

# The Kitab-i dedem Qorkut as a source for the cultural history of the Oghuz Turks

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The *Kitab-i dedem Qorkut* is the only written epic of the Oghuz Turks. As a whole it reflects the world outlook that was forming among the Oghuz tribes during their migration to the west and in the course of their Islamization. The stories in the *Kitab-i dedem Qorkut* combine pre-Islamic elements, or an ancient Turkic base and some Muslim elements. This can be seen on every fragment of the text of this epoch.

Those elements existed in Turkic literature even before part of the Oghuz tribes came to Asia Minor and have appeared since the early period of their Islamization. Firstly it is necessary to admit that the songs comprising the *Kitab-i dedem Qorkut* include those elements of the Muslim world outlook that were already under the strong influence of other cultural traditions, mainly Turkic. Additionally we can refer to them the comprehension of human life and death.

This can be seen from the example of different clichés, which came to the *Kitab-i dedem Qorkut* through other Turkic literary traditions and became *locus communis* in medieval Turkic literature. For example, the metaphor of life as a caravan:

Anlar dahı bu dünyaya geldi geçdi; kervan  
gibi konu göçdü.  
Anları dahı ecel aldı, yer gizledi. Fani dü-  
nya kime kaldı.

They also were born and passed away.  
As the caravan they travelled stopping  
and going on. Taken by death and con-  
ceded by earth, to whom has the world  
been left at last.

According to Kononov, the sources of these metaphors and images are different but most of them come from Muslim theological literature (like *hadith* and moralistic literature).<sup>1</sup> We can see the same metaphor in Abu-l-Ghazi's *Shadjara at-tarakima*:

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<sup>1</sup> A. N. Kononov, tr. and comm. *Rodoslovnaya turkmen. Sochinenye Abu-l-Ghazi, hana Khivinskogo*. [Genealogy of the Turkmen written by Abu-l-Ghazi, the khan of Khiva] Moscow-Leningrad 1958, 89.

بو دنيا بر رباطغه او خشار آدم فرزندلار كاروانغه  
اوشا لار بري كوجار بري قونار

(the world is like a caravan-saray, and the children of Adam are like a caravan:  
some of them wander and some of them stay for stand)

*Shadjara at-tarakima* 332-334<sup>2</sup>.

The idea of the temporal, lay life contrasted with eternity is not something new for Turkic literature. Almost the same formulations as in the *Kitab-i dedem Qorkut* can be found in the didactic poem *Hibat al-haqayiq* written by Ahmed Yugneki, around the eleventh or twelfth century.

Each one of the twelve stories of the *Kitab-i dedem Qorkut* finishes with such a formula, where the same idea of the vanity of the transient human life is expressed:

[*Kanı dedügüm Beg erenler; dünya  
benüm deyenler?*]

*Ecel aldı, yer gizledi*

*Fani dünya kime kaldı*

*Gelimlü, gidimlü dünya*

*Son ucu ölümlü dünya*

Where are the hero beys I used to talk  
about -

Those who once claimed the world?

Taken by death and concealed by earth.

To whom has the world been left at last -

The world with its coming and going -

The world that is rounded off by death?

The principle of the rhythmical organization of these eight lines is the same quantity of syllables in each line, comparable to the Turkic poetry tradition which uses the *barmak* metre, based on the equality of syllables. It is also widespread in Turkic folklore and so here it is possible to suppose some quite archaic elements of oral folk poetry in the written epic. At the same time such fragments in which it is possible to find traditional Turkic metrical structures express a specific (specifically Muslim) comprehension of life connected with the idea of *taqdir* as the predetermination of the existing system and customs and the whole of human life and activities. Human life and the world around us are perceived as transient and perishable; death is inevitable. There is a contradiction in the *Kitab-i dedem Qorkut* (especially clearly seen in the example of the so-called blessings of Qorkut - the endings of each of the twelve stories of the epic). On the one hand, the whole idea of the epic is the glorification of heroes of the Oghuz tribes fighting with *kafirs* ('infidels'), on the other hand, nevertheless, the heroic deeds of the *begs* ('lords') of the Oghuz belong to this world, to the temporal existence or *dünya* ('world'). That contradiction is confirmed by the composition and contents of the texts of the blessings: firstly they tell of the vanity of existing and after that there are expressions with meaning of wishing of the constancy of the kin and generations the at the second part of the blessing of Qorkut. So, in that way there lies a distinction, a border between the Islamic comprehension of the world order and the pre-Islamic world reflected in the epic.

