

KORKYT-ATA: RECONSTRUCTING THE BIOGRAPHY OF A LEGENDARY TURKIC FIGURE

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Abstract

Korkyt-Ata—the legendary Turkic poet, musician, and philosopher—occupies a central place in the cultural memory of Turkic peoples as a figure situated at the intersection of history, mythology, and music. Shaped by epic, mythological, and cosmological motifs, his image combines symbolic archetypes with traces of a historical personality. While mythological interpretations have been widely examined, the biographical dimension of his legacy remains understudied. This article addresses this gap through a biographical approach supported by comparative-historical, cultural–anthropological, and musicological methods, aiming to reconstruct the historiography of Korkyt-Ata and trace the transformation of his figure across different cultural contexts.

The study draws on epic narratives, medieval chronicles, ethnographic materials, and musical traditions to analyze how Korkyt-Ata is represented in oral and written sources. Particular attention is given to *kyuis* attributed to him, whose structural patterns and symbolic themes—struggle, balance, and blessing—reflect a philosophical conception rooted in Tengrian cosmology. These compositions conceptualize music as a means of maintaining cosmic harmony and reveal the ritual origins of *kobyz* performance.

The analysis demonstrates that Korkyt-Ata’s image developed along two interconnected lines: the epic-historical tradition, portraying him as a wise elder and adviser to Oghuz leaders, and the mythological tradition, in which he appears as a shamanic wanderer seeking immortality and mediating between earthly and spiritual realms. Contemporary debates, such as the contested authorship of the *kui* “Konyr,” reveal ongoing tensions between collective oral creativity and modern notions of individual authorship.

By integrating biography and mythology, the article offers a more comprehensive understanding of Korkyt-Ata’s enduring cultural significance and his continuing influence on scholarship, performance practice, and processes of cultural identity formation.

Keywords

Korkyt-Ata, Turkic mythology, biographical method, *kui*, *kobyz*, cultural memory.

INTRODUCTION

Korkyt-Ata is one of the most fascinating and symbolically charged figures of Turkic cultural heritage, remembered simultaneously as a poet, philosopher, musician, and shaman. His image transcends the boundaries of a single historical personality: it represents a multilayered cultural construct in which history, legend, and mythology converge. On one level, he appears as a legendary bard and the reputed creator of the *kobyz* and early *kyuis*—instrumental pieces performed on the bowed lute that later became central to the musical traditions of the Kazakh steppe. At the same time, his image embodies philosophical reflections on the nature of life, death, fate, and immortality, forming one of the most enduring symbolic narratives within the Turkic world.

The legends associated with Korkyt-Ata are interwoven with mythological motifs whose origins extend deep into the archaic past of nomadic Eurasia. These narratives have shaped not only oral epic traditions but also ritual practices, cosmological beliefs, and musical aesthetics. Tengrian cosmology, with its characteristic duality of worlds and its understanding of time and fate, provides an interpretive framework through which Korkyt-Ata’s wanderings, his confrontation with death, and his use of the *kobyz* are often understood. Sacred sound occupies a central place within this worldview, linking

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music to ritual practice and cosmological order. At the same time, textual sources such as *Kitab-i Dede Korkyt* preserve epicized layers of his image, presenting him as a wise elder, mediator, adviser to khans, and the moral voice of the Oghuz community. The coexistence of these layers illustrates the hybrid nature of his legacy, bridged between mythic archetypes and historical prototypes.

Despite the symbolic richness of this figure, the biographical dimension of Korkyt-Ata remains insufficiently investigated. Scholars have long acknowledged the complexity of separating historical evidence from mythological embellishment. However, this complexity has often discouraged attempts at a systematic reconstruction of Korkyt-Ata's life and of the sociocultural contexts in which he might have lived. Existing studies tend to focus either on the mythological archetype or on the epic narrative, treating them as separate domains. As a result, the multidimensionality of Korkyt's identity across different Turkic traditions has not yet been integrated into a unified analytical framework.

