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The Story of Barzu

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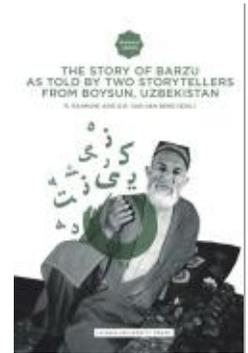
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The Barzunoma in Boysun

For more than 30 years, I have been collecting different types of folkloric texts from Tajiks and speakers of Tajik. The texts collected originate from Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Iran and Uzbekistan. Whilst collecting the material, I have focused in particular on the epical tradition of the *Šohnoma* or ‘Book of Kings’.

In the regions of Central Asia there existed *Šohnomakhonī* or the reciting of the *Šohnoma*, alongside storytelling on the basis of the *Šohnoma* and other epics. I have been informed by old men who are literate in the Persian alphabet and who I have interviewed in the last 30 to 35 years, that the recitation of the *Šohnoma* as well as the *Šohnoma* storytelling tradition, in addition to the oral and written stories that have been composed as a supplement to the *Šohnoma*, and alongside all kinds of stories, fairytales, legends and poems thrived amongst the Tajiks in the territory of Uzbekistan, in places such as Bukhara, Samarkand and Boysun. A number of scholars have referred to this tradition, including Muhammadjon Šakurī, who made the following remark:

On long winter nights my aunt used to read books and the women of the neighbourhood used to gather and listen. She read about the heroes from the prose *Šohnoma*, she read from the *Abūmuslimnoma*, from the *Zamchinoma*, from the *Hamzanoma* and from other epics, and about the generosity of Hotim Toi, or she exulted in the wonders of the Thousand and one Nights. And there were other things. Sometimes we listened to the *Šohnoma* of Firdavsi, or the *Devon* of Hofiz, or a selection of the *Devon* of Bedil and the like. (Šakurī 2005: 158)

I have not only heard these kinds of references from older people, but I have also been able to make recordings by means of a tape recorder and a video camera. One of the regions that I have been looking at regularly and closely is my birthplace, the village of Pasurxī, in the region of Boysun in

present-day Uzbekistan. In the village of Pasurxī it had become a tradition in the nineteenth and in the early twentieth century to tell stories from the *Šohnoma*. In the first half of the twentieth century there were old men who told stories from the *Šohnoma* and who knew large parts of it by heart.

Storytellers such as Mullo Šarif (1888-1972), Mullo Qosim (1882-1966) and Jūra Kamol (1921-1997) used to tell stories from the *Šohnoma* in response to people's interest in and love for these tales. Mullo Šarif relied on his gentle, eloquent voice and the movements of his hands, as well as on his ability to recite parts of the story in verse, which he sang like a singer. Jūra Kamol, on the other hand, used to rise when he told stories from the *Šohnoma*: he spoke in a loud voice and at moments of anguish he used to mimic the war on the battlefields. During accounts of Rustam, Sührob, Isfandiyor, Siyovuš, Barzu and others he would cry out loud. At the end of the story of Rustam and Sührob he would cry just like Rustam, mourning his dear son.

During the storytelling session, when a hero would throw his enemy to the ground, Jūra Kamol would cry out '*Yo Rustami doston*' ('Oh Rustam son of Doston!') and '*Yo Ali madad!*' ('May Ali help us!'), while he mimicked the enemy lying on the ground, and rising up again. He even neighed like the horse during those sessions. He accompanied his performance with shouting, pleading, preaching and yelling, with roaring laughter and by bursting into tears: this vivid performance was characteristic of Jūra Kamol, reminiscent of the storytellers of old. In order to keep the audience's attention, he sometimes changed his manner of speech, or he would fall silent and looked at his audience for several seconds, upon which he would suddenly cry out 'Ha!' 'Yes!', before continuing on with his story.

I have also recorded this manner of *Šohnomakhoni* and the telling of stories from the *Šohnoma* by the sons of Mullo Šarif, Rahim Šarif (born 1925) and Wohid Šarif (born 1941), and by his grandson Qahhor Rahmon (1931-2005), as well as by the son of Jūra Kamol, Mulloravšan Kamolov (born 1956).