The traditional Turkic content of the world outlook in the *Kitab-i dedem Qorkut* is reflected in dreams predicting death and/or disaster. Most of the motives of

<sup>2</sup> Kononov, *Rodoslovnaya turkmen*, 45.

those dreams (for example, the dream of Salur Kazan) have parallels in other Turkic cultures and mantic traditions.<sup>3</sup>

As a whole, the dream motif has a great importance in Turkish and Turkic folklore and, corresponding to that, more than once it has been a subject of research. Köksal considers the dream motif as one of the main, basic motifs of Turkic epic poetry in general, distinguishing the group of definitive motifs of the Turkic epic stories which go back to pre-Islamic times.<sup>4</sup> The dream motif has always been considered to proceed from the role of dreams as an important part of the plot structure. Başgöz has already noticed the connection between the dream motif and shamanist initiation in Turkish folk narrative *hikaye* which is another genre of Turkish folklore.<sup>5</sup> Finally, the dream motif is one of the most important motifs of stories of the *Kitab-i dedem Qorkut*, as Gökyay in his research devoted to these epic stories found.<sup>6</sup> In his opinion, the most frequent motif in the Turkic epic tradition and folktales is a dream of the main epic hero who sleeps deeply for seven days. Nevertheless, drawing such wide parallels between different genres of the Turkic folklore, Gökyay does not dwell on the dreams of heroes in the *Kitab-i dedem Qorkut*; he only notes that probably the dream of Salur Kazan refers to the traditional Turkic shamanist world outlook.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time detailed analysis of fragments of the text of *Kitab-i dedem Qorkut* which are united by common themes allows us to mark out pre-Islamic outlines in those epic stories.

The dream of Salur Kazan is interpreted by his brother, Kara Güne:

*Kara Güne aydur: Kardeş, kara bulut dedüğün senün devletündür; kar ile yağmur dedüğün leşkeründür, saç kaygudur; kan kadadur, kalamısın yorabilmen, Allah hayra yorsun, dedi.*<sup>8</sup>

*Kara Güne said: Brother, what you say about a black cloud has to do with power. Snow and rain from such a cloud would mean troops. Hair represents sorrow, and blood means trouble. I cannot interpret the rest. May Allah interpret it!*

Almost everything in Salur Kazan's dream has bad connotations, according to different Turkic traditions.

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<sup>3</sup> Many Turkic people have a developed tradition of dream interpretation. Dreams are considered as a way to obtain knowledge about future. Among Turks of southern Siberia dreaming is considered a means of gaining prophetic knowledge and can be close to the shaman's practices. *Traditsionnoe mirovozzreniye turkov Yuzhnoy Sibiri. Znak i ritual.* [Traditional world outlook of the South Siberian Turks] Novosibirsk 1990, (henceforth: TMT), 10.

<sup>4</sup> H. Köksal, *Milli destanlarımız ve türk halk edebiyatı*. İstanbul 1985, 26.

<sup>5</sup> I. Başgöz, "Dream motif in Turkish folk stories and shamanistic initiation." in *Turkish Folklore and Oral Literature*. Selected essays of İlhan Başgöz, Bloomington 1998.

<sup>6</sup> *Dedem Korkudun Kitabı*. Haz. Orhan Şaik Gökyay. İstanbul 2000, (henceforth: OŞG) cccii.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, cccii.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

For example, there is a *düm kara pusarik* (literal meaning 'absolutely dark fog'). The word *pusarik* mainly has meanings 'very dense fog (like water)', 'cloudy weather', 'mist'.<sup>9</sup> There is a clear connection between turbid, dark water (smoke, fog or mist) and a bad presage for a person who sees that in a dream as a whole. For the Uyghurs (according to their beliefs about dreams and their dream-book) to see in a dream fire with black smoke presages different troubles and also, as they believe, for a person to see himself inside dark storm betokens 'to suffer from a despot'.<sup>10</sup> According to contemporary Turkish beliefs, dirty and turbid water appearing in a dream portends death.<sup>11</sup>