The present study seeks to address this gap by reconstructing the historiography of Korkyt-Ata through an interdisciplinary lens. By employing the biographical method, the analysis seeks to understand how historical memory, oral tradition, and ritual practices jointly shaped the image of Korkyt over time. The comparative-historical method allows us to examine the preservation and transformation of his figure across various Turkic societies—sedentary (Azerbaijan, Turkey, Turkmenistan) and nomadic (Kazakhstan, Karakalpakstan, Kyrgyzstan), revealing differences in worldview, cultural transmission, and symbolic interpretation. The cultural–anthropological approach highlights the role of Korkyt within community rituals, sacred geography, and collective identity, while the musicological perspective focuses on the *kyuis* attributed to him, their philosophical content, structural features, and ritual functions.

A significant part of the research concerns the relationship between musical tradition and cultural memory. Within the Kazakh musical heritage, the *kobyz* occupies a special place as an instrument associated with shamanic practice, liminality, and spiritual mediation. The timbral richness of the *kobyz*, its overtone-dense sonority, and its capacity to evoke trance-like states reveal the depth of its ritual past. *Kyus* attributed to Korkyt frequently follow narrative structures that depict existential struggles, cosmic cycles, and archetypal journeys, reflecting a worldview in which music operates not only as art but also as a means of restoring harmony, overcoming fear, and maintaining spiritual equilibrium. Contemporary scholarship, including the work of Ayazbekova, Mukhambetova, and others, demonstrates that the philosophical and symbolic dimensions of these compositions function as a sonic expression of Turkic cosmology.

At the same time, modern debates over the authorship of certain *kyuis*—most notably the widely known *Konyr*—reveal the complexities of oral musical transmission and the interplay between collective creativity and individual attribution. These debates underscore the need to examine not only the mythological and historical layers of Korkyt's image but also the processes of cultural reinterpretation in the modern era, including the influence of Soviet historiography and nation-building narratives.

In light of these considerations, a comprehensive study that unites mythological, historical, ethnographic, and musicological perspectives. By reconstructing the historiography of Korkyt-Ata and analyzing the transformations of his image across time, this research seeks to illuminate the dynamic processes through which cultural memory is preserved, reinterpreted, and transmitted. Ultimately, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how Korkyt-Ata continues to shape Turkic identity, musical heritage, and contemporary scholarly discourse.

METHODOLOGY

This research employs an interdisciplinary methodological framework that makes it possible to reconstruct the multifaceted image of Korkyt-Ata, by integrating textual, ethnographic, mythological, and musicological data. Given the complexity of Korkyt's legacy, which spans oral epic tradition, mythopoetic narratives, historical memory, ritual practices, and musical heritage, no single methodological approach is sufficient for a comprehensive analysis. The study, therefore, adopts a layered methodology, with each layer illuminating a distinct dimension of the phenomenon.

Central to the research is the biographical method, which enables the reconstruction of the historiography of Korkyt-Ata's image and an assessment of how various historical periods interpreted,

adapted, or mythologized his figure. This approach reveals the interplay between the legendary and the historical elements, allowing for the identification of potential prototypes behind the epicized character. It also facilitates an analysis of narrative structures in which biographical elements are embedded. Episodes, motifs, and symbolic actions are examined as possible reflections of concrete sociohistorical realities and collective experiences.

The contextualization of Korkyt's biography and the tracing of his image across different historical periods and cultural settings is achieved through the application of the comparative-historical method. This approach enables the critical examination of written and oral sources originating from different regions of the Turkic world—Anatolia, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Karakalpakstan, Kyrgyzstan, and the Volga-Ural region. By comparing divergent versions of legends, manuscript traditions of *Kitab-i Dede Korkyt*, and ethnographic records, it becomes possible to trace the evolution of Korkyt's role as a sage, musician, shaman, and cultural hero. By comparing divergent versions of legends, manuscript traditions of *Kitab-i Dede Korkyt*, and ethnographic records, the research traces the evolution of Korkyt's role as a sage, musician, shaman, and cultural hero. The comparative perspective also highlights differences between sedentary and nomadic societies: while sedentary cultures tend to represent Korkyt primarily as an adviser and epic narrator, nomadic traditions preserve his image mainly as a shamanic wanderer, healer, and creator of sacred sound.