In the month of August of the year 2002, I visited the region of Boysun, Samarkand and Bukhara for a period of ten days, together with the American sociologist William Beeman. When he talked to the people of Boysun about their legendary stories, he was very surprised and he stressed the importance of recording and, if possible, publishing all that they know. Indeed, Beeman recorded everything that was told to him.

In this way, the stories 'Rustami Doston', 'Siyovuš', 'Rustam and Isfandiyor', 'Rustam and Sührob', 'Zol the White One', 'Som', and others have been recorded in the course of time on tape. Each story has its own special fea-

tures and structure. For example, in one of the stories Rustam is only twelve when he defeats Isfandiyor and, according to the storyteller (Qahhor Rahmon), a herb named *hazorispand* (wild rue) was growing from the eyes of Isfandiyor that could serve as a cure for a thousand ailments.

Today, a number of proverbs, expressions and other customs, which are reminiscent of *Šohnoma* heroes, remain in vogue. For example, in the past in the village of Pasurxī, when a woman survived the birth of a son with a large body, the child would be named Rustam and they would say: ‘*Rustam-rastam*’, meaning that the mother had been saved from death.

In the region of Boysun, the story of Barzu is viewed as an episode of the *Šohnoma* and Barzu is regarded as having continued the Rustam family line.

About the *Barzunoma*

The *Barzunoma* is one of the Persian epics added to the immortal *Šohnoma* of Firdavsi. To date, no research in the form of a scholarly treatise has been devoted to the *Barzunoma*, although references can be found to written versions of the *Barzunoma* in the writings and articles of scholars such as Anquetil du Perron, Jules Mohl, E. Blochet, Zabehulloh Safo and others. Moreover, a series of articles, all very similar, have appeared in encyclopaedias published in Iran and other countries under the title ‘*Barzunoma*’. Recently, Akbar Nahvī has published an article entitled ‘What has not been said about the *Barzunoma*’, in which he presents information on the written and oral versions of the *Barzunoma*. This article both summarises and criticises the research of the aforementioned authors and of others who have written about the *Barzunoma* (Nahvī 2006: 107-130).

According to the information available, the *Barzunoma* has been transmitted both in poetry and in prose. It is believed that the poetical text has 65,000 verses (Safo 1342: 304; *DJI* 1375: 93). Manuscripts of this book have been preserved in the National Library of Paris, in the Academy Library of Dushanbe, in the Vatican Library, in the Academy Library of Cluj in Romania, and in Columbia University Library (*DJI* 1375: 94).

Researchers of the *Barzunoma* have mentioned the existence of an ‘old’ and a ‘new’ *Barzunoma*. According to the research by Akbar Nahvī, the author of the ‘old’ *Barzunoma* was Mavlon Shamsiddin Kavij (Kavsaj), while the author of the ‘new’ *Barzunoma* was Ato’i (Nahvī 2006: 16-118).

Recently, Muhammad Ja’fari (Qanavoti) published a small book of verse under the title ‘*Kitobi Burzu va devi dusar*’, in the journal *Farhangi mardum*.

This book consists of 80 *bayts* or verses, and deals with the death of Barzu (Ja'fari 1387/2008-9: 125-132).

Researchers have paid much less attention to the prose version of the *Barzunoma*, which exists both in Persian and in Turkish. The prose text of the *Barzunoma* is primarily found in the *Šohnoma*. In the *Šohnoma*, and also amongst the people, Barzu is believed to be the grandson of Rustam and the son of Sührob, but this needs to be further examined.

The Oral Text of the 'Dostoni Barzu' ('The Story of Barzu')

The story of Barzu has been handed down orally in the past, but the oral variants of this story have rarely been recorded by researchers. The reason for this may be the fact that it takes a lot of time to record and transcribe orally transmitted texts. An extensive oral variant of the story of Barzu may be found in the *tumor* or collection of stories entitled *Haft Laškar* (*Haft Laškar* 1377: 247-438). Oral variants of the story of Barzu have also been collected by a number of individual scholars. Firstly, six versions of the story of Barzu and Rustam may be found in Injavī Šerozi's *Firdavsīnoma* (Injavī Šerozi 1369: 106-128). Secondly, the Russian scholar A.L. Grunberg has recorded stories on Rustam in Sarakhs, a town in the province of Khorasan in the north eastern part of present day Iran in the years 1958-1959. These stories were told by a storyteller named Ismo'il Yormuhammad, born in 1915 in Siston, who had heard many stories from his father. Later, in 1975, Grunberg returned to Sarakhs with I.M. Steblin-Kamenski and recorded the stories of Rustam on tape. One of these stories is called 'Barzu', and has appeared in Russian translation in the collection *Skazki i legendy Sistana* (*Skazki* 1981: 106-128). In the commentary, it is stated that the story of Barzu is sometimes regarded as part of the *Šohnoma*, but that it can be assumed that this text is not part of Firdavsi's work, but rather an independent work (*Skazki* 1981: 261).

