЗСКОЙ НАЦИОНАЛЬНОЙ ИДЕНТИЧНОСТИ

Абдыкулов Уланбек Аманбаевич¹

¹Международный университет имени К.Ш. Токтомаматова, Кыргызстан

Аннотация

В данной статье рассматривается культурно-историческое значение Барпы Алыкулова (1884–1949), выдающегося кыргызского акына (народного поэта и импровизатора), как ключевой фигуры в сохранении и развитии кыргызской национальной идентичности. Опираясь на его поэтические произведения и мастерство айтыша — традиционной кыргызской формы поэтической импровизации, — исследование анализирует, как творческое наследие Барпы отражало социальную несправедливость, любовь к родине и коллективную память в период глубоких преобразований в Центральной Азии начала XX века. Его поэзия представлена не только как художественное выражение, но и как средство социальной критики, национального единства и культурной преемственности. В статье также подчеркивается актуальность творчества Барпы в современном кыргызском обществе, особенно в образовательной и культурной практике, а также важность сохранения этого наследия для будущих поколений.

Ключевые слова: Барпы Алыкулов, кыргызская культура, национальная идентичность, айтыш, устное творчество

© 2025. The Authors. This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, CC BY, which allows others to freely distribute the published article, with the obligatory reference to the authors of original works and original publication in this journal.

Introduction

The history of every nation is enriched by the names of those who, through the art of words, preserved and transmitted national wisdom, traditions, and the spirit of their time. One of the most outstanding figures in Kyrgyz cultural heritage is Barpy Alykulov — a folk poet (akyn) whose creative path reflects the complex social, political, and cultural processes of the early 20th century.

Barpy's poetry is not only a part of the artistic legacy of Kyrgyz people, but also an important instrument in preserving and strengthening national identity.

The aim of this article is to consider Barpy Alykulov as a cultural phenomenon and to identify his contribution to the formation of Kyrgyz national consciousness through his poetic works and the oral tradition of aitysh.

Barpy Alykulov (1884–1949) [1] was a renowned Kyrgyz improvisational poet (akyn) whose works reflect the social struggle, folk wisdom, and cultural uniqueness of the Kyrgyz people in the early 20th century.

Born into a poor peasant family, Barpy experienced social injustice from an early age — this gave his poetry a deep concern with themes of social equality, the protection of the oppressed, and criticism of feudal systems[2].

His mastery of aitysh and oral poetry became a powerful tool for expressing public sentiment and contributed to shaping collective identity during times of upheaval. Barpy not only preserved the richness of oral traditions [3], but enriched them with modern civic and social content.

Today, Barpy Alykulov is seen as the voice of the people, a defender of justice and a symbol of the Kyrgyz cultural heritage. His legacy continues to inspire generations, reinforcing the national identity of Kyrgyzstan.

The purpose of this study is to analyze the literary heritage of Barpy Alykulov in the context of its impact on preserving and developing the cultural identity of the Kyrgyz people. The article aims to explore how Barpy's poetic works reflect essential elements of national distinctiveness [3] — social values, historical memory, and oral traditions — and how they contributed to the consolidation of a shared identity and cultural continuity during the socio-political changes of the early 20th century.

Barpy Alykulov as the Voice of the People

Themes in His Poetry and Aitysh: The Struggle for Justice, Critique of Social Injustice, Love for Nature and Homeland

The poetry of Barpy Alykulov is deeply rooted in the real life of the Kyrgyz people and reflects the core cultural and moral values of his era. At the heart of his songs and aitysh lies the struggle for justice. Barpy consistently opposed social inequality, denouncing the tyranny of local feudal lords (bais and manaps) and corrupt authorities who exploited the poorest layers of society. Through vivid metaphors and powerful poetic imagery, he gave voice to the suffering of ordinary people, raising their dignity and resilience [4].

His critique of injustice was not abstract or rhetorical — it was based on direct observation and personal experience of poverty and oppression. His poetry became a form of popular protest, contributing to the rise of social awareness and a desire for fair change.

Alongside his social themes, Barpy's deep love for nature and his native land occupies a significant place in his work. He skillfully portrayed rivers, mountains, and steppes as spiritual sources of strength for the Kyrgyz people. Nature, in his poetry, is not only a physical reality but also a symbol of freedom, vitality, and unity with the homeland. Through the beauty of the natural landscape, Barpy inspired a strong sense of belonging and pride in national culture.

