

**Representing a National Concept of Space in Epic Literature /  
*Representando um conceito nacional de espaço na literatura épica***

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**ABSTRACT**

Drawing material from the famous Karakalpak epic poem *Yer Ziyuar*, this paper aims to explore real and symbolic dimensions of conceptualizing space in epic literature through the functioning of place names as a reflection of the national and cultural uniqueness of ideas about space. In their direct use, real toponyms signify physical space that determines the geographical borders of the events in the poem. In addition, real toponyms from other countries expand the geography of the poem to show social, political, economic and cultural connections with other nations. The symbolic dimension is based on the combination of ancient myths and references to Islam. Mythical toponyms serve as markers of a fictional world created in the poem and acquire symbolic meanings by acting as obstacles on the hero's path and giving him strength to overcome these obstacles. Some sacred place names evoke associations with homeland through the realization of religious motives.

**KEYWORDS:** Heroic Epos; Symbol; Myth; Toponym; Space

**RESUMO**

*Baseando-se em material de um famoso poema épico de Karakalpak Yer Ziyuar, este artigo pretende explorar dimensões reais e simbólicas da conceituação do espaço na literatura épica, através do funcionamento de nomes de lugares como um reflexo da singularidade nacional e cultural das ideias sobre o espaço. Em seu uso direto, os topônimos reais significam o espaço físico que determina as fronteiras geográficas dos acontecimentos do poema. Além disso, topônimos reais de outros países expandem a geografia do poema para mostrar ligações sociais, políticas, econômicas e culturais com outras nações. A dimensão simbólica baseia-se na combinação de mitos antigos e referências ao Islão. Os topônimos míticos servem como marcadores de um mundo ficcional criado no poema e adquirem significados simbólicos ao atuarem como obstáculos no caminho do herói, dando-lhe forças para superar esses obstáculos. Alguns nomes de lugares sagrados evocam associações com a pátria através da realização de motivos religiosos.*

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Épicos heróicos; Símbolo; Mito; Topônimo; Espaço

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## Introduction

The Karakalpaks are a Turkic-speaking people making up the main population of the Republic of Karakalpakstan, which is part of the Republic of Uzbekistan. Since ancient times, the Karakalpaks and their ancestors have been living on the territory of modern Karakalpakstan. The richest and most diverse Karakalpak folklore comprising various genres like folk songs, fairy tales, witty riddles, wise proverbs and sayings has developed over many centuries. Among these genres, the most attractive for research are dastans, which hold a prominent place in world epic literature. Being common in the Middle East and Southeast Asia, *dastans* depict heroic deeds and events created by the people on a historical and legendary basis. Like Scandinavian and Russian sagas, *dastans* reflect historical reality, but the heroes in them are endowed with supernatural powers, which are often exaggerated and idealized (Sagitov, 1986).

A large number of studies by famous Karakalpak scholars have been devoted to various aspects of the analysis of Karakalpak *dastans*. They give a general description of Karakalpak folklore (Davkaraev, 1959) and trace the ways of the emergence of folklore works in certain historical conditions (Bakhadyrova, 1992); contain rich material about the spiritual culture of the Karakalpak people, reflecting, among other things, their ritual life (Aimbetov, 1968), including wedding celebrations (Maksetov, 1985) and family rituals (Kamalova, 1996); explore legends reflecting certain historical events in the life of the Karakalpak people (Zhapakov, 1972). Based on the material of heroic epic works, the historical and ethnographic aspects of national traditions and rituals have been touched upon (Esbergenov, 2000), and the ways of forming the traditional everyday and social life of the peoples of the Southern Ural region have been analyzed (Khoshniyazov, 1992).

Despite a considerably large number of works on Karakalpak folklore, few attempts have been made to study forms of representing the national concept of space in heroic epos, although space has attracted considerable attention in world epic literature, as the motif of a road or travelling across mythical worlds is a common feature in heroic epos all over the world (Reshetnikova, 2016). There have been several works devoted to the use of place names, or toponyms, in Karakalpak epic literature by Khojaakhmed Tolibayev explaining the origin of some toponyms based on national legends and myths

(Tolibayev, 2021), exploring stylistic functions of place names and their contribution to the formation of harmony with other words in poetic lines by meaning (Tolibayev, 2020a) and to the provision of links between episodes in the development of conflict (Tolibayev, 2020b). In the present study, we aim to identify ways, in which the category of space is conceptualized in a famous Karakalpak epos, *Yer Ziyuar*, which stands out among other Karakalpak *dastans* by its ideological and aesthetic perfection and richness of artistic means.