In the Sixties and Seventies of the twentieth century, when I was between 12 and 17 years old, I heard the story of Barzu from my paternal grandfather Fayzulloev Mullo Šarif (1888-1972). In 1989, I recorded a summary of this story from the son of Mullo Šarif, Rahim Šarif (born 1925). In this text it is said that the Barzu is the son of Rustam. This text was published in 1993 ('Rustam va Barzu' 1993: 24-26).

Other storytellers, namely Xalil Qosimov (born 1929), Ato Jabborov (born 1930), Homid Šarif (born 1936), Vohid Šarif (born 1941) and Mul-

loravšan Kamolov (born 1956), have also summarised and transmitted what they heard, as it was remembered by them. Xalil Qosimov and Ato Jabborov regarded Barzu as the son of Rustam, while the others considered him to be the son of Sührob. I have indications that in the region of Panjakent in Tajikistan a number of stories on Barzu are circulating, but these have not been recorded so far.

It is natural, that every story in the oral tradition passes from one person to another. When it is told again and again, some points are forgotten by the storyteller and others are added. In 1995, I recorded another version of the story of Rustam and Barzu, told by Jūra Kamol (1921-1997), in which Barzu is considered the son of Sührob, just as in the written versions of the story of Barzu.

In this version, as in other versions, the storytellers see Barzu as an inhabitant of the region of Boysun. Many old men think that Barzu once lived as a farmer in Boysun. It is as if he was born here, and was afterwards sent to Afrosiyob to battle Rustam. A short summary of the text is as follows:

- Sührob marries Turkonxotun and gives her a ring; Sührob is killed in his battle with Rustam
- Barzu is born and when grown up works as a farmer together with his mother
- Afrosiyob passes Boysun on his road and his soldiers demolish a field of melons. Barzu attacks them with a spade and hits, wounds and kills 300 of them.
- Afrosiyob is worried and sends Piron, son of Gesa (Visa), towards Barzu
- Barzu is brought to court and tested
- Having crossed the Amu Daryo, Barzu is sent to war with Rustam
- Rustam is wounded by Barzu
- The veiled Zavora enters the battlefield instead of Rustam.
- Barzu hits himself on the head by accident with his mace and is captured and taken to prison
- His mother is informed of his situation and crosses the river via Tirmiz; she finds some friends and with their help succeeds in releasing Barzu
- Barzu fights Rustam for the second time.
- On the request of Rustam, the battle between Rustam and Barzu is suspended for 40 days.
- Zavora poisons Barzu's food.
- Turkonxotun informs Rustam that Barzu is his granchild.
- Rustam and Barzu, grandfather and grandson, together fight Afrosiyob's army of 10,000 soldiers.

- Barzu sustains 72 wounds and is carried away on a horse, unconscious. He is brought to the garden of the king of Farang, whose daughter Farangibonu falls in love with Barzu.
- A slave girl also falls in love with Barzu. Helped by her cunning mother, she fights to reach her aim.
- The king of Farang sends Barzu to prison.
- Rustam is informed on this by the daughter of the king of Farang.
- Rustam comes to rescue Barzu; the king of Farang is killed, Barzu marries Farangibanu and Rustam returns to Iran.

In previous centuries, the Story of Barzu and stories from the *Šohnoma* were told amongst the people during meetings (*jam'omadho*) and evening parties (*gaštakho*). According to Jūra Kamol, a number of people (about 10-15), close friends, came together in the winter season and in spring, and they would have an 'evening party' (*gaštak*). In winter they gathered in a house and in spring they went outside to sit in a field or a meadow. This evening meeting or *gaštak* means to come together at someone's place and to sit around a table full of food, and to exchange stories, anecdotes, jokes, and pleasantries, and to read stories from books. It is still a custom in Boysun to hold a *gaštak*, but the telling of epic tales or other stories has become rare.

