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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Sonlessness as Cultural Trauma in the Book of Dede Korkut: Reproductive Legitimacy, Collective Memory and Symbolic Continuity

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Keywords

Book of Dede Korkut; sonlessness; reproductive trauma; collective memory; reproductive legitimacy; affect theory.

Abstract

This article re-examines the motif of sonlessness in the Book of Dede Korkut through the interconnected frameworks of collective trauma, reproductive legitimacy, affective memory, and transgenerational transmission. While folkloristic scholarship has largely interpreted sonlessness as a problem of patriarchal inheritance and lineage continuity, this study argues that it constitutes a psycho-cultural structure expressing anxieties concerning social legitimacy, exclusion from collective memory, and the loss of collective futurity. Drawing on close reading, comparative folkloristic analysis, and psycho-cultural interpretation, the study examines stories of the Dede Korkut corpus through the theoretical perspectives of trauma studies, affect theory, cultural memory, and transgenerational transmission. Comparative references to Korean, Japanese, and Indian folkloric traditions are used to identify psycho-cultural parallels without presuming historical-genetic connections. The analysis demonstrates that sonlessness is repeatedly transformed from an experience of reproductive absence into social stigma, ritual compensation, anxiety over the loss of the son, and a demand for heroic validation. The study further shows that the son functions not as a biological heir but as a carrier of lineage, social recognition, heroic legitimacy, collective memory, and imagined future continuity. Ritual practices such as prayer, sacrifice, feasting, and blessing operate as mechanisms of symbolic repair and social reintegration rather than solutions to biological infertility. The originality of the study lies in conceptualizing sonlessness as a mediated form of reproductive trauma within an epic system. It concludes that the motif ultimately encodes a collective fear of symbolic disappearance and disrupted continuity.

Citation

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1. INTRODUCTION

The *Book of Dede Korkut* is one of the most significant epic texts encoding the collective memory, social organization, and heroic ideals of the Turkic peoples. Originating from traditions that can be traced back to the fifth–seventh centuries and preserved through the fifteenth-century Dresden and Vatican manuscripts, the epic is not merely a literary representation of heroic deeds and historical memory. It also constitutes a complex psycho-cultural system that reflects *Oghuz* conceptions of family, lineage, legitimacy, mortality and continuity. The recurring motifs, ritual practices, and social relationships depicted in the text function as cultural mechanisms through which individual experiences acquire collective significance and are transformed into normative patterns of social behavior (Abdulla Kamal, 1999).

For many decades, scholarship on the *Book of Dede Korkut* has focused primarily on historical-ethnic, structural-semiotic, mythological and heroic-epic dimensions of the text (Hajiyev, 2024; Lotman, 1990; Saygin Kusmush, 2021). These studies have provided an important theoretical foundation for understanding the epic's poetic structure, mythological layers, models of social organization, and heroic ideals. However, comparatively little attention has been paid to the psycho-cultural functions of the traumatic motifs that recur throughout the various stories. Among these, one of the most persistent and structurally significant motifs is sonlessness.

In the *Book of Dede Korkut*, sonlessness is not represented merely as a biological or domestic condition. Rather, it is associated with the loss of social legitimacy, erasure from collective memory, and the fear of interrupted lineage continuity. Within the semantic universe of the epic, the son functions not only as a biological heir but also as a symbolic agent responsible for transmitting the family name, lineage, and collective recognition into the future. Dirse Khan's lament—“Those without sons or daughters have been cursed by God; we too curse them. Be aware of it. Is the fault yours or mine? Why does God not grant us a single son?”—demonstrates that sonlessness is experienced not simply as a familial concern but as a profound psycho-cultural anxiety affecting social legitimacy and self-perception (Hajiyev, 2024, p.24). In this context, sonlessness signifies more than biological incompleteness; it is linked to questions of remembrance, lineage continuity, and recognition within the collective order.

Existing scholarship has generally interpreted the motif of sonlessness within the framework of patriarchal inheritance and lineage continuity (Saygin Kusmush, 2021). While such approaches offer valuable insights, they do not fully explain why sonlessness is represented throughout the epic with such intense emotional force, ritual tension, and repetitive narrative emphasis. As Judith Herman argues, traumatic experience persists not only in the event itself but also through its subsequent social and emotional repetitions (Herman, 1992, pp.129–133). From this perspective, sonlessness in the *Book of Dede Korkut* is not merely a form of status loss; it functions as a psycho-cultural mechanism that mobilizes prayer, sacrifice, oath-taking, heroic action, and collective ritual practices. Bayindir Khan's declaration — “Those who have neither son nor daughter have been cursed by God, and we too curse them”—further indicates that sonlessness is construed not simply as a domestic problem but as a social and metaphysical stigma.

This article reconsiders the motif of sonlessness through the interrelated frameworks of collective trauma, reproductive legitimacy, affective memory, and transgenerational transmission. Its central argument is that sonlessness in the *Book of Dede Korkut* should not be understood as an expression of individual deficiency but rather as a fundamental psycho-cultural code articulating the fear of disrupted collective continuity. Across different stories, this code manifests in diverse forms, including social stigmatization, ritual compensation, heroic mobilization, and intergenerational transmission.

Rather than mechanically applying Western psychoanalytic and trauma theories to the text, this study places them in critical dialogue with the epic's own semantic system.

The application of trauma theory to the *Book of Dede Korkut* requires a distinction between individual psychological trauma and its collective and cultural dimensions. While psychological trauma primarily concerns the effects of a distressing experience on an

individual's emotional and subjective life, collective trauma refers to suffering that emerges and persists through shared social relations, whereas cultural trauma occurs when experiences of loss, exclusion, or disruption become incorporated into collective identity and systems of meaning (Abrutyn, 2024, pp. 240–241). This distinction is particularly relevant to the present study because sonlessness in the *Book of Dede Korkut* is not interpreted as a clinical or psychiatric condition affecting individual characters. Rather, it is examined as a psycho-cultural structure through which reproductive absence becomes associated with social stigma, legitimacy, lineage continuity, and collective memory. Accordingly, the term “reproductive trauma” is used here as an interpretive category referring to the affective and symbolic consequences of disrupted reproductive continuity within the epic's social and cultural system. This approach also corresponds with Pérez Baquero's (2021) observation that cultural trauma theory extends the discussion of trauma from individual psychological experience toward the ways in which collective suffering and unsettling memories are narrated and transmitted within cultural frameworks (pp. 372–374). Recent literary trauma research likewise demonstrates that traumatic memory can persist through narrative representation, where literary texts become spaces for articulating and interpreting the long-term effects of collective traumatic experience (Tsitsagi, 2026, pp. 291–300). The recurring representation of sonlessness, its ritual management, and its association with lineage and collective recognition therefore provide a methodological basis for interpreting the motif as a culturally mediated form of collective anxiety and symbolic trauma. This approach is further supported by Çetinkaya's (2015a) analysis of *Dede Korkut* stories as a field of cultural memory in which symbols function as carriers of inherited meanings and transmit cultural codes across generations. By emphasizing the processes of defining, interpreting, encoding, preserving, and transmitting cultural memory, Çetinkaya situates *Dede Korkut* within a framework of cultural continuity (p. 84). This perspective reinforces the present study's argument that the motif of sonlessness can be read not only as a representation of reproductive absence but also as a symbolic concern with the preservation and transmission of lineage, social values, and collective memory.