Kara Güne interpreted snow and rain (*kar ile yağmur*) as troops. In the Uyghur dream-book 'to see snow in a dream [means] to go to a war'.<sup>12</sup> Beliefs of the Khakass hold that seeing rain in a dream presages tears.<sup>13</sup> 'The black camel' (*kara deve*) in Salur Kazan's dream also has a threatening meaning. According to the contemporary Turkish beliefs widespread in Anatolia, seeing a camel in a dream foretells death; the same belief can be found among the Sari-Uyghurs.<sup>14</sup> There is in general a large group of motifs that predict death within the Turkish beliefs connected with dreams: besides those connected with trees, fruits and vegetables, there are also different animals (camel), dark water, fog or mist.<sup>15</sup>

Dreams are connected with the mythological system of the ancient Turks. The dream of Salour Kazan is a part of the second story of the *Kitab-i dede Qorkut*, which is considered one of the oldest stories chronologically in the corpus. As has been noticed before, the dream motif itself is quite an archaic element of the epic. The main elements of the dream of Salur Kazan, by their meanings, are connected with the conceptions of dwelling, state and social structure.

The word *\*ordu/orða* (see the phrase, "*Düm kara pusarik ordumun üzerine dökülür gördüm*") etymologically in all Turkic languages has a wide range of meanings but the main ones are 'camp, stand, khan's headquarters'.<sup>16</sup> Sevortyan de-

<sup>9</sup> G. Clauson, *An Etymological Dictionary of Pre-Thirteenth century-Turkish*. Oxford 1972, 374; OŞG, 27.

<sup>10</sup> N. N. Pantusov, *Materialy k izucheniyu narechiya taranchey Iliyskogo okruga*. Vyp. 7. Taranchinski snotolkovarel (text i perevod). [Materials to the Studying of the Taranchi Language of the Ili District. Pt. 7. Taranchi dream book (text and translation)] Kazan 1901, 39-40.

<sup>11</sup> S. V. Örnek, *Türk halkbilimi*. Ankara 1977, 209-210.

<sup>12</sup> Pantusov, *Materialy k izucheniyu*, 40.

<sup>13</sup> *Obrazcy narodnoy literatury tyurkskih plemen izdannye W. Radlovym*. Ch. IX. Narechiya uryanhaytsev (soyotov), abakanskih tatar i karagasov. Texty, sobrannye i perevedennye N.F. Katanovym. [Folklore of the Turkic people] W. Radloff. Pt. IX. Language of the Uraynkhay, Abakan Tatars and Karagas. Texts collected and translated by N. F. Katanov, Saint Petersburg 1907, 462.

<sup>14</sup> S. E. Malov, *Yazyk zheltyh uyghurov*. Teksty i perevody. [Sary Uyghur Language. Texts and translations] Moscow 1967, 23.

<sup>15</sup> Örnek, *Türk halkbilimi*, 209-210.

<sup>16</sup> *Sravnitelno-istoricheskaya grammatika tyurkskih yazykov*. Lexika. [Comparative historical grammar of Turkic languages. Vocabulary] Moscow 2001 (henceforth: SIGL), 495.

rives the word from the verb *orut-* 'set up camp', and one of its meanings, *ordu* ('army'), connected with that verb has been preserved in the ancient Turkic language, Ottoman, Turkish, Azerbaijani and in the language of the Crimean Tatars,<sup>17</sup> i.e., in the Turkic languages that belong to the Oghuz sub-group; in the *Kitab-i dedem Qorkut*, *ordu* means 'retinue, escort of *bey*'.<sup>18</sup>

There is one more word-combination or formulaic expression in the dream of Salur Kazan besides *ordu* that means 'nomad camp'. It is *ag ban ev* (*ag ev*) which means 'nomad's dwelling'. In general, quite a frequent word combination in the *Kitab-i dedem Qorkut*<sup>19</sup> is 'dwelling with a white roof' (*gökden ıldırım ağ ban evüm üzerine şakır gördüm*), which is affected by lightning. The image of the house absolutely destroyed and burned is a sign of disaster and evil omen in the ancient Turkic mantic (fortune-telling) book *İrk Bitig*: "*Uluğ äb örtänmiş, qatynğa täği qalmaqduq, bökiñä täği qodm(ad)uq, – tir, ança biliñlär: jablaq ol!*"<sup>20</sup> "A big house was burnt down. Nothing remained right to its floors (and) nothing was left to right its corners, it says. Know thus: (The Omen) is bad."<sup>21</sup>

Furthermore, *İrk Bitig* connects and unites a quite abstract conception of 'destroying' with the idea of the state: "*Qara jol täñri män synuquñun säpärmän üzüükiñin ulajur män ilig itmiş män...*"<sup>22</sup> "I am the old road god. I fix your broken parts (and) I join together your torn things. I have organized the realm..."<sup>23</sup>

