



## Theatrical Structures and Performance Traditions in Azerbaijani Folklore

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### Abstract

This article examines the theatrical structures and performance traditions embedded within Azerbaijani folklore, proposing that oral narratives, ritual practices, and musical storytelling constitute a form of proto-theatre. Drawing on theoretical insights from performance studies and folklore research—particularly the works of Richard Bauman and Victor Turner—the study frames Azerbaijani folklore not only as a repository of cultural heritage but also as a dynamic performative system. Through the analysis of epic tales (dastans), lyrical folk songs, the Ashiq bardic tradition, and seasonal rituals, the article identifies key dramatic elements such as structured plots, character archetypes, stylized dialogue, spatial symbolism, and musical integration (Sadikhova, 2022).

Special attention is given to the Ashiq as a multifaceted performer, whose blend of narration, music, improvisation, and audience interaction represents a theatrical tradition rooted in oral culture. The article also explores how Azerbaijani playwrights like Huseyn Javid and Jafar Jabbarly adapted folklore into modern theatrical forms, especially during the Soviet and post-Soviet periods, contributing to the development of a distinct national stage.

By situating folklore within a theatrical framework, this study underscores the richness and relevance of indigenous performance traditions. It calls for further research in comparative folklore theatre, field documentation, and the integration of folk forms in contemporary education and cultural preservation.

**Keywords;** *Azerbaijani folklore, national theatre, Ashiq tradition, ritual performance, oral literature, dramatic structure.*

### 1. Introduction

The purpose of this article is to explore the theatrical structures and performance traditions embedded within Azerbaijani folklore. While folklore is typically analyzed through literary or

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anthropological lenses, this study proposes a performative approach—highlighting the theatrical qualities that predate and inform Azerbaijan’s formal national theatre tradition.

Azerbaijan’s rich folkloric heritage—comprised of *dastans* (epic narratives), Ashiq performances, ritual songs, and seasonal festivities—serves not only as a vessel of oral history but also as a dynamic performance practice. These expressions encompass many of the same elements found in formal theatre: character development, dialogue, staging, symbolic movement, and audience interaction. Understanding these elements as inherently performative allows us to view folklore not merely as tradition, but as theatre in its own right.

The concept of "theatricality" in this context refers to the structured presentation of narrative and emotion through embodied performance, while "performance" entails ritualized, often communal, acts of storytelling that engage both the performer and the audience. This framework aligns with studies in performative folklore (Bauman, 1977; Turner, 1982) and builds upon region-specific research such as the Ashiq tradition and choreographic expressions in Azerbaijani cultural practices (Shahmuradova & Saitova, 2024).

This article proceeds as follows: it begins with a theoretical foundation rooted in performance studies, then surveys major genres of Azerbaijani folklore. It continues by analyzing specific theatrical elements within these traditions—structure, dialogue, character, space, and music—before turning to the Ashiq art as a proto-theatrical form. Finally, it discusses how these performative folk traditions influenced the emergence of a modern Azerbaijani national theatre.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

The analysis of Azerbaijani folklore through a theatrical lens requires a multidisciplinary theoretical foundation, merging performance studies, folklore theory, and semiotics. Central to this approach is the understanding of folklore not solely as a repository of cultural memory, but as a living, performative tradition.

Richard Bauman (1977) emphasizes the concept of “**verbal art as performance**”, wherein the act of storytelling is viewed not just as narrative transmission but as an aesthetic and socially meaningful event. He situates performance within a communicative framework, highlighting how storytellers use stylization, pacing, and audience engagement to co-create meaning. Similarly, Victor Turner (1982) bridges ritual and theatre, arguing that both are forms of “**social drama**”—structures that mediate communal values and conflicts through symbolic performance.

In the Azerbaijani context, rituals such as wedding songs, seasonal celebrations (e.g., Novruz), and Ashiq performances echo these ideas, combining narrative with embodied action and communal interaction. These traditions often involve **role-playing**, where performers assume specific character archetypes (hero, elder, jester, etc.) and use costuming, gesture, and formulaic speech to enhance the performative effect.

