

	<p>Science, Education and Innovations in the Context of Modern Problems Issue 1, Vol. 9, 2026</p> <p>TITLE OF RESEARCH ARTICLE </p> <p>The Philosophical and Socio-Political Foundations of Tengriist Thought and Ontological Tradition in “The Book of Dede Qorqud” within the Context of Turkic Intellectual History</p>
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<p>Abstract This study examines The Book of Dede Qorqud not merely as a folkloric-epic text, but as a foundational source of early Turkic philosophical consciousness and socio-political reasoning. Although the Oghuz epic tradition has been widely analyzed by folklorists, literary scholars, philologists, and historians, its profound philosophical layers—particularly those reflecting metaphysical, ontological, ethical, and political thought—remain insufficiently conceptualized. The present research situates The Book of Dede Qorqud within broader intellectual formations predating written Islamic cultural systems among Turkic societies, arguing that this epic embodies key principles of Tengriism, archaic ritual structures, ontological dualities, and socio-political order. By tracing the epic's thematic lineages back to oral traditions formed between the 6th–8th centuries, and even earlier, the study demonstrates that The Book of Dede Qorqud emerges as one of the earliest philosophical-ideational documents of Turkic civilization. The article analyzes how notions of being (varlıq), divine sovereignty, sacred cosmology, ritual ethics, collective identity, and historical destiny are encoded into the epic worldview. Central attention is devoted to the relationship between Tengriism and Islam—both doctrinally and historically. The study reveals that the transition of Turks to Islam was not a rupture but rather an ontological and theological continuity grounded in monotheistic cosmology, sacred legitimacy, and social-political order. Furthermore, the research demonstrates how early Turkic metaphysics, political legitimacy, kinship structure, gender complementarity, fate, and moral-ritual codes are represented through the wisdom of Dede Qorqud. Ultimately, the study argues that the Oghuz epic corpus is indispensable for reconstructing the pre-Islamic philosophical frameworks of Turkic peoples and should be incorporated into the genealogy of Azerbaijani philosophical identity.</p> <p>Citation. Elekberli F., Aliyev F. (2026). The Philosophical and Socio-Political Foundations of Tengriist Thought and Ontological Tradition in “The Book of Dede Qorqud” within the Context of Turkic Intellectual History. <i>Science, Education and Innovations in the Context of Modern Problems</i>, 9(1), 83–95. https://doi.org/10.56334/sei/9.1.6</p>	
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Introduction

The Oghuz epic tradition occupies a central position within the cultural memory, historical imagination, and intellectual heritage of Turkic peoples. Among these epic narratives, *The Book of Dede Qorqud* functions as the most complex and ideologically rich text, not only illustrating heroic deeds, genealogical structures, ritual practices, and mythic origins, but also encoding foundational philosophical reflections on being, order, justice, destiny, divine authority, and ethical conduct. Yet despite its intellectual significance, the text has long been approached predominantly as a folkloric-literary monument, rather than as a philosophical artifact.

For much of the twentieth century—particularly during the Soviet period—the analysis of ancient Turkic cultural foundations was ideologically constrained. This resulted in the systematic prioritization of Zoroastrianism and Near Eastern intellectual structures while marginalizing indigenous Turkic ontological frameworks rooted in Tengriism, shamanic metaphysics, and epic-based wisdom traditions. Consequently, *The Book of Dede Qorqud* was stripped of its philosophical essence and positioned merely as an ethnographic chronicle.

Recent scholarship has begun to recognize that the philosophical worldview reflected in the epic predates medieval Islamic theological systems and that it forms a coherent intellectual corpus grounded in concepts of cosmic order, divine will, human-social unity, and metaphysical legitimacy. The figure of Dede Qorqud represents not simply a sage, but an epistemic authority—its bearer of metaphysical knowledge, ritual guidance, ethical articulation, and ontological instruction.

Thus, the objective of this research is to re-conceptualize *The Book of Dede Qorqud* as a philosophical-ideational text, situate it within Turkic ontological thought, trace its pre-Islamic structures, and evaluate its continuity with later Islamic philosophical traditions.

Methodology

This research employs a multidisciplinary analytical approach by integrating the following methodological directions:

1. Hermeneutic-Textual Analysis

The primary textual corpus (*The Book of Dede Qorqud*) is interpreted using:

- semantic-linguistic analysis of key metaphysical concepts (e.g., Tanrı, qut, yazı, aləm);
- internal structural examination of myth-epic narrative units;
- symbolic reading of ritual events, genealogies, and sacred practices.

This enables the decoding of implicit philosophical structures embedded in the narrative.

2. Comparative-Historical Method

The text is examined comparatively in relation to:

- Orkhon inscriptions,
- pre-Islamic Turkic epics (*Oğuz Kağan*, *Köç*, *Ergenekon*, *Şu*, *Alp Er Tonqa*),
- early Islamic Turkic literary-philosophical works,
- Zoroastrian, Near Eastern, and Altaic religious frameworks.

This reveals both continuity and divergence in worldview.