Recently, several Karakalpak authors have tried to investigate the plot and expressive features of the famous epic poem *Yer Ziyuar*. Thus, Abbaz Zharimbetov (2014) examined the role of expressive devices like epithets, similes and hyperboles in the creation of an epic image in the poem through descriptions of the protagonist's strength, heroic deeds and moral qualities. In her analysis of the plot typology of the poem, A. Bekbergenova (2024) came to the conclusion that a comparative study of the plot typology of epics is important for determining the origin of the epic, genre features, and a deeper disclosure of its content. However, despite the importance of this *dastan* in Karakalpak culture, to the best of our knowledge, *Yer Ziyuar* has not yet been subjected to detailed research from the point of view of how space is constructed both directly and indirectly, or symbolically.

The current research looks at the ways of conceptualizing space in the *dastan Yer Ziyuar* in two dimensions – real space and mythical space. In the actualization of both real and mythical space, an essential role is performed by place names, or toponyms. Place names in folklore acquire symbolic, figurative and metaphorical meanings in culture that generalize the results of human's consciousness and attach the epic literary work to a certain location. In our study, we are primarily attracted by national epic literature as it is a “multi-layered, multi-level, multi-valued, and multi-faceted” reflection of culture (Mamayev *et al.*, 2021, p. 117) and one of the main sources of cognition of the worldview and national identity (Zhanibekova and Beisenova, 2021). In epic poems, place names allow for a better understanding of features typical of the national way of life determined by a particular geographical position (Hadieva and Akish, 2015), which is of significant importance in the investigation into ways to conceptualize space as an expression of the linguistic and cultural specificity of a people (Gritsenko and Aleshinskaya, 2015). In this study, real and mythical toponyms in the famous piece of

Karakalpak folklore are considered as a reflection of the national and cultural uniqueness of ideas about space, which can be transformed according to toponymic data.

In our analysis of the functioning of place names in the Karakalpak epic poem *Yer Ziyuar*, we will distinguish between physical representations of geographical borders of the events in the literary work and figurative representations that metaphorically expand the space of the poem to encompass such concepts as home, obstacle and religion. We will show that in epic literary texts toponyms are not only landmarks in time and space, but also transmitters of the most significant ethnocultural information related to particular locations, creating a fundamental cultural link between the characters and events of the *dastan*.

## Material and Methods

The present investigation employed a qualitative research design having a focused sample collected from a famous Karakalpak epic poem. The research material was drawn from the *dastan Yer Ziyuar*, which was a version from the repertoire of Kurbanbai zhyrau<sup>1</sup> and was included in volumes 24-47 of a series of 100-volume academic publications produced by the publishing house *Karakalpakstan* in the city of Nukus. The *dastan* was recorded from the narrator Kurbanbai three times: in 1941, 1953 and 1958 (Maksetov, 1985). Currently, all the three available versions of the *dastan*, which are stored in the handwritten collection of the fundamental library of the Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Uzbekistan (R-140, No. 86076.71), are the only version recorded from the lips of Kurbanbai. Based on this manuscript, under the leadership of G. Yesemuratov, the first edition was published in 1958. Later, the *dastan* was included in the 27th volume of *Karakalpak Folklore*, compiled and edited by Nagmet Aimbetov (2011). In preparing the epic for this edition, some texts of religious content were restored, which in previous editions were deleted as contrary to the requirements of the Soviet era, and the poetic lines, which had been changed in order to preserve the creative skill of the narrator, were returned to the handwritten text.

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<sup>1</sup> Kurbanbai zhyrau Tazhibayev (1876–1958) is a famous Karakalpak storyteller who memorized and performed more than 20 *dastans*, thereby enriching the epic heritage of the Karakalpak people.

The research data were collected using purposive sampling that allowed us to select all the examples that contained names of different places such as water objects, types of surface relief and types of settlements from the original texts of the versions of the epos *Yer Ziyuar*. To supplement our textual analysis, articles and books by etymologists were used as secondary sources to add to the description and interpretation of the data from the *dastan*. The secondary sources used for this research are included in the Reference section at the end of the paper.

The qualitative research procedure involved the examination of the selected place names in terms of their meaning and origin through complex etymological analysis combining the linguacultural approach (Karasik, 2002) and intensive topology approach (Tent, 2015). The linguacultural paradigm in textual analysis is understood as “a complex field of scientific knowledge about the interconnection and interplay of language and culture” (Karasik, 2002, p. 103). According to this paradigm, language acts as a repository of the specific features of national culture and mentality, allowing both for the penetration into mentality and expression of culture (Pangereyev *et al.*, 2023). Such an approach gives special emphasis to the cultural meaning of place names and allows identifying the specific features of toponyms that preserve the originality of the national mentality of the Karakalpak people and their culture through the conceptualization of space.

