

PATTERNS OF IDENTITY IN UZBEK FOLK MUSIC ARTS

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Abstract: Uzbek folk music arts constitute a vast and intricate sonic tapestry, one that functions as a primary and dynamic medium for the expression, negotiation, and preservation of identity. This article posits that identity within the Uzbek context is not merely reflected in but is actively performed and patterned into existence through musical practice. The folk music tradition, encompassing the epic narratives of the baxshi, the lyrical songs of daily life and ritual, the instrumental repertoires of the dutar and tanbur, and the communal dance melodies, encodes a complex matrix of belonging. These sonic patterns articulate geographical origin, social structure, spiritual worldview, and historical consciousness. Through an analysis of performance practice, melodic mode (maqom and regional tune), lyrical content, and the social context of musical events, this paper explores how musical arts serve as audible maps of regional identity, as vessels for communal memory and ethical codes, as agents in life-cycle rituals, and as resilient markers of cultural continuity in the face of modernization. The argument is advanced that to understand Uzbek identity, one must learn to listen to its patterns - the rhythmic cycles that ground it, the melodic contours that give it shape, and the poetic verses that tell its story. Folk music is not an accompaniment to life; it is a fundamental thread in the very fabric of being Uzbek.

Keywords: Baxshi Tradition, Dutar, Musical Dialect, Epic Narrative, Ritual Performance, Sonic Identity

Introduction

The soundscape of traditional Uzbekistan is a profound articulation of place and people. From the soaring, ornamented vocal lines of a Shashmaqom suite in Samarkand to the driving, rhythmic doira that animates a Bukharan wedding, from the plaintive, storytelling strains of a Khorezmian baxshi to the joyful, communal melodies of Ferghana Valley harvest songs, music provides the most visceral and nuanced expression of identity. Uzbek folk music arts are not a unified monolith but a constellation of regional dialects, each with its own tonal vocabulary, poetic themes, and social functions. Yet, collectively, they form a coherent system - a patterned language of sound that communicates who the Uzbeks are, where they come from, what they believe, and how they belong to one another.

This musical identity is performative and participatory. It exists not in static scores but in the living moment of performance, in the relationship between the musician (hofiz, baxshi, dutarchi) and the community that listens, responds, and often joins in. The identity is patterned through the recurrence of specific melodic modes tied to locales, through the rigid yet flexible rhythmic cycles that govern movement and time, through the stock poetic images and narrative archetypes of the lyrics, and through the deeply embedded social rituals that music invariably accompanies. This paper will journey through these audible patterns, arguing that Uzbek folk music is a primary technology of identity formation. We will examine how musical style delineates the cultural map of Uzbekistan's oases and valleys, how epic poetry functions as an oral

constitution of communal values, how music sanctifies and gives structure to key human experiences from birth to death, and how this ancient art form navigates the pressures and possibilities of the contemporary world. In listening closely, we discover that identity is not a silent fact but a resonant, evolving performance.

Before the consolidation of a national identity, a person's primary sonic affiliation was to the acoustic environment of their region. The diversity of Uzbek folk music provides a precise auditory map of the country, where musical dialect immediately signals geographical and cultural origin. These regional patterns are defined by distinct instrumental ensembles, repertoires, vocal timbres, and melodic preferences, creating a tapestry of localized identities.

The musical culture of the Ferghana Valley, for instance, is characterized by its luminous lyricism and vibrant energy. The ensemble often centers on the dutar (two-stringed long-necked lute) and the frame drum doira, with the surnay (shawm) and nay (end-blown flute) adding color. The vocal style here, heard in songs like the beloved "Qashqarchay" or the lively "Yalla," is often bright, direct, and rhythmically incisive, suited for both intimate gatherings and expansive circle dances. The melodies of the Ferghana Valley frequently carry a sense of open-hearted joy and pastoral connection, reflecting the region's fertile land and its history as a crossroads. This contrasts sharply with the majestic, complex musical traditions of the historical cities of Samarkand and Bukhara. Here, the classical maqom tradition holds sway, representing an identity rooted in urban sophistication, courtly patronage, and deep Islamic scholarship. The instruments - the tanbur, the sato, the dutar, and the doira - are used in more contemplative, structurally intricate ways. The vocal production is often more ornate, with a wide vibrato and profound attention to the microtonal subtleties (parda) of the maqom system. To perform or deeply appreciate the Shashmaqom is to align oneself with an identity of refined urbanity and historical depth.

Traveling west to Khorezm, the musical identity shifts again. The isolated oasis culture, with its ancient Zoroastrian substrate and unique history, produced a powerfully dramatic and narrative-driven music. The Khorezmian baxshi tradition is legendary. Accompanied by the robust, often two-voiced playing of the dutar and the intense, driving rhythms of the doira, the Khorezmian epic singer employs a guttural, powerfully projected vocal style, capable of immense dynamism to portray the heroes, horses, and battles in epic narratives like "Gorogly." The music feels expansive, heroic, and deeply connected to a mythologized past. Meanwhile, in the Surkhandarya region in the south, one encounters the unique qalandar and safo traditions, songs with a distinct melodic flavor and lyrical themes often linked to Sufi spirituality and introspection. Each region, through its sonic signature, proclaims a unique answer to the question "Where are you from?" The very tuning of the instruments, the choice of repertoire, and the style of vocal emission are ingrained patterns of local identity, learned from childhood and felt as an intrinsic part of the self.