The theoretical framework draws upon Lotman's concept of the semiosphere (Lotman, 1990), Grace M. Cho's model of transgenerational haunting (Cho, 2008), Cathy Caruth's trauma theory (1996), Judith Herman's work on collective trauma (1992), Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory (2012), Sara Ahmed's theory of affect (2004), and Kim Seong Nae's reflections on collective trauma, ritual, and postmemory (Kim, 2024). In particular, Cho and Kim demonstrate that traumatic experiences continue to operate not only through individual memory but also through ritual practices, collective forms of remembrance, and intergenerational emotional relations. Their perspectives offer a productive framework for interpreting the recurrent structure of sonlessness in the *Book of Dede Korkut*. Cho's emphasis on the persistence of trauma across generations through emotional and ritual forms is especially relevant to understanding the enduring presence of this motif. Likewise, Ahmed and Massumi provide conceptual tools for analyzing emotions not as purely individual experiences but as affective forces circulating through social relations and collective structures of behavior.

Within a comparative folkloristic framework, the article examines the trauma of sonlessness in the *Book of Dede Korkut* alongside analogous structures of reproductive legitimacy and collective continuity found in Korean and Japanese cultural traditions. The objective is to demonstrate that sonlessness is not merely a local epic motif but a collective structure operating within broader Asian psycho-cultural systems.

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. Why is sonlessness represented as a traumatic condition in the *Book of Dede Korkut*?
2. Through which ritual and social mechanisms is this trauma managed?
3. What collective function does the figure of the son perform within the epic system?
4. How is the trauma of sonlessness repeated and transformed across different stories?
5. What psycho-cultural and metapsychological determinants underlie the trauma of sonlessness?

To answer these questions, the article employs close reading to analyze “The Story of Boghach Khan, Son of Dirse Khan,” “The Story of Kan Turali, Son of Kanli Koja,” “The Story of Emren, Son of Begil,” “The Story of Segrek, Son of Ushun Koja,” and “The Story of How Salur Kazan Was Taken Prisoner and His Son Uruz Freed Him.” The aim is to demonstrate that sonlessness is not merely a folkloric motif but one of the principal structural components shaping the collective psychology of the *Book of Dede Korkut*.

The application of trauma theory to the *Book of Dede Korkut* requires a distinction between individual psychological trauma, collective trauma, and cultural trauma. While individual trauma concerns the psychological effects of distressing experiences on the subject, collective trauma emerges through shared social relations, whereas cultural trauma occurs when experiences of loss or disruption become incorporated into collective identity and systems of meaning (Abrutyn, 2024, pp. 240–241). In this study, “reproductive trauma” is used as an interpretive category referring to the affective and symbolic consequences of disrupted reproductive continuity within the epic's social and cultural system. Sonlessness is therefore not treated as a clinical condition, but

as a culturally mediated experience through which stigma, legitimacy, lineage, and collective continuity are articulated. Since collective suffering may also be narratively transmitted and incorporated into cultural frameworks over time (Pérez Baquero, 2021, pp. 372–374), trauma theory provides a methodological lens for examining how reproductive absence in *Dede Korkut* is transformed into a culturally meaningful representation of collective anxiety, social legitimacy, and continuity.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study examines the motif of sonlessness in the *Book of Dede Korkut* not merely as a folkloric narrative element or a problem of patriarchal inheritance, but as a psycho-cultural expression of collective trauma, reproductive legitimacy, and anxieties surrounding social continuity. The theoretical framework is grounded in an integrative approach situated at the intersection of folkloristics, trauma studies, affective memory research, and comparative Asian ethnology. Accordingly, the study seeks to read the *Book of Dede Korkut* not only as a heroic epic but also as a dynamic affective system that encodes collective anxieties.

In conventional *Dede Korkut* scholarship, the motif of sonlessness has generally been interpreted within the framework of lineage continuity, patriarchal social organization, and heroic succession (Saygin Kismush, 2021). While these approaches provide valuable insights, they do not fully account for the emotional intensity and ritual tension that accompany the motif throughout the text. Dirse Khan's lament — “Why does God not grant us even a single son?” — together with sacrificial rituals, fears of lineage extinction, and the affective weight of father–son relationships, suggests that the issue extends beyond a social institution and touches deeper layers of collective psychology.

One of the principal theoretical foundations of this study is Grace M. Cho's concept of *transgenerational haunting*. In her analysis of the legacy of the Korean War, Cho demonstrates that trauma persists not only as memory of an event but also through silence, ritual practices, bodily responses, and emotional repetition (Cho, 2008). This model is particularly productive for the study of the *Book of Dede Korkut*. The motif of sonlessness does not emerge once and disappear; rather, it repeatedly returns across different stories, becoming a durable structure within collective memory. Each recurrence is reconstructed through prayer, sacrifice, lamentation, heroic trials, and fears concerning lineage continuity. Sonlessness thus appears not as a resolved problem but as a recurring traumatic structure circulating throughout the epic.

This perspective is further complemented by Kim Seong Nae's reflections on collective trauma, ritual, and postmemory. Kim argues that trauma persists not only within individual consciousness but also through collective commemorative practices, ritual behavior, and social relationships (Kim, 2024). Sara Ahmed likewise emphasizes that emotions are not merely internal states but affective forces that generate social relations and collective orientations (Ahmed, 2004, p.191). From this perspective, acts of lamentation, prayer, and ritual gesture in the *Book of Dede Korkut* produce forms of collective affective orientation that exceed individual emotional experience. Wedding feasts, sacrificial ceremonies, paternal households, sites of captivity, and battlefields are all represented as emotionally charged spaces. Dirse Khan's experience of incompleteness at the wedding feast or the outbreak of collective lamentation in Ushun Koca's household may therefore be interpreted as spatialized manifestations of trauma. Space, in this context, functions not merely as a backdrop for events but as a carrier of collective affect.

While the approaches discussed above analyze sonlessness as a psycho-cultural mechanism that sustains collective memory and activates ritual behavior, Freud's metapsychological perspective provides an additional psychodynamic dimension. Freud's approach suggests that traumatic experiences are underpinned by fears, anxieties, and perceptions of symbolic loss that generate internal psychic tensions (Fulgencio, 2005). From this perspective, sonlessness may be understood not only as a social and ritual problem but also as an internal conflict emerging between the desire for continuity and the fear of symbolic disappearance. Accordingly, Freud's metapsychological model is employed in this study not as a primary theoretical framework but as a supplementary interpretive tool for illuminating the psychodynamic dimensions of trauma.

Another important theoretical orientation informing this article derives from Japanese folklore phenomenology. Particularly relevant is the question posed by Komatsu Kazuhiko in his studies of *yōkai*: not “What is a *yōkai*?” but “Why are *yōkai* narrated?” (Komatsu, 2017, p.12). Komatsu argues that folkloric beings constitute symbolic projections of fears and collective anxieties that societies are unable to articulate directly. This perspective offers a productive model for understanding the persistent recurrence of sonlessness in the *Book of Dede Korkut*. The central issue is not the empirical existence of sonlessness itself but the reason for its repeated and emotionally charged narration. In other words, the motif symbolically expresses *Oghuz* fears of erasure from social memory, lineage extinction, the weakening of collective power, and the loss of collective futurity.