The intensive topology approach (Tent, 2015) was used to gather data on the meanings of these place names, the reasons for their nomination and the location of these places. In order to study the content of the place names, the method of component analysis was used. The distributional method was used to study the context of the use of toponyms in the folklore text. The comparative method was used to describe toponyms in other *dastans* from the point of view of identifying both differences and universals in them.

Particular attention in our qualitative analysis was paid to the functions performed by toponyms in the text of the *dastan Yer Ziyuar*, how they contribute to the actualization of space in the epic poem. Using the complex approach described above, we were able to identify direct and indirect (symbolic) ways of representing the category of space in the literary work under consideration. Toponyms in the poem allow directly drawing the geographical boundaries of the events taking place in the poem. They also reveal symbolic boundaries of the categories of space, encompassing the concepts of home, obstacles on one’s path, and religious motives. In what follows below, we will briefly

describe the essence of the *dastan* under analysis and then dwell of the specific ways of actualizing the concept of space that is presented in two dimensions, directly and figuratively.

### **Setting of the Epic Poem *Yer Ziyuar***

The poem successfully combines real historical and fictional mystical events. The events of the epic poem *Yer Ziyuar* take place in a historical place, Khorezm, which in the 13th-14th centuries was part of the Golden Horde and afterwards was part of the Nogai Horde. It is believed that this *dastan* originally arose during the period of the Nogai Horde in the 15th-16th centuries. Since the ancestors of the present Karakalpaks at that time bore the ethnic name Nogais, the main character of the epic *Yer Ziyuar* is a Nogai by origin and fights for the independence of his country against the Kalmyks, who in scientific literature are called Dzungars. The composition and plot content of the *dastan* is based on the narration of the epic biography of the hero – the defender and savior of the country from external enemies, who establishes a free and fair life.

The main figures of the *dastan* are Khan Khasen and his sons *Yer Ziyuar* and *Yer Zhanay*, and in the center of the plot of the literary work are *Yer Ziyuar*'s heroic deeds. In the first battle, due to the great loss of the army, Khan Khasen was forced to retreat. At this moment, seeing the oppressed state of his father, *Yer Ziyuar*, at the head of the army, went to attack the khan of the Kalmyks, Toktamys. The narrator displays the courage in the image of *Yer Ziyuar* in detail and puts it in the central place of the poem.

After the victory over Toktamys, *Yer Ziyuar* went hunting with his comrades-in-arms. On the way back to Khorezm, they met an old man (*dervish*), who predicted *Yer Ziyuar* another struggle for life, which would be with a witch, and his salvation would depend on the good fairy, with whose help he would eventually find his love. The old dervish described the beautiful *Ainazhamal* in such a way that *Yer Ziyuar* wanted to find her. In his search of love, he encountered many obstacles in the form of mountains and deserts.

*Yer Ziyuar* rode his horse for a long time without stopping and arrived at a city that looked like a garden, where there was a castle made of white pearls. The owner of this castle was an old witch, who was very angry that *Yer Ziyuar* had disturbed her peace,

and cursed him by turning him into a deer. Together with his horse, Yer Ziyuar ran away from the witch, going through yet another test in the form of mountains. Behind these mountains there was a road to an unusual garden, where no human had gone before. Hungry Yer Ziyuar entered the garden through the gorge to enjoy the fruits growing there. He thus ended up in the country of the good fairy Zauria, who helped him find his beloved Ainazhamal. Fairy Zauria happened to be the daughter of the evil witch, and she turned him back into a human.

Fairy Zauria and her forty friends accompanied Yer Ziyuar and helped him fight the giants, fairies, snakes, and dragons who guarded the castle of the beautiful Ainazhamal. Seeing how strong Yer Ziyuar was, the beautiful Ainazhamal fell in love with him and agreed to marry him and return with him to his homeland Khorezm. Upon arrival in Khorezm, Yer Ziyuar learned that the dervish he had met while hunting had been sent by Abakan, the right hand of the Kalmyk khan. While Yer Ziyuar was absent from the country, his brother Yer Zhanai, under the influence of his Kalmyk wife Aktamak and Abakan, began to oppress his own people. The khan of Khorezm, the father of Yer Ziyuar and Yer Zhanai, was overthrown from the throne by his own son.