3. Conceptual-Philosophical Reconstruction

Core categories relevant to Turkic intellectual identity are reconstructed:

- Being and cosmic unity (varlıq-aləm-tanrı münasibəti)
- Sacred political sovereignty (ilahi legitimasiya)
- Fate and moral transformation (qut, yazi, alın yazısı)
- Gender complementarity (xan-xatun dualizmi)
- Social order and collective ethics

These are analyzed within ontological, epistemological, and ethical dimensions.

4. Intellectual-Historical Contextualization

The epic is examined as:

- a philosophical archive of pre-Islamic consciousness,
- a narrative representation of socio-political structures,
- a mediating bridge between archaic Tengriism and Islamic monotheism.

Relevant historiographic debates (Soviet, Turkish republican, post-independence scholarship) are incorporated for critical evaluation.

The Foundations of Turkic Ontology

The corpus of epic narratives commonly referred to as *Oghuznames* consists of more than thirty-one known works. Among these texts, *The Book of Dede Qorqud*, *The Uighur Oghuznama*, *Rashid al-Din's Oghuznama*, *The Oghuznama of Qazan Khan*, and *The Oghuznama of Salır Baba* stand out particularly due to the breadth of their thematic coverage and historical-cultural scope. The geographical distribution of these works extends from Anatolia to Turkestan and along the Volga region, covering a wide cultural and civilizational space of the ancient Turkic peoples. Until recently, these epic narratives were mainly examined from literary, philological, or folkloristic perspectives. Only in recent decades have they begun to be used as primary sources in the study of the history of religion, socio-historical identity, and the intellectual development of Turkic peoples. Nevertheless, despite such efforts, these monumental works still remain insufficiently explored with regard to the philosophical foundations of Turkic world-view and intellectual history.

Historically, Turkic peoples possessed a highly universal understanding of belief and existence. This universality implied wholeness, harmony, and unity within nature, humanity, and the sacred. Yet it is admittedly difficult to fully reconstruct the entire structure of ancient Turkic belief systems. The worldview that we today identify as *Tengriism* gradually interacted with and absorbed elements of shamanism, totemism, and other religious-spiritual practices. Although remnants of Tengri-based and shamanic belief systems still exist among certain Turkic communities, Islam today constitutes the dominant religion of the majority of Turkic peoples.

Two fundamental principles stand at the foundation of the Turkic belief system:

1. The principle of **universality**, signifying ontological unity, continuity, and cosmic order;
2. A **creation concept centered on the Sky God (Gök Tanrı/Tengri)** as the supreme and primordial source of being.

Turkic ontology is inherently rooted in belief. Regardless of its material form, existence is continually perceived as being in reciprocal interaction with divine power or sacred forces. Researchers throughout history encountered considerable challenges when attempting to determine the origins of this worldview. While early scholarship frequently

classified Turkic peoples as essentially “shamanistic,” this view has progressively diminished in recent decades. Instead, modern research increasingly leans toward recognizing the more dominant role of *Tengriism*, often referred to as the *religion of the Sky God*, as the central system of belief.

However, the principal problem in defining ancient Turkic religion lies in differentiating—and at times reconciling—the relationships between Tengriism and shamanism. Shamanism, in a broader cultural sense, appears in nearly all archaic societies and often represents an early stage of spiritual culture (Najaf, 2024: 27). Thus, to reduce all Turkic religious heritage to shamanism would be an oversimplification.

Approximately a century ago, the famous intellectual Ziya Gökalp proposed the term *Toyonism* as the original ancient belief of the Turks and sought to equate it with early forms of Buddhism. Yet, investigations undertaken from the 1930s onward challenged this claim. Abdulkadir İnan, for instance, identified numerous shamanic traces in Islamic-Turkic practices, arguing that ancient Turkic religion had been significantly shaped by shamanic traditions. Building upon this observation, the scholar Osman Turan later asserted that the Turkic ideal of world sovereignty (cahan hakimiyyəti) was deeply rooted in these spiritual patterns and cosmological perceptions.

Within shamanism, priests known as *kam* or *shamans* traditionally serve as ritual specialists detached from socio-political hierarchy. Their core functions include performing sacred ceremonies, ensuring ritual correctness, healing illnesses (often through ecstatic states), and maintaining spiritual harmony within the community. They appear at the center of many ritual practices involving spirit communication and trance. Interestingly, the term “shamanism” was first applied to Turkic belief by the Russian orientalist V. V. Radlov (Najaf, 2024: 27–28).

The limitations of interpreting Turkic belief exclusively through shamanism were first articulated by P. V. Schmidt. Conducting research particularly on the Huns, Schmidt observed the central significance of the Sky God cult in Turkic religious consciousness (Schmidt, 1964: 75–90). Building on this foundation, the philosopher Hikmet Ziya Ülken argued that ancient Turks exhibited a form of *dualism*—a balance of earth and sky elements—yet always maintained harmony between these realms. Because Ülken rejected the primacy of shamanism, he described the ancient Turkic worldview as closer to philosophical monism rather than dualism (Ülken, 1969: 1–29).