It had been more than 25 years since the storyteller Jūra Kamol had told this story. I recorded his version of the story of Barzu in 1995 on tape. The son of Jūra Kamol, Mulloravšan Kamolov, also knows the story of Barzu, and I have now recorded his version twice (on camera and on tape).

In the preceding centuries, wrestling ceremonies were not only held during official feasts, but were also organised by wealthy people on the occasion of a circumcision; wrestling champions from neighbouring countries would also attend these parties. This had become a custom in Boysun and in other parts of Central Asia. In the time of the emirate of Bukhara (until 1920), the wrestling champions of Boysun would go to Bukhara and to Mazori Šarif in Afghanistan.

Wrestling was also very popular during the Soviet era. In those years 60-80 per cent of the people who held circumcision ceremonies organised wrestling games at the same time and, in some cases, wrestling champions from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kirghizstan and Kazakhstan took part in these feasts. These kind of wrestling games are still common in Boysun, although they take place less every year. I have heard on numerous occasions heroic and epic stories in the context of analysing local and regional wrestling games. Indeed, it is possible that the tradition of wres-

ting is the reason why the epic stories to which storytellers refer are still remembered by the people.

Jūra Kamol says that Barzu comes from Boysun and he believes the mother of Barzu was of Turkic origin. According to Jūra Kamol and his son Mulloravšan Kamolov, the area of Boysun has always been essentially Tajik, but Turkic speaking tribes (Uzbek tribes, Qunghurot tribes) had also arrived at its borders. Over the course of time these tribes mingled with the Tajiks. Certainly, Sūhrob marrying a girl from an Uzbek family was a good way to promote the friendship between Tajiks and Uzbeks.

Most storytellers mention that Boysun has long been a hunting ground for heroes. Indeed, heroes like Rustam and Sūhrob came from different areas to Boysun in order to hunt or to train.

It is possible that in this version some episodes were forgotten by the storyteller and others may have been added – this would become clear from a comparison between the written version and the oral version, but we will not go into this any further here.

At the beginning of the story, Barzu is presented as a simple, ignorant, short-sighted countryman. At the same time, he is also said to be sincere, hospitable, full of honour and hard-working; in other words, a generous farmer. The storyteller has thus expressed the characteristics of Barzu, and continues:

Barzu means bull! That is the meaning, a fierce and strong bull, working the field and taking what is his share from the field. That is why they have named him Barzu the farmer. For him farming comes first, from his eighth birthday onwards he has been working the fields. With a spade he has ploughed the earth and has harvested from it.

His mother is very friendly towards her son, and in times of trouble she hastens to rescue him. Although the old Rustam is weaker than he used to be, he is – as the heroes of old – sincere and friendly, and when his grandson is in trouble he rushes to save him from death.

Other figures in the story of Barzu support the development of the story and the vicissitudes of the real heroes and those who surround them. It should be mentioned that some of the names of the figures in this text are different from those in the written versions. Perhaps the storyteller has forgotten the names over the course of time.

It can be argued that it is more appealing to listen to a story than to read it. When the story is told, a number of people are present. The audience

listens attentively. The storyteller has drawn his audience towards him by the magic of his words, in such a way that no one dares to ask a question. Customarily, the storyteller raised his hands for prayer. The text of one oral version of the story concludes with a question from me, concerning the talent of the storyteller Mullo Šarif; the answer given by the storyteller was typically modest.

The Language of the Text

The story is told in the Tajik dialect of the village of Pasurxi. Exactly what the storyteller told is exactly what has been put on paper, which is also useful for dialectological research. We will not speak extensively about the language of the story, but we will refer to a number of issues.

The most striking features of the text are: the diverse pronunciation of one and the same word, the touched-up expressions, the obscure words, the addressing of the audience, the emphasised way of speaking, the different callings, the repetitions, and the curses, which all make the text more attractive to the listener. For example, the obscure interjection ‘*unči*’; the designation ‘*čirraz*’, which refers to the high voice of a person; the ‘*šaqar-šaqar*’ that expresses the sound of a horse walking; ‘*vaghar-vughur*’, which is the noise of a crowd; ‘*hingir-hingir*’, the neighing of a horse; the rude curse ‘*e kusi yeget-ba*’; the calling ‘*uuuu*’ ‘*eee*’, ‘*ore!*’, etcetera.

