

## WISE OLD MAN CHARACTERS IN TURKIC EPIC

**B.A. Alibabaoglu***PhD student at Azerbaijan State Pedagogical**University**Azerbaijan State Pedagogical**University***Summary**

In many ancient and classical Turkic epics, we frequently encounter the figure of a wise elder who plays a key role in guiding the hero. The primary function of such sages was to offer guidance to the ruler and his people. This recurring motif reflects the profound respect traditionally accorded to elders and sages in Turkic societies. As is well known, almost none of the Turkic epics were transcribed during the pre-Islamic period. Although epics such as *Shu* and *Oghuz Khagan* originated in this era, they were only written down after the advent of Islam. Information about the pre-Islamic Turks is mainly derived from Chinese and Greco-Roman sources. The earliest comprehensive indigenous records about the Turks are found in the Orkhon-Yenisei inscriptions, which offer valuable insights into the reverence shown to wise men in early Turkic culture. The fact that a monument was dedicated specifically to the Gokturk vizier Tonyukuk stands as clear evidence of this veneration. To better understand the significance of this motif, it would be beneficial to analyze the representations of sage figures in the narrative and thematic structures of Turkic epics from ancient times onward.

**Keywords:** Turkic epic tradition, wise, elder, guidance, hero.

**Abstrakt**

Ko'plab qadim va klassik turk dostonlarining syujeti va mazmuni bilan tanishar ekanmiz, ko'pincha qahramonga yo'l ko'rsatgan donishmand qari obraziga duch kelamiz. Ushbu donishmandlarning asosiy vazifasi xalqqa, uning xaqaniga, xoniga yo'l ko'rsatish bo'lgan. Bunday syujet va mazmun turklar orasida qariyalar va donishmandlarga bo'lgan chuqur hurmat belgisi edi. Ma'lumki, Islomdan oldingi davrda yozilgan va bizgacha yetib kelgan deyarli hech qanday turk dostoni mavjud emas. "Shu", "O'g'uz xaqan" kabi dostonlar Islomdan oldingi davrga taalluqli bo'lsa-da, ular Islomdan keyin yozilgan. Islomdan oldin turklar haqida ma'lumotlarni asosan Xitoy, Yunon-Rim mualliflarining asarlaridan olamiz. Ma'lumki, turklar o'zlari haqida yozgan birinchi mukammal manba Orxon-Yenisei yozuvlaridir. Ushbu yozuvlar qadim turklarda donishmandlarga bo'lgan hurmat haqida aniq tasavvur beradi. Go'yturklarning vaziri Toniyoq uchun alohida abidə qo'yilishi va unga bo'lgan hurmat bu gaplarimizni aniq tasdiqlaydi. Mavzuni yaxshiroq tushunish uchun qadim davrdan boshlab turk dostonlarining syujeti va mazmunida donishmand obrazlarini tahlil qilish foydali bo'ladi.

**Kalit so'zlar:** turk epik an'anasi, dono, keks, yo'l ko'rsatish, qahramon

### Резюме

В ряде древних и классических тюркских эпосов наблюдается устойчивый мотив мудреца, направляющего главного героя. Основная функция таких персонажей заключается в наставничестве и советах, адресованных обществу, кагану или хану. Эти мотивы отражают высокую степень уважения к пожилым и мудрым людям в тюркской традиции. Письменные памятники тюрков доисламского периода практически не сохранились. Хотя эпосы «Шу» и «Огуз-каган» восходят к этому периоду, их запись относится к более позднему времени. Информацию о древних тюрках мы в основном черпаем из китайских, греко-римских и других иностранных источников. Первые письменные тексты, созданные самими тюрками, — это

орхоно-енисейские надписи, которые свидетельствуют о почитании мудрецов в тюркском обществе. Ярким примером служит возведение памятной стелы (абиды) в честь визиря Тоньюкука, отражающее особое отношение к нему. Поэтому представляется целесообразным провести содержательный анализ образа мудреца в тюркских эпосах с древнейших времён до классического периода.