Furthermore, **semiotic** and **structuralist** approaches contribute to understanding how folklore encodes symbolic meaning. Drawing from Propp’s morphology of the folktale and Lévi-Strauss’s



binary oppositions, one can identify repetitive narrative structures, moral polarities, and signs within Azerbaijani folk tales that function theatrically. These embedded structures form the skeleton of proto-dramatic expression—especially in genres like *dastan* or *Ashiq* improvisations—where performance is guided by deep-rooted narrative formulas.

By applying this theoretical triad—performance theory, ritual studies, and semiotic analysis—this article establishes a framework to analyze the performative dynamics of Azerbaijani folklore as a foundation for national theatrical identity.

### 3. Overview of Azerbaijani Folklore Genres

Azerbaijani folklore presents a diverse and layered corpus of oral traditions that serve not only as cultural memory but also as dynamic forms of public performance. Each genre reflects a different facet of the Azerbaijani worldview and contributes uniquely to the formation of proto-theatrical traditions. This section offers a concise exploration of the principal genres, highlighting their structural and performative qualities.

#### Epic Tales (Dastans)

Among the most prominent folkloric forms in Azerbaijan are **dastans**, or heroic epics. These narrative cycles—such as *Koroghlu* and *Asli və Kərəm*—are rich in drama, suspense, and moral instruction. Typically transmitted orally by a skilled narrator or **Ashiq**, these epics include dramatic dialogues, vivid characterizations, and action-driven plots, making them structurally akin to theatrical scripts. Performers often assume multiple roles, using voice modulation, gestures, and musical interludes to differentiate between characters and maintain audience engagement.

#### Folk Songs and Lyrical Storytelling

Azerbaijani folk songs, often referred to as **bayatılar**, express personal, social, and emotional themes (Gulkhara&Farzaliyeva, 2025). These songs are lyrical in nature and highly performative, using melody and rhythm to convey nuanced sentiments. While not always narrative, many songs include short story arcs or symbolic imagery that invite interpretive engagement. In communal contexts, such as weddings or mourning rituals, these songs function as performative acts with clear emotional and social resonance.

#### Ashiq Art

The **Ashiq** tradition represents the most direct link between folklore and theatre in Azerbaijan. An Ashiq is a bard who composes, sings, and performs poetry accompanied by the **saz**, a long-necked lute. This form integrates music, storytelling, improvisation, and audience interaction—hallmarks of theatrical performance. The Ashiq not only tells stories but enacts them, often assuming different roles, altering voice and posture, and responding in real-time to the listeners. This interactive aspect makes Ashiq art a living theatre deeply rooted in oral tradition.

#### Rituals, Festivals, and Communal Storytelling



Folkloric rituals—especially those tied to seasonal festivals like **Novruz**—contain performative sequences rich in symbolism and collective participation. These include costumes (e.g., *Keçəl* and *Kosa*), scripted dialogues, and humorous or moral scenes performed before an audience. Such events blur the line between ritual and theatre, combining narration, role-playing, music, and space usage in ways reminiscent of dramatic performance. Communal storytelling, often conducted around the hearth or in village gatherings, also serves as a stage for moral instruction, historical memory, and social cohesion.

Together, these genres form the foundation of Azerbaijan’s intangible cultural heritage, revealing the inherent theatricality that precedes and inspires the development of formal national theatre.

#### 4. Theatrical Elements in Azerbaijani Folklore

Azerbaijani folklore is not only a source of national identity and cultural memory but also a repository of performative elements that parallel the foundational structures of theatre. Embedded within epics, songs, and rituals are distinct theatrical features—narrative arcs, characters, dialogue, space, and spectacle—that give these oral traditions their dramatic vitality. This section outlines the primary theatrical elements found in Azerbaijani folklore.

##### 4.1. Narrative Structure and Dramatic Plot

Folk epics and storytelling traditions in Azerbaijan exhibit classic narrative architecture. Most follow a three-act structure: **conflict**, **climax**, and **resolution**. In tales like *Koroghlu*, the protagonist undergoes trials, faces antagonists, and emerges transformed—a trajectory common to dramatic plots. These stories also rely on **suspense**, **irony**, and moments of **humor**, engaging the listener emotionally and cognitively. The narrator, often the *Ashiq* or elder, uses timing, tone, and pacing to heighten dramatic effect, creating anticipation and catharsis much like in formal stagecraft.