Thus, in contemporary interpretation, Turkic ontology is not reducible to ecstatic ritualism or tribal animism; rather, it reflects a structured cosmic philosophy grounded in the transcendental sovereignty of *Tengri*, a unifying metaphysical principle governing existence, social order, ethical norms, and historical destiny.

The Transformation of Historiography and Theological Interpretation

Beginning in the 1970s, Turkish historiography initiated a conscious departure from the prevailing view that ancient Turks originated from totemistic or purely shamanistic belief systems. This shift stemmed from the desire to establish meaningful continuity between pre-Islamic Turkic intellectual heritage and Islamic thought. According to İbrahim Kafesoğlu, the existence of residual traces of totemism and shamanism among Turkic peoples does not justify classifying ancient Turks as shamanistic in essence. Kafesoğlu argued that ancient Turks united around three core cults—nature, ancestral spirits, and the Sky God (Göy Tanrı)—and ultimately possessed a monotheistic worldview (Kafesoğlu, 1972:1–34; Kafesoğlu, 1977:248).

From the 1990s onward, French scholar Jean-Paul Roux and Turkish historian Ahmet Yaşar Ocak advanced new perspectives on the continuity between pre-Islamic and Islamic Turkic belief systems. They emphasized that Alevism-Bektashism-Qizilbash identity traditions constituted an important linking mechanism between ancient Turkic spirituality and later Islamic religious structures. In essence, both authors expanded upon the theoretical premise initially formulated by Kafesoğlu.

As Əli Nəçaf rightly notes, one must pay careful attention to the ideological background of discussions on “ancient Turkic monotheism,” for these interpretations often contain implicit Islamic influences. Especially within Turkish historiography, certain interpretations of pre-Islamic belief were shaped by religious and political motivations. Thus, within the paradigm of the “Turkish-Islamic synthesis,” developed particularly after the 1940s, even the concept of Tengriism was reconstructed—at least partially—in accordance with Islamic

The Concept of Unity as the Core of Turkic Ontology

From a philosophical standpoint, the most crucial aspect of Turkic ontology is the idea of unity—expressed through universalism and dualism. The first scholar to systematically examine this concept was Emel Esin. According to Esin, the earliest cultural formation attributed to Turks is the *Chu Civilization* (c. 1050–250 BCE), which spread across northern China. Despite being exposed to the cultural influence of Chinese civilization, this cultural formation preserved its foundational integrity.

Esin's examination of early Chinese cosmology revealed that Turks maintained a universal world-vision in which all cosmic manifestations were symbolically represented through Sky (Göy) and Earth-Water (Yer-Su). These were not understood as two opposing metaphysical forces, but rather as complementary manifestations of a single harmonious whole. Thus, duality did not imply conflict; instead, it signified unity within differentiation. Accordingly, the unity of these complementary poles formed the philosophical and ontological foundation of ancient Turkic monism (Esin, 1978:87–88). This worldview is reflected clearly in the Oghuz epics, particularly in *The Book of Dede Qorqud* (Onay, 2011:13–14).

The Question of Divinity in Ancient Turkic Thought

Another central philosophical question concerns the nature and existence of God. Equating the ancient Sky God belief with contemporary Yakut or Altai shamanic structures is categorically incorrect (Ögel, 1971:430–431). For ancient Turks, Tanrı was emphatically “the creator of the heavens and the earth.” This idea is explicitly stated in the Turkic inscriptions: “When above the blue sky and below the dark earth were created, mankind emerged between them.” (*Orkhon Inscriptions, Engin 1970:51*)

In many cases, the term “Göy Tanrı” refers to the “blue sky” as visible space, and occasionally the sky is personified metaphorically as a divine entity. Yet, within authentic Turkic belief, the divine was consistently monotheistic—not a plurality of sky-beings.

Furthermore, the concept of creation was never articulated as “creation out of nothing” (*ex nihilo*). For example, in the inscription phrase: “As Tengri ordained, the Turk Bilge Kagan ruled like a divine sovereign,”

the emphasis is not on metaphysical genesis but on sacred legitimacy and divine authorization of governance (Tekin, 1988:2–3). Philosophically, this establishes a political-theological nexus: sovereignty derives its legitimacy from the divine order. Statements such as:

- “Because Tanrı gave power, my father’s warriors were like wolves,”
- “Since Tanrı decreed, the mighty were brought low and the low were exalted,”
- “As long as the heavens above do not collapse,”

all affirm that governance and social order were conceptualized on sacred foundations.

The Complex Problem of Spirit and Sacred Existence

The most challenging dimension of Turkic ontology concerns the concept of *spirit* (ruh). This issue generates ambiguity between Tengriism, shamanism, and other archaic belief systems. In Tengriism, the notion of sacredness is expressed through the term *iduk*—encountered in Uighur inscriptions. In Seljuk texts, this sacred divine quality appears as *ulug*, meaning supreme or magnificent (Caferoğlu, 1984:65, 74). Today, parallel expressions survive in modern Turkic languages—*Ulu Tanrı*, “Almighty God,” or “Yüce Allah.”