**Ключевые слова:** тюркская эпическая традиция, мудрый, старец, наставничество, герой

**Introduction.** When discussing the essence of the matter, it is helpful to refer to the ideas of Mahmud al-Kashgari. According to his records, the Turkic peoples used the term *öge* (*oge*) to refer to wise elders. While explaining the meaning of this concept, the author recounts an intriguing legend — possibly a condensed version of a longer epic. After conquering many lands, the great ruler Dhul-Qarnayn arrives in the territory inhabited by the Turkic tribes. The khagan of the Turks decides to send a group of young warriors to prepare for his arrival. At this point, the vizier advises him: “All your men are young. Appoint an experienced person to accompany them.” The khagan replies: “You mean an *oge*?” The vizier responds: “Yes.” Two key aspects are noteworthy here. First, both the vizier and the khagan recognize the need for an *oge* — a wise old man. Second, the khagan accepts the vizier’s advice. This suggests that the vizier himself embodies the qualities of a sage, an *oge*. It is highly likely that the roots of this legend trace back to ancient times — possibly to the Scythian era. As seen in the works of Nizami Ganjavi, there was a well-established tradition in the Muslim East of identifying Alexander the Great with Dhul-Qarnayn. It is also important to note that during his campaigns, Alexander the Great encountered the Scythians and one of their legendary leaders, Spitamenes, in Turkestan (Central Asia). This legend, therefore,

appears to be a transformed version of that historical episode, preserved through oral tradition until the time of Mahmud al-Kashgari. (6, pp. 154-155)

It appears that such wise vizier figures found in ancient Turkic legends and epics later served as prototypes for characters like Korkut in the historical *Oghuznames*. Over time, the figure of Dede Korkut gained widespread recognition and became a symbolic embodiment of Turkic epic tradition.

**Discussion.** In terms of its origins and mythological foundations, the *Oghuz Khagan* epic stands as one of the oldest and most significant narratives of the Turkic peoples. The central hero, *Oghuz Khagan*, occupies a vital ideological position in the spiritual and political consciousness of the Turks. Prominent Turkic dynasties such as the Seljuks, Ottomans, Baharlis (*Kara Koyunlu*), and Bayanduris (*Ak Koyunlu*) regarded themselves as direct descendants of *Oghuz Khagan*. A close analysis of Turkic cultural and political history reveals that *Oghuz Khagan* served as a symbolic figure of unity and legitimacy across both pre-Islamic and Islamic periods. His legacy was so deeply rooted among Turkic societies that many dynasties not only claimed ancestral ties to him but also used this claim to reinforce their moral and legal authority over the territories they had conquered through military and political means.

Consequently, ruling houses such as the Ilkhanids and the Ottomans commissioned historians like Fazlullah Rashid al-Din and Ali Yazichizade to produce *Oghuznames* — works inspired by the *Oghuz Khagan* epic, but enriched with Islamic elements and interwoven with historical, political, literary, religious, and mythological motifs. Both the original *Oghuz Khagan* epic and the later *Oghuznames* penned by historians prominently feature the archetype of the “wise elder.” In the *Oghuz Khagan* epic, this motif is embodied in the character of Ulugh Turk, who exemplifies the traditional sage figure serving as a moral and strategic guide.



In the *Oghuz Khagan* epic, the character of Ulugh Turk is portrayed as a wise figure, well-versed in matters of governance and politics, and at the same time endowed with mystical qualities. In the epic, Oghuz Khagan is guided by these two figures: the Grey Wolf and Ulugh Turk. The Grey Wolf serves as a guide to Oghuz throughout his journey and provides him with direction during his military campaigns. Ulugh Turk, on the other hand, tells Oghuz about a favorable dream he has had. It is after consulting with Ulugh Turk that Oghuz decides to divide his land among his sons.

In Rashid al-Din's account of Oghuz Khan, one can find depictions of wise vizier figures such as Yushi and Korkut. M. Aça traces the origins of this motif back to the Legend of Shu.<sup>(1, pp. 33-38)</sup> It is also worth noting that the first known reference to Dede Korkut appears in the works of Rashid al-Din. However, it would not be entirely accurate to claim that these accounts reflect historical reality. According to Rashid al-Din, Korkut served as vizier to Yinal and several subsequent Oghuz's khagans, met the Prophet Muhammad, embraced Islam, and lived for 295 years.

In the *Dede Korkut Oghuznames*, that is, the *Dede Korkut* epic, Dede Korkut is not portrayed as a vizier but rather as the spiritual elder and a great sage of the Oghuz people. The prologue of the epic refers to *Dede Korkut*, and it is important to note that the epic was recorded during the Ottoman period. Consequently, the information provided in the prologue largely corresponds with the accounts of the Ottoman historian Ali Yazıcıoğlu. The prologue emphasizes that this great Oghuz sage possessed knowledge of the unseen, and numerous examples of his sayings are cited. Mystical elements associated with Korkut also appear throughout the epic's narrative. For instance, when Dede Korkut acts as an envoy for Beyrek to Banu Chichék, Deli Karchar — who refuses to give his sister in marriage—raises his hand against him, and by Korkut's curse, the young man's hand withers.