Thus, the themes of Barpy Alykulov's aitysh and poetry were not only personal or artistic expressions, but powerful tools for preserving cultural memory and defining the national identity of the Kyrgyz people.

Connection to the Historical Context: Reflection of an Era of Change and Collective Suffering

Barpy's work is closely tied to the historical context of the late 19th and early 20th centuries — a time marked by dramatic social, political, and economic transformations in Central Asia. This era witnessed the decline of the traditional feudal order, the intensification of colonial rule, growing class tensions, and widespread dissatisfaction among the people.

Barpy lived in a time when the Kyrgyz population faced severe oppression: poverty, injustice from local rulers, and the exploitation of peasant labor. His poetry directly reflected these hardships — portraying the true condition of the oppressed, the lawlessness of the powerful, and the pain of the common people.

His work became especially poignant during the early years of Soviet rule, when the first reforms were introduced. While remaining faithful to the interests of the people, Barpy gave voice not only to their suffering but also to their hope for justice and a better future. He envisioned a society based on equality and fairness, without abandoning his deep-rooted cultural values.

Aitysh as a Cultural Code of the Kyrgyz People

Aitysh is a traditional form of improvised poetic competition between Kyrgyz folk poets (akyns) and holds a special place in Kyrgyz cultural identity. It is not merely a contest in wit and eloquence, but a collective act of cultural expression, reflecting the values, ideals, and worldview of the people. Through aitysh, historical knowledge, social norms, and ethical principles were transmitted, and akyns themselves were seen as guardians and transmitters of cultural memory.

In Kyrgyz society, aitysh has long been regarded as a public forum, where important social, political, and moral issues were voiced. It served not only as a form of entertainment but also as an instrument of social reflection, moral education, and the strengthening of national consciousness [4].

How Barpy Used Aitysh Not Just for Art, but as a Tool to Defend the People's Interests

Barpy Alykulov elevated aitysh to a powerful form of social critique. With remarkable sharpness and precision, he used his improvisational poetry to condemn injustice, abuse of power, and exploitation of the poor. Barpy went beyond the traditional image of aitysh as mere verbal dueling — he transformed it into a voice for the people's suffering and aspirations.

His aitysh often directly targeted the greed and cruelty of feudal lords and corrupt officials. Using rich folklore techniques, metaphor, and symbolism, Barpy made his messages accessible to a broad audience, increasing their social impact. His verses not only reflected the spirit of the times but shaped public opinion, calling for justice, dignity, and moral responsibility.

Examples of Barpy's Aitysh

One of the most well-known aitysh performances was his poetic duel with Toktogul Satylganov, another legendary Kyrgyz akyn. In this exchange, themes of social justice, truth, and honor were central. These aitysh events were not merely literary performances, but genuine manifestos of popular conscience.

Barpy frequently used images of nature — rivers, wind, mountains — to symbolize freedom and the enduring spirit of the people [4, 6]. For example, in one of his aitysh, the river becomes a metaphor for truth and inevitable change:

“Akkan suuday akyikat keler,

Jalğan düynö jaŋğylat bir kün.”

(Translation: “Like a flowing river, truth will come;

This false world will one day be transformed.”)

Such metaphors added emotional power to his verses, turning aitysh into a poetic force for justice and the preservation of Kyrgyz moral and cultural foundations.

The Image of Kyrgyzstan in Barpy's Poetry

In the poetic world of Barpy Alykulov, nature occupies a central place and serves as a powerful symbol of homeland and national identity. In his verses, the images of rivers, mountains, wind, and steppes are not merely descriptive — they carry deep symbolic meaning, expressing the spiritual bond between people and their native land.

The river in Barpy's poetry often symbolizes the flow of time, constant renewal, and the pursuit of truth. Mountain peaks represent resilience, strength of spirit, and the freedom of the Kyrgyz people. The wind becomes a symbol of change, bringing renewal and cleansing society of injustice and stagnation. These natural images together create a holistic vision of the homeland as a living, dynamic space intimately linked to the destiny of the Kyrgyz nation.

Barpy seamlessly wove national mythological views into his poetic descriptions of nature, portraying it as a sacred force that upholds life and moral values. His admiration for the beauty of the Kyrgyz landscape conveyed a deep sense of pride and belonging.