Certain parallels may also be identified between the Japanese folkloric figure of the *ubume* and the forms of reproductive trauma represented in the *Book of Dede Korkut*. The *ubume* is the spirit of a woman who dies during childbirth or whose concern for her

child persists beyond death (Park, 2013). Within Japanese folklore, this figure functions as a mythic embodiment of reproductive anxiety and the trauma of interrupted motherhood. Although no comparable demonological transformation is explicitly present in the *Book of Dede Korkut*, the silence and enduring affective burden associated with Basat's mother generate a structurally analogous pattern. In both cases, reproductive concerns transcend the biological sphere and become carriers of collective emotional tension. The comparative dimension of the study is further extended through Korean and Indian materials. Kendall's research on Korean shamanism demonstrates that ritual practices related to fertility and children function not merely as forms of individual religious experience but as collective mechanisms that sustain family continuity and social relations (Kendall, 1984, pp.61–64). From this perspective, the absence of offspring is perceived not simply as a domestic problem but as a social and emotional disruption affecting collective stability. These comparisons suggest that across diverse Asian cultural traditions, reproductive continuity functions not merely as a family concern but as a mechanism of collective legitimacy and social continuity.

Methodologically, the study combines close reading, comparative folkloristic analysis, and psycho-cultural interpretation. The primary textual corpus is based on the critical edition of the Dresden manuscript prepared by Asif Hajiyeve (Shirvanelli) (Hajiyeve, 2024). This edition was produced within the framework of modern philological scholarship grounded in the Dresden manuscript tradition and belongs to the same textual lineage as the widely used edition of Muharrem Ergin (Ergin, 2000). The selection of this edition facilitates a more consistent analysis of the semantic and structural features of the text.

The corpus was established according to the principle of a representative thematic corpus; that is, the study focuses on stories that most clearly reflect the various stages and affective manifestations of the trauma of sonlessness:

- “The Story of Boghach Khan, Son of Dirse Khan”
- “The Story of Kan Turali, Son of Kanli Koja”
- “The Story of How Salur Kazan Was Taken Prisoner and His Son Uruz Freed Him”
- “The Story of Emren, Son of Begil”
- “The Story of Basat's Killing Tepegöz (Goggle-eye)”

These stories were selected because they present, with particular semantic intensity, such structures as social stigma, ritual compensation, reproductive legitimacy, transgenerational transmission, and affective trauma.

The close-reading analysis focuses on the following analytical markers:

- reproductive lexicon (“son,” “lineage,” “name and reputation,” “inheritance”);
- affective expressions (lamentation, fear, silence, anger);
- ritual practices (prayer, sacrifice, wedding ceremonies, votive offerings);
- formulas of social stigma (“the black tent,” erasure of name and reputation);
- structures of transgenerational transmission (father–son addresses and discourses of inheritance).

These elements are examined comparatively according to their frequency of recurrence, structural position, emotional intensity, and ritual function.

The comparative Asian materials employed in this article are not intended to establish historical-genetic connections. Rather, they serve to illuminate the functional and psycho-cultural parallels of the trauma of sonlessness across different cultural traditions. This approach makes it possible to read the *Book of Dede Korkut* both within its local *Oghuz-Turkic* epic system and within a broader Asian affective-cultural context.

Figure 1 presents the conceptual model developed in this study, linking the progression from individual and collective trauma to cultural and reproductive trauma with the three analytical stages identified in the *Book of Dede Korkut*.

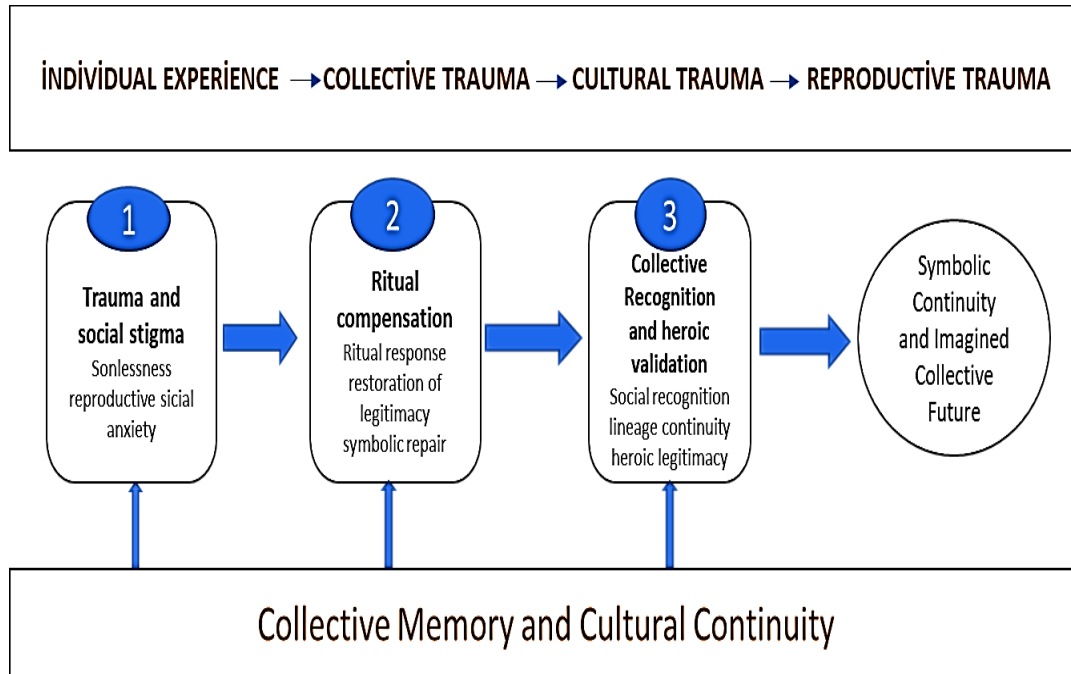


Figure 1. Conceptual model of sonlessness as cultural trauma in the Book of Dede Korkut.

3. THE PRIMARY FORM OF THE TRAUMA OF SONLESSNESS: "THE STORY OF BOGHACH KHAN, SON OF DIRSE KHAN"

The most explicit and structurally developed representation of the trauma of sonlessness in the *Book of Dede Korkut* appears in "The Story of Boghach Khan, Son of Dirse Khan." This story is not merely a narrative about a family's desire for a child; rather, it constitutes a foundational epic model demonstrating how reproductive legitimacy, social recognition, and collective memory are constructed within *Oghuz* society. From the very beginning of the narrative, sonlessness is presented not as a form of individual deficiency but as a social threat and a source of collective shame.

One of the opening scenes clearly reveals the public nature of this trauma. Bayindir Khan organizes a great feast and assigns his guests to tents according to their reproductive status: "Place those who have sons in the white tent, those who have daughters in the red tent, and those who have neither son nor daughter in the black tent" (Hajiyev, 2024, pp.23–24).

This episode is of central importance. Reproductive status is transformed into a system of social identity. The "black tent" is not merely a physical space; it functions as a symbol of stigma. Sonlessness is represented not as a private misfortune but as a mechanism of collective classification. An individual's position within society is determined by his capacity to ensure reproductive continuity. Dirse Khan's humiliation and grief at the feast demonstrate the emotional depth of this trauma: "Dirse Khan rose to his feet and said: 'Rise, my warriors, rise from your places. This black shame belongs either to me or to my wife'" (Hajiyev 2024, p.23). Open expressions of grief by male heroes are rarely emphasized so strongly in the *Book of Dede Korkut*. Dirse Khan's reaction therefore signifies more than emotional vulnerability; it reflects the fear of losing collective recognition. He is devastated not simply because he cannot become a father but because he perceives himself as losing his legitimate place within the social order.