##### 4.2. Characterization and Role-Play

Azerbaijani folklore includes a range of **archetypal characters**, such as the noble hero, the cunning trickster, the wise elder, and the tragic lover. These roles are often enacted through **voice modulation**, **gestures**, and even symbolic **costuming**, especially in ritual performances or seasonal plays like *Keçəl* and *Kosa*. Performers may shift between **dual roles**, taking on both narrator and character, engaging in **improvisation** that reflects the dynamic nature of live theatre.

##### 4.3. Dialogue and Language

Oral storytelling traditions rely heavily on **dialogue** to convey tension, humor, and morality. Dialogic exchanges are often **stylized**, employing **repetition**, **rhythm**, and **formulaic expressions** to maintain audience attention and ensure memorability. Phrases such as “bir var idi, bir yox idi...” (“once there was, once there wasn’t...”) serve as performative cues, signaling the beginning of a story and drawing listeners into the narrative world.

##### 4.4. Space and Setting



Unlike institutional theatre, Azerbaijani folkloric performance traditionally occurs in **natural or communal settings**—village squares, homes, or outdoor stages. These spaces function as **symbolic sites**, representing forests, battlefields, or divine realms depending on the narrative. The use of space is both practical and metaphorical: the hearth may represent a family's unity, while a circle of spectators suggests communal witnessing, echoing the spatial dynamics of ancient theatre.

#### 4.5. Musical and Visual Elements

Music is integral to Azerbaijani folklore. Instruments like the **saz** and **balaban** accompany Ashiq narratives, while rhythmic chanting and **melodic storytelling** enhance emotional expression. Musical interludes serve as transitions or dramatic emphasis, much like in operatic theatre. Additionally, **visual elements**—including ceremonial dress, masks, and symbolic props—are prominent in **wedding songs**, **mourning rituals**, and **Novruz festivities**. These add a layer of spectacle, reinforcing meaning through sensory experience.

In sum, Azerbaijani folklore embodies all the essential elements of drama. Its performance is rich with theatrical structure and expression, underscoring its role not only as a medium of tradition but also as a vibrant, living theatre. Theatre should be alive since it is more entertaining. Spectators cannot enjoy online performance as they are unable to feel facial expression as a teacher in online classes (Babayev, 2022)

#### 5. Ashiq Tradition as Proto-Theatre

The **Ashiq** tradition occupies a central position in Azerbaijani folklore, not only as a cultural treasure but as a vivid example of **proto-theatre**—a form of performance that predates formal stage drama but contains all its essential elements. The Ashiq, a poet-singer and storyteller, serves as **performer, narrator, musician, and moral guide**, often playing a public role comparable to that of the dramatist and actor combined.

Ashiqs traditionally perform epic tales, lyrical poems, and love stories, drawing from a collective folkloric memory while also infusing their performances with **personal improvisation**. This improvisational aspect—known as **deyişmə** (verbal duel)—is particularly theatrical, involving the spontaneous exchange of verses in front of an audience, sometimes in competition with another Ashiq. These performances demand not only poetic skill but also stage presence, quick wit, and emotional intelligence.

The **saz**, a long-necked lute, is more than a musical instrument; it is a performative tool that provides rhythm, atmosphere, and emotional coloring. The Ashiq sings while playing, using melody and pacing to evoke different moods—joy, grief, longing, or triumph. Through this blend of **music, voice, gesture, and narration**, the Ashiq guides the audience through a dramatic arc, evoking empathy, reflection, and collective memory.

Audience interaction is another key theatrical element. The Ashiq often responds to the audience's mood, engages in call-and-response, and adapts the story or song to the social context of the



performance—be it a wedding, a mourning event, or a public celebration. The boundary between performer and spectator is fluid, making the event a **communal theatre** of sorts.

In village life and urban settings alike, the Ashiq's performance has functioned as a **social theatre**, reflecting societal values, reinforcing moral norms, and offering commentary on contemporary issues through metaphor and allegory. The Ashiq embodies the convergence of artistic disciplines—music, literature, drama—and transforms them into a singular performative act, making this tradition a foundational pillar in the development of Azerbaijani national theatre.