The Role of Poetry in Cultivating Patriotism

Barpy Alykulov's poetry played a crucial role in the development of patriotic consciousness among the Kyrgyz people. His works not only praised the natural beauty of the land, but also called for the preservation of cultural heritage and the recognition of the profound connection between the individual and the fate of the nation.

Through vivid, emotionally resonant images of nature, Barpy instilled a collective understanding of the value of native land as the foundation of national existence. His poetry helped to foster a sense of historical continuity, reverence for ancestors, and pride in cultural identity. During the period of intense social and political transformation in the early 20th century, Barpy's poetry became a unifying force, helping to anchor Kyrgyz society around shared values and ideals.

Thus, by celebrating nature and homeland, Barpy Alykulov significantly contributed to the formation of national self-awareness, making his poetry a powerful source of patriotic education and cultural identity for the Kyrgyz people.

Barpy in Contemporary Culture.*How His Memory Is Preserved Today: Monuments, Schools, Events*

The memory of Barpy Alykulov continues to live actively in the cultural and social life of Kyrgyzstan. His name is given to schools, streets, and cultural institutions. In the Suzak district of the Jalal-Abad region, where he was born, memorial plaques and busts have been erected in his honor. Additionally, there is a secondary school named after Barpy in the village of Barpy, which serves as an important center for patriotic and cultural education of youth.

Annually, various events dedicated to his memory are held across Kyrgyzstan: literary evenings, improvisational poetry contests (aitysh), and academic conferences. These occasions help to popularize Barpy's heritage among younger generations and strengthen his status as a symbol of national pride and cultural consciousness.

140th Anniversary of Barpy (2024) under the Auspices of TÜRKSOY[2]

In 2024, the 140th anniversary of Barpy Alykulov's birth was celebrated at an international level. On the initiative of the Kyrgyz Republic and with the support of the International Organization TÜRKSOY [2], a series of solemn events were held.

The main activities took place in his historical homeland—the Jalal-Abad region—where international conferences, aitysh contests, exhibitions, and presentations of new research on Barpy's work were organized.

These events emphasized Barpy's contribution to the development of the Turkic cultural community and his role as one of the key voices expressing the national spirit of the Kyrgyz people on the global stage.

Conclusion

Barpy Alykulov holds a special place in the history of Kyrgyz culture not only as an outstanding improvisational poet (akyn), but also as a guardian and transmitter of national identity. His creative work reflected the deep social processes experienced by the people, embodying ideals of justice, honor, and respect for the homeland and culture. Barpy succeeded in preserving in poetic form the spiritual values that defined the essence of Kyrgyz society, passing them on to subsequent generations [5, 6].

Through vivid images of nature, critique of social injustice, and glorification of national values, Barpy fostered a sense of belonging to native culture, strengthened national consciousness, and inspired people to defend their rights and traditions. His work became a living cultural code, maintaining continuity between generations.

Preserving the cultural heritage of figures like Barpy Alykulov is of exceptional importance for the future. In the context of globalization and cultural changes, such examples help younger generations to recognize their identity, respect their history, and safeguard their unique spiritual values.

Barpy's legacy remains a shining spiritual beacon, reminding society of the need to cherish culture as the foundation for sustainable development.

References

1. Alykulov B. Selected Poems. Bishkek: Kyrgyzstan Publishing House; 1950.-218 p.
2. Turksoy. 140th Anniversary of Barpy Alykulov Celebrated in Jalal-Abad Region of Kyrgyzstan. [Internet]. 2024 [cited 2025 Apr 26]. Available from: <https://www.turksoy.org/ru-RU/novosti/140-letie-barpy-alykulova-otmechayut-na-istoricheskoy-rodine-v-dzhalal-abadskoj-oblasti-kyrgyzstana>
3. Kyrgyz Literature Encyclopedia. Bishkek: Main Editorial Office of Kyrgyz Encyclopedia; 2007.
4. Abdykulov, U.A. The Barpy We Knew. Osh, 2024. -212 p.
5. Shamshiev, Bektash. Barpy: Research, Memories, Dedications. Bishkek, 1994. 185p.
6. Dautov, Kadyrkul. The World of a Mighty Poet with a Noble Spirit. Bishkek, 2003.-174p.

Received / Получено 28.06.2025

Revised / Пересмотрено 28.07.2025

Accepted / Принято 08.08.2025