The most revealing expression of this trauma appears when Dirse Khan declares that "this great shame belongs either to me or to my wife."

This statement demonstrates the complete internalization of the stigma. Rather than interpreting his situation as a form of social injustice, Dirse Khan experiences it as a personal defect and a condition of moral incompleteness. Reproductive failure thus becomes a crisis of masculine legitimacy.

Within this framework, the son is not merely a biological heir but the embodiment of social continuity itself. The subsequent turn toward prayer marks the transition from traumatic experience to ritual compensation. Sonlessness is no longer simply a condition to be endured; it becomes a problem requiring collective and sacred intervention.

This episode constitutes one of the central theoretical nodes of the present study. Dirse Khan's wife does not portray sonlessness as an individual or domestic deficiency but as a disruption within the wider system of collective relations. Significantly, the solution is sought not at the level of individual action but through social and ritual practices: feeding the hungry, clothing the poor, releasing debtors from their obligations, organizing communal feasts, and offering prayers. These actions are more than charitable or religious gestures; they function as ritual mechanisms through which collective relations are restored and emotional tensions are managed.

From this perspective, sonlessness is perceived not merely as reproductive incompleteness but as a disruption of collective harmony. The resolution of trauma is therefore linked not primarily to biological reproduction but to the restoration of social relations and moral equilibrium. As Judith Herman argues, traumatic experiences are processed not only at the individual level but also through the reconstruction of social relationships (Herman, 1992). In the *Book of Dede Korkut*, ritual participation and collective involvement do not eliminate trauma; rather, they transform it into a collectively meaningful and manageable affective experience.

This psychological structure may also be compared with patterns of reproductive anxiety observed elsewhere in Asia. Kendall's studies of Korean shamanism demonstrate that fertility rituals and practices related to offspring function not merely as forms of individual religious experience but as collective mechanisms safeguarding family continuity and social relations (Kendall, 1984, pp.61–64). From this perspective, the absence of offspring is understood not simply as a domestic problem but as a disruption within the broader social order. A similar structure is evident in the *Book of Dede Korkut*, where reproductive continuity is associated not with individual fulfillment but with the preservation of collective memory and social legitimacy.

The ritual model proposed by Dirse Khan's wife is particularly noteworthy:

"If you see the hungry, feed them; if you see the naked, clothe them. Release debtors from their debts. Heap meat like a mountain and pour kumis like a lake. Hold a great feast and pray for your wish! Maybe God will give us a clever child for the sake of the applause of someone with good prayers" (Hajiyev, 2024, pp.24–25).

Perhaps, through the blessing of one whose prayers are accepted, God will grant them a mature son. This statement reveals that reproductive legitimacy is understood not merely as a biological process but as a sacred status attained through collective prayer and social blessing.

The passage further demonstrates that reproductive legitimacy is achieved not through private supplication alone but through collective sharing and ritual economy. To obtain a son, one does not simply appeal to God; one seeks to restore social balance. In this respect, Dirse Khan's actions display notable structural parallels with the fertility rituals described by Dandekar in Indian folkloric traditions (Dandekar, 2017, pp.242).

Viewed through a metapsychological lens, the trauma of sonlessness reveals the unconscious impulses, fears, and collective taboos underlying human behavior and emotional response. Freud's metapsychological approach makes it possible to interpret sonlessness not merely as a social condition but as an internal psychodynamic tension emerging between the desire for symbolic continuity and the fear of disappearance (Fulgencio, 2005). The son thus becomes more than a biological heir; he emerges as a symbol of the individual's desire to project both personal existence and social presence into the future.

As Leopoldo Fulgencio observes, Freud's metapsychological model explains psychic phenomena through the interaction of instinctual forces and psychic energies, functioning as a theoretical framework for understanding the internal structure of observable mental processes (Fulgencio, 2005, pp.105–108). From this perspective, the motif of sonlessness in the *Book of Dede Korkut* may also be interpreted as a psychodynamic tension between the desire for continuity and the fear of social and symbolic loss.

Bayindir Khan's placement of the sonless individual in the black tent is therefore not a random ceremonial detail. Rather, it constitutes a psycho-cultural model through which sonlessness is coded within collective consciousness as social exclusion, loss of legitimacy, and symbolic incompleteness. Read alongside Sara Ahmed's theory of the social circulation of emotions, the black tent functions not merely as a physical location but as an affective space through which shame, incompleteness, and social isolation are collectively organized and directed (Ahmed, 2004, pp.8–12). Emotions thus operate not as purely internal states but as collective forces that structure social relations and invest particular spaces with meaning.

In the later stages of the story, the birth of Boghach appears to resolve the initial trauma. From a metapsychological perspective, his birth may be understood as the reactivation of the life impulse and the restoration of continuity. Yet a crucial transformation occurs at this point. The birth of a son does not eliminate danger; rather, it inaugurates a new stage of anxiety. The central concern shifts from obtaining a son to protecting him and transforming him into a hero capable of sustaining the social order. Boghach must not only be born; he must also become worthy of carrying the burden of collective continuity.

At this stage, the nature of trauma begins to change. The initial trauma of sonlessness, rooted in fears of interrupted lineage continuity, evolves into anxiety over the possible loss of the son or his failure to fulfill collective expectations. Trauma is therefore not resolved; it is reconfigured within new relations, responsibilities, and expectations. The attainment of reproductive continuity does not generate security but instead produces new affective and social obligations.

In this regard, the episode in which Boghach confronts the bull possesses significant symbolic meaning:

“The boy struck the bull on the forehead with his fist and stepped aside. The bull could no longer remain standing; it fell and collapsed upon its head” (Hajiye, 2024, p.26).

This scene marks the transition from biological inheritance to social heroism. A son does not acquire legitimacy simply through birth; he must earn his place within the collective system of power and recognition.

One of the most traumatic turning points in the story occurs when Dirse Khan, manipulated by deceitful nobles, wounds his own son. The text describes the event as follows:

“He struck the boy between his shoulders and knocked him down. The arrow pierced him, and dark red blood flowed into his garments and his bosom was filled with blood... Dirse Khan’s wife, saying, ‘This is my boy’s first hunt,’ slaughtered stallions, camels, and rams... She looked to her right and left but could not see her son. Her dark breast trembled, and her whole heart shook” (Hajiye, 2024, p.29).

This scene represents one of the most important theoretical turning points of the present study. Here trauma enters a new phase: the trauma of sonlessness, initially rooted in fears of lineage discontinuity, is transformed into anxiety over the loss of the son himself. The achievement of reproductive continuity does not abolish trauma; rather, it reconstructs it within new affective and social responsibilities. Whereas the earlier fear centered on the absence of a son, the dominant anxiety now concerns the possible loss of an already secured continuity.

Equally significant is the fact that the text does not frame trauma solely in terms of physical injury. The mother’s response—“her dark breast trembled, and her whole heart shook”—demonstrates how individual suffering becomes transformed into a collective affective experience. As Cathy Caruth emphasizes, trauma persists not only in the event itself but also through its emotional repetitions and indirect expressions (Caruth, 1996). Trauma in the *Book of Dede Korkut* is therefore not represented as a static event but as a structure that undergoes continual transformation and persists across generations.