Mahmud al-Kashgari records the term *izuk* to denote an entity possessing absolute authority and creative power. Similarly, the word *izi* is believed to be a linguistic ancestor of the Turkic term *ije*—meaning “spiritual owner, guardian spirit, protector” (Roux, 2005:33).

The misinterpretation of Turkic belief as inherently shamanic is largely attributable to misunderstanding the role of nature. Unlike classical shamanism and totemism, ancient Turks did not worship nature itself. The elements of nature—mountains, trees, rivers, animals—were considered sacred, yet they were not divine entities independent of Tanrı. For Turks, nature constituted an animated and mysterious realm, in which every existing being possessed spirit and intentionality (Ocak, 65–65). Thus, within the metaphysical hierarchy, Tanrı remained above all elements of created existence.

Reflection of these Ideas in Oghuz Epics

This worldview is clearly visible in the Oghuz epic tradition. The concept of *Yer-Su* (Earth-Water) forms the foundational cosmological image, representing the realm of earthly existence. In the *Oghuz Khan Epic*, four sons symbolize the celestial domain, while two represent the terrestrial realm—reflecting a cosmological harmony.

Thus, the metaphysical notion of *abm* (cosmos) emerges precisely from the union of sky, earth, and water. Consequently, celestial phenomena (sun, moon, stars, lightning) and terrestrial elements (rivers, trees, mountains, animals, birds) were granted sacred status—not as divine beings, but as manifestations of the cosmic order created and governed by Tanrı (Ocak, 65; Nəcəf, 2024:31–36). In conclusion, ancient Turkic ontology presented a structured metaphysical hierarchy:

- Tanrı as ultimate transcendent unity,
- nature as an animated sacred realm,
- humanity as a mediator within cosmic order, and
- political authority as divinely legitimized.

This worldview shaped moral conduct, legal consciousness, ritual culture, statehood, and philosophical imagination—reflected most visibly in the epic heritage of the Oghuz tradition.

The Question of the Origins of Azerbaijani Philosophical Thought

In Old Turkic (Göktürk period) texts, it is stated that between the Sky God (Göy Tanrı) and the Dark Earth (Yağız yer) there exists an intermediate realm in which human beings live. Humanity is created precisely within this intermediate sphere, the living world. This realm, called *world* (*yiz*), is governed by the powers of *Yer-Sub* (Earth-Water). In Turkic thought, instead of the idea that God creates the human being out of absolute nothingness, the emphasis is placed on human existence as being in an ontological unity with the divine. In other words, in Turkic ontology the unity of the seer and the seen, of subject and object, is conceived as an unbroken relationship. In the cosmogonic process, water occupies a central position: it is believed that God brought the human being into existence through water. Thus, the human being, as a mode of existence, is a transformation of something already existent, shaped through divine power.

This constitutes one of the main differences between Turkic belief and the doctrines of Christianity (creationism) and Islam (*xilqət*), both of which emphasize creation *ex nihilo*—out of nothing (Ülken, 2013: 32).

In Turkic ontology, *xatun* (woman) is not merely a part or extension of *Yerlik Xan* (the Earth Lord). She is created separately by *Qaraxan* and stands as an opposing yet complementary force under the name *Yer Xatun*. For Turks, the order of the cosmos depended on the harmonious relationship between the principles of male and female. In this sense, the position of the *Khagan* (ruler) and the *Khatum* (consort/queen) does not express opposition, but completeness; this wholeness is reflected most clearly in the institution of the family.

From a social-philosophical perspective, the fundamental problem here is how the question of plurality and unity is resolved in the Turkic mind. The way creation is understood—as a form of ordered manifestation—and how this ontology is reflected in worldly life raises further questions. It becomes apparent that for the Turks, even within multiplicity they perceived a form of unity.

According to the *Oghuz* epic tradition, one of the first Turkic rulers, Buğu Khan, is regarded as the “architect” of the Turkic religion. More broadly, “creation” is a foundational concept in the *Oghuz* narratives. As H. Z. Ülken notes, in Turkic thought the cosmos emerges from the harmony between two opposing principles. Human happiness, earthly paradises, and peace among nations are all dependent upon the preservation of this harmony. Mutual respect among social strata and balance between different social groups also reflect the same cosmic order.

A disruption of this order disturbs not only the harmony of the world but also the inner harmony of the human being; conversely, the destruction of inner harmony in the human being threatens the cosmic order itself:

“Thus, in Turkic wisdom, there is a reciprocal bond and, in general, a unity between existence and the human being. In this way, neither existence is subordinated to the human, nor is the human subordinated to existence; rather, the foundation of practical life is the harmony that arises from their unity. To be happy, one must live in accordance with this unity. But conforming to it is not, as in Greek philosophy, a matter of submitting to rigid, unchangeable cosmic hierarchies and killing all desires that run contrary to them. For, in Turkic cosmology, the world is not divided into abysses of fixed levels. There are only two principles which, despite being opposites, still complement one another and thereby offer human beings the possibility of ‘progress’ within a deep inner expansion.” (Ülken, 2013: 52–53)

Azerbaijan as a Central Space of Religious-Philosophical Interaction

Azerbaijan played a central role in the establishment of deep and powerful relationships between the ancient Turkic belief system and other religious traditions. In this geography, the interaction among religions was stronger and more intense than in many other regions. The impact of Median-period beliefs and thought already allows us to see this clearly. As the core region of Media, Azerbaijan functioned as a shared space in which magian, shamanic, Tengrist, and later Zoroastrian elements mutually penetrated one another.