Seeing his son alive and well, Khan Khasen realized that there was nothing more valuable in the world than the life of his children. After hugging his son, the exhausted khan passed away with a calm soul. At the end of the *dastan*, Yer Ziyuar destroyed all the traitors, Yer Zhanai's wife was expelled. Fairy Zauria punished the old dervish by throwing him into a strong stream of water. Yer Zhanai married the beautiful Zhakhan, a faithful friend of Zauria. Since then, the Nogai people and the Kalmyks lived in peace and harmony for a long time.

### **Realization of Space through Bakhtin's Road Chronotope**

Before discussing direct and figurative representations of space in the Karakalpak *dastan Yer Ziyuar*, we should explain the conceptual basis of our analysis. Mikhail Bakhtin's (1986) notion of the chronotope provides a useful lens through which to view space representations in epic literature. The term "chronotope" denotes "a certain form of sensation of time" and its "relation to the spatial world" allowing for the analysis of the spatio-temporal basis of narratives (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 355). The initial idea behind the

chronotope is that time cannot be understood without a spatial dimension, and thus in a chronotope, time and space are intertwined (Pedersen, 2009). The notion of the chronotope is closely connected with Bakhtin's theory of the novel, in which distinctions between the epic poem and the novel are made. As opposed to the novel, the epic poem as a specific genre is characterized by representing a complete, absolute past based on the national tradition. The epic poem is separated from the present by an absolute epic distance. Space in the epic poem is associated with the place of action, and time is associated with the time of the supposed events. These categories play an important role in resolving the concept of the plot and characters, and act as their objectified characteristics.

As the central motif behind heroic epos is travelling, the analysis of ways how space is conceptualized in the Karakalpak *dastan Yer Ziyuar* is based on the road chronotope. This chronotope serves a powerful symbol in epic literature, standing for a journey that is both literal and metaphorical. The image of the road has been widely used in epic and contemporary poetry to express a wide range of meanings, from social development to personal transformation (Yunusova, 2024). The road chronotope includes symbolic meanings that emerge throughout the journey supplementary to the actual path that is traveled along.

The description of the epic space by means of the chronotope is inherent in epic texts. In the descriptions of the journeys of epic heroes, the chronotope of the road prevails, since in the folk epic the main characters usually make a campaign or journey over long distances. However, in the *dastan* under consideration, the exact time of the events is not specified. The text of the *dastan* mainly mentions such temporal constants of the road chronotope as days and parts of the day (dawn, sunset), which are in fact a generalized description, for example: *once, on one of the days, in distant times, several days, when a ruddy sunset came*.

In epic poetry, place names are used as spatial constants of the road chronotope. Toponyms are an important way of conceptualizing space in the heroic epic, since they contain a connection with the historical past (the time component) and the geographical object (the spatial component) (Zhakupov *et al.*, 2020). The study of the functioning of toponyms in the epic poem helps to shed light on how the nation structured space and time in the past (Hrobat, 2014). In this regard, toponyms serve to shape a chronotope of



culture, being viewed as ethnocultural texts containing relevant data on the nation's historical past (Boribayeva *et al.*, 2018) and proxies of their ethnic culture (Zhu *et al.*, 2018).

Thus, place names have a spatial reference, being witnesses to the historical development of the geographical area and its settlement by nationalities, reflecting the nature of their employment in different eras, historical events related to these areas, the natural and economic features of these areas (Gataullin and Fatykhova, 2018). Being “persistent” linguistic symbols, place names reveal essential information about certain locations in the times, during which they were settled and named (Seidl, 2019, p. 19). In epic literature, toponyms play an essential role in the narrative movement through a space and time, which are “empirically measurable as well as historically and geographically recognizable,” even when being highly fictionalized (Spurr, 2005, p. 18). In oral tradition, time is even subordinated to the category of space, the past being “a mere aspect of the landscape” (Hrobat, 2014, p. 2).

In the Karakalpak *dastan Yer Ziyuar*, the road chronotope performs an essential role in the plot-compositional organization of the literary work and allows reproducing a specific cultural picture of the world, based on a specific perception of space by the nation. Moreover, in the epic work the road chronotope has a certain specificity: it is realized in two dimensions – literal and figurative. Moreover, space in these two dimensions is expressed by different sets of toponyms. Below are provided direct and symbolic representations of space in the *dastan Yer Ziyuar*, which are expressed by real and unreal toponyms, respectively.