A cultural–anthropological approach plays a crucial role in analyzing Korkyt's position within community practices, sacred geography, and symbolic systems. Through this lens, the research examines pilgrimage traditions associated with the Korkyt memorial complex, mytho-ritual motifs surrounding his struggle with death, and the sacral function of the kobyz within healing and ceremonial contexts. This method draws on the works of ethnographers such as V. Radlov, G. Potanin, and A. Divaev, whose materials document local variations of the Korkyt myth and the persistence of ritual practices linked to his name. It also benefits from contemporary anthropological interpretations that frame Korkyt as an embodiment of Tengrian cosmology and as a culture hero whose music maintains cosmic balance.

Textological and philological analysis constitutes another important component of the methodology. The two extant manuscript versions of *The Book of Korkyt-Ata*—Dresden and Vatican—contain variations that inform our understanding of how oral tradition was adapted to written form. By examining structural differences, formulaic language, and thematic emphases, the research identifies how scribes, storytellers, and communities reshaped the image of Korkyt across centuries.

The study also employs musicological analysis to investigate the *kyuis* attributed to Korkyt. This includes an examination of melodic structure, modal organization, timbral characteristics of the kobyz, and the philosophical or symbolic narratives embedded within these compositions. The musicological method allows for an evaluation of ritual-ecstatic features, such as the use of overtone-dense sonorities, the prevalence of tritones, incantatory repetitions, and timbral **noise**, which link kobyz performance to shamanic musical practices of Inner Asia. The method also aids in addressing the problem of authorship, especially in cases like the *kyui* Konyr, where stylistic, historical, and genealogical markers are crucial for determining the origins of the piece.

Finally, the methodological framework integrates oral history and performance ethnography, drawing on recordings, field data, and contemporary performers' interpretations. Interviews and commentaries by traditional musicians, such as Aknar Sharipbayeva, Raushan Orazbayeva, and others, provide insights into the transmission of kobyz repertoire, the reinterpretation of Korkyt's legacy, and the dynamics between individual authorship and collective creativity. These sources illuminate how modern performance practice continues to shape and redefine Korkyt's role within cultural memory.

These methods create a comprehensive analytical structure that captures the full complexity of Korkyt-Ata as a cultural phenomenon—bridging history and mythology, ritual and artistry, and local traditions and pan-Turkic identity.

RESULTS

The analysis of Turkic epic and historiographic sources demonstrates that scholarly interpretations of Korkyt-Ata have developed along two principal trajectories. The first presents Korkyt as an epic figure rooted in the Oghuz narrative tradition, while the second interprets him as a mythological and

cosmological character associated with sacral knowledge and shamanic practice. As Zhumabekova observes, the surviving manuscript versions of *The Book of Korkyt-Ata* reflect not only “hyperbolized epic imagination,” but also real sociohistorical conditions of the 9th–11th centuries (Zhumabekova, 2005: 65). This dual nature of the source accounts for the complexity of Korkyt’s portrayal. Within the epic framework, he appears as a wise elder, a moral authority, and a figure whose presence unites the Turkic tribes in moments of collective struggle. His performance of zhyr-kyuis to the sound of the kobyz serves as a means of articulating social values, inspiring warriors, and preserving communal continuity.

In many Turkic studies, including those by Azerbaijani, Turkish, Russian, Bashkir, and Kazakh scholars, this epic dimension is linked directly to the Oghuz saga tradition. The narrative emphasizes Korkyt’s extraordinary lifespan—80, 295, or even 300 years—along with his status as the **chief ideologist of the khanate** who embodies the moral and spiritual center of the community. According to Zhumabekova (2005) and other researchers, this epic layer performs an important ideological function: it elevates Korkyt to the level of a symbolic ancestor, representing unity, resistance, and the communal ethos of Turkic peoples during periods of external threat or internal transformation.