In some cases, the storyteller employs the speech of fairytales, in order to connect the different events, such as: ‘*gapa azinja šunaved*’ ‘Listen to this’.

In the written version there is a place called Šingon, which is visited by Afrosiyob and where Afrosiyob meets Barzu. In Boysun there is also a place called Čing. It seems that there is a melodious connection here: Šing + on and Čing. I do not know whether there is an etymological connection; proofs are necessary to verify this. In order to solve this kind of problem it would be very useful to collect and research the toponyms of Central Asia. What may be mentioned here is that there is a place in Samarkand that is called the ‘Tali Barzu’, the ‘Hill of Barzu’. Archeologists have found there remnants of Sogdian culture. These findings can be dated back to the second and third centuries A.D. At its centre there was a palace, surrounded by buildings. In addition, Soghdian inscriptions have been found at this place (EST. J.7 1987: 236).

Because the Tajiks and the Uzbeks live in the same ecological environment, it is natural that their languages have influenced each other. During

the storytelling performance, Uzbek words may be heard, such as: ‘*aylanmiš*’ (to turn, to circle); ‘*butam*’ (a term of endearment); ‘*yana*’ (again); ‘*kiyim*’ (clothes); ‘*kurišmiš*’ (meeting); ‘*qalqon*’ (shield); ‘*qamoq*’ (prison); ‘*qanat*’ (wing); ‘*quyma*’ (fitting); ‘*pitišli*’ (similar); ‘*sayla*’ (choice); ‘*tentak*’ (mad); ‘*ugh*’ (arrow); ‘*uxša*’ (similar); ‘*ega*’ (owner), among other words.

Some Russian words have entered the language of the people of the former Soviet Union as a result of the media and the communal Soviet life. In this text, the words ‘*kapek*’ (kopeke, coin); ‘*mament*’ (moment, at this instance) and ‘*rana*’ (wounded) have been used.

In the text of the story a variety of words, morphology and syntax of the dialect – even incomprehensible sentences – may be noted and which researchers of spoken language can use.

Concluding Remarks

The story of Barzu is only famous amongst the Tajiks in this particular area that has been studied. I have tried to find information on oral versions in Uzbek. I have interviewed people from the Uzbek villages of the Boysun region, and asked whether they knew the Uzbek version of this story. To date, no Uzbek version has been found. However, a prose version in Uzbek is present in the Uzbek version of the *Šohnoma*.

In my opinion, the story of Barzu has spread throughout Boysun via book readers and storytellers. In order to make Barzu more attractive for their audience, the storytellers from Boysun told that Barzu was born in the Boysun area. Thus, the people, who are convinced of the truth of fairytales, myths and epics, believed that Barzu is in fact from Boysun. It is common practice for storytellers to sometimes insert the names of local places or people into their stories.

In conclusion, one may say that the stories from the *Šohnoma*, in particular those stories about Rustam and his family, have been very popular in the past amongst the people. This popularity can perhaps be connected to the popularity of wrestling and wrestlers amongst the people. It is still possible to record the most recent examples of epic stories from the people of Iranian origin. Every time I interview people, the storytellers give me a summary of a story, which might be their latest information on a certain text. Of course, if they stop telling these stories, they will disappear.

At present, there are a number of scholars who believe that nothing has been preserved amongst the people, and they point to the fact that every

year the people's interest in orally transmitted traditional stories becomes less and less. But this is not true. Indeed, in the years ahead, it will be possible to find traces of earlier oral literature and culture. For this reason, it is vital to record as much as possible, while it is still possible.

The last time I went to interview the elderly people of the village of Pasurxī, in October 2007, I asked them whether they knew something about Barzu. It was very illuminating for me to hear the elders say: 'We have heard of Barzu the farmer from our grandfathers. They have told that Barzu had much land in this very place Yakkatut (south of the village of Pasurxī). He cultivated melons and watermelons.'

I sincerely hope that in the future more material will be collected, and that the oral variants of *Šohnoma*-related texts will be published.

Ravšan Rahmonī, 2009