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ANCESTOR CULT AS AN IDEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION OF STATEHOOD AND NATIONAL IDENTITY IN THE OGHUZ EPIC TRADITION

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Abstract

This article examines the ancestor cult in the Oghuz epic tradition as a fundamental ideological system that unites the historical memory, national-spiritual values, and statehood traditions of the Azerbaijani people. The study argues that the ancestor concept in Oghuz society was not limited to mythological beliefs but served as a key mechanism for legitimizing political power, organizing social structure, and preserving ethnic identity. Through the analysis of Oghuz Khan, Dede Qorqud, Bayandur Khan, and other figures, the article demonstrates how the ancestor cult functioned as a sacred mediator between the divine and the social, between the past and the present. The article concludes that the ancestor cult reflects the ancient roots of the Azerbaijanism ideology and plays a crucial role in maintaining national unity, spiritual integrity, and identity consciousness.

Keywords: *Ancestor cult, Azerbaijanism, Oghuz Khan, Dede Qorqud, statehood, national identity, epic tradition.*

Introduction

The Oghuz epic tradition represents one of the richest folkloric layers in the formation of the national-spiritual value system of Turkic peoples, especially the Azerbaijani people. In this tradition, the ancestor cult functions not only as a mythological belief but also as a key ideological pillar regulating the socio-political and spiritual life of society. Through Oghuz Khan, Dede Qorqud, and other figures, the wisdom, leadership, and protective role of the ancestor are empha-

sized. In this regard, the images of ancestors in the *Oghuznames* hold special significance both for the preservation of national identity and for expressing the historical roots of Azerbaijanism.

This context gives every image in the Oghuz epic tradition not only aesthetic meaning but also deep ideological and cultural content. If Oghuz Khan acts as the supreme ruler who establishes the socio-political order of the Oghuz people, then Dede Qorqud embodies the wise elder who

shapes the spiritual foundations of this order. At the same time, figures like Irkil Qoca, as carriers of secret knowledge, perform the sacred mediatory function of guiding the ruler and protecting him from dangers.

The Ideological Role of the Ancestor Cult in Oghuz Society

In the *Oghuznames*, governance is based not only on physical strength but also on spiritual leadership and connection to divine knowledge. Thus, this system of images, formed within the framework of the ancestor cult, serves as an expression of the statehood traditions, national solidarity, and spiritual integrity historically possessed by the Azerbaijani people. In this regard, the Oghuz epic tradition can be assessed as an important example of spiritual heritage that preserves the ancient layers of the Azerbaijanism idea.

As F. Bayat writes about the epic laws of the Oghuz world and the biography of the hero, the ancestor concept is one of the most important points of this biography (Bayat, F., 2019, p. 36–55). The ancestor cult reflected in the *Oghuznames* carries great importance for studying the historical-cultural essence and transformative forms of this cult. In the *Oghuznames*, the breath of the ancestor is felt, and they also hold special significance for instilling patriotism and national values.

The Oghuzname as a Sacred Text of National Consciousness

When we pay attention to Azerbaijani mythological texts and legends reflecting mythological beliefs, we see that the mythological worldview of Turkic peoples, their historical path, and their way of life were first widely reflected in the *Oghuznames*. In this sense, *Oghuznames* are not simply epics but, in every sense, history – the history of the Oghuz. However, this history cannot be understood in a narrow specific sense, i.e., only in the sense of historicity as we understand it today. Because the epic *Oghuznames* carried meanings higher than being history, even meanings that we sometimes cannot understand today.

Just as a religious person approaches the book they consider sacred with respect, love, and affection, the ancient Oghuz considered the *Oghuznames* as a sacred book – *bitik* –

about their great ancestor Oghuz Khan. In this sense, the most characteristic information about the ancestor is found precisely in the *Oghuzname* epics. This has been confirmed by specialists.

The Oghuz Epic Tradition and Azerbaijanism

The Oghuz epic tradition reflects the ancient roots of the Azerbaijanism idea. Azerbaijanism, as a national ideology, emphasizes the unity of the Azerbaijani people, their historical and cultural heritage, and their statehood traditions. The ancestor cult, with its emphasis on lineage, respect for elders, and continuity of values, provides a deep historical foundation for this ideology. The figures of Oghuz Khan, Dede Qorqud, and Bayandur Khan embody the ideals of leadership, wisdom, justice, and protection of the people – ideals that are central to the Azerbaijanism worldview.

Moreover, the Oghuz epic tradition has preserved the memory of the Oghuz Turks' migration, settlement, and state-building activities in the territory of modern Azerbaijan. This memory serves as a bridge connecting the past to the present, reinforcing the idea that the Azerbaijani people have a long and continuous history on this land. The ancestor cult, therefore, is not merely a relic of the past but a living tradition that continues to shape national consciousness and identity.

The Sacred Mediator Function of Ancestors

The ancestor in Oghuz society served as a sacred mediator between the divine and the human, between the past and the present. Through rituals, stories, and epic performances, the ancestors were invoked, honored, and asked for guidance. This mediatory function was crucial for legitimizing political authority. A ruler who could trace his lineage to Oghuz Khan or other revered ancestors possessed not only political but also spiritual authority. This connection between ancestry and legitimacy is a recurring theme in Turkic statehood traditions.

The figure of Dede Qorqud exemplifies this mediatory function. He is not a ruler but a wise elder who advises rulers, resolves disputes, and ensures that the social order

remains aligned with spiritual values. His words carry the weight of ancestral wisdom, and his blessings and curses have real effects in the epic world. This reflects a broader understanding in Oghuz society that the ancestors continue to participate in the life of the community through their living descendants and through figures like Dede Qorqud who embody their wisdom.

Conclusion

In Oghuz cosmogony, the ancestor cult served as a fundamental ideological system that united historical memory, national-spiritual values, and statehood traditions. The concepts of *ata*, *baba*, and

dede represent not merely kinship relations but deep mythological, ideological, and cultural meanings. This chain of meanings became one of the main pillars determining the socio-political structure, moral value system, and worldview of Oghuz society. The preservation of these concepts in the Oghuz epic tradition ensures the continuity of the historical memory, national identity, and statehood thinking of the Azerbaijani people. Thus, the ancestor cult, while being a carrier of national-spiritual values, also serves as an important cultural heritage that preserves and transmits the deep historical roots of the Azerbaijanism idea to future generations.

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