The mythological dimension of Korkyt’s image complicates and enriches this epic portrayal. In this layer, he emerges as the first shaman, the inventor of the kobyz, and the originator of the earliest kyuis. His journeys across the **four corners of the world** in search of immortality, his encounters with death, and his attempts to escape fate position him as a liminal figure who mediates between the earthly and the divine. These motifs are deeply rooted in Tengrian cosmology—a pre-Islamic worldview in which music, magic, healing, and spiritual mediation formed a unified sphere of ritual practice. Within this framework, Korkyt functions as a cultural hero whose sound stabilizes the world and restores cosmic balance. This duality is also linked to the differing cultural contexts of sedentary and nomadic societies. Among sedentary civilizations—Turkmens, Azerbaijanis, Turks—Korkyt appears primarily as a wise elder, narrator, and epic hero. Among nomadic peoples—Kazakhs, Karakalpaks, and Kyrgyz—he is remembered as a shamanic wanderer, musician, performer-healer, and eternal seeker of immortality. The coexistence of these interpretations is confirmed by the two manuscript versions of *The Book of Korkyt-Ata* that have survived to our day: one shaped within sedentary literary culture and the other rooted in oral nomadic tradition. As Kerogly noted, this dual tradition reflects distinct sociohistorical conditions, worldviews, and patterns of collective memory within Turkic communities.

The broad geography of Korkyt’s image, ranging from the Syr Darya and Aral regions to the Caucasus, Anatolia, and the Volga-Ural area, further supports the idea of a common Turkic cultural foundation. According to Zhumabekova, the persistence of Korkyt-related traditions among diverse Turkic peoples testifies to its early emergence and deep integration into shared cultural memory. Prominent scholars of the 19th–20th centuries, including Radlov, Potanin, Divaev, Bartold, and others, emphasized that the epic and mythological narratives show remarkable stability across regional variations, suggesting that the figure of Korkyt was widely known and venerated long before the compilation of written sources.

This view is reinforced by medieval literary evidence. The great Uzbek poet and thinker A. Navoi, although he did not write a dedicated work on Korkyt-Ata, testified to the extraordinary renown of the figure: “Among the Turkic peoples, no one was more celebrated than he ... his fame requires no further proof” (Zhumabekova, 2005: 39). Azerbaijani scholars have also shown that the narrative episodes in *The Book of Korkyt-Ata* correspond to real historical and geographical settings in the Middle East and Central Asia, indicating that the text preserves authentic sociocultural memories of the Oghuz world.

Scholars have long attempted to distinguish the historical prototype of Korkyt from the mythological and epic layers. The view of academician Alkey Margulan significantly deepens this argument. According to Margulan, Korkyt was a real historical figure who lived along the Syr Darya in the 7th–8th centuries and gained prominence as a sage, musician, and spiritual leader. The later epic narratives of the 10th–11th centuries, in his view, retained genuine historical memory while adding mythological embellishments. As Margulan states: “The image of Korkyt is not a product of mere imagination. It is grounded in historical reality. No one should doubt that such a person truly lived” (Margulan, 1999: 56). This conceptualization bridges the gap between history and legend, suggesting that

Korkyt's transformation into a mythic hero was the result of centuries of collective reinterpretation. Further methodological insights arise from examining the typological features of Turkic myth. The mythological characteristics of Korkyt's image—sacred origins, a cosmological function, super-natural longevity, and the invention of the first musical instrument—align with patterns found in the mythic consciousness of ancient Turkic societies. Myth, in this tradition, does not simply describe an event but serves to explain the origins of the world, phenomena of nature, and foundational aspects of cultural identity. Korkyt's association with the invention of the kobyz and his creation of the first melody situates him within the category of **cultural heroes**, who bring essential knowledge, arts, or technologies to humanity. This interpretation echoes broader Inner Asian notions of shamanic musicians whose sound connects different levels of the cosmos.