### **Direct Representations of Space in *Yer Ziyuar***

The *dastan Yer Ziyuar* can be distinguished by its realism, closeness to life, and a clear reflection of the history of the Karakalpak people. Many names of geographical objects that are mentioned in the passages are real and still retain their names. This indicates that the events described in the Karakalpak *dastan* are, to a large extent, echoes of real historical events that took place in the distant past of the Central Asian peoples (Maksetov, 1976). In this regard, the primary function of toponyms used in the epic poem *Yer Ziyuar* is to display the physical borders of the events described in the literary work.

At the beginning of the *dastan*, the narrator introduces us to *Khorezm*, which appears 72 times from beginning to end, as well as the city of *Akzhurim*, whose ruler is khan Khasen. The epic text begins with the following lines:

Far back in the past,  
During Nogai's minority,  
In the religion of the Muslims,  
In the vastness of the land of *Khorezm*,  
In the city of *Akzhurim*,  
There was a khan named Khasen (Aimbetov, 2011, p. 9).

*Khorezm* was first mentioned in the holy book of Zoroastrianism, *Avesto*. Scientists defined the lexical meaning of the word *Khorezm* as “sunny land.” In Arab sources, during the conquest of *Khorezm*, it is called the country of a thousand fortresses (Tolstov, 1948). Thousands of caravans passed through this land, and it occupied most of the territory of Karakalpakstan. Therefore, this toponym is often found in the folklore texts of the Karakalpaks, especially in *dastans*, such as *Yer Sayym*, *Amanbay Batyr*, etc. The toponym *Akzhurim* in the epic is described as the capital of *Khorezm*, where the main character of the *dastan* was born. Although it is not often found in the *dastan Yer Ziyuar* and there is no information about its etymology in scientific literary sources, this toponym has historical significance for the plot of the *dastan*, as it serves to specifically convey the historical event that is the center of the poem. Thus, the toponyms *Khorezm* and *Akzhurim* are the main core of the *dastan Yer Ziyuar* and determine the geographical location of the events being described. The narrative of the poem begins and ends with these two toponyms, and these two toponyms are the only ones in the poem that are directly related to the Karakalpaks.

Mountains are also considered a spatial element that is often found in heroic epics. In the *dastan* under consideration, the name of the only mountain appears, which is *Kokshetau* with a peak called *Besmazar*, and the oronyms perform an informative function in the text of the *dastan*. The mention of these oronyms indicates the location of the events taking place. According to the story, Khan Khasen and his two sons, Yer Ziyuar and Yer Zhanai, managed to drive the enemies out of the territory of *Khorezm* for some time. The location is determined in the poem through the use of these two oronyms: “To the west of Mount *Kokshetau*, there is the peak *Besmazar*, there are five men we killed in

this grave;” “Takta Khan, the khan of non-Muslims, when running away from *Besmazar*, of Ziyuar and Zhanai’s bravery he found out” (Aimbetov, 2011, p. 18).<sup>2</sup>

Many toponyms perform an informative and nominative function in the *dastan* and thus demonstrate the wide geography of the events depicted in the poem. Thanks to the journey and feat of Yer Ziyuar, readers get acquainted with the vast expanses of the Eurasian steppe and the cities located along the Great Silk Road. His travels take place through the most important and sacred habitats of the Turkic peoples. Unfolding the plot of the *dastan*, by detailing Yer Ziyuar’s journey through towns and countries in search of his beloved one, the narrator manages to show the maximum number of toponyms:

At the top of the colorful mountains,  
There was a place called “Forty springs,”  
Near the Forty Springs,  
One path went to Greece,  
One went to Kakpan,  
One went to Bahgdad,  
One went to Tehran,  
One went to Kabul,  
There were many paths.  
Towards Shynmashyn and Nahar,  
Towards Kandarhar and China,  
To the country of India,  
Towards Samarkand and Bukhara,  
Towards Tashkent and Kokan,  
There is a thick wood (Aimbetov, 2011, p. 76).<sup>3</sup>

This fragment of the *dastan* covers a fairly wide geography along the Great Silk Road. It is interesting that all the cities and towns described in this fragment are sequentially located along the Great Silk Road. Physically, Yer Ziyuar did not visit these countries, but he came to the crossroads of nine roads leading to them.

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<sup>2</sup> In Karakalpak: “*Kokshetaudyn* kublasyn *Besmazar*, Bul mazarda biz oltirgen bes yer bar;” “Geuirdin khany Takta khan, *Besmazardan* kashkanda, Ziyuar menen Zhanaidyn, Bilgen edi erligin.”

