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THE CULT OF ANCESTORS IN OGHUZ COSMOGONY: THE CONCEPTS OF ATA, BABA, AND DEDE

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Abstract

This article explores the essence and functions of the ancestor cult – specifically the concepts of *ata* (father), *baba* (grandfather/elder), and *dede* (wise elder) – within the cosmogony of the Oghuz Turks. Based on the Oghuz epic tradition, the study demonstrates that the notion of the ancestor is not merely a mythological belief but also a fundamental ideological factor shaping the socio-political structure, moral values, and national identity of Oghuz society. Through figures such as Oghuz Khan, Dede Qorqud, and Bayandur Khan, the article reveals the leadership, wisdom, protective, and sacred mediatory functions of the ancestor. The cult of ancestors in the Oghuz epic tradition is assessed as a fundamental system uniting the historical memory, national-spiritual values, and statehood traditions of the Azerbaijani people.

Keywords: *Ancestor cult, Oghuz Khan, Dede Qorqud, epic tradition, Ata, Baba, Dede, cosmogony*

Introduction

The Oghuz epic tradition is one of the richest folkloric layers that played a significant role 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 emphasized. In this context, 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 (Bayat, F., 2019, p. 255).

The Oghuz epic tradition represents a complex system where every image carries not only aesthetic meaning but also deep ideological and culturological content. Oghuz Khan acts as the supreme ruler who establishes the socio-political order of the Oghuz people, while Dede Qorqud embodies the wise elder who shapes the spiritual foundations of this order. Figures like Irkil Qoca serve as sacred mediators who guide the ruler and protect him from dangers. Management in the *Oghuznames* is based not only on physical strength but also on spiritual leadership and connection to divine knowledge.

The Function of Ancestors in the Oghuz Epic Tradition

In the Oghuz epic tradition, there are several functions related to Oghuz Khan and other figures, including Dede Qorqud, connected to the ancestor cult. In the *Oghuznames*, if Oghuz Khan is the social organizer of the Oghuz people, then Irkil Qoca is the one who secretly guides him and saves him from difficulties. Likewise, as a symbolic image, the Gray Wolf is the sacred figure that always leads Oghuz from darkness to light, pointing him to the right path. In the epic “Kitabi-Dede Qorqud,” Bayandur Khan protects the Oghuz people as a social organizer, while Dede Qorqud acts as a transformative paradigm of the wise elder figure.

As M. Kazımoğlu İmanov writes: “*The epic ‘Kitabi-Dede Qorqud’ is, first and foremost, an epic about lineage. Researchers, quite rightly, call ‘Dede Qorqud’ an epic about the ancestors, and they specifically note that the mindset ‘the father’s name is the greatest property for the son’ holds a leading place in this epic. They consider that, in accordance with the poetics of the epic, ‘Dede Qorqud’ speaks of a sacred time when ancestors lived and acted – a time when the blessings of the beys were blessings and their curses were curses*” (Kazımoğlu (Imanov), M., 2016, p. 8).

Oghuz Khan as the Primal Ancestor

Oghuz Khan is both a mythical hero and a great ancestor. He elevates the society he represents, makes campaigns, conquers lands, expands territories, and finds ways for the people to live prosperously. He treats the populations of conquered lands normally, names peoples and heroes. In him exist such high values as grandeur, greatness, elderliness, sanctity, and the elevation of his people. Examining the mythological texts of Azerbaijan 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.

B. Ögel considered the *Oghuzname* an epic concerning the great states and world empires established by the Turks (Ögel, B., 1995, p. 1). F. Sümer approached the *Oghuznames* as the

main source of Turkic national consciousness (Sümer, F., 1992, p. 346). V.M. Zhirmunsky showed that the word *oguz-name* was used among Turkic peoples in the 15th-16th centuries to refer to written and oral poetic monuments of the mythical-legendary history of the Oghuz people (Zhirmunsky, V.M., 1974, p. 522).