Analyzing the epic and mythological materials together reveals that Korkyt serves as a symbolic nexus of Turkic cultural identity. He embodies the ethical, cosmological, and artistic ideals of the community, while also functioning as a historical marker that anchors collective memory in recognizable political and geographical realities. Scholars such as Margulan (1999), Ayazbekova (2010), Omarova (2002), and Mukhambetova (Amanova & Mukhambetova, 2002) have emphasized that the music associated with Korkyt preserves ritual features—repetitive structures, overtone-rich sonorities, incantatory rhythms—that echo the archaic foundations of Turkic shamanic practice.

The cumulative evidence from epic narratives, mythological motifs, ethnographic observations, medieval chronicles, and musicological analysis suggests that the image of Korkyt-Ata evolved through a continuous interplay between history and myth, between communal experience and artistic expression. His multifaceted identity as sage, shaman, poet, musician, and cultural hero reflects layers of symbolic meaning accumulated over centuries of cultural transmission.

DISCUSSION

The historical record provides substantial grounds to view Korkyt not only as a mythological figure but also as a historical personality whose memory underwent a gradual epic and cosmological transformation. As Orientalist N. Inostrantsev observed, *Kitabi-i Dede Korkyt* depicts him not primarily as a warrior but as a wise narrator and patriarch uttering aphorisms, reflecting a type of authority grounded in social and moral leadership rather than military prowess (Inostrantsev 94). Abulgazi Bahadur Khan's *Shajara-i Tarakima* further supports this perspective by describing Korkyt as an adviser to five khans and a man who lived for 95 years—a portrayal that brings him closer to a real historical individual than to a purely fictional hero. Medieval and early modern geographical sources expand the spatial field of Korkyt's cultural presence. Travelers in the 17th-century such as Adam Olearius and Evliya Çelebi recorded places in Transcaucasia and Asia Minor where legends of Korkyt were told, demonstrating the broad continuity of his veneration far beyond the Kazakh steppe. These accounts align with references in the works of Eastern historians such as Ibn al-Athir and Hafiz-i Abru, who describe Oghuz leaders engaged in political and military struggles with Sultan Sanjar in the 12th century, offering potential historical prototypes for the legendary sage. Local traditions recorded by V. Radlov and A. Divaev link Korkyt with the city of Zhankent on the Syr Darya and with the Aral region, where, according to legend, his grave is located. Among the Bashkirs, genealogical chronicles (*shezhire*) identify Korkyt as an ancestor, while among the Turkmens he is revered as a sage and miracle worker. Of particular interest is the wide cultural and geographical spread of traditions about Korkyt, extending across Central Asia, the Caucasus, northern Iran (Mazandaran), and the Volga-Ural region. Some of these legends evolved into folk tales and songs (e.g., Ak-Köbek, Baybori, Karabek), preserved in oral tradition among Kazakhs and Karakalpaks (Margulan, 1999: 41-42). This demonstrates the broad cultural reach of Korkyt's image and its adaptation to diverse ethnic and cultural contexts.

Beyond historical and ethnographic evidence, an equally significant layer concerns the symbolic, cosmological, and musical dimensions of Korkyt's legacy. For the Kazakh people, the name of Korkyt-Ata fuses multiple foundational meanings—cosmogonic, ethnogenetic, epic, musical, and philosophical. In each of these domains, he is regarded as a progenitor: the founder of the first musical instrument (the kobyz), the originator of the *kyui* genre, the creator of shamanic performance practice, and the embodiment of the cosmic struggle between life and death. As Kazakh sources emphasize,

“the Kazakh people know Korkyt as the progenitor of kobyzy performance and the first performer of kyuis; he is called küy atasy—the ‘father of kyuis’” (Ayazbekova, 2010: 197). Notably, 11 of the 20 known kyuis attributed to him have been recorded in contemporary folkloric collections. A distinctive characteristic of these kyuis is their **autobiographical nature**: each composition narrates a specific event or emotional state from the legendary life of Korkyt, the shaman-musician. Among them are kyuis such as *Korkyt*, *Targyl tana* (*Piebald Calf*), *Bashpai* (*Toe*), *Ushardyn aluy* (*Wail of Ushar*), *Elim-ai*, *halkym-ai*, *Auppai*, *Zhelmaya*, and *Bailauli kiiktin zary* (*Lament of the Bound Doe*) (Ayazbekov, 2010: 197). These programmatic titles indicate a repertoire in which life narrative and cosmological reflection merge through sound.