At the conclusion of the story, Boghach’s survival and return to his family restore the collective order. Yet the narrative makes clear that trauma never fully disappears; it merely assumes a new form. In this respect, “The Story of Boghach Khan, Son of Dirse Khan” establishes the foundational model of the trauma of sonlessness in the *Book of Dede Korkut*. The central psycho-cultural mechanisms that will recur throughout the epic—social stigma, ritual compensation, reproductive legitimacy, and the fear of losing the son—are systematically articulated here for the first time.

4. FEAR OF LOSING THE SON AND TRANSGENERATIONAL CONTINUITY

If the trauma of sonlessness in “The Story of Boghach Khan, Son of Dirse Khan” is primarily represented as the problem of the *absence* of a son, in the later stories of the *Book of Dede Korkut* this trauma enters a new phase. The central anxiety is no longer remaining sonless but losing an already acquired son. This transformation introduces a significant shift in the psycho-cultural structure of the epic. The son is no longer merely a child who has been born; he becomes the bearer of collective memory, social legitimacy, and future continuity. Consequently, the fear of losing the son functions as a fear of the collapse of collective futurity itself.

One of the most powerful expressions of this transformed trauma appears in “The Story of How Salur Kazan Was Taken Prisoner and His Son Uruz Freed Him.” At the beginning of the story, Salur Kazan’s capture occurs when he falls into a state described as a “little death”:

“A ‘little death’ came upon Kazan, and he fell asleep” (Hajiye, 2024, p.179).

The association between sleep and death is not incidental. Within *Oghuz* epic thought, the weakening of paternal authority and heroic leadership is perceived as a collective threat. Salur Kazan’s captivity signifies not merely the absence of an individual hero but the destabilization of the symbolic center of the *Oghuz* social order.

A deeper layer of this trauma emerges in the scene in which Uruz learns that his father is still alive. Addressing his mother, he declares: “Mother, it seems I am not merely the son of a khan—I am the son of Khan Kazan. Why did you never tell me this, you, the daughter of the pimp? Had the saying ‘A mother’s right is God’s right’ not existed, I would have drawn my black steel sword and struck off your beautiful head...and would have stained the Earth with your red blood.”

His mother replies:

"My son, your father is alive. I feared that if I told you, you would seek the infidel, place yourself in danger, and perish. That is why I kept silent, my dear son" (Hajiyev, 2024, p.186).

This exchange conveys far more than genealogical information; it constitutes a profound crisis of identity. For Uruz, the father represents not merely biological origin but admission into a heroic lineage and a source of collective legitimacy. His recognition of his father thus functions simultaneously as a reactivation of collective memory. Through paternal recognition, the son gains access to the symbolic order that defines his place within the community.

One of the most emotionally charged episodes in the story occurs when father and son encounter one another on the battlefield without recognizing each other. After Uruz unknowingly strikes his father, Salur Kazan addresses him:

"O son, lofty as my dark mountain! O light of my darkened eyes! My hero Uruz, my lion Uruz!" (Hajiyev, 2024, p.190).

This address vividly reveals the symbolic function of the son in the *Book of Dede Korkut*. The son is portrayed as "the light of the eyes," "the summit of the mountain," and the continuation of strength and vitality. Through these metaphors, the father acknowledges that both his physical existence and his social presence endure through his son. The son thus assumes the role of symbolic immortality.

Uruz's response exposes the affective depth of this relationship:

"The veins of compassion stirred within Uruz. He descended from his horse and kissed his father's hand" (Hajiyev, 2024, p.190).

Heroism here is not defined solely through combat and martial prowess. It becomes an act of recognition, compassion, and collective attachment. By rescuing his father, Uruz does not merely fulfill a filial obligation; he safeguards the collective order and preserves social memory.

A related psychological structure appears in "The Story of Emren, Son of Begil," though in a somewhat different form. Here the focus shifts toward an aging and weakened father whose social function must be continued by his son. The text recounts Begil's injury during a hunt:

"Begil realizes that his wife is wise and intelligent. He has his horse brought to him, mounts it, and goes hunting. While hunting, he encounters a wounded deer and chases after it. Suddenly, the deer jumps from a high place. Begil is unable to control his horse and falls to the ground. His right thigh hits a rock and breaks. In great pain, he stands up and cries. Feeling lonely and helpless, he laments that he has neither an elder son nor an elder brother to help and support him in such a difficult situation. 'I have no elder son, no elder brother!'" (Hajiyev, 2024, pp.157–158).

This statement demonstrates how systems of collective support operate in moments of danger. For the father, the son functions as protection, continuity, and social support. Sonlessness is therefore represented not merely as a social stigma but as the collapse of a vital system of security and assistance.

One of the most revealing moments occurs when Begil addresses Emren:

"My son, my son! O light of my darkened eyes! O strength of my powerful back! See what has happened to me, what calamities have befallen me!" (Hajiyev, 2024, p.159).

Structurally, this address parallels Salur Kazan's invocation of Uruz. In both cases, the son is represented as the father's "light," "strength," and "continuing life." The son is therefore more than an heir; he is the successor to the father's unfinished collective function.

The ritual dimension of this role becomes even more explicit in Begil's subsequent commands:

"I am ready to give my life for you, my son," he said. "I hope you will not bring me shame or cast a shadow over my past name. Bring my clothes, let my son wear them! Bring my bay stallion, let my son ride it! Let my son go into the arena without fear and enter the battle!" (Hajiyev, 2024, p.161).

The son does not merely assist his father; he assumes his place. He wears the father's garments, mounts his horse, and continues his social role. The scene establishes a ritual model of transgenerational transfer in which biological inheritance is transformed into social substitution and symbolic succession.

This traumatic structure expands further in "The Story of Segrek, Son of Ushun Koja," where the logic of continuity extends from father-son relations to fraternal bonds. The captivity of Egrek plunges the family into a state of collective mourning:

"Lamentation arose before Ushun Koja's white tent. His daughters and daughters-in-law removed their white garments and dressed in black. Ushun Koja and the fair-faced mother cried together, calling out, 'My son, my son!'" (Hajiyev, 2024, p.168).

In this context, the absence of a single family member is sufficient to destabilize the entire familial system. Segrek's declaration— "I shall not remain among the *Oghuz* without my brother!" (Hajiyev, 2024, p.168)—demonstrates that brotherhood functions as a form of collective security. Sons and brothers thus fulfill analogous psycho-cultural functions within the epic: both serve as guarantors of collective continuity.

A particularly significant variation of reproductive trauma appears in "The Story of Basat's Killing Tepegöz (Goggle-eye)." Here the trauma of sonlessness is expressed indirectly but in a structurally important manner. At the beginning of the story, Basat's mother, frightened by an extraordinary encounter, gives birth to an abnormal child. This event generates a form of reproductive trauma associated not with absence but with defective birth. Her prolonged silence in response to Tepegöz's growth, increasing power, and destructive actions suggests that trauma is not directly articulated but rather experienced as enduring affective tension. As Cathy Caruth argues, trauma is frequently expressed through delayed and fragmented forms rather than direct narration (Caruth, 1996, pp.7–9).

The absence of explicit speech does not indicate the absence of trauma; rather, it reveals its fragmented social and emotional expression. The mother's silence may therefore be interpreted not as emotional passivity but as an indirect manifestation of unresolved reproductive anxiety and a collectively unassimilated experience. Trauma functions here less through direct articulation than through silence, behavior, and affective burden.

