



ARTISTIC-COMPOSITIONAL FEATURES OF TERMA IN THE BAKHSHI TRADITION OF SOUTHERN UZBEKISTAN

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17268262>

Abstract

This article examines the artistic and compositional features of terma in the bakhshi tradition of Southern Uzbekistan, with particular attention to the Surkhandarya-Kashkadarya epic environment, where poetic speech, instrumental performance, improvisation, moral commentary and collective memory operate as a unified artistic system. The study interprets terma not as a minor introductory song or an accidental lyrical fragment, but as a compact compositional unit through which the bakhshi establishes performative authority, prepares the listener for epic narration, formulates ethical judgment and demonstrates mastery of poetic-musical thinking. The relevance of the research is determined by the growing scholarly and cultural attention given to bakhshi art as an element of intangible cultural heritage, especially after its recognition in international and national heritage frameworks. The methodological basis of the article combines folkloristic genre analysis, structural-compositional interpretation, functional analysis and contextual reading of the Southern Uzbek epic tradition. The results show that terma is organized through thematic concentration, address forms, parallel syntactic construction, formulaic diction, rhythmic repetition, semantic intensification, improvisational flexibility and moral closure. In the Southern Uzbek tradition these features are strengthened by the epic temperament of regional bakhshi schools, particularly the Sherabad, Boysun and Qamashi environments. The article concludes that terma should be studied both as an autonomous lyric-didactic genre and as a functional component of the broader epic performance system, because its artistic value lies precisely in the mediation between short poetic expression and large-scale epic worldview.

Keywords: Bakhshi art; terma; Southern Uzbekistan; Uzbek folklore; Surkhandarya; Kashkadarya; oral epic tradition; composition; improvisation; intangible cultural heritage.

Introduction

The bakhshi tradition occupies one of the most important positions in the cultural memory of Uzbekistan because it unites epic narration, oral poetry, musical performance, historical imagination, ethical instruction and communal communication in a single living art. Within this tradition, the genre of terma deserves separate and serious attention, since it is frequently treated only as a small lyric-didactic text placed before or between epic narratives, whereas in actual performance it carries a much wider artistic and compositional burden. In the Southern Uzbek environment, especially in Surkhandarya and Kashkadarya, bakhshi performance has historically developed through strong local schools, master-disciple transmission, ceremonial practice and a repertoire in which heroic memory and moral speech are inseparable. This regional setting gives terma a special function: it is not simply sung, but used to open the emotional space of performance, regulate the relationship between performer and audience, introduce the ethical tone of the gathering and create a bridge from everyday communication to the elevated world of epic discourse. UNESCO describes bakhshi art as the performance of epic stories and original pieces accompanied by traditional instruments and transmitted through memory and living practice [1]. In Uzbekistan, official cultural policy has also emphasized the preservation, development and popularization of bakhshi and epic storytelling art, including education, methodological literature, media promotion and support for master performers [2]. These circumstances make the study of terma relevant not only for literary scholarship, but also for the protection of intangible heritage, because the survival of the bakhshi tradition depends on understanding the internal mechanisms through which oral genres continue to function. The term terma is commonly connected with the idea of selection or gathering, and this semantic core corresponds to the genre's poetic nature: the bakhshi selects wisdom, images, moral evaluations, invocations, proverbs, autobiographical hints, social observations and formulaic expressions, then arranges them into a concise but internally dynamic sequence. The genre is small in size but not small in meaning.



In a large doston, the plot unfolds through characters, conflict, journey and resolution; in terma, the same worldview is compressed into a concentrated structure of address, repetition, contrast and ethical conclusion. A terma may praise the homeland, honor the teacher, condemn greed, defend truth, reflect on the instability of life, glorify courage, remind listeners of ancestral dignity or speak about the responsibility of the poet's word. The compositional compactness of the genre makes it particularly powerful: a few lines, supported by instrumental rhythm and performed by a skilled bakhshi, may activate the emotional field of an entire epic tradition. The relevance of the topic is also connected with a methodological problem. Written folklore studies sometimes separate text from performance, but terma cannot be understood adequately if it is reduced to written words alone. Its meaning emerges in the interaction of voice, melody, instrument, pause, repetition, bodily presence and audience response. The same verbal formula may function differently when performed at a wedding, at a folk festival, before a heroic epic, during a pedagogical demonstration or in a modern concert hall. Therefore, the artistic-compositional structure of terma must be studied as a living performance form. Southern Uzbekistan provides especially rich material for such analysis because the Surkhandarya-Kashkadarya oasis is associated with a pronounced epic orientation and with strong bakhshi schools such as Sherabad, Boysun and Qamashi [3]. In this environment, terma often sounds like a threshold between song and saga. It may begin with a respectful address to the audience or teacher, continue with a sequence of parallel moral images, intensify through repetition and conclude with a blessing, warning or final judgment. This movement is not accidental. It shows that terma has its own internal architecture, its own beginning, development and closure, even when it appears improvised. The aim of this article is to identify and interpret the main artistic-compositional features of terma in the bakhshi tradition of Southern Uzbekistan. To achieve this aim, several tasks are pursued: to clarify the functional position of terma in the bakhshi repertoire; to describe its thematic and structural organization; to analyze the role of address, repetition, formula and parallelism; to explain the relationship between verbal text and musical performance; and to evaluate the importance of the genre for the preservation of oral epic culture. The scientific novelty of the article lies in considering terma as a compositional mediator between lyric condensation and epic expansion. It is autonomous because it can be performed independently as a complete piece, yet it is also dependent on the broader epic