The central idea permeating Korkyt’s artistic world is the establishment of Cosmic Harmony and the struggle against death and evil. As Alkey Margulan observed, “Korkyt’s philosophy of struggle against death is a rare phenomenon in world history; it is one of the most luminous images ever created by humanity. Comparable parallels are found only in the ancient literature of Prometheus and Kart” (Margulan, 1999: 297). This philosophical concept is remarkably clearly embodied in the compositional structure of his kyuis, which adhere to a stable sequence of text-thematic stages:

1. The theme of evil (death, chaos, existential threat).
2. The theme of overcoming (resistance, musical struggle, invocation).
3. The theme of balance (cosmic duality, equilibrium of forces).
4. The theme of blessing (affirmation, harmony, life-renewal) (Ayazbekova, 2010: 197).

This structure, identified by Ayazbekova and confirmed by modern analytical studies, functions as a fundamental dramaturgical schema uniting the Korkyt corpus. Although the individual kyuis vary in thematic detail, tonal gestures, rhythm, and melodic contour, they share this deeper philosophical framework.

An illustrative example is the kyui *Korkyt*. Its theme of evil corresponds to the motif of death: “Korkyt travelled across the four corners of the world, but wherever he arrived, death and an open grave awaited him” (Ayazbekova, 2010: 198). The theme of overcoming expresses his protest against mortality: “As long as he plays the kobyzy, death cannot approach him” (Ayazbekova, 2010: 198). The theme of balance reflects the dualistic worldview in which Chaos and Harmony do not annihilate one another but coexist as complementary forces. Finally, the theme of blessing emerges as a hymn to immortality: “As long as Music sounds, Life will endure on Earth” (Ayazbekova, 2010: 198). The philosophical meaning of the kyui articulates a cosmological law: harmony is not achieved through the destruction of opposing forces but through their dialectical equilibrium, which is maintained by the active role of the demiurge. Music thus becomes an instrument of world harmonization.

At the same time, modern scholarship reveals new tensions between traditional and contemporary perspectives on Korkyt’s legacy. A notable example is the debate surrounding the authorship of the kyui *Konyr*. Although long attributed to Korkyt, some leading traditional performers have argued that available evidence points instead to Ykylas as its true author. Performers themselves explain that this attribution emerged within the Soviet cultural–ideological environment, which deliberately elevated Korkyt as a unifying national symbol. This ideological context often led to the reassignment of anonymous or collectively transmitted works to culturally significant figures rather than to their actual composers.

Traditional performers also cite concrete historical arguments. The temporal distance between Korkyt (8th–9th centuries) and Ykylas (19th century) spans nearly a millennium, making direct authorship attribution implausible. Furthermore, “Konyr was documented from the performance of Zhappas Kalambaev, a disciple of Sugyr, who was himself a disciple of Ykylas—constituting a clear line of transmission that supports the attribution to Ykylas” (Orazbayeva & Baikuatova, 2025).

Several deeper factors may be identified as contributing to this conflict. Historically, musical knowledge in the Turkic world was transmitted orally, producing variation and fluidity. As Omarova notes, many traditional works are built on **migrating motifs**—shared intonational blocks that travel from one kyui to another (Omarova, 2002: 56). The uniqueness of each kyui often lies in its opening formula, while the subsequent development proceeds through common archetypal themes. This structural continuity explains why some works were eventually absorbed into the corpus associated with legendary cultural heroes like Korkyt rather than individual historical composers.