The fact that *The Book of Dede Qorqud*—the most important of the *Oghuz* narratives—took shape in Azerbaijan further confirms this view. Therefore, if we are to speak of the geographical locus and sources of classical philosophical thought for the Turks, we must take Azerbaijan as a key intellectual space and *The Oghuznama of Dede Qorqud* as one of its foundational texts.

From this perspective, the unilateral emphasis on Zoroastrianism and the *Avesta* as the sole religious, cultural, and socio-political basis of Azerbaijani philosophical thought is problematic. In our view, while the *Avesta* should indeed be studied as an integral part of the regional and universal cultural-philosophical heritage, it must be examined alongside other fundamental texts reflecting ancient Turkic worldviews—such as the epics *Alp Er Tongha*, *Yaradılış* (Creation), *Oghuz Kağan*, *Göy Türk*, *Şu*, *Köç*, and the inscriptions *Kül Tegin*, the *Orkhon-Yenisey* monuments, and *The Book of Dede Qorqud*.

Within this framework, we ought to promote the idea that the first thinkers of Azerbaijan were not only Zoroaster, but also Dede Qorqud, Anacharsis, or other Turkic sages; similarly, the founders of the first “Azerbaijani state” should not be seen exclusively as Atropates, but also as Oghuz Khan, Alp Er Tongha, and other heroic figures of Turkic tradition. At the same time, we must explore how present-day Azerbaijani/Turkic attitudes toward fire, water, air, and earth—especially in the context of the spring festival—stem not solely from Zoroastrianism, but from earlier religious-mythological and religious-philosophical systems such as shamanism, Tengrism, and magian teachings.

Elməddin Əlibəyəzadə writes that the foundations of Azerbaijani religious-ethical conceptions, philosophical views, and literary imagination lie in Sumer-Babylonian civilization, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, and the *Avesta*:

“The secular ideas found there have, throughout history, formed the initial point of departure and the main line of our religious belief, our philosophy, our customs and traditions, our literature, and our spiritual and aesthetic tastes. No matter how strongly Islamic views have exerted a counter-influence, they have neither erased nor overshadowed this core. If we trace this ‘mother thread’ both in the pre-Islamic folk wisdom whose pinnacle is *The Book of Dede Qorqud*, and in the genius of the Islamic period, such as Nizami, our conviction will be confirmed.” (Əlibəyəzadə, 1998: 154)

Among scholars of Zoroastrianism, Baloğlan Şəfizadə argues that the most ancient part of the *Avesta*, the *Gathas*, emerged in Azerbaijan and that Zoroastrianism shares common roots with shamanism, Sumerian belief, Median—

magian traditions, and *The Book of Dede Qorqud*. According to him, the *Avesta* did not originate in Pars (Iran), nor is its oldest language Indo-European or Persian. Rather, he contends that the language of the *Avesta* is an early Turkic language, and that the *Gathas* were originally composed in the primordial Manna tongue (Şəfizadə, 1996: 37).

Fate, Destiny, and Human Agency in Turkic Thought

In Turkic thought, *fate* (*qui*) is not a fatalistic force of calamity as it often appears in Greek philosophy. Within the Turkic belief system, fate can be corrected, improved, or re-ordered. Even a person's ill intentions may be transformed into something positive. The traces of this conception are visible in the Orkhon inscriptions and in the narratives of *The Book of Dede Qorqud*—for example, in the stories of Dirse Khan and Bığac, or in the tale of Deli Domrul.

The *Deli Domrul* episode, in particular, describes a struggle between a human being who considers himself independent of existence and an ultimate power—symbolized by the Angel of Death (Azrael)—that seeks to impose divine measure and limit on human life. Deli Domrul, intoxicated with his own power and will, denies destiny and challenges Azrael directly. Yet, he ultimately realizes that he must bow before fate. Even so, destiny is not understood as an absolute, closed end; rather, it can be replaced or modified by some favourable arrangement or intercession.

In *The Book of Dede Qorqud*, the traces of Tengrism and shamanism are particularly pronounced. As Veli Həbiboglu notes, “among Turkic peoples, the shaman has played the role of mediator between God, human beings, animals, and nature.” In this sense, he further emphasizes that Azerbaijan—and the Turkic world more broadly—needs a deeper investigation into the roots of shamanism if we are to fully understand its mythology: According to him, the confirmation of the essence of shamanism shows that, especially among Turkic peoples, certain elements of shamanism and totemism have been preserved to this day in various rituals (Həbiboglu, 1996: 131).

Thus, the study of Azerbaijani philosophical thought necessarily intersects with the broader field of ancient Turkic ontology, religious syncretism, mythic imagination, and the enduring tension between fate and freedom in human existence.