<sup>3</sup> In Karakalpak: “Koken taudyn basyn, “Kyrk bulak” degen bar edi, Kyrk bulaktyn kasynda, Biri ketken – Yunanga, Biri ketken – Kakpanga, Biri ketken – Bagdadka, Biri ketken – Tegeranga, Biri ketken – Kabyлга, Nebir zhollar bar edi. Shynmashyn menen Nakharga, Kandarkhar menen Kytayga, Khindistannyn zhurtyna, Samarkand penen Bukharga, Tashkent penen Kokanga, Kalyn togay zhaylagan.”

## Symbolic Representations of Space in *Yer Ziyuar*

The narrative of epic literature is influenced to a large extent by mythology, which is one of the oldest representations of spiritual culture, being specific for each nation at a certain stage of its historical development (Zharylgapov *et al.*, 2023). Traditional Karakalpak culture reflects the nomadic lifestyle, whose main socio-cultural norm is to preserve spiritual traditions and connection with the land (Altayev and Imanbayeva, 2021). The symbolism of the epic poem *Yer Ziyuar* in the conceptualization of space is realized through the combination of pagan myths and references to the religion of Islam.

The Karakalpak *dastan* under consideration contains unreal place names or epic names of space, which are markers of a fictional world constructed in the poem. These fictitious (mythical) toponyms are associated with mystical characters such as fairies, witches, genies. The country of genies is called *Zhadyulardyn zhurty*, the country of fairies is *Perilerdin zhurty*. *Omanshanyn zhurty* is the country where good fairies live, who helped Yer Ziyuar and showed the way to the country of his beloved Ainazhamal. Mount Kaf (*Kap tauy*) is the mountain under which for seven years the fairy Zauria worked to liberate from the old witch's craft. To illustrate the colorfulness of the description of mythical places in the *dastan* colorfully, we will provide a fragment depicting the country of witches, *Gohibulyr*:

A witch attacked your son,  
She is located in *Gohibulyr*,  
If a giant cannot go to this mountain,  
Because in *Gohibulyr*.  
Everything is taken care of by fairies,  
If a human enters there,  
They can never get out of there (Aimbetov, 2011, p. 72).<sup>4</sup>

In addition to describing the mythical space, in the Karakalpak heroic epic the mountains and springs located nearby acquire a symbolic meaning by serving as an obstacle to the protagonist's path. Thus, on the eleventh day of his journey, Yer Ziyuar encountered obstacles on his way in the form of the mountains *Aksha Tau* and *Koken Tau*.

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<sup>4</sup> In Karakalpak: "Balandy kapkan ol kanshyk, Bolur *Gohibulyr*, Dau bolmasa ol tauga, Baralmaydy adamzat. Sebep *Gohibulyr*, Barlygyn peri zhaylaydy, Eger barsa adamzat, Bant etip taska baylaydy."

Both toponyms do not exist on the map of modern Karakalpakstan, but are found in Kazakhstan, in a distant location, where one should take effort to get.

In these mountains is located the spring *Kyryk Bulak*, the place where the hero rested before entering the fairy country, which gave him new strength. Having had enough of the spring water, he watered his horse and continued his way. In the *dastan Yer Ziyuar*, the epic hero met mountains and a spring on his way, which give him new strength and confidence to continue his journey and achieve his goal. Of the hydronyms that are used in the heroic epic, the name of the spring *Zam Zam* should also be mentioned, which is located on the holy land of Muslims, Mecca. The *dastan* does not describe the hero's trip to Mecca, still in his mystical journey he encountered the spring Zamzam on his way to the land of fairies. He stopped at the spring to gain strength and water his horse: "He goes close to his name from a flowing spring, waters his horse, soaked in *Zam-Zam* water" (Aimbetov, 2011, p. 89).<sup>5</sup> It is interesting to note that the hero could not physically visit this place, but the name of the sacred spring here plays rather a symbolic role, connecting the mystical plot and religious motives. We learn about the magical power of this spring from the episode when Yer Ziyuar meets the old dervish who predicts that he will go to the land of fairies: "Everything in this world is false, who did not die from this world?! They put fire in my heart, which only the waters of *Zam Zam* can extinguish" (Aimbetov, 2011, p. 90).<sup>6</sup>

The hero's path was determined by the purpose of the journey, which consisted in the accomplishment of a feat in the name of the happiness of the family and the country, and returning home. In the epic poem, we find place names that are used in a secondary or indirect sense. In the next fragment, the obstacle to the main character's story about his mother and his native house is described, interwoven with the hope of return: "My desperate mother who gave me white milk, open your eyes, your child has arrived, you are my *Kubla*, you are my *Kaaba*, your son has come to visit" (Aimbetov, 2011, p. 83).<sup>7</sup> The events in this episode have no relation to the space in which they occur, but are used to give the *dastan* a poetic touch. The narrator simultaneously uses these names in a

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<sup>5</sup> In Karakalpak: "Atyna zhakyn barady, Agyp zhatkan bulaktan, Swugarady tulparady, *Zam-zam* swuyna kandyryp."

