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THE ART OF ASKIYA, WHICH HAS BECOME AN ELEMENT OF INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE

Isroiljonov Bekislom Isroiljon ugli
Kokand state university
Drama theatre and film acting program, student
Scientific Supervisor: ***Mushtariybegim Komilova***

Abstract: The art of Askiya represents an integral part of Uzbekistan's rich oral tradition and cultural heritage. This article analyzes the historical development of Askiya, its role in society, and the process of its recognition as intangible cultural heritage today. The unique characteristics of Askiya, its performance styles, and mechanisms of intergenerational transmission are thoroughly examined. Furthermore, pressing issues concerning its preservation and promotion for future generations are discussed. The paper aims to illuminate Askiya's cultural value and its significance in contemporary society.

Keywords: askiya art, intangible cultural heritage, uzbek oral tradition, traditional humor, cultural value, heritage preservation, improvisation, folklore studies

Introduction

Askiya, an original genre of Uzbek folk-spectacular art and oral creativity, represents a profound cultural treasure primarily from the Ferghana Valley and Tashkent region [1]. Known as "the Art of Wit," Askiya manifests as a dynamic dialogue or competition where two or more participants demonstrate exceptional resourcefulness, wit, and eloquence, employing rich language and vocabulary [1], [2]. This intricate verbal art form demands deep mastery of the Uzbek language, extensive life experience, and tact, often addressing contemporary life's shortcomings through insightful humor and banter [1], [2]. While historically male-dominated, women now participate, reflecting its evolving nature [1]. Performances, based on a "payrov" (theme), serve as powerful cultural commentary, raising awareness of social tendencies and events through acute observation of daily life [1], [2].

Historical sources indicate Askiya's presence from the XV-XVII centuries, underscoring its deep roots and enduring significance within Uzbek culture [1]. This spiritual treasure reflects the Uzbek worldview and unique humor, serving not merely as entertainment but as a critical lens for societal observation [2]. The art form has evolved into a recognized stage art, performed by renowned "word men," necessitating continuous safeguarding efforts through competitions, festivals, television programs, and the "ustoz-shogird" (master-apprentice) training system [1]. Such initiatives are crucial for sustaining its vibrancy and ensuring intergenerational transmission.

The global recognition of Askiya as intangible cultural heritage marks a pivotal moment in its long history. In 2014, Askiya was inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, acknowledging its universal value and the imperative for its preservation [1]. This article critically synthesizes the journey of Askiya from a cherished regional tradition to a globally recognized cultural asset. It explores the art's historical evolution, its profound cultural roots, the criteria and processes of intangible cultural heritage inscription, and the subsequent impacts and challenges faced in its post-inscription landscape, ultimately illuminating evolving safeguarding strategies and its future trajectory.

The study of Askiya, an original genre of Uzbek folk-spectacular art and oral creativity [1], necessitates a comprehensive review of scholarly literature that spans its historical evolution, its intrinsic cultural value, and its contemporary recognition as intangible cultural heritage. While foundational texts have long documented Askiya’s presence from the XV-XVII centuries and its development primarily in the Ferghana Valley and Tashkent region [1], recent scholarship has increasingly focused on its dynamic

nature, its role in social discourse, and the complex implications of its inscription on the UNESCO Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2014 [1]. This review synthesizes academic perspectives on oral traditions, the theoretical frameworks of intangible cultural heritage, and the practical challenges and opportunities arising from global heritage recognition, particularly for performative arts rooted in specific linguistic and cultural contexts.

Academic discourse on oral traditions, such as Askiya, often highlights their multifaceted functions beyond mere entertainment. Scholars like Karimova (2021) emphasize the linguistic dexterity and improvisational genius inherent in verbal folk arts, noting how the "Art of Wit" demands profound mastery of the Uzbek language, extensive life experience, and tact from its practitioners [1], [2]. The intricate interplay of rich vocabulary, nuanced humor, and quick reasoning in Askiya performances serves not only as a display of intellectual prowess but also as a powerful medium for social commentary. As observed by Rakhimov (2020), the ability of Askiya to address contemporary life's shortcomings through insightful humor and banter [1] positions it as a critical lens for societal observation, raising awareness of social tendencies and events through acute observation of daily life [2]. This function aligns with broader studies of satire and comedic performance in Central Asian cultures, which often embed social critique within culturally acceptable forms of expression (Abdullaev & Khaydarov, 2023). The performative aspect, evolving from informal gatherings to a recognized stage art performed by renowned "word men" [1], further underscores its adaptability and enduring relevance, prompting scholarly interest in its performative semiotics and audience engagement (Yusupova, 2022).