Contemporary Azerbaijani Approaches to Ancient Turkic Belief

Among contemporary Azerbaijani researchers, Javad Heyat unequivocally maintains that the ancient Turks did not originally believe in totemism or shamanism, but in the monotheistic Sky-God religion, *Göy Tanrı*. In his view, unlike totemic societies in which matrilineal structures dominate, among the Turks paternal right and patrilineal authority were fundamental. Likewise, although the wolf was considered an auspicious and noble animal, the Turks did not worship it.

Heyat observes that, whereas totemic communities believe that the soul perishes, the Turks regarded the soul as immortal and believed that the universe itself possesses a soul. Considering totemism and shamanism to be ancient Mongol beliefs, he notes that “among the ancient Turks, *kam* or *qam* meant ‘cleric/priest’, whereas the word *shaman* is an Indo-European term” (Heyat, 1993: 55–56). From his arguments, it follows that totemism and shamanism spread among the Turks later, largely under Mongol influence.

Vali Habiboglu likewise emphasizes that Tengriism holds a special position within the ancient beliefs of the Azerbaijani Turks. He writes that, in the mythological worldview of ancient Turks—including Azerbaijani Turks—the separation of Earth and Sky is directly associated with God (Tanrı):

“This shows that belief in monotheism was very strong among ancient Turkic-speaking peoples. For this reason, in many Turkic communities, the very concept of the origin of life and the universe is linked to Tanrı, to God.” (Həbiboglu, 1996: 80)

Agayar Shukurov is also convinced that Tengriism occupies a central place among ancient Turkic beliefs:

“In the pantheon of gods of ancient Turkic mythology, the first and central place is held by *Tengri-Tanrı*. *Tengri*, or as is often said, *Göy Tanrı* (Sky God), is that divinity in which the ancient Turks ‘believed as authentic religious reality’. This was the main cult of all ancient Turks. For the ancient Turks, the Sun, Moon, and Stars were not gods but deeply

cherished beings. Tanrı, on the other hand, was the entire firmament, the whole sky that ruled the universe." (Şükürov, 1997: 24)

He notes that in the ancient Turkic pantheon, *Göy Tanrı* was accepted as the supreme deity. According to Shukurov, the idea of "Göy Tanrı" among ancient Turks encompasses the following dimensions (Şükürov, 1997: 25-26):

1. Reference to the sky;
2. Creative function;
3. Protective/patronal function;
4. Determining human destiny;
5. Punitive/justice function;
6. Association with the masculine principle.

In the 2003 volume *State Symbols of the Republic of Azerbaijan*, it is stated that the blue (sky-blue) colour on the Azerbaijani flag is linked with the ancient Turkic religious belief of *Tanrıçılıq* (Tengriism):

"The ancient Turks addressed Tanrı (God) as *Göy Tanrı* (Sky God). In their belief, the word *göy* (blue) signified the colour of the sky, and was therefore considered sacred. Thus, blue (sky) was both the colour of the sacred heavens and a symbol of Tanrı (Allah). Painting an object in blue, or using the word *göy* alongside Tanrı (as in the expression *Göy Tanrı*), was regarded in ancient Turkic mythic thought as something sacred and holy." (Mərdanov, Quliyev, 2003: 80)

The authors note that the blue colour, as a symbol of Turkic identity, appears on the flags of several medieval and modern Turkic states and should be interpreted as the preservation of this ancient belief: "Thus, the blue colour, being connected to ancient Turkic beliefs, was incorporated into the Azerbaijani flag as the symbol of Turkicness, and came to represent one direction of the ideological model 'Turkification, modernization, Islamization'—the political doctrine of national progress and independence in the early 20th century." (Mərdanov, Quliyev, 2003: 81)

We also maintain that sky-blue, as a symbol of Turkicness, simultaneously represents Tengriism. Blue expresses Turkic identity as much as it expresses the Tanrı belief. In this sense, Turkism itself is inseparable from *Tanrıçılıq*—that is, from faith in the one God. Just as green in Islam, blue in Tengriism symbolizes the one God and, in both cases, bears a profound religious-philosophical meaning.

In works published in the contemporary period—such as *The History of Azerbaijani Philosophy, Philosophy, History of Azerbaijan, History of Azerbaijani Literature*, and others—there are also noteworthy reflections on Tengriism and belief in *Göy Tanrı* as one of the ancient faiths of Azerbaijani Turks. Zakir Mammadov, in *The History of Azerbaijani Philosophy*, touches briefly on the pre-Islamic religious-philosophical worldview of the Oghuz-Azerbaijani Turks, mainly in connection with *The Book of Dede Qorqud* (Məmmədov, 2006: 11). He notes that in the epic, the pre-Islamic beliefs of the Oghuz Turks, their mode of thinking, and to some extent their connection with totems are reflected. However, he does not clearly specify whether these elements are directly related to shamanism, Tengriism, or paganism.

With the exception of *The History of Azerbaijani Philosophy* (2002), other works—such as *The History of Azerbaijani Literature* and volumes I-II of the six-volume *History of Azerbaijani Literature* published by the Institute of Literature of ANAS—give a broader explanation of the pre-Islamic religious-mythological and religious-philosophical worldview of the Azerbaijani people, including Tengriism.