Mukhambetova emphasized that kobyz kyuis embody the inseparability of life and death, past and future, and retain structural elements rooted in ancient ritual practice (Amanov & Mukhambetova, 2002: 94; Inostransev, 1999). The use of the tritone, the overtone-rich timbre of the hair-string kobyz, and the principle of repeated, varied motifs create a hypnotic, incantatory effect that sustains shamanic musical traditions. In this way, kobyz music retains not only an aesthetic value but also a ritual and cosmological dimension, reinforcing its link to collective cultural memory. Consequently, the debate over the authorship “Konyr” reflects a broader clash between collective creativity rooted in oral tradition and modern concepts of individual authorship. The dispute itself testifies to the continuing vitality of Korkyt’s symbolic presence in contemporary musical discourse.

CONCLUSION

The figure of Korkyt-Ata emerges as a profound synthesis of history and mythology, art and philosophy, ritual practice and collective cultural memory. Through the integrated analysis of epic narratives, mythological motifs, historical testimonies, ethnographic data, and musicological interpretations, this study demonstrates that Korkyt occupies a liminal space between historical reality and symbolic representation. On the one hand, references found in medieval chronicles, genealogical records, and travelers’ accounts attest the existence of a historical personality—a zhyrau at the court of Sultan Sanjar, an adviser to Oghuz khans, and a bearer of political–ideological authority. On the other hand, the mythological image of Korkyt as a wandering sage seeking immortality, the first shaman-musician, and the creator of the kobyz reflects a deeper cosmological framework rooted in the Tengrian worldview and nomadic philosophical traditions.

This duality is not accidental but intrinsic to the cultural logic of the Turkic world, where mythic imagination and historical memory have always coexisted, informing and reinforcing one another. Korkyt’s multifaceted image thus became a repository for diverse meanings: cosmogenic, ethnogenetic, epic, and musical. His kyuis, including *Korkyt*, *Targhyl tana*, *Zhelmaya*, and others, encode philosophical reflections on life and death, balance and transgression, chaos and harmony. Their internal structure—progressing from evil through overcoming, from balance to blessing—articulates a distinct cosmological principle in which music itself assumes the role of the demiurge, an agent of world harmonization. In this sense, Korkyt’s musical legacy transcends aesthetic expression and enters the domain of metaphysics and ritual, preserving the archaic logic of shamanic practice within artistic forms.

At the same time, the ongoing scholarly debates—particularly the contemporary controversy over the authorship of the kui “Konyr”—reflect the dynamic, evolving, and sometimes contested nature of Korkyt’s cultural role. These disputes illuminate fundamental tensions between collective authorship and individual attribution, the fluidity of oral tradition and the fixity of written records, the symbolic elevation of cultural heroes and the modern demand for historical precision. They also demonstrate how ideological frameworks, including those of the Soviet period, shaped the transmission, reinterpretation, and canonization of musical heritage.

Rather than diminishing Korkyt’s significance, these complexities testify to the enduring vitality of his image. The fact that questions of authorship, symbolism, and historical identity continue to provoke discussion indicates that Korkyt-Ata remains an active cultural force—a prism through which different epochs reinterpret their own values, anxieties, and aspirations. His figure continues to inspire performers, scholars, and communities alike, functioning as both a link to ancestral cosmology and a source of contemporary cultural reflection. Ultimately, Korkyt-Ata exemplifies the enduring capacity of mytho-historical figures to shape collective identities, artistic traditions, and philosophical worldviews. His legacy demonstrates how oral traditions preserve not only stories and melodies, but also systems of meaning and modes of being. Situated at the intersection of myth and history, ritual and art, Korkyt-Ata stands as a cultural archetype whose resonance extends beyond the historical past, remaining profoundly relevant in the present and open to further reinterpretation in the future.

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Appendix



Figure 1: Painting of Korkyt-Ata, created by Tomiris Nazyimbekovna Makasheva. More information can be obtained via email to the authors.