According to the perceptions of the ancient Turks, the whole world and the people who inhabit that world form a state of the Turks, and the *kagan* is considered the governor of the whole world.<sup>24</sup> But, according the same perception of the Orkhon Turks, the breakdown of the world order involves disasters and disturbance in the state's life and in society; rebellion of *begs* is equal to the catastrophe of the universe.<sup>25</sup> The myth about the universal catastrophe (the plot is distinguished by Klyashtorny as a part of a myth-creating circle related to the cosmology of the Turks) in the Orkhon inscriptions is embodied by allusions, in a postulated connection between disorders in the human world and cataclysms in nature and the world around. Every violation of the world order entails disasters in the state. More bad consequences like the death of the state may follow after the rising of the *begs* and people – with this rebellion of *begs* and people comes disaster, when the sky is 'crushing' and the earth is 'yawning'.<sup>26</sup> There is an idea about the

<sup>17</sup> SIGL, 563.

<sup>18</sup> SIGL, 563.

<sup>19</sup> OŞG, 158

<sup>20</sup> S. E. Malov, *Pamyatniki drevneturkskoy pismennosti*. [Monuments of the Ancient Turkic script] Moscow-Leningrad 1951, 86.

<sup>21</sup> T. Tekin, *İrk Bitig: The Book of Omens*. Wiesbaden 1993, 11.

<sup>22</sup> Malov, *Pamyatniki drevneturkskoy*, 90.

<sup>23</sup> Tekin, *İrk Bitig*, 21.

<sup>24</sup> B. Ögel, *Türk mitolojisi (kaynakları ve açıklamaları ile destanlar)*. I cilt. Ankara 1971, 274.

<sup>25</sup> S. G. Klyashtorny, "Mifologicheskiye suzhety v drevneturkskih pamyatnikah." [Mythological Plots in the Ancient Turkic Monuments] *Turkologicheskiy sbornik* 1977, Moscow 1981.

<sup>26</sup> Klyashtorny, "Mifologicheskiye sujety," 123.

end of the world among the Altays: the earth will be burned in fire from inside, water will be full of blood and the sky will be split.<sup>27</sup> Breaking of the social order as a first sign of the end of the world appears in the Teleut and the 'Uryankhay' (i.e., Tuvinian) narratives: "When the end of the lifetime comes, the sky will become firm like iron, the earth will be firm like power (как мощь будет тверда), king will rise against king, nation will rise against nation. Hard stone will be broken. Strong trees will be shattered. All nations will rebel... The father won't know his child, the son won't recognize his father"<sup>28</sup> "Heredity and kinship will be suppressed".<sup>29</sup> The end of the world among all Turkic peoples considered as a crash of the social structure based on kin which is encoded in the culture by means of the definite objects of nature, which have the same function in some fragments of the text of the *Kitab-i dedem Qorkut*.<sup>30</sup>

Everything in the dream of Salur Kazan portends something evil: he watches how different disasters befall himself, his home and his people, and the scale of that catastrophe in his dream begin to assume a universal character. Thus the dream of Salur Kazan is full of eschatological motifs that are represented not so much as foretelling the individual's fate and death but mostly as destroying the state<sup>31</sup> and heralding the end of the world.

The image of the wolf in Turkic mythology and among different Turkic traditions is not so simple and is very contradictory<sup>32</sup>. One of its aspects is connected with eschatological motifs as well. According to the astronomical ideas of the an-

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<sup>27</sup> M. Uraz, *Türk mitolojisi*. Istanbul 1967, 73.

<sup>28</sup> V. I. Verbitsky, *Altayskiye inorodtsy*. [The Altays]. Moscow 1893, 114.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>30</sup> For details, see, T. A. Anikeeva, *Kinship in the Epic Genres of Turkish Folklore // Kinship in the Altaic World*. Proceedings of the 48<sup>th</sup> International Altaistic Conference. Moscow, 10-15 July 2005. Wiesbaden, 2006. This can be illustrated also by other examples from the text of the *Kitab-i dedem Qorkut*: "Your black mountain collapsed; and rose at last! Your rivers stained with blood dried up and seethed at last! Your strong tree withered and turned green at last!..." (III, story of Bamsi-Beyrek, the son of Qan-Bura: *Argab argab kara dağın yıkılmışıdı, yüceli Ahur, Kanlu kanlu suların soğulmuşıdı, çağladı Ahur, Kaba ağacın kurumuşıdı, yeşerdi Ahur* [OŞG, 55]. Burla-hatun, the wife of Kazan, says to her husband: "You, Kazan, collapsed my black mountain; you, Kazan, fell my shady strong tree; taking a knife, you, Kazan, cut the edges of my tent; you, Kazan, killed my only son Uruz" (IV, Song about the captivity of Uruz-bek, the son of Kazan-bek). Those formulae reflect the social situation (in the first example the return of Bamsi Beyrek to his father's *orda* from captivity, and in the second the supposed death of the son).

