

Craft Rituals and Master-Apprentice Traditions in Uzbek National Knifemaking

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Abstract: This article analyzes the nature and essence of the relationship between master and apprentice in the craft of knife-making, examining its social functions and its role in ensuring the continuity of traditional knowledge and values. The study also explores the significance of the master-apprentice system within the broader context of folk craftsmanship, focusing on the customs and rituals that shaped it, as well as its present-day condition from a historical and ethnographic perspective. Additionally, the article provides a detailed account of the rituals associated with master-apprentice relations in the knife-making tradition.

Keywords: Craftsmanship treatise, “Is chiqarish”, “Peshqadam korsoz”, “Fotiha berish”, “Kamarbandon”, “Arvohi pir”, dedication to craftsmanship, ceremony, tradition, “peshqadam”, elder.

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Introduction

One of the key ethnographic features that distinguishes a nation from others is its system of rituals[1]. The craft traditions of the Uzbek people have a centuries-old history, among which the art of knifemaking holds a special place. A knife is not only a household tool or a domestic weapon but is also regarded as a vivid expression of the people's aesthetic worldview, customs, symbolic thinking, and artisanal culture. This art form has developed over the centuries based on the master-apprentice tradition and has served as an important social institution for the transmission of craft secrets from generation to generation.

In traditional Uzbek knifemaking, the master is recognized not only as a skilled artisan but also as a leader who imparts moral, spiritual, and aesthetic values. The apprentice, in turn, acquires not only the skills of production but also absorbs the cultural and spiritual heritage, professional ethics, and the spirit of craftsmanship from the master. These relationships formed a complex social and cultural mechanism that went far beyond ordinary vocational training.

It is well known that the historical development of ancient legends and myths concerning the origins of various crafts is also reflected in the *risolas* the internal regulations of craftsmen. Typically, each branch of craftsmanship had its own *risola*. These documents regulated the internal rules of the trade, including religious, economic, legal, moral, and professional aspects. Most importantly, the *risolas* captured the

defining characteristics of artisanal industries as they existed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries[2].

According to researchers M. Gavrilov and M. Andreyev, the emergence of craft *risolas* coincided with the early spread of Islam in the region[3]. It has also been noted that the patron saints (*pir*) mentioned in the *risolas* were later Islamized over time[4]. For example, M. Gavrilov noted during his study of *risolas* from craft centers in the Fergana Valley that all of them were written in a similar style. These regulations typically began with praise for Allah and the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), followed by references to the festivals of the craft and the invocation of the patron saints (*pir*) associated with the trade[5].

Many traditions, customs, and rituals associated with craftsmanship were closely tied to the veneration of ancestors and the expression of respect toward them. Within the craft communities, those directly involved in production typically included master artisans, hired workers, and apprentices. The head of the artisan guild, known as the *oqsoqol* (elder), was usually elected from among the most experienced and respected masters. If the *oqsoqol* carried out his duties successfully, he could lead the guild for the remainder of his life. This position generally remained in place until the early 20th century. In other branches of traditional craftsmanship such as blacksmithing, coppersmithing, engraving, tanning, and pottery the head of the guild was also referred to as *bobo* or *g'olib*[6].

Master craftsmen often possessed guild-specific manuals (*risola*) related to their trade. For example, the private museum of the Shakhrixon-based knifemaker Rahmatkhoja Alikhodjaev preserves a blacksmiths' manual that includes legendary narratives and ethical codes of conduct. These rules and traditions were memorized by all apprentices accepted into the trade.

Moreover, the *risola* texts elaborated in detail on various customs and rituals associated with craftsmanship. Every artisan was required to study these manuals, comprehend their content and meaning, and strictly adhere to their principles in both practice and conduct[7]. The manuals on craftsmanship particularly in the field of blacksmithing also outlined the nature of the master-apprentice relationship, which served as a guiding model for knifemakers as well. Human agency played a vital role in the development of craftsmanship, with the bond between master and apprentice occupying a central place.

Because knifemaking is a complex trade, apprentices were typically accepted at the age of 12 to 14. The apprentice's father was expected to create the necessary conditions for his son to continue the craft independently after fully mastering the profession[8].

In traditional knifemaking, the elder or head of the guild was referred to as the *peshqadam*. Master knifemakers who crafted the finest blades and successfully trained apprentices were known as *peshqadam korsos* who held the responsibility of overseeing work within the craft.

Young apprentices who had learned the secrets of knifemaking were required to visit the *peshqadam* together with their master to receive a ceremonial blessing, known as *oq fotiha* (pure benediction). This rite of passage held deep significance in the craft. The blessing was also personally given by the master to the apprentice in a ritual called *fotiha berish* (giving the blessing), during which the master would declare that his spirit would continue to support the apprentice after his death.

Another key ritual was *kamarbandon*, or the "belt-tying" ceremony. After completing both of these rites, the apprentice would part from his master, open his own workshop, and begin working independently as a full-fledged craftsman[9].

Once the apprentice had attained the rank of master, it was customary for him to dedicate a portion of his earnings throughout his career to the memory of the deceased *peshqadam* (senior) masters. This act, known as *xudoyi*, was a form of charitable offering made in honor of their spirits, reflecting deep respect and spiritual continuity within the craft tradition[10]. In the knifemaking tradition, the "*Arvohi pir*" a mastership initiation ritual was conducted in a distinctive manner. The ceremony was attended by the master craftsman (*ustoz*), senior knifemakers (*peshqadam*), a mullah, and close relatives. Typically, the

apprentice organized this ritual upon improving his financial situation after beginning his independent work.

Unlike other craft branches, in blacksmithing and knifemaking, it was customary for each attending master to bring two loaves of bread to the initiation ceremony. Before receiving the *oq fotiha* (blessing) from his master, the apprentice would drink water three times, symbolically asking for consent and spiritual acceptance.

At the end of the ceremony, following the mullah's prayers, the master formally gave his *oq fotiha* and publicly presented the knives crafted by the apprentice to the guests. As part of the ritual, the master dressed the apprentice in a ceremonial robe (*to'n*) and tied a belt around his waist, symbolizing his transition into an independent craftsman. To support the apprentice's successful career start, the master also gifted him his finest handcrafted knife[11]. In order to express his satisfaction with the apprentice, the master would entrust him with two core obligations: to remain faithful to the traditions of the craft and to train apprentices of his own in the future. Thus, among the various rituals of craftsmanship, the apprentice's elevation to the rank of master held a particularly important place—it marked the apprentice's readiness to independently pursue the trade he had mastered.

In places like Shahrixon and Chust, this ritual has continued in traditional form, closely monitored by leading knifemakers (*peshqadam pichoqchilar*), who ensure its proper observance.

As with many other forms of traditional craftsmanship, knifemaking was expected to be passed down from father to son. Among families practicing the craft, it was widely believed that if a child did not learn and carry on his father's trade, the family's patron spirits (*homi-y-pir-lar*) would abandon the household. In cases where a master craftsman had no sons, he would often marry his daughter to his most trusted apprentice, thereby continuing the family line and ensuring the transmission of the craft[12].

The art of knifemaking represents an inseparable part of the rich artisanal heritage of the Uzbek people. Within this tradition, the master-apprentice relationship has developed over centuries into a stable and structured system through which not only technical skills, but also aesthetic values and moral-ethical norms have been meticulously transmitted from one generation to the next.

Research indicates that the master served not merely as an instructor of craft techniques, but also as a mentor instilling essential social values in the apprentices such as devotion to the trade, diligence, honesty, and perseverance.

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