system because its full meaning often appears when it prepares, interrupts, comments on or concludes epic narration. This dual status requires a more precise theoretical approach. Terma should not be placed in the corner like a decorative carpet in a ceremonial room; in many performances it is closer to the door itself, the device through which the listener enters the epic house.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research methodology is based on an interdisciplinary approach that combines folkloristic genre analysis, structural-compositional interpretation, performance theory, functional analysis and regional contextualization. Since terma belongs to oral-performance culture, the article treats it as a complex artistic phenomenon consisting of three interdependent layers: the verbal text, the musical-performative act and the cultural function. The first methodological procedure is genre identification. Terma is examined in relation to neighboring forms such as doston, lyrical song, didactic verse, praise song, invocation, moral counsel and improvisational poetic utterance. Its distinction from doston is not only quantitative but structural. A doston is organized through narrative continuity, character development, conflict and episodic expansion, while terma is organized through thematic concentration, formulaic movement, rhetorical contrast and moral culmination. Its distinction from ordinary lyric song also lies in function: in the bakhshi repertoire, terma is not only an expression of feeling, but a performative instrument that prepares the epic act, frames the audience's attention and confirms the ethical authority of the performer. The second procedure is structural-compositional analysis. In this stage, attention is paid to the internal construction of terma: opening address, thematic statement, repetition of parallel syntactic units, accumulation of images, contrast between positive and negative values, intensification of thought, moral conclusion and final cadence. This method makes it possible to identify stable patterns behind the apparent spontaneity of oral performance. The third procedure is functional analysis. In oral tradition, a genre is defined not only by its content, but by the work it performs within a social and artistic situation. A terma may invite listeners to attention, praise the host, honor a master bakhshi, introduce the name of a hero, bless a community, criticize social vices, regulate the rhythm of a gathering, test the performer's voice or connect a lyrical reflection with the coming epic narrative. Some studies of the terma genre emphasize its role in preparing the



performer and listeners for the reception of epic narration and its close connection with musical accompaniment [4]. The fourth procedure is performance-oriented interpretation. A written transcription can preserve lexical and syntactic material, but it cannot fully represent vocal timbre, melodic contour, instrumental strokes, pauses, gestures, emotional pressure or audience reaction. Therefore, the analysis proceeds from the principle that the composition of terma is not limited to the arrangement of words; it also includes the temporal arrangement of sound. The repetition of a phrase may coincide with a recurring instrumental pattern; a pause after a moral judgment may create semantic weight; a rising melodic line may intensify the final conclusion. The fifth procedure is regional contextualization. Southern Uzbekistan is not treated as a neutral geographical label, but as a historically formed epic-cultural environment. The Surkhandarya and Kashkadarya regions have preserved strong traditions of bakhshi performance, and scholarly sources often associate this oasis with epic expressiveness and with specific schools of performance [3]. Such regional specificity influences the tone, imagery and compositional logic of terma. The sixth procedure is cultural-historical interpretation. The analysis takes into account contemporary heritage policy, the inclusion of bakhshi art in international intangible heritage discourse, and national measures aimed at supporting performers and educational transmission. These sources help clarify why the study of terma is not only an academic problem but also a matter of cultural continuity. The materials considered include published research on Uzbek oral folklore, descriptions of bakhshi art, official heritage resources, legal-cultural documents and comparative observations related to regional performance. The study uses qualitative interpretation rather than statistical measurement, because the object is an oral genre whose meaning is shaped by variation, context and performance. The reliability of the analysis is strengthened by triangulating genre theory, regional cultural data, available descriptions of bakhshi practice and the internal logic of terma composition. The article has certain limitations. It does not present a complete annotated corpus of terma texts, nor does it provide musical notation of specific performances. Such work would require field recordings, transcription of dialectal features, interviews with master bakhshis and ethnomusicological analysis. The aim here is more conceptual: to define a model for understanding the artistic-compositional features of terma in the Southern Uzbek bakhshi

tradition. This model can later be expanded through archival research, fieldwork and comparative analysis of variants.