Beyond regional sound, one of the most potent patterns of identity in Uzbek folk music is the narrative, particularly the epic tradition (doston). Performed by a baxshi, the epic is far more than entertainment; it is the primary vessel of communal memory, ethical instruction, and historical consciousness for pre-literate and literate societies alike. The epic narrates the foundational myths, trials, and triumphs of the people, effectively serving as an oral constitution that defines the ideals of courage (jasorat), loyalty (sadoqat), wisdom (donish), and justice (adolat).

The performance of a doston is a ritual of identity reinforcement. The baxshi, through masterful use of formulaic language, melodic motifs associated with specific characters or actions, and rhythmic drive, transports the audience into the story. In hearing the adventures of the cultural hero Alpamыш - his battles against injustice, his endurance through captivity, his loyalty to his tribe and his beloved - the community hears its own idealized self-portrait. The epic encodes the social norms, the gender roles, the relationship to authority, and the proper conduct in the face of adversity. It answers the question, "What does it mean to be a good person, a good community member, here?" The musical setting is not incidental; the rising intensity of the dutar, the accelerating rhythm of the doira, and the passionate shifts in the singer's voice elicit emotional participation, making the lessons of the epic felt rather than just heard. The audience, in collectively experiencing this narrative, reaffirms a shared set of values and a connection to a mythic past that informs their present identity. The epic pattern is thus a recurring rehearsal of cultural codes, ensuring their transmission across generations.

Uzbek folk music is inseparable from the rituals that structure human life and communal time. It provides the sonic architecture for these events, transforming biological or calendrical moments into culturally meaningful milestones. In doing so, music patterns identity by marking an individual's place within the social fabric and the cyclical rhythm of the year.

Life-cycle rituals are saturated with specific musical genres. Alla lullabies, with their gentle, rocking rhythms and tender poetic images, are a child's first introduction to the melodic and linguistic patterns of their culture, a sonic embrace from mother to child that initiates belonging. Wedding rituals (sumalak) represent the most extensive musical catalog. Distinct songs exist for the bridal farewell (qizlar ashulasi), the groom's procession, the unveiling of the bride, and the celebratory dances. Each song carries specific social functions, from expressing the bittersweet emotions of a family to publicly celebrating the union and instructing the new couple in their roles. The music here orchestrates the entire social drama, guiding participants through the emotional and procedural steps of the ritual. Funeral laments (yog), characterized by specific, mournful melodic contours and improvised poetic outpourings of grief, provide a sanctioned emotional and musical pattern for confronting loss, connecting personal sorrow to a communal expression.

Calendrical and work rituals also have their soundtracks. The joyous Navruz spring festival has its own set of lively, celebratory songs welcoming renewal. Harvest songs (hosil ashulalari) often feature call-and-response structures that synchronize labor, lighten the burden of work, and express gratitude. These musical patterns tie communal identity to the land and the seasons, rooting people in an agricultural cycle and a shared productive endeavor. In every case, the music does not simply accompany the ritual; it is a constitutive element of it. To perform the ritual correctly is to perform its specific music. Thus, one learns one's social identity by learning the songs appropriate to one's station, age, and the occasion, internalizing the patterns that govern communal life.

The 20th and 21st centuries presented profound challenges and transformations to the patterns of Uzbek folk music. Soviet cultural policies, urbanization, mass media, and global musical flows have all impacted traditional practice. Yet, the response has not been simple disappearance but a complex process of adaptation, preservation, and re-contextualization, illustrating the resilience of these musical patterns as markers of identity.

The Soviet period saw the formalization and folklorization of many traditions. Baxshis were brought into state-sponsored ensembles; epic narratives were sometimes shortened and purged of religious references; and regional styles were homogenized into staged, concert performances for a “national” audience. While this disrupted the organic ritual context, it also ensured survival and created a new, pan-Uzbek canon of folk music. The identity expressed became less locally specific and more emblematic of the “Uzbek nation” within the Soviet framework.

Since independence, there has been a vigorous state-sponsored revival of folk music as a pillar of national heritage. The Shashmaqom was inscribed on UNESCO’s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Grand festivals showcase folk musicians, and conservatories teach traditional instruments. This has elevated the status of folk musicians and solidified certain repertoires as official national symbols. Simultaneously, a fascinating organic fusion has occurred. Contemporary artists are weaving dutar melodies into pop and rock music, using samples of doira rhythms in electronic tracks, and writing new songs that employ traditional poetic imagery to address modern themes. In this global soundscape, the traditional patterns - a specific melodic turn, a rhythmic cycle, the timbre of the surnay - become conscious stylistic choices, sonic flags of Uzbek identity inserted into international musical dialogues. They signal a desire to be modern yet rooted, global yet distinct.

Conclusion

The patterns of identity in Uzbek folk music arts are enduring and eloquent. They form an auditory code that is continuously performed and reinterpreted. These patterns map the soul of a place, from the joyous valleys of Ferghana to the epic deserts of Khorezm. They narrate the timeless ethical struggles and triumphs that define a people’s character. They provide the rhythm and melody for the journey of an individual life and the turning of the communal year. And they demonstrate a remarkable capacity to evolve, finding new resonance in the concert hall, the recording studio, and the digital arena.

To be Uzbek is, in a profound sense, to inherit this sonic world - to feel the rhythmic pulse of the doira as one’s own heartbeat, to understand the melancholy of a mugham phrase, to know the stories sung by the baxshi as one’s own ancestral story. The identity is not static; it is a performance. Each time a musician picks up a dutar and a singer breathes life into an ancient verse, they are not merely playing notes and words. They are actively weaving the ongoing pattern of what it means to belong to this land, this history, and this people. In a world of increasing homogenization, these intricate, resonant patterns offer a powerful assertion that identity can be sung, and that in the singing, it is forever renewed.

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