The birth of Tepegöz represents perhaps the most unusual variation of the son motif in the *Book of Dede Korkut*. He is biologically an heir, yet he cannot be integrated into the collective heroic system. In this sense, he constitutes an inverted image of sonlessness: the son exists, but he lacks legitimacy. Basat's eventual slaying of Tepegöz may therefore be interpreted as an attempt to resolve reproductive trauma across generations. Through his heroic action, Basat symbolically compensates for the trauma of defective birth that burdened the previous generation.

This story demonstrates that the trauma of sonlessness in the *Book of Dede Korkut* is not confined to literal absence. It may also appear in indirect forms through figures such as the defective son and the silent mother. Trauma thus manifests itself not only through loss but also through failed continuity and disrupted legitimacy.

The recurrence of these motifs is far from accidental. As Grace M. Cho observes, traumatic structures reappear across generations and diverse situations, thereby organizing collective memory (Cho 2008, pp.45–47). A similar pattern is evident in the *Book of Dede Korkut*. The trauma of sonlessness undergoes a series of transformations: first, the fear of having no son; then the fear of losing a son; and finally, the fear that the son may fail to fulfill his collective function. As Judith Herman argues, one of the defining characteristics of trauma is its inability to achieve complete closure and its tendency to reproduce itself within social relationships (Herman, 1992, pp.51–56).

From this perspective, the stories of the *Book of Dede Korkut* demonstrate that the son is not merely a family successor. He is the principal bearer of the social order, collective memory, and epic legitimacy. Consequently, the fear of losing the son ultimately becomes a fear of losing the future itself.

5. RITUAL COMPENSATION AND REPRODUCTIVE LEGITIMACY

In the *Book of Dede Korkut*, the trauma of sonlessness is not represented solely as an emotional or social problem; it is simultaneously constructed as a state of disrupted order that requires ritual intervention. For this reason, the resolution of sonlessness signifies not the fulfillment of an individual desire but the restoration of a collective and sacred equilibrium. Across different stories of the epic, acts of prayer, sacrifice, votive offerings, feasting, and communal sharing become the primary means through which reproductive legitimacy is reconstructed (Seyidov, 1983).

The most systematic articulation of this mechanism appears in "The Story of Boghach Khan, Son of Dirse Khan." In order to resolve the trauma, Dirse Khan's wife advises him not only to pray but also to enact collective redistribution:

"If you see the hungry, feed them; if you see the naked, clothe them; release debtors from their debts." (Hajiyev, 2024, pp.24–25).

This passage is of particular significance. Here, the attainment of a son is not presented as a miraculous event detached from social reality; rather, it is framed as the outcome of restored social and ethical balance. In other words, reproductive legitimacy is directly linked to collective well-being. One cannot desire a son solely for oneself; one must first fulfill one's social obligations toward the community.

From this perspective, the ritual system in *Dede Korkut* exhibits a clear parallel with Marcel Mauss's theory of the gift economy: the individual gains sacred legitimacy through acts of giving and reciprocal circulation. Dirse Khan's sacrifices and feasts thus form part of this ritual economy. The text explicitly states:

“Black sheep were slaughtered, and a great feast was held” (Hajiyev, 2024, p.25).

Here, sacrifice functions not merely as a religious rite but as an act of collective redistribution and the renewal of social bonds. The birth of the son is therefore represented not as an individual reward but as the consequence of restored harmony with the community. Comparable structures can be observed in fertility rituals within South Asian folklore. Dandekar, in his analysis of the Satvāi cult in Maharashtra, demonstrates that women experiencing reproductive difficulties do not rely solely on private prayer; rather, they engage in collective ritual systems through which they seek to restore their social legitimacy (Dandekar, 2017, pp.242–245). In *Dede Korkut*, sonlessness likewise produces social exclusion, while ritual becomes the mechanism for overcoming that exclusion.

Similar patterns are also evident in Korean folkloric and shamanic traditions. Kendall’s studies of Korean shamanism show that fertility- and child-related ritual practices are not merely individual religious experiences but collective mechanisms that sustain familial continuity and the broader system of social relations (Kendall, 1984, pp.61–64). These practices operate through prayer, communal participation, and engagement with sacred intermediaries to regulate emotional and social tension. In this respect, the scenes of sacrifice, prayer, and communal gatherings in *Dede Korkut* reveal structural parallels. In both contexts, reproductive problems are not limited to the family sphere but are framed as psycho-cultural disturbances affecting collective stability and social continuity.

In Japanese folklore, ritual forms of compensating reproductive trauma are more closely associated with childbirth and maternal cults. The *ubume* motif, in particular, represents the spirit of a woman who dies in childbirth or whose maternal bond remains unresolved after death (Park, 2013). Although this motif differs from the direct form of sonlessness trauma in *Dede Korkut*, it is significant in that it demonstrates how reproductive failure is experienced not as a private tragedy but as a collective emotional disturbance.

Ritual compensation in *Dede Korkut* is not limited to the birth of a son. After the son is born, ritual mechanisms continue in order to confirm his social legitimacy. The naming of Boghach Khan after his victory over the bull exemplifies this process:

“I gave him his name; may God grant him his years” (Hajiyev, 2024, p.26).

Naming here is not merely an act of identification; it is a rite of collective recognition. The son does not become fully legitimate through birth alone. He must pass heroic trials, acquire social recognition, and be accepted by the collective system.

Thus, reproductive legitimacy is constructed through a three-stage process:

1. Trauma and social stigma
2. Ritual compensation
3. Collective recognition and heroic validation

This model is further developed in “The Story of Kan Turali, Son of Kanli Koja.” Kan Turali’s desire not for an ordinary woman but for a woman who is “stronger than himself” demonstrates that reproductive legitimacy becomes a matter of qualitative heroic continuity:

“Father, let her rise before I rise; let her mount my black-maned horse before I mount it” (Hajiyev, 2024, p.26).

Here, marriage is not simply a social contract; it becomes a mechanism for ensuring the continuation of heroic lineage. The woman is transformed into a guarantor of the future social and epic quality of the lineage.

From this perspective, the reproductive system in *Dede Korkut* is not merely a biological mechanism of reproduction but a model for the regeneration of collective power and social order. A son must be born, but he must also become a legitimate, heroic, socially recognized subject capable of sustaining collective continuity. The social significance attributed to the son in *Dede Korkut* is likewise reflected in the broader kinship and collective-order structures identified by Çetinkaya (2015b, pp. 79–88).

Recent scholarship on the Book of *Dede Korkut* likewise emphasizes that the son is not represented merely as a biological descendant but as a figure whose transformation into a capable and virtuous heir carries broader social significance. Benli (2024) demonstrates that the transition from boyhood to sonhood and ultimately to beyhood is constructed through culturally defined expectations of skill, virtue, and social recognition, and that the son’s success has significance beyond the individual level (pp. 135–151). This perspective supports the present study’s interpretation of sonlessness as a crisis of reproductive legitimacy, because the absence of a son implies not only the absence of offspring but also the interruption of a socially recognized trajectory through which lineage, status, and collective continuity are reproduced.

For this reason, ritual compensation in the stories of *Dede Korkut* does not constitute the “complete resolution” of trauma; rather, it performs the function of temporarily stabilizing the collective system. Trauma is not eliminated—it is deferred and perpetuated through successive generations.