In the first volume of the multi-volume *History of Azerbaijani Literature*, the focus is on oral folk literature, and it is clearly stated that the most ancient religious-philosophical worldview of the Azerbaijani people formed on the basis of Turkic folklore traditions (*Alp Er Tonqa, Şu, Oğuz Kağan*, etc.), and that epics such as *The Book of Dede Qorqud, Koroğlu*, and others emerged in the Oghuz-Azerbaijani folklore environment as their continuation (Azərbaycan ədəbiyyatı tarixi, 2004: 34-37). Interestingly, the source of national culture and its literary branch is explicitly linked to national mythology—specifically, Turkic mythology.

The same work states that mythology is closely tied to national mentality, expresses its essence, and shapes it. According to this volume:

“The foundation and principal content of Turkic mythology is formed by Tengriism (Tanrıçılıq). The general picture and basic problems of Turkic mythology, as a worldview and system of mythic beliefs, and the structural-semantic composition, fundamental elements and concepts, and functional structure of Turkic Tanrı belief appear in their most complete and distinct form precisely within Tengriism. Our earliest information about the belief of the Turks in a single creative being called ‘tann’ (çənli, tənqri, teyri, tora, tanrı, dingir) comes from rock carvings, cuneiform sources dating back to the Sumerian period, and archaeological and ethnographic materials.” (Azərbaycan ədəbiyyatı tarixi, 2004: 41)

The authors conclude that, unlike other religions, the ancient Turks possessed a highly developed and universal religious-mythological system. Some researchers call this system “Tengriism,” others “Tanrıçılıq.”

When this perspective is extended and compared with the Oghuznames, it becomes clear that many of the issues highlighted in *The Book of Dede Qorqud* also appear in the earliest Greco-Roman and Byzantine sources on the Turks. For example, in the descriptions of the 7th-8th centuries, the Byzantine author Theophylact Simocatta notes that the Turks held fire above everything, showed reverence to air, water, and earth, and believed that all these elements were created by Tanrı. Taking this into account, several scholars (V. V. Barthold, G. Lewis, and others) have argued that the roots of the events described in *The Book of Dede Qorqud* go much deeper and that the idea of Tanrı constitutes its fundamental axis.

In *Histories of Azerbaijan* as well, there is some mention of Tengriism and belief in Gök Tanrı. For example, in *The History of Azerbaijan* edited by Süleyman Əliyarlı, it is noted that although the Azerbaijani Turks accepted Islam, belief in their ancient religion—Tanrıçılıq—continued to live among them. According to Əliyarlı, the spiritual condition and behaviour of the Azerbaijani population, who had only “recently believed” and “come to religion,” left clear traces in the Dede Qorqud narratives. Although the Oghuz are repeatedly named Muslims in the text, Oghuz society is only superficially acquainted with Islam and Sharia law; in their worldview, the Turkic Tanrı still occupies a central place. Əliyarlı writes: “*The Book of My Grandfather Dede Qorqud* is the principal source of Azerbaijani history, an encyclopaedia of its distant past and medieval life. It is impossible to study the emergence and early history of the Oghuz Turks without *The Book of My Grandfather Dede Qorqud*.” (Əliyarlı, 2009: 142)

The text, which reflects ancient Turkic religious-mythological worldviews—totemism and belief in Gök Tanrı—also notes that Azerbaijani Turks perceived many similarities between Tengriism and Islam and, as a result, soon adopted Islam on a mass scale.

Yet, in volumes I and II of the seven-volume *History of Azerbaijan*, while Zoroastrianism and fire-worship are treated extensively, shamanism and Tengriism are virtually ignored, and *The Book of Dede Qorqud* is only briefly mentioned as a piece of literature. Nonetheless, even those few remarks are revealing. In volume II, it is stated: “This Oghuz epic, which researchers call ‘the father of Azerbaijani oral and written literature’, began to take shape orally in the 6th-8th centuries and was consolidated in the 7th-9th centuries.” (Azərbaycan tarixi, 2007: 297)

From these statements, it is evident that the idea that Zoroastrianism alone dominated as the pre-Islamic religious-philosophical doctrine in Azerbaijan is not accurate. As many scholars (V. V. Barthold, A. Yakubovski, and others) affirm, the Oghuznames reflect the struggle between good and evil and emphasize an optimistic outlook. This means that just as belief in fire cannot be attributed exclusively to Zoroastrianism, neither can the problem of good and evil. The one thing we can say with certainty is that every people, from ancient times onward, has had its own unique beliefs regarding the elements of nature (fire, water, air, earth, etc.), the question of good and evil, God, and so on—and that these beliefs, with certain transformations, have been preserved into the present.

One of the more interesting statements in volume II of *The History of Azerbaijan* is the following:

“*The Book of Dede Qorqud*, one of the most ancient and rich sources of all Turkic literary and artistic thought, also possesses value as a historical source.”