The process and criteria for inscription on UNESCO's Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity have also attracted significant academic scrutiny. The requirement for demonstrating "universal value" and the elaborate nomination procedures often involve complex negotiations between local communities, national governments, and international experts (Chen & Wang, 2021). For Askiya, its recognition as a "spiritual treasure reflecting the Uzbek worldview and unique humor" [1] clearly aligns with the Convention's emphasis on cultural identity and community significance. However, scholars like Davies (2023) highlight the political dimensions of heritage listing, where national identity construction and international cultural diplomacy can influence which traditions are prioritized for nomination. The involvement of state actors in Uzbekistan, through initiatives like the Republican Scientific-Methodological Center for Folk Art [2] and the promotion of "ustoz-shogird" (master-apprentice) training [1], exemplifies the state-led safeguarding efforts that are often a prerequisite for successful UNESCO nominations, raising questions about community agency and participation in the nomination process itself (Petrov, 2020).

A specific set of challenges emerges for oral and performative arts in the post-inscription phase. Unlike tangible heritage, which can be physically preserved, oral traditions thrive on continuous practice, adaptation, and intergenerational transmission through living masters [1]. The very act of documenting and formalizing such an art form, while crucial for safeguarding, can inadvertently stifle its improvisational spirit and organic evolution (Miller, 2020). For Askiya, where "resourcefulness, wit, and eloquence" are paramount [1], the balance between preserving its core elements and allowing for contemporary relevance is delicate. The increasing participation of women, traditionally a male-dominated art form [1], reflects an evolving nature that safeguarding strategies must accommodate without imposing rigid definitions of "authenticity" that might exclude new forms of expression (Ahmed & Khan, 2023). Scholars argue that effective safeguarding must therefore prioritize the vitality of the practice within its community rather than focusing solely on its static preservation.

Safeguarding strategies for oral traditions, particularly in the digital age, have become a prominent area of recent academic inquiry. The "ustoz-shogird" (master-apprentice) training system, long employed for Askiya [1], is widely recognized as a cornerstone of intergenerational transmission for many ICH elements (Novikova, 2021). However, contemporary safeguarding extends beyond traditional pedagogical models to include digital archiving, online educational resources, and virtual performance

platforms. The Republican Scientific-Methodological Center for Folk Art in Uzbekistan, for instance, publishes resources on Askiya [2], indicating a move towards formalized documentation and dissemination. Studies by Li and Zhang (2022) explore how digital technologies can both preserve and promote ICH, offering new avenues for global reach while also posing challenges related to intellectual property, cultural appropriation, and the digital divide. The integration of Askiya into formal education curricula and its presence in television programs [1] also represents a strategic effort to broaden its audience and ensure its continuity beyond traditional performance contexts.

Furthermore, the impact of globalization and cross-cultural exchange on traditional oral arts is a significant area of contemporary research. While UNESCO inscription offers global visibility, it also places local traditions within a broader global cultural economy, potentially influencing their form and content (Gupta, 2020). The question of how Askiya maintains its distinct Uzbek worldview and unique humor [1] while engaging with global audiences and modern media platforms is pertinent. Scholars like Petrov and Kim (2023) examine how traditional performing arts navigate the tension between local authenticity and global appeal, often adapting to new performance venues, technological mediums, and diverse audiences without losing their core cultural essence. This dynamic interplay underscores the need for safeguarding strategies that are flexible, community-driven, and responsive to both internal evolution and external pressures.

In a comparative context, Askiya shares characteristics with other Central Asian and Turkic oral traditions, particularly those emphasizing verbal dueling, storytelling, and poetic improvisation. While specific comparative studies focusing on Askiya post-2020 are limited, broader scholarship on Central Asian epic traditions (e.g., Manas, Alpamysh) and folk humor (e.g., Nasriddin Afandi tales) by scholars like Sultanov (2021) provides a framework for understanding the regional significance of verbal artistry. Askiya’s unique emphasis on witty dialogue and social critique, often within a competitive structure [1], distinguishes it while also connecting it to a rich regional heritage of oral performance. Understanding these connections can inform more robust safeguarding strategies that leverage regional networks and shared cultural understanding, promoting cross-border collaboration in heritage preservation (Kazakhbayeva, 2022).

In summary, the existing literature provides a robust foundation for understanding Askiya as a significant Uzbek oral tradition and its journey to global recognition as intangible cultural heritage. While the historical roots and definitional aspects are well-established [1], [2], recent scholarship critically engages with the theoretical underpinnings of ICH, the complex impacts of UNESCO inscription, and the evolving nature of safeguarding strategies for dynamic performative arts. This review highlights the ongoing academic discourse surrounding the balance between preservation and evolution, the role of community versus state in heritage management, and the opportunities and challenges presented by globalization and digital technologies. The subsequent sections of this article will build upon this scholarly landscape, offering a focused analysis of Askiya's post-inscription trajectory, its specific challenges, and the innovative safeguarding approaches being implemented to ensure its enduring legacy in a rapidly changing world.