<sup>31</sup> It is interesting that in Slavic folk tradition the motif of Death is also connected with the motif of destroying a dwelling. The house or dwelling, is perceived as a 'locus of life' (Tolstaya, 2002 – C. M. Tolstaya *Inomirnoe prostranstvo sna // Sny i videniya v narodnoy kulture*. [The other space of a dream // Dreams and visions in a folk-culture]. Moskva 2002, 202) and so its destruction to a not inconsiderable degree portends a death of one of the family members.

<sup>32</sup> The wolf as well as the dog is one of the most important figures in the Turkic mythological system. For more detail, see Ögel, 1971, 42-52.

cient Turks, the constellation of the Lesser Bear (Ursa Minor) is a vehicle (carrriage) drawn by two horses, which are pursued by seven wolves in the harness of the constellation of the Big Bear (Ursa Major). If they catch up with those horses, the order of earth and sky will be disturbed and the end of the world will come.<sup>33</sup> In the *Khakass* beliefs about dreams, the wolf becomes the forerunner of evil, or the devil.<sup>34</sup>

There are some other moments connected with archaic beliefs of the Turks in the dream of Salur Kazan, like the epithet for a dream; ‘kara-kura’ (*kara-kura düş* = *kara kaygulu vakia*) – ‘black ominous dream’. According to the index of the *Kitab-i dedem Qorkut* that epithet (*karakura*) is found in the epic only once as the epithet to a dream; as a whole expression, ‘kara-kura düş görmek’ means ‘to dream of something terrible, to see a nightmare, to feel hardness while sleeping.’<sup>35</sup> In general, the word *karakura*, as Gökyay mentions, means evil ghost who, according to contemporary Turkish beliefs of Anatolia, comes to a person who is sleeping<sup>36</sup>. In a more detailed form, that belief is expounded in Gordlevsky’s work: ‘*karakura* – is an animal like a cat, and it sits on a man while he is sleeping. He feels hardness, loses [his] voice and can’t turn around, his breath breaks” [Gordlevsky, 1968, p. 308; written down from a native of Ayaş]. It is necessary to read the first *aya*t from the 113 *sura* of the Qur’an in order to make the *karakura* go away, and it is also necessary to put a knife or a piece of iron under one’s pillow to ensure that it not to come at all (ibid.). Contemporary Turkish beliefs retain the echo of the mythological views of the Oghuz; but even if in the *Kitab-i dedem Qorkut* those words have been already become nothing more than just an epithet, probably that vague image reflects some more ancient views.

Dreams in the *Kitab-i dedem Qorkut* keep and render many elements of the traditional Turkic world outlook. It is quite obvious that they may be considered as one of the most archaic parts, where the influence of Islam is the least. The perception of death in the *Kitab-i dedem Qorkut* is closely connected with the eschatological motives of the ancient Turks’ mythology. According to those myths, the death of the state (of which first of all the causes are internal social conflicts, for example, rebellion of *begs* and people) is described in terms of the end of the whole world. In the *Kitab-i dedem Qorkut* that kind of perception can be seen on the example of the dream of Salur Kazan from the second story (one of the most archaic) of the epos.

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<sup>33</sup> Ögel, 1971, 50.

<sup>34</sup> Образцы, 1907 – *Образцы народной литературы тюркских племен изданные В. Радловым. Ч. IX. Narechiya uryanhaytsev (soyotov), abakanskih tatar i karagasov. Texty, sobrannye i perevedennye N. F. Katanovym.* [Folklore of the Turkic people Published by W. Radloff. Pt. IX. Language of the Uraynkhay, Abakan Tatars and Karagas. Texts collected and translated by N. F. Katanov]. Sanktpeterburg, 1907, 463.

<sup>35</sup> OŞG, 237.

<sup>36</sup> OŞG, CCCII.