RESULTS

The analysis shows that *terma* in the *bakhshi* tradition of Southern Uzbekistan is organized through several recurring artistic-compositional features that together form a stable but flexible genre model. The first feature is thematic concentration. Unlike the *doston*, which unfolds a broad narrative world through events and characters, *terma* condenses a major ethical or emotional theme into a relatively brief poetic structure. A single *terma* may focus on the dignity of the homeland, the sacredness of the teacher's path, the responsibility of the poetic word, the value of loyalty, the danger of arrogance, the generosity of the brave, the instability of wealth or the transience of human life. The theme is usually not developed through plot, but through a chain of images, judgments and comparisons. This concentration gives the genre its aphoristic energy. The listener does not require an entire heroic biography in order to understand courage; the *bakhshi* may evoke it through a brief but rhythmically powerful formulation. The second feature is performative address. *Terma* frequently begins with or contains direct appeals to the audience, the host, the teacher, the homeland, the instrument, the hero, the soul or the divine. Address is not a decorative device; it creates the communicative frame of the performance. Through address, the *bakhshi* establishes a relationship of responsibility with the listeners. The performer is not merely presenting an aesthetic object, but entering into dialogue with a community. This is particularly important in Southern Uzbek settings where *bakhshi* art often functions in public gatherings, family events, festivals and educational contexts. The third feature is parallel syntactic and semantic development. *Terma* often proceeds by repeating similar structures while changing the semantic content of each line or unit. Such parallelism allows thought to move without narrative sequence. Instead of following the question "what happened next?", the listener follows the deepening of moral meaning. For example, a composition may oppose the generous person to the greedy one, the loyal friend to the betrayer, the wise elder to the ignorant youth, the brave hero to the coward, or the truthful word to false speech. Each parallel unit strengthens the previous one and prepares the final moral conclusion. The fourth feature is formulaic diction. Oral genres survive through formula, and formula in *terma*



should not be regarded as artistic weakness. It is a technology of memory, a mark of continuity and a code of recognition. Fixed epithets, traditional invocations, paired oppositions, proverbial expressions and repeated evaluative phrases allow the bakhshi to maintain continuity with the inherited repertoire while adapting the performance to the immediate situation. The fifth feature is rhythmic repetition, which links the verbal composition to the musical structure. Bakhshi art is traditionally accompanied by instruments such as the dombra and, in some traditions, the kobuz; the instrumental rhythm does not merely accompany the words but shapes their internal organization [1]. In terma, repetition may follow instrumental strokes, pauses may intensify moral statements and melodic return may mark the closure of a compositional unit. This means that the true composition of terma is auditory and temporal, not only textual. The sixth feature is semantic intensification. Many terma compositions move from general reflection to sharper ethical judgment. The opening may be broad and respectful, the middle may develop a series of examples or contrasts, and the ending may deliver a warning, blessing, praise or conclusion. This movement gives the genre a clear internal direction. Even when the text is brief, it has a trajectory. The seventh feature is moral-didactic culmination. Terma often concludes by affirming values such as truthfulness, courage, generosity, respect for elders, loyalty to the homeland and fidelity to tradition, or by condemning arrogance, greed, betrayal and ignorance. This does not make the genre simple propaganda. Its didacticism is aestheticized through rhythm, image, voice and performance. The moral idea becomes memorable because it is made beautiful. The eighth feature is improvisational openness. While terma relies on stable formulas, the bakhshi may expand, shorten, reorder or contextualize the composition according to occasion. At a wedding, blessing and family harmony may dominate; before a heroic doston, courage and ancestral memory may become central; at a festival, national identity and artistic pride may be emphasized; in a pedagogical setting, wisdom, discipline and respect for teachers may be foregrounded. This flexibility is one of the reasons why the genre remains alive. A fixed text may be preserved in memory, but a living terma is renewed in performance. The ninth feature is transitional function. Terma often operates as an entrance into the epic narrative. It changes the atmosphere of the gathering and prepares listeners for the emotional and ethical demands of the doston. This function is especially important in the Southern Uzbek tradition, where epic narration is frequently