<sup>6</sup> In Karakalpak: "Bul duenya degennin beri zhalgandy, Bul duenyadan kimler oelmey kalgandy, Menin zhuregime otlar salgandy, *Zam-zam* sewyp oeshimersen neyleiyn."

<sup>7</sup> In Karakalpak: "Ak suet bergen gaerip anam, Kozindi ash, balan keldi, *Kublagahim*, zhanym *Kaabam*, Ziyaratka balan keldi."

figurative sense to denote family ties, as instead of repeating the word *ana* (mother), he replaces it with the name of the Muslim sacred place. In Karakalpak literature, especially in *dastans*, mother is often compared to the Kaaba.

The toponyms *Mecca*, *Madine*, *Mysir* (Egypt) found in the *dastan Yer Ziyuar* have a sacred meaning under the influence of the Arabs. These toponyms are not associated with the place where the events took place and are not directly related to the *dastan* and do not perform the function of localization. On the contrary, they are often referred to as the birthplace of the protagonist: “The boy’s birthplace, *Medina*, *Mecca*, *Egypt*, did fate bring him by his will, the chase went wild” (Aimbetov, 2011, p. 84).<sup>8</sup> The above excerpt is from the episode where Yer Ziyuar, in search of his beloved Ainazhamal, met a witch on his way who bewitched the hero and he turned into a deer. In these lines, the toponyms have a sacred meaning and are used figuratively, in the meaning of the protagonist’s homeland. Because these cities are historically and culturally significant, it is understood that each person’s birthplace has equal significance to the Karakalpaks. These place names are used to more colorfully emphasize the meaning of the native place. In the *dastan*, the above toponyms perform a symbolic function, since toponyms are associated with the fate of the main character. This can be proven by the toponym *Mysyr* (Egypt), which is used in stable expressions in the meaning “homeland” in many Turkic languages, including the Karakalpak language: “Khar kimnin tuiylgan zheri Mysyr shaekhari” (The homeland is sacred to every person) or “Munnan ketken an kuslar, Baryp Mysyrda kyslar” (The homeland is considered a blessed and gracious place for everyone). In this respect, it should be noted that the name *Mysyr* (Egypt) is a sacred and precious concept for the Karakalpaks.

## Discussion and Concluding Remarks

*Yer Ziyuar* is a unique example of Karakalpak epic poetry, which occupies a special place in world epic literature. On the one hand, the *dastan* can be compared with the epic works of Homer, since it is written entirely in verse and describes in detail and figuratively the long journey of the main character. At the same time, unlike Central Asian

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<sup>8</sup> In Karakalpak: “Tuygan zheri zhigittin, *Madine*, *Makke*, *Mysyrdy*, Aydagan kueni nesiyebe, Aydagan kueni nesiyebe.”

*dastans*, which are mostly characterized by exaggeration and idealization of the hero, in the heroic *dastan Yer Ziyuar* the plots are closer to the depiction of everyday life, which brings it closer to Scandinavian sagas (Lethbridge, 2016). Researchers of the Karakalpak epic believe that realism is one of the characteristic features of the *dastan Yer Ziyuar*, since it contains very few abstract things (Sagitov, 1986) and its poetic hyperbole is weaker as compared to Mongolian and Russian epics (Orlov, 1945). The connection with Scandinavian epos is seen in regards to the world of spirits and mystical world described in the *dastan Yer Ziyuar*. Moreover, to some extent, the *dastan* can be related to Celtic mythology, especially in the function of the old man (dervish) who predicts the hero's future. In Celtic mythology, this function is normally performed by a druid, a seer who knows all secrets and has the ability to predict the future (Aimukhambet, 2017).