Ritual practices thus function as symbolic and affective mechanisms for managing collective anxiety in the context of sonlessness trauma. As Seyfeddin Rzasoy notes, within the *Oghuz* epic system ritual elements are not merely religious forms of behavior but structural components that organize the collective model of the world and social relations (Rzasoy, 2002). In this sense, sacrificial practices, prayers, and communal gatherings in *Dede Korkut* operate as psycho-cultural mechanisms that transform individual anxiety into collectively interpretable meaning. As trauma theory emphasizes, traumatic experiences do not only generate individual emotional responses; they also necessitate the reconfiguration of social relations and collective frameworks of meaning (Herman, 1992, pp.51–53). As Sara Ahmed argues, emotions are not simply internal states but affective forces that circulate between bodies, objects, and social relations (Ahmed, 2004, pp.8–12). From this perspective, ritual practices are not merely religious or symbolic acts; they are psycho-cultural techniques for distributing emotional burden, managing collective tension, and re-establishing social equilibrium.

In this regard, sacrificial offerings, prayers, communal feasts, and blessings in *Dede Korkut* function not only as religious ceremonies but also as collective affective practices that symbolically compensate for the social and emotional incompleteness produced by sonlessness. Ritual, therefore, does not eliminate trauma; rather, it transforms it into a form that can be managed and collectively shared.

6. TRAUMA OF SONLESSNESS IN KOREAN AND JAPANESE CONTEXTS

6.1. *Dede Korkut* and Asian Collective Memory

In the *Book of Dede Korkut*, the trauma of sonlessness is not represented as a merely familial or genealogical issue; rather, it is constructed as a question of collective continuity, social legitimacy, and symbolic existence. This characteristic allows the epic to be read comparatively within a broader Asian folkloric and ethnographic framework. However, the aim of this study is not to demonstrate any historical-genetic connection between these cultural traditions. Instead, the primary objective is to elucidate how the trauma of sonlessness operates through distinct functional and affective structures across different epic and ritual systems.

From this perspective, the comparative framework is deliberately focused on Korean and Japanese materials. Both cultural contexts provide rich ethnographic and theoretical resources for examining issues such as collective memory, ritual compensation, reproductive legitimacy, and affective folklore. In particular, Korean trauma studies and Japanese folkloric phenomenology make it possible to interpret the motif of sonlessness in *Dede Korkut* not merely within the domain of social structure, but also within a broader system of collective affect and symbolic anxiety.

These comparisons do not confine *Dede Korkut* to a localized *Oghuz* epic tradition. On the contrary, they situate it within wider Asian models of collective memory, thereby rendering visible its operation within a more expansive psycho-cultural landscape.

6.2. Sonlessness in Korean Tradition

In Korean tradition as well, reproductive continuity is not understood as a purely domestic or familial concern; rather, it is closely linked to the persistence of the broader system of social relations. Kendall's studies on Korean shamanism demonstrate that fertility- and child-related ritual practices are deeply intertwined with the preservation of lineage and the restoration of social harmony (Kendall, 1984, pp.61–64). From this perspective, the absence of children is perceived less as an individual misfortune than as a disruption within the relational fabric of society.

A similar structure can also be observed in the *Book of Dede Korkut*. Sonlessness is not merely biological incompleteness; it is constructed as a condition that threatens an individual's social legitimacy, the continuity of lineage, and one's position within collective memory. In this sense, sonlessness functions not simply as a reproductive deficiency but as a psycho-cultural condition that carries the risk of symbolic and social erasure.

Within Korean shamanic traditions, the compensation for this trauma is carried out through ritual mechanisms. Shamanic ceremonies (*kut*) are not solely religious practices; they operate as social technologies for the management of collective affect. As Kendall notes, Korean shamanic ritual functions as a social platform that “processes” familial and communal anxieties in affective terms (Kendall, 1996, pp.518–520). In *Dede Korkut*, sacrificial rituals, prayer acts, feasting ceremonies, and forms of collective participation fulfill a comparable function. Dirse Khan's supplication to God and his performance of sacrifice for the longing of a son appear less as individual desire than as an attempt to restore collective harmony.

One of the most significant comparative examples in the Korean context is the myth of Princess Bari. The figure of Bari, who is abandoned for being another daughter after six female children, illustrates how reproductive expectations are transformed into collective trauma. The central issue here is not simply childbirth, but the notion of the “proper child.” In *Dede Korkut*, the son likewise is not merely a child; he is represented as the continuation of lineage, the bearer of political legitimacy, the successor of heroic

tradition, and the guarantor of collective futurity. In this respect, both the Bari myth and the story of Dirse Khan reveal the affective burden embedded in reproductive legitimacy.

Grace M. Cho's concept of "transgenerational haunting" further deepens this comparative perspective. Cho argues that trauma does not disappear as a singular event; rather, it persists across generations through silences, ritual repetitions, and embodied emotional practices (Cho, 2008, pp.5–7). The recurring emergence of the sonlessness motif across different stories in *Dede Korkut* can also be interpreted through this lens. Trauma here is not a resolved problem but an affective structure circulating within the epic system.

6.3. Yōkai Phenomenology and the Symbolic Form of Reproductive Fear

Japanese folklore expresses sonlessness and reproductive trauma less through direct social narration and more through metaphysical and affect-laden figures. In particular, the phenomenology of *yōkai* functions as a folkloric projection of collective anxieties. Komatsu Kazuhiko formulates this issue in a decisive way: the central question is not "What are *yōkai*?" but rather "Why are *yōkai* spoken about?" (Komatsu, 2017, p.12). In this sense, folkloric entities constitute a symbolic language through which social and emotional disturbances are articulated.

This approach is particularly productive for interpreting *Dede Korkut*. The motif of sonlessness in the epic is not merely a social condition; rather, it operates as a continuously narrated form of collective fear. The anxiety of sonlessness is not an individual tragedy alone; it is fundamentally a fear of the loss of collective futurity. In this respect, sonlessness in *Dede Korkut* transforms into a form of affective folklore.

One of the most important comparative elements in Japanese folklore is the *ubume* figure. The *ubume* is the spirit of a woman who dies in childbirth or whose concern for her child persists beyond death. Park Hee-young interprets the *ubume* as embodying both the "deep resentment of dying childless" and the "endless maternal attachment" (Park, 2013, pp.201–205). Here, reproductive trauma transcends the boundary of physical death and acquires a metaphysical continuity.

Although *Dede Korkut* does not contain an explicit demonological transformation equivalent to the *ubume*, the maternal figure in the story of Basat exhibits a structurally comparable affective configuration. The mother's silence, prolonged emotional burden, and the non-articulation of trauma suggest a similar affective structure. Trauma is not fully spoken; it persists in gestures, silence, and delayed emotional release. As Brian Massumi argues, affect often exists as intensity in the body prior to its translation into language (Massumi, 2002, pp.27–29). In this sense, Basat's mother's silence can be read as an affective load that remains unexpressed in language but continues to operate through bodily and behavioral registers.

From this perspective, both the *ubume* and Basat's mother embody a form of reproductive fear that cannot be fully articulated in linguistic terms. As Cathy Caruth notes, one of the defining features of trauma is its delayed and fragmented mode of expression rather than direct narration (Caruth, 1996, pp.4–9). The silence of Basat's mother thus does not indicate the absence of trauma but rather its indirect and deferred manifestation.

The Japanese comparative framework demonstrates that sonlessness in *Dede Korkut* is not solely a social or genealogical issue but also a system of collective affect and symbolic anxiety. If the Korean trajectory highlights sonlessness as a problem of social guilt and collective legitimacy, the Japanese trajectory renders it visible as unspoken fear, affective tension, and metaphysical unease.