performed with strong emotional intensity. The listener is not thrown abruptly from everyday conversation into the heroic world; terma creates the passage. The tenth feature is the unity of lyric and epic consciousness. Terma may not narrate a full plot, but it contains the values from which epic plots grow. It praises the same virtues embodied by epic heroes and condemns the same vices represented by their opponents. Therefore, terma may be described as a miniature epic code. It tells listeners what kind of person deserves honor before the doston shows such a person in action. The eleventh feature is regional expressiveness. In the Surkhandarya-Kashkadarya environment, terma often carries a serious, heroic and philosophically charged tone. This does not mean that humor, irony or lyrical softness are absent, but they are usually subordinated to the larger dignity of epic speech. The local schools of bakhshi performance have contributed to this expressive style through their repertoire, vocal manner, teaching methods and communal authority [3]. The twelfth feature is social memory. Terma preserves not only artistic formulas but also behavioral models. In oral culture, ethics must be memorable, repeatable and emotionally convincing. Terma achieves this by turning moral thought into rhythmically organized speech. It makes wisdom portable. A listener may not remember a long narrative in detail, but a sharp terma line can remain in memory for years and reappear in social conversation, education or family advice. The thirteenth feature is dual status. Terma is autonomous because it can be performed as a complete lyric-didactic piece, but it is also dependent because its deepest function often appears within the broader bakhshi performance cycle. This duality is the core of its artistic-compositional identity. It is a small structure that belongs to a large system.

DISCUSSION

The findings suggest that the terma genre should be reconsidered within Uzbek folklore studies as a compositional mediator between lyric miniature and epic architecture. Its importance becomes visible precisely when one avoids reducing it to a simple introductory song. In the Southern Uzbek bakhshi tradition, terma performs the work of orientation: it orients the performer, the listener, the musical rhythm and the moral atmosphere of the event. This function places it near other threshold forms in world oral and written cultures, such as invocations, prologues, blessings and preludes, yet its specific structure is rooted in the Uzbek epic environment. The genre's compositional movement from address to



intensification, from repeated image to conclusion, and from musical preparation to ethical judgment demonstrates that terma has a disciplined internal order. At the same time, this order is not mechanical. The living quality of terma is created by the tension between stable formula and situational variation. This tension is one of the central principles of oral art. If a bakhshi repeats only memorized formulas without sensitivity to the audience, the performance becomes dry and ceremonial in the weakest sense. If he improvises without respect for inherited formulas, the genre loses its traditional grammar. Mastery lies between these two extremes. This is why the teacher-disciple system is essential for the transmission of terma. A young performer must learn not only words, but also timing, pause, voice pressure, instrumental response, respectful address, appropriate moral proportion and the limits of improvisation. Official measures in Uzbekistan aimed at supporting bakhshi art, developing methodological literature and strengthening educational transmission are therefore significant [2]. However, institutionalization must avoid turning living oral forms into rigid textbook objects. Terma should be documented and taught, but it should also remain performable, variable and responsive to context. The comparison between terma and doston also clarifies the logic of epic culture. The doston dramatizes values through narrative action: heroes travel, fight, suffer, love, remain loyal, overcome betrayal and restore moral order. Terma expresses the same values through condensed poetic judgment. In this sense, terma is the ethical grammar of the epic. It states what the doston narrates. This relationship helps explain why many listeners accept terma not as a separate entertainment but as part of the epic worldview. When the bakhshi sings about truth, loyalty, generosity or courage before beginning a heroic narrative, he prepares the listener to evaluate the coming story through these values. The genre thus functions as a moral lens. The role of repetition also requires careful interpretation. In written literary aesthetics, repetition may sometimes be criticized as redundancy, but in oral performance repetition is often the primary means of intensification, memory and collective participation. A repeated phrase gives the audience time to absorb meaning, recognize structure and anticipate closure. In terma, repetition can be both musical and semantic. It may echo the dombra pattern, return to a key moral term or create a chain of parallel examples. The result is not stagnation but movement by accumulation. The genre advances by deepening, not by plot development. The role of formula should likewise be defended against superficial criticism.



