



On Some Mythological Plots in Ancient Uyghur Literature

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Attributed to the ancient Uyghur literary tradition are some texts written in Uyghur and Arabic script in the 8th-9th centuries and some literary monuments written a couple of centuries later in the 11th. These texts are as a rule connected with the main, established religious traditions (though some of them have only *jural* or household content) of Central Asia – Buddhism, Christianity, Manichaeism, Zoroastrianism, and, later, Islam.

Texts from Turfan written in ancient Uyghur have been discovered in Eastern Turkestan. Most of these texts are, to varying degrees, influenced by Buddhist tradition (Buddhism was adopted in this area of Central Asia), but some others are influenced by Islam, such as religious hymns, conjectural texts, calendars, and astronomical calculations (on the motion of the planets and constellations).

These Uyghur texts from Turfan were first translated, published and investigated by Gabdul R. Rachmati, Albert von Le Coq, Willy Bang and Annemarie von Gabain. Although these texts cannot be fully attributed to folklore, their form dates back to ancient folk traditions, because the creators of these texts borrowed from folklore not only poetry techniques, but also the system of images. Uyghur texts with Islamic content are closer to the chronologically later works of Ahmed Yugnaki (12th century) and Yusuf Balasaguni (11th century). *Divan Lugat at-Turk*, which was written in Arabic by Makhmud Kashgari in 1071 can be also seen as part of the Uyghur literary tradition (though the study of this literary monument is now, of course, considered part of the separate and voluminous field of Turkology).

The traditional Turkic worldview contains elements of ancient Turkic spatial orientation and some mythological concepts that are found reflected both in runical inscriptions, and in the later and didactical *Kutadgu Biliq* and *Divan Lugat at-türk*. These elements of the Turkic worldview have remained partially visible in Turkic epic folklore and some historical monuments and chronicles. These elements include, for example, dreams, predictions of death and/or disaster, and form part of a traditional Turkic social picture and of the eschatology of the ancient Turkic mythological system, according to which the death of the state, of which internal social conflicts such as the rebellion of *begs* and of the people are the first cause, is described as being the end of the whole world.¹

The essential part of that world outlook is the system of spatial orientation. As is well known, ancient Turks had (and some Turkic people have kept till the present day) several linear sorts of spatial orientation, each characterized by a certain position concerning the sun: first, toward the rising sun (the East); second, toward the midday sun (i.e., the point at which the sun reaches its zenith, *kün ortu*, or to the South); and toward the midnight side, *мӱһ опмы* (Kononov, 1978, p. 73). In some Turkic languages the North side is connected with the concept of darkness, rendered as *мӱһ* or “night” (ibid., p. 84).² Orientation from the Sun at its zenith, i.e. facing toward the South, reflects, in this researcher’s opinion, the ancient cult of the South of Turkic people, which today has been partially but not completely replaced by worship of the East, or of the rising sun (ibid., p. 78).

The Turks also had another way of orientation which used a vertical axis “up — down”³: the East and the West are defined by a vertical line, the South and the North – by a horizontal line by facing the noon side of the sky. Thus, for example, in Turfan Buddhist texts: ...alngadturɣu saqinč [:] ödün *kün ortu* (italics added.— T.A.) yingaq yuz-länip ät’üz täğšürüp burqan ät’üz -in blgürtip (TT V A88–89: “the meditation on the weakening of the [demons]”). See also texts devoted to planetary motion and location of constellations, which also contain astrological information: *kün ordu-ta asursar*,... (TT VII 354, 10, 22, 28 etc.: “when a man [in a midday] [stays]”). That kind of spatial orientation continued among various Turkic peoples: the Turkmen, Sari Uyghurs, Salar, and the Khakass. If the starting position is to face to the South, with the North behind one’s back, then the orientation is similar to that of worshipping the Sun at its zenith.

This archaic Turkic system of orientation is very stable and traces of it have long remained visible despite the Islamic influences that entered into later texts, texts of various genres by other Turkic peoples, such as the historical *Secere-i tarakima* by Abulghazi-han, *Kitab-i dedem Korkut*, and *Daftar-i Çingiz- nāmā*. Such traces can be seen in the Oghuz Turkic medieval epic *The Book of Dede Qorqut* (*Kitab-i dedem Korkut*), which is undoubtedly an important source for understanding the social and cultural life of the Oghuz Turks. *The Book of Dede Qorqut* consists of stories that hark back to the 11th Century, though they did not taken their written form until approximately the 15th Century.

The oldest Uyghur literary monument is *Kutadgu Biliq* (*The lesson of how to be happy*) by Yusuf Balasaguni, a poem written in 1068 and dedicated to the governor of Qashgar Bogra-khan. The poem was extremely popular and came to be known as the “Ethics of rule” and even “Turkic Shakh-name.” As a didactic treatise, *Qutadgu Biliq* deals with various aspects of the life of an ideal ruler and his officials, and gives an

account of “the qualities of the ambassador,” “the qualities of a military leader,” “the necessary qualities of the court,” and so on. At the same time, its ideas apply to more general issues.