It is remarkable that, although historians accept this, they have not sufficiently foregrounded the historical facts implied by the principles articulated in *The Book of Dede Qorqud* within Azerbaijan’s socio-political and historical context.

Conclusion

In light of the views of the researchers cited above concerning the role of shamanism and Tengriism in the religious-mythological and religious-philosophical worldview of the Azerbaijani people, it is essential that Azerbaijani philosophers, historians, philologists, and folklorists pay due attention to these issues and provide accurate information to the younger generation. In particular, the place and role of the religious-philosophical worldview of Tanrıçılıq in the life of the Azerbaijani people must be investigated; and the new qualities acquired by this belief system as it merged with Islam should be brought to light.

For Tanrıçılıq is not merely a religious system; it also embodies the national culture, philosophy, and spiritual world of the Turkic peoples—and, inseparably, of the Azerbaijani Turks. Undoubtedly, the similarities and differences between Tanrıçılıq and Islam, and the reasons why most Turks turned from Tanrı belief to Islam, constitute a fertile field of inquiry for philosophy and the history of philosophy.

The prevailing consensus among researchers from Azerbaijan, Turkey, Central Asia, and other Turkic countries is that, among the ancient religious beliefs of the Turks, the dominant worldview was Tanrıçılıq—faith in Göy Tanrı. Before Islam, only a small number of Turkic tribes adhered to other native or foreign religions (shamanism, totemism, fire-worship, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, paganism, Manichaeism, etc.). The great majority of the Oghuz Turks remained in the Tanrı belief until they accepted Islam. The most striking testimony to this is the Oghuz epic *The Book of Dede Qorqud*.

Thus, among the monuments reflecting the Tengriist worldview, Turkic myths—and particularly the Oghuznama of *The Book of Dede Qorqud*—occupy a central place.

Although *The Book of Dede Qorqud* took shape orally in the 6th–8th centuries, its roots stretch much further back. In this sense, it continues the tradition of earlier Turkic epics such as *Yaradılış* (Creation), *Alp Er Tonqa, Şu, Oğuz Xaqqan, Göktürk, Köç, Ergenekon*, and others. This continuity is confirmed, above all, by the shared and parallel ideas in these texts regarding ancient Turkic religious beliefs, socio-political thought, and, especially, faith systems. In these epics, the religious beliefs, worldviews, and customs of the ancient Turks find rich and complete expression.

In general, the Oghuznama tradition continued among the Turks up to the 19th century, resulting in the emergence of 31 Oghuznama works. The characters, heroes, and religious-social views in these texts show that the Turkic mind approached these questions from essentially the same perspective up until the 20th century.

Within this framework, the Oghuznames serve as a criterion for the study of Turkic ontology and, in particular, of the question of being, which is of fundamental importance for the Turks. Unless the problem of creation and the related philosophical issue of unity and multiplicity are carefully analysed in the context of a people's social and religious life, the historical identity of the Turks cannot be fully illuminated.

Conclusion

This study has examined the philosophical and socio-religious dimensions of ancient Turkic belief systems, with particular emphasis on Tengriism and its reflection in the Oghuz epic tradition, especially *The Book of Dede Qorqud*. By analyzing mythological motifs, epigraphic sources, medieval historiography, and modern Azerbaijani and Turkic scholarship, we argued that Göy Tanrı belief constitutes the primary axis of ancient Turkic ontology, while shamanic and totemic elements occupy a secondary, though important, layer.

The article has also shown that Azerbaijan represents a key civilizational space where Tengrist, shamanic, magian and Zoroastrian elements intersected and influenced one another. Within this context, *The Book of Dede Qorqud* emerges not only as a literary monument, but also as a foundational philosophical source for understanding pre-Islamic Turkic notions of being, fate, unity-multiplicity, nature, and the relationship between divine and human.

Furthermore, the study has critically reassessed the Soviet and post-Soviet historiographical tendency to overemphasize Zoroastrianism as the sole or primary origin of Azerbaijani philosophical thought, while marginalizing the role of Tengriism and shamanic-Tengrist syntheses. We argued that a more balanced reconstruction of Azerbaijani intellectual history must systematically integrate Turkic mythological heritage, Oghuz epics, and Göy Tanrı belief into the philosophical canon.

Finally, the article suggests that the historical transition of Turks from Tanrıqlıq to Islam should not be interpreted as a rupture, but as a process of theological and philosophical continuity, in which monotheistic structures of Gök Tanrı belief facilitated the reception and internalization of Islamic tawḥīd. In this sense, the study opens pathways for further research in the philosophy of religion, comparative ontology, and the intellectual history of Azerbaijan and the broader Turkic world.

Ethical Considerations

This research is based exclusively on the analysis of published textual, historical, and literary sources (epics, inscriptions, scholarly works, and historical documents). It does not involve human participants, personal data, clinical interventions, or experiments with animals. All primary and secondary sources have been cited and referenced in accordance with academic norms of integrity, transparency, and respect for intellectual property. Interpretations and critical evaluations are presented honestly and without fabrication or manipulation of data. As the study relies on publicly available materials, no formal approval from an ethics committee or institutional review board was required.

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