From the research of these scholars, it becomes clear that the ancestor-lineage line beginning with Oghuz Khan stands at the foundation of Oghuz national consciousness, statehood, and memory-historical thinking. F. Sümer shows that* “Oghuz Khan” and the ‘Oghuzname’ written by Fazlullah Rashiduddin give us a very clear idea about the essence of Turkic consciousness. It is understood that the foundations of this consciousness are: a) From Oghuz Khan to the period when the work was written, the Turkic world is represented by these named peoples: Oghuz (Turkmen), Uyghur, Kipchak, Kanli, Karluk, Kalach; b) The Turks, like the Mongols’ Genghis Khan, have world-conquering rulers who lived in ancient times; c) The Turkic world emerged as a result of Oghuz Khan’s great conquests; d) The Oghuz descended from Oghuz Khan’s 24 grandchildren; e) In the ‘History of the Turks’ chapter, Oghuz Khan is shown as a prophet-ruler sent by God to bring his people to the true religion”* (Sümer, F., 1992, P. 346–347).

The Semantic Chain of Ata-Baba-Dede

H. Ismailov has valuable thoughts regarding the meanings of the terms *ata*, *baba*, and *dede* in connection with the ancestor cult. According to his concept, the art of the *ashug* passed through the following stages: 1. Ata (God’s envoy); 2. Baba (baba dervish); 3. Dede (truth lover); 4. Ashug (artist) (Ismayilov, H., 2002, p. 66). This is a completely new approach to the origin and development stages of the *ashug* art. It becomes clear that the *ashug* art, by its roots, is connected to the ancestor tradition.

Regarding *ata*, Ismailov writes: “*Initially, this name is a sign of the ancestor cult. He is the community leader. Later, he is a shaman-priest. Still later, he is the prophet of Tengrism, the ancient Turkic monotheistic religion*” (Ismayilov, H., 2002, p. 16). Several layers of meaning – being an ancestor, being

a community leader, being a shaman-priest, and being a prophet of Tengrism – are fused in the name *ata*. There is a syncretism here; these functions are inseparably connected with each other.

Regarding the sign *baba* of the ancestor cult, Ismailov writes: “*Since the baba phenomenon has not been systematically studied either in folklore or ethnography, its place in the belief system as an ancestor cult and its position in folklore as a carrier of literary thought have not been determined. Regarding the ‘baba’ seen in folklore, the following is known: – he presents the magical apple in fairy tales; he gives the inspiration (buta) to lovers in epics; – he helps folklore heroes in difficult situations. In general, the phenomenon called ‘baba dervish’ passes through folklore carrying a salvific function*” (Ismayilov, H., 2002, p. 18).

Regarding the concept of *dede*, Ismailov writes: “*The activity of the group understood under the name ‘Dede’ is included in the ata-baba complex we previously noted. If ata is taken as a group sign in the artistic phenomenon of the Eastern Oghuz (ancient Turks), and baba as that of the Western*

Oghuz, then Dede will be distinguished as a specific cultural institution of the Oghuz-Turkmen type within the Oghuz in general” (Ismayilov, H., 2002, p. 21).

Conclusion

In the cosmogony of the Oghuz, the concepts of *ata*, *baba*, and *dede* are not merely kinship terms but fundamental concepts carrying deep mythological, ideological, and cultural meaning. This chain of meanings, formed within the framework of the ancestor cult, became one of the main pillars determining the socio-political structure, moral value system, and worldview of Oghuz society. *Ata* symbolizes the primal beginning, divine knowledge, and authority; *baba* carries the function of transformation and protection; *dede* represents wisdom and spiritual leadership. This tripartite system functions as a sacred mechanism ensuring both the cosmogonic act of creation and the spiritual continuity of society. In the Oghuz epic tradition, the preservation of these concepts is one of the important factors ensuring the continuity of the historical memory, national identity, and statehood thinking of the Azerbaijani people.

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