## 6. From Folklore to Formal Stage

The transition from oral folkloric tradition to formal theatrical expression in Azerbaijan marks a significant cultural evolution. Beginning in the early 20th century, Azerbaijani playwrights and theatre artists drew heavily from folk narratives, themes, and performance modes to shape a national theatrical identity rooted in indigenous cultural forms (Farzaliyeva&Seyidov, 2025). This transformation was not merely aesthetic—it was also ideological, aligning folklore with the broader goals of nation-building, modernity, and, later, Soviet cultural policy.

Writers such as **Huseyn Javid** and **Jafar Jabbarly** played pivotal roles in this synthesis. Javid, influenced by Romanticism and Islamic mysticism, incorporated **epic themes, mythological elements, and moral conflicts** drawn from folklore into his poetic dramas, such as *Sheikh Sanan* and *Iblis*. His works evoke the spiritual and philosophical depth of oral tales while employing Western dramatic forms. Jabbarly, on the other hand, focused on **social realism**, yet often infused his plays with **folk idioms, archetypes, and traditional gender dynamics**, as seen in *Sevil* and *Almaz*. These early dramatists translated the performative soul of Azerbaijani folklore into the structured space of the modern stage (Ahmadova, 2023).

Folklore also inspired **thematic and stylistic experimentation** in the Soviet era, when cultural institutions actively promoted the adaptation of folk heritage into state-approved theatre. Plays based on *dastans*, folk heroes, and Ashiq legends were written, staged, and toured across the republic. While these adaptations sometimes served ideological purposes—highlighting class struggle, progress, or Soviet unity—they also preserved and recontextualized traditional forms for new generations. Directors began to experiment with **costumes, folk music, and set designs** that evoked village life and mythic landscapes, creating a uniquely Azerbaijani theatrical aesthetic.

In the **post-Soviet period**, national theatre underwent a process of revival and redefinition. With the easing of ideological constraints, artists and scholars revisited folkloric sources with renewed interest in their **symbolic, ethical, and performative dimensions**. Contemporary productions often explore themes of identity, memory, and displacement—again using folk characters, structures, or symbols as dramatic frameworks. This return to folklore reflects a broader cultural movement to **reclaim and celebrate indigenous narratives** in the face of globalization and historical rupture.

Thus, the movement from folklore to stage was not linear but dialogic, involving reinterpretation, adaptation, and innovation. Azerbaijani theatre, shaped by its folkloric roots, remains a living



medium that bridges the past and present—preserving collective memory while inviting artistic renewal.

## 7. Conclusion

This study has explored the theatrical dimensions embedded in Azerbaijani folklore, highlighting how oral traditions function not only as storytelling devices but also as performative acts with deep cultural resonance. Drawing from epic narratives, lyrical songs, the Ashiq tradition, and communal rituals, Azerbaijani folklore presents a fully formed structure of performance that mirrors—and in many ways predates—the conventions of formal theatre.

The analysis demonstrates that these traditions exhibit all the essential components of theatricality: **narrative structure, character archetypes, dramatic dialogue, spatial dynamics, music, and visual expression**. The Ashiq, in particular, stands as a prototype of the actor-poet, merging music, voice, and interaction in ways that blur the lines between storyteller and dramatist. Furthermore, the adaptation of folk elements into modern theatre—especially through the works of Huseyn Javid and Jafar Jabbarly—illustrates the continuity and transformation of cultural heritage into a national theatrical identity.

Azerbaijani folklore remains an **abundant reservoir of theatrical forms and techniques**, offering both aesthetic inspiration and socio-cultural insight. Its study not only deepens our understanding of Azerbaijani performance culture but also contributes to global discourses on indigenous theatre and oral performance traditions.

For future research, several promising directions emerge: **comparative analyses** between Azerbaijani and other Turkic or Caucasian folkloric performance styles (Sadikhova, 2024); **field recordings and ethnographic studies** to document endangered practices; and explorations into how these forms can be reimaged in **educational or children's theatre**, ensuring their transmission to younger generations in both traditional and innovative formats.

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