After the adoption of Islam, the image of the “wise elder” (ağsaqqal) in Turkic epics underwent a transformation, acquiring new qualities aligned with Islamic ideology. Following the Islamization of the Turkic peoples, two spiritual figures began to feature prominently in Turkic epic narratives: Ali and Khidr. These figures typically act as guides to the heroes, bestowing them with supernatural qualities such as strength, longevity, or spiritual insight. For instance, in the Dastan (Epic) of *Satuk Bughra Khan*, Khidr leads the protagonist to embrace Islam, while in the Book of *Dede Korkut*, he shows the way for healing Buğach’s wound. B.Ögel points out that figures resembling Khidr existed in Turkic mythology even before the adoption of Islam.(9, pp. 89) The figure of Ali appears in epics such as *Alpamysh* and in several variants of *Koroglu*. B.Akın emphasizes that the portrayal of Ali in the *Alpamysh* epic embodies a multifunctional character.(2) In the Uyghur variant of the *Koroglu* epic, the hero himself is portrayed as the son of Ali, born in a supernatural manner.(5)

By the late Middle Ages and the dawn of the modern era, the figures of wise elders in Turkic epics gradually shed their mystical embellishments and began to transform into more realistic and human characters. Ashiq Junun, from the Azerbaijani variants of the *Koroglu* epic, exemplifies such a character. He guides heroes, offers assistance, and provides counsel; however, he possesses no mystical attributes. Rather, he is an ordinary man—experienced, possessing a rich worldview, and a skilled ashik well-versed in his art.

**Conclusion.** It is evident that wise and guiding elder figures constitute a fundamental and inseparable element of the character system in the Turkic epic tradition. These figures can manifest in various roles and at different levels. Sometimes, they appear as viziers who advise the heroic ruler; other times, they embody religious or mystical personalities; and occasionally, they take on the role of the hero’s biological father, as exemplified by Ali Kishi in the Azerbaijani

version of the *Koroglu* epic. Based on these observations, the following general characteristics can be identified for the wise elder archetypes within Turkic epic literature:

1. The frequent appearance of the wise elder figure is a distinctive characteristic of Turkic heroic epics.
2. This tradition was further strengthened following the Turks' adoption of Islam.
3. Mythical elements in Turkic heroic epics are also reflected in the character of the wise elder, imparting a mystical aura to the figure.
4. After the acceptance of Islam, Ali and Khidr occupy a special place among the wise figures in Turkic epic literature.
5. Over time, particularly toward the end of the medieval period and the beginning of the modern era, the weakening and decline of mythical elements throughout Turkic epic structures significantly influenced the nature of these characters.

## REFERENCES

1. Aça, M. "From the "Öge" in the Şu Epic to Yuşı Hoca in Reşideddin's Oghuzname". In Prof. Dr. Necmeddin Hacıeminoğlu Memorial Book. 2017, 33–38. Istanbul.
2. Akın, B. (2012). "The Concept of Hz. Ali in the *Alpamish* Epic". Milli Folklor Dergisi, 2012, 12(96), 19–28.
3. *The Book of Dede Qorqud: Encyclopedic Dictionary*. Baku, Öndər, 2004, 368 p.
4. Gökyay, O. Ş. *The Book of Dede Korkut*. Istanbul, Milli Eğitim Press, 1973, 692 p.

5. İnayet, A. On the Uighur variant of the Köroğlu Epic – “Emir Göroğlu” – and its episode and motif structure. Erdem, 2001, 13(37), 205–225.
6. Kashgari, M. (2006). *Divanü Lügat-it-Türk* (Vol. I). Baku: Ozan Publishing, 2006, 512 p.
7. *Kitabi-Dede Qorqud: Original and Simplified Text*. Baku, Öndər, 2004, 376 p.
8. *Koroğlu*. Baku, Lider Publishing, 2005, 552 p.
9. Ögel, B. *Turkish Mythology* (Vol. II). Ankara, Turkish Historical Society Press, 1995, 609 p.
10. Rashid al-Din. *Oghuzname*. Baku, NPB, 2003, 108 p.
11. *Turkic Epics* [Internet source]. Retrieved from <https://ataturk.org.au/wp-content/uploads/docs/Turk-Destanlari.pdf>

Surname: Alibabaoğlu

First name: Baba

Father's name: Alibaba

Education: PhD student in the Doctoral Program at Azerbaijan State Pedagogical University

Contact number: +994 50 458 42 48, +994 70 513 97 58

Email: [elibabaoglu@mail.ru](mailto:elibabaoglu@mail.ru)

<https://orcid.org/0009-0003-0322-3023>