One of the main specific features of the Karakalpak *dastan Yer Ziyuar* is the realization of the national concept of space. In the poem, space is revealed through the road chronotope, which is expanded to include both real and imaginary space. According to Emily Lethbridge (2016), the overlapping of real-world and imaginary-world places in epic literature serves the dramatic requirements of the plot in an epic work. In both the real and figurative dimensions, a special role in constructing space in *Yer Ziyuar* is performed by place names. The category of space is actualized directly, through the use of real toponyms, and figuratively, through the use of mythical and religious toponyms. When used directly, place names are the main signifiers of physical space, as they name locations and determine the geographical borders of the events described in the epic poem. For greater authenticity of the events taking place in the *dastan*, the narrator uses the names of real geographical objects that still exist today.

Some real toponyms used in the *dastan*, especially those naming distant places on the Great Silk Road such as Greece, China and India, sometimes depict a wider geography than the actual events described in the poem, being related to other countries and places, which the protagonist of the *dastan* did not actually visit during his long journey. According to Irada Ganiyeva (2017), when used along with local names, place names from other languages and countries can expand the area of events and heroic deeds, show them in different geographical locations, thus creating conditions for closer acquaintance with other peoples and cultures. Thus, real toponyms from distant places on the Great Silk Road are used by the narrator to expand the geography of the *dastan* to demonstrate

the people's social, political, economic and cultural connections with other countries and peoples.

The epic poem *Yer Ziyuar* also has a mythical dimension, where space is conceptualized through the combination of ancient myths and references to the religion of Islam. Mythical place names associated with mystical creatures serve as markers of the fictional world created in the poem. In the depiction of this imaginary world, a special role is performed by unreal oronyms, or names of mountains. Erbolat Bayat (2016) emphasizes that for the inhabitants of a particular location, the mountains of boundless steps were an inexplicable and unknown world. The well-known Uzbek scientist who studied the onomastics of Khorezm *dastans* Valentina Ondar (2016) claims that the presence of oronyms in fairy tales, myths and legends shows that just behind these mountains there is a country of fairies and giants, where no human foot has ever trodden, where it is difficult to get to. As seen from this explanation, the image of mountains in the mythical part of the *dastan* is found in the transfer (or creation) of mythical space as a place where the hero undergoes a test, or has to overcome an obstacle. Unreal geographical objects acquire symbolic meanings by acting as obstacles on the protagonist's path or giving rest and strength to the protagonist on his way through obstacles.

Another association assumed by the symbolic meaning of space is that with a "wonderful place," which is quite common in Turkic and Celtic mythology (Aimukhambet, 2017, p. 25). A wonderful place is a mystical place, for instance, an island of happiness in folklore. In the *dastan Yer Ziyuar*, this place is transformed into a real place characterized by a comfortable life surrounded with mother's care, a blessed home. Furthermore, this meaning can be referred to the idea of "sacred locatives" suggested by Eugen Schochenmaier when contrasting physical geography and mental geography in the use of Biblical symbols in toponymy (Schochenmaier, 2019, p. 4). The central idea around sacred locatives is that people tend to get attached to particular spaces that evoke special meanings and serve as spatial coordinates for remembering. Toponyms are often "markers of place-based stories, events and associations" (Schochenmaier, 2019, p. 3), and they can allude to sacred places as part of a certain religion. Some sacred place names evoke associations with home, homeland through the realization of religious motives in memories of mother. For the protagonist of the *dastan Yer Ziyuar*, Madine, Mecca and



Egypt, as well as the spring Zam Zam, are sacred locatives alluding to certain aspects of the religion of Islam, which is an essential part of the Karakalpaks' identity.

To conclude, in the Karakalpak *dastan Yer Ziyuar*, toponyms are not only landmarks in physical space, but also guardians and relays of the most significant linguacultural information, which are subject to the specifics of folk thinking and the laws of the genre within which these toponyms function. It is demonstrated that place names in the epic poem serve as an essential source of cognition of the worldview and national culture, whose specificity is determined by the combination of pagan mythology and the religion of Islam. The complex qualitative study of the relation between language and culture through place names used in the famous Karakalpak epos contributes to the development of linguoculturological studies in toponymy and enables a better understanding of ways to conceptualize space in epic literature.

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All authors contributed to the conception and design of the research. Material preparation and data acquisition were performed by Ainur Kenbayeva, and analysis and interpretation were performed by Sharapat Abisheva and Aqkerbez Amangalieva. The first draft of the manuscript was written by Ainur Kenbayeva and Sharapat Abisheva, and the manuscript was critically revised for important intellectual content by Ainur Kenbayeva and Aqkerbez Amangalieva. All authors read and approved of the final manuscript. All authors are accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.

### **Research Data and Other Materials Availability**

The contents underlying the research text are included in the manuscript.

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