Formulaic expression is not a sign that the bakhshi lacks originality. Rather, formula provides the shared language through which originality becomes intelligible. A completely private poetic language would not function effectively in communal oral performance. The bakhshi's individuality appears in selection, arrangement, voice, timing, expansion, contextualization and emotional force. A familiar formula in the mouth of a master performer may sound newly urgent because it is placed at the right moment and delivered with the right intonation. Regional specificity further strengthens the need for contextual analysis. Southern Uzbekistan has long been associated with strong epic performance, and the Surkhandarya-Kashkadarya oasis is often described as one of the important centers of bakhshi schools [3]. In this environment, terma tends to carry heroic seriousness and social authority. It may include philosophical reflection, public counsel, praise of ancestors and strong moral contrast. These features reflect the historical and cultural conditions of the region, where oral performance has functioned not only as art but also as a form of collective memory and social instruction. At the same time, the genre should not be idealized as unchanging. Modern stages, festivals, mass media, educational institutions and digital platforms influence the way terma is performed and received. The International Bakhshi Art Festival and similar events have increased the visibility of the tradition and contributed to the preservation of oral storytelling [8], yet festival performance may differ from community performance. On a stage, terma may become shorter, more polished and more representative of national heritage; in a local gathering, it may be longer, more dialogic and more dependent on audience response. Digital recordings preserve sound and image, but they cannot fully preserve the social atmosphere that shapes performance. A video can show the bakhshi; it cannot entirely show why a particular line mattered to that particular audience at that particular moment. For this reason, future research should combine textual analysis with fieldwork, ethnomusicology, performer biography and audience studies. Another important question is the pedagogical use of terma. Because it is compact, memorable and ethically charged, it can be effectively used in folklore courses, music education, cultural heritage programs and literary analysis. Students can learn through terma how oral composition works: how repetition creates structure, how parallelism develops meaning, how formula supports memory, how musical rhythm shapes verbal form and how moral ideas become aesthetically persuasive. Yet pedagogical use must avoid flattening the



genre into moral slogans. Terma is not merely a lesson; it is a performed lesson, and the performance dimension is the source of its force. From a theoretical perspective, terma helps expand the understanding of composition itself. In written literature, composition is often associated with the arrangement of chapters, scenes, stanzas or narrative episodes. In oral performance, composition includes the ordering of sound, breath, pause, gesture, audience contact and situational adaptation. Terma demonstrates this expanded composition with particular clarity. It is a verbal-musical design that lives in time. It is also a cultural design that organizes the transition from ordinary time to epic time. Therefore, the artistic-compositional study of terma contributes not only to Uzbek folklore studies, but also to the broader theory of oral poetics and intangible heritage. The central argument can be formulated as follows: terma is a small genre with a large function. It condenses values, opens performance, displays mastery, activates memory and links local identity with national heritage. In Southern Uzbekistan, where bakhshi art retains a strong epic character, this function becomes especially visible. The genre is not the shadow of the doston; it is one of the ways the doston's worldview becomes audible before the story itself begins.

CONCLUSION

The article confirms that terma in the bakhshi tradition of Southern Uzbekistan is a complex artistic-compositional genre whose significance exceeds its external brevity. It functions simultaneously as lyric-didactic expression, performative address, moral commentary, musical-poetic exercise, threshold to epic narration and carrier of collective memory. The main features identified in the study include thematic concentration, direct address, parallel development, formulaic diction, rhythmic repetition, semantic intensification, moral-didactic culmination, improvisational openness, transitional function and regional expressiveness. These features form a flexible but recognizable genre model. In the Surkhandarya-Kashkadarya epic environment, terma is shaped by the heroic and philosophical temperament of local bakhshi schools, by the teacher-disciple transmission of performance knowledge and by the communal expectation that the bakhshi should not only entertain but also guide, evaluate and remember. The study also demonstrates that terma has a dual status. It can be performed independently as a complete poetic unit, yet its deepest cultural meaning often

appears within the broader performance cycle of bakhshi art, where it prepares the audience for doston, frames moral understanding and links lyric speech with epic worldview. The relationship between word and music is central to this structure. Instrumental rhythm, vocal intonation, pause and melodic return are not external ornaments but components of composition. Therefore, future studies should analyze terma through both textual and performance-based methods. For cultural preservation, the genre should be documented through audio and video recordings, annotated transcriptions, performer interviews, regional variant comparisons and educational materials. At the same time, preservation must respect the living nature of oral art. A terma should not be frozen into one official version, because its vitality depends on variation within tradition. The most productive scholarly and pedagogical approach is to preserve formulas, contexts, performance principles and regional styles while allowing young bakhshis to develop individual mastery. In conclusion, terma may be defined as a miniature epic-lyric composition that concentrates the ethical code, aesthetic rhythm and communicative intelligence of bakhshi art. In Southern Uzbekistan, it remains one of the clearest examples of how a community turns memory into voice, wisdom into rhythm and tradition into living performance.

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