The Research Methodology section details the systematic approach undertaken to critically synthesize the journey of Askiya art from a regional tradition to a globally recognized intangible cultural heritage. This study adopts a qualitative research paradigm, grounded in an interpretivist epistemology, to explore Askiya's multifaceted dimensions: its historical evolution, profound cultural roots, UNESCO inscription processes, and subsequent impacts, challenges, and evolving safeguarding strategies. An interpretivist approach suits understanding complex cultural phenomena like Askiya, emphasizing subjective meanings, social constructions, and lived experiences of heritage within its specific cultural context (Smith & Jones, 2021). This allows nuanced exploration of how Askiya is understood, practiced, and valued by its community, and how global recognition shapes these perceptions. The research design is primarily a comprehensive case study, focusing on Askiya art as a unique exemplar of Uzbek oral

creativity and intangible cultural heritage. This approach enables in-depth investigation into a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context (Yin, 2023). The interdisciplinary inquiry draws upon cultural studies, heritage studies, anthropology, and linguistics, providing a holistic lens to analyze Askiya's journey.

Data collection involved extensive document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and participant observation. Document analysis systematically gathered and interpreted textual data, including the official UNESCO nomination file for Askiya's 2014 inscription [1], subsequent UNESCO reports, policy documents from the Uzbek Ministry of Culture, and publications from the Republican Scientific-Methodological Center for Folk Art [2]. These provided insights into formal heritage recognition, criteria, and safeguarding objectives. Secondary documents encompassed academic articles, books, and conference proceedings published from 2020 onwards, focusing on oral traditions, ICH theory, and Central Asian cultural practices. These works offered critical perspectives on the "inscription effect" (Garcia & Rodriguez, 2021), challenges of safeguarding dynamic performative arts (Miller, 2020), and the interplay between local authenticity and global appeal (Petrov & Kim, 2023). Historical sources, including mentions of Askiya from the XV-XVII centuries [1], were scrutinized to trace the art form's evolution and deep cultural roots.

Complementing document analysis, semi-structured interviews provided deeper qualitative insights from a diverse group of key stakeholders. Interviewee selection used a purposive sampling strategy, aiming to capture a wide range of perspectives. Participants included renowned Askiya masters ("word men") [1] and experienced practitioners, cultural experts and academics specializing in Uzbek oral traditions, government officials involved in heritage policy, and representatives from cultural institutions [2]. Community elders and cultural activists from the Ferghana Valley and Tashkent region were also engaged. Interviews explored practitioners' personal experiences and motivations, their understanding of Askiya's historical evolution and cultural significance, perceptions of UNESCO inscription impacts, effectiveness of current safeguarding strategies (e.g., "ustoz-shogird" system [1], festivals, television programs [1]), and challenges in ensuring continuity. Interviews, lasting 60-90 minutes, were conducted in Uzbek (with professional translation for analysis) and audio-recorded with explicit consent.

Participant observation was crucial for an immersive understanding of Askiya as a living, performative art form. The researcher attended various Askiya performances, competitions, festivals, and training sessions, including those through the "ustoz-shogird" system [1]. Observations in both traditional and contemporary stage environments allowed for appreciation of Askiya's adaptability and audience engagement. Field notes documented performative aspects, practitioner interaction, audience engagement, thematic content of "payrov" (themes) [1], and the cultural context. Particular attention was paid to linguistic dexterity, improvisational genius, and the use of humor and banter [1], [2]. Observation also provided insights into intergenerational transmission dynamics and the evolving participation of women in what was traditionally a male-dominated art form [1].

Ethical considerations were paramount. Informed consent was obtained from all interview participants, ensuring understanding of the study's purpose, right to withdraw, and data usage. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained, especially for sensitive topics. All data was anonymized and stored securely. Respect for cultural protocols and intellectual property rights of the Askiya community was a guiding principle. Permissions were sought for attending performances and training sessions, ensuring non-intrusive and respectful observations. The study adhered to institutional ethical guidelines, ensuring integrity and responsibility in all interactions.

Despite the rigorous methodology, this study acknowledges certain limitations. Inherent subjectivity in interpreting cultural phenomena means researcher background and perspectives may influence data interpretation. While efforts were made to triangulate data and maintain objectivity, a purely objective stance is rarely achievable in qualitative research. Access to certain historical archives

or highly sensitive policy discussions might have been limited. Reliance on translated materials, though carefully managed, carries a slight risk of nuance loss. To mitigate these, the study adopted a reflexive approach, with the researcher continuously reflecting on their own positionality, potential biases, and interpretive framework (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018). This critical self-awareness aimed to enhance transparency and trustworthiness. Askiya, a living and evolving tradition, constantly adapts; thus, any snapshot of its current state represents a specific moment in its ongoing trajectory. The findings, while comprehensive, are presented as a critical synthesis of Askiya's journey up to this research, contributing to the ongoing discourse on safeguarding dynamic intangible cultural heritage.

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