Its sermons are accompanied by information from various fields of science such as mathematics, astronomy, and medicine. The poem’s “role models” are given in characters from Iranian mythology—legendary Iranian kings and heroes (e.g., Afrasiab). But at the same time *Kutadgu Biliq* retains both mythological images connected with Islam and especially its mythological, geographical tradition (countries *Çin* and *Maçin*, mount Kâf⁴) and images deriving from ancient Turkic cosmology. Some of the last ones we can see in the author’s traditional preface to his treatise where he appeals to the one God, who created “*brown earth and blue sky*, the Sun, the Moon and night” (see: Malov, 1951, p. 235; this is the usual way to represent the mythological past of the Turks, for example, in runic Orkhon inscriptions like the large inscription of Kultegin).

As mythological images connected with Islam and relevant geographical traditions, we can also see them in *Divan Lugat at-türk: Çin/Sin* and *Maçin/Masin* are no less real than lands of different Turkic tribes (MK 2649: though they include, as Kashgari writes, real lands, for example part of Kashgar); Iskander *Zu-l-Karnayn* appears as the legendary hero of the past, whose deeds are still examples for the author of *Divan Lugat at-Turk* (e.g. MK 2645, 6584), and so on. There are furthermore several mentions of different mythological animals, plants, and stones. Most of them are probably closely connected with archaic ancient Turkic beliefs, such as *kumlāk* (MK 2823, “the plant from the land of Kipchak... If one bring that plant on a boat going to the sea, the storm will rise”), *bulān* (according to Kashgari this is the big animal with one horn in the form of a bowl where snow and water can be collected. See MK 2345), and *urumday* (MK 919: “the stone that can be used as an antidote”).

Thus, the monuments of ancient Uyghur literature retain the traces of different mythologies—mostly those of Ancient Turkic (including the system of spatial orientation), but also some that came from Islamic mythology.

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¹ According to the perceptions of the ancient Turks, the whole world and the people inhabiting it form a state of Turks, of which *kagan* is considered the leader (Ögel, 1971, p. 274). But according to the same perception of the Orkhon Turks, breaking down the world order involves disasters and disturbances in the life of State and society. The rebellion of the *begs* is equal to the catastrophe of the universe (Klyashtorny, 1981). This myth about universal catastrophe (Sergey G. Klyashtorny that plot is described as being part of a myth-creating circle related to the cosmology of the Turks — T.A.) in the Orkhon's inscriptions is embodied by allusions made according to a postulated connection between the disorders in the world of the people and cataclysms in nature and the surrounding environment. Every violation of the world order entails a disaster in the state. More bad consequences may follow the death of the state after the uprising of the *begs* and ordinary people. The rebellion of the *begs* and the people, or the disaster, occurs when the sky is “crushing”, and the earth “yawning” (ibid., p. 123). The Altays also had their own description about the end of the world: “the earth will be burned in fire going from inside, water will be full of blood, and the sky will be split” (Uraz, 1967, p. 73). The rupture of the social order as a first sign of the end of the world appears in the narratives of Teleut and of Uryankhay, that is, the Tuva narratives: “When the end of life comes, The sky will become firm like iron, The earth will be firm like power (как мощь будет тверда), King will rise against king, The nation will rise against the nation. Hard stone will be broken, Strong tree will be shattered, All nations will rebel... Fathers won't know their children, Sons won't recognize their fathers” (Verbitsky, 1893, p. 114), and “Hereditary and kinship will be suppressed” (ibid., p. 115).

² One meaning of the word *dün* in Turkic languages is “the North” (along with the main meaning of “night”), and that connected with the one of traditional sorts of spatial orientation among Turkic peoples. For example, the geographical name *Tün Dengizi* is attended at “Daftar-i Çingiz-nāmā” — the North Sea: *güzāl kemā birlä Tün Dengizinä salib yibäräling* (Däftär-i Çingiz-nāmā, p. 34). The North, or the side of the North, is also marked as “the side of the night” in “Oghuz- nāmā”: андан соң үчәгүсү таң сарға бардлар, такі үчәгүсү сарға тун бардлар (“and then three of them went to the East and the other three to the side of the night,” i.e., to the North (Scherbak, 1959, p. 58–59))

³ Furthermore, there are two possible initial positions, which mark the cardinal points on the vertical axis: facing the East (a top, upper part, “the east”; and a bottom, lower one, “the west”) and facing the South (a top, upper part, “the south”, and a bottom, lower one, “the north”) (see: Kononov, 1978, p. 84). That system of the spatial orientation remains part of folklore, particularly in Eastern Turkestan, as can be seen in relatively contemporary texts of Salar folklore such as those of Tenishev from the 1950s (Tenishev, 1964).

⁴ As is well-known, the image of Kaf, which admittedly come down from Iran mythology, played an important role not only in the mythology of Islam and Arabic, Persian and Turkic folklore but also in Arabic geographical literature (Krachkovski, 2004, p. 45). As we know, “the orientation to the South, as the real manifestation of the cult of the South among Turkic people who had accepted Islam (8-9th cc.), was strengthened by the traditional Islamic orientation to Kiblah” (Kononov, 1978, p. 79). At the same time, in other Oghuz epics, such as the Turkmenian “Göroğlu,” the image of the Kâf plays an important role as the orientation to Kibla.