6.4. Ritual Compensation and Social Stigmatization

The Indian material is not employed in this study as a primary comparative axis but rather as an auxiliary parallel for clarifying mechanisms of ritual compensation. Dandekar's analysis of the Satvāi cult in Maharashtrian folklore demonstrates that childlessness is accompanied by social stigmatization and is subsequently addressed through ritualized forms of compensation (Dandekar, 2017, pp.235–242).

One of the key points emphasized by Dandekar is the socially constructed hierarchy between women with sons and those without children. In this framework, a childless woman is not merely an incomplete individual; she is also perceived as a potential source of disorder and as a "distorted social body." This mechanism establishes a functional parallel with the anxiety surrounding childlessness in the Book of *Dede Korkut*. In both cases, reproductive failure is displaced from the level of individual experience to the level of collective legitimacy and social order.

However, a significant specificity of *Dede Korkut* lies in the fact that the paternal figure is more often the primary bearer of this anxiety. In the Indian material, by contrast, stigmatization is predominantly centered on the female subject. Despite this difference in gendered distribution, both systems consistently frame reproductive continuity as a precondition for collective stability and social cohesion.

6.5. Models of Reproductive Trauma in Asia

The comparative analysis of Korean, Japanese, and partially Indian materials demonstrates that, within Asian folkloric systems, childlessness is not merely a biological issue; rather, it constitutes a deeply affective structure linked to collective memory, social legitimacy, and future continuity. Three key conclusions emerge from this comparison:

1. Childlessness is often perceived in many Asian cultural contexts as a form of social and symbolic death;
2. The compensation of trauma is enacted through ritual practices and collective participation;
3. Reproductive anxiety frequently transforms into folkloric and affective figures, circulating continuously within collective memory.

A distinguishing feature of *Dede Korkut* is that the “son” is represented not only as the bearer of familial continuity but also as the carrier of heroic legitimacy, political succession, and collective futurity. For this reason, the trauma of childlessness in the epic does not remain a private or familial tragedy; it becomes a fundamental anxiety directed toward the future of *Oghuz* collectivity as a whole. Marianne Hirsch’s concept of “postmemory” highlights that trauma is not only experienced by direct witnesses but is also emotionally and symbolically transmitted to subsequent generations (Hirsch, 2012, pp.5–7). In *Dede Korkut*, the transmission of paternal burdens and anxieties onto the son closely aligns with this postmemory structure, forming a model in which affective inheritance operates as a mechanism of collective continuity.

7. CONCLUSION

In this article, the motif of childlessness in the *Book of Dede Korkut* has been re-examined within the framework of psycho-cultural trauma and collective memory systems. The textual analyses conducted in this study demonstrate that childlessness in *Dede Korkut* is not merely a familial or biological issue; rather, it constitutes a fundamental structural code that expresses the fear of disrupted social legitimacy, collective continuity, and epic memory. This interpretation is consistent with Yair’s (2024) argument that cultural trauma can become embedded in collective narratives and cultural codes, thereby contributing to the formation of collective identities and orientations toward the future (pp. 44–45, 58–60). From this perspective, the recurring anxiety surrounding sonlessness in the Book of Dede Korkut may be understood not simply as a representation of reproductive loss, but as a narrative mechanism through which the continuity of collective identity and the imagined future of the community are symbolically negotiated. In this sense, the concept of the “son” does not simply denote offspring; it becomes a symbolic figure that integrates multiple functions such as lineage continuity, collective recognition, political power, heroic legitimacy, and the transmission of memory into the future.

This interpretation is also consistent with recent scholarship showing that Dede Korkut narratives contain cultural codes and motifs that can be reinterpreted and transmitted across changing historical and ideological contexts. Saraç and Aşçı (2024) demonstrate that, in the adaptation of Dede Korkut into Soviet Azerbaijani cinema, themes concerning family, homeland, collective unity, and future-oriented social values were selectively emphasized and reconfigured (p. 52). This suggests that the epic’s symbolic structures possess a capacity for cultural continuity through reinterpretation, supporting the present study’s argument that the figure of the son functions not only as a marker of lineage but also as a symbolic vehicle for negotiating collective continuity and the imagined future. This point represents a convergence between Grace M. Cho’s concept of “transgenerational haunting” and psychodynamic approaches. Cho argues that trauma is not merely a past event; rather, it persists in the emotional relations, silences, and repetitive behavioral patterns of subsequent generations (Cho, 2008). Psycho-dynamic approaches likewise emphasize that traumatic experiences do not disappear entirely but may return in various symbolic and affective forms. From this perspective, the persistent recurrence of childlessness anxiety across different narratives can be interpreted as an indicator of unresolved collective anxiety and intergenerational emotional transmission.

In this sense, the motif of childlessness may be understood as performing a form of “haunting”: unresolved fears and experiences of loss from the past continue to circulate within the cultural memory of subsequent generations without being fully resolved.

The analysis of “The Story of Boghach Khan, Son of Dirse Khan” demonstrated, that childlessness is initially constructed as a form of social stigma and collective exclusion. The system of the “black tent” established by Bayindir Khan clearly illustrates how reproductive status becomes a mechanism of social classification. Dirse Khan’s crying and his appeal to God further indicate that childlessness is experienced not merely as an individual emotional breakdown but as a fear of losing collective legitimacy.

The subsequent narratives reveal a transformation of this trauma. While the initial stage is characterized by the fear of not having a son, in later episodes the trauma shifts into the fear of losing an already acquired son. In narratives such as “The Story of How Salur Kazan Was Taken Prisoner and His Son Uruz Freed Him,” “The Story of Emren, Son of Begil,” and “The Story of Segrek, Son of

Ushun Koja,” the son is represented as the “light of the father’s eyes,” the continuation of collective strength, and the guarantor of the future. Thus, reproductive trauma in *Dede Korkut* is not static; it operates as a dynamic psycho-cultural system that passes through different stages of transformation.

Another important conclusion of this study concerns mechanisms of ritual compensation. The analysis shows that the resolution of childlessness is not achieved solely through prayer but is closely linked to collective redistribution, sacrifice, and the restoration of social balance. Dirse Khan’s feeding the hungry, freeing the indebted, and organizing a large feast demonstrate that reproductive legitimacy is embedded in both social and ritual dimensions. Becoming a father is not presented as an individual reward but as a consequence of re-establishing harmony within the collective order.

Comparative analyses also yielded significant findings. Parallels drawn with Korean and Japanese folkloric traditions indicate that the trauma of childlessness is not merely a local epic motif but part of a broader structure of collective anxiety across Asian cultures. Korean shamanic practices related to fertility and familial continuity (Kendall, 1984), as well as Komatsu’s observations on the symbolic articulation of social fears in Japanese folklore (Komatsu, 2017), enabled a broader psycho-cultural interpretation of the traumatic structures in *Dede Korkut*. These comparisons suggest that reproductive continuity in various Asian cultural contexts is not simply a family matter but a fundamental structure tied to collective legitimacy, social harmony, and the continuity of cultural memory.

At the same time, these comparisons also highlight the specificity of *Dede Korkut*. While in many other Asian traditions the son primarily functions as the bearer of lineage continuity, ancestor veneration, and ritual reproduction, in *Dede Korkut* the son is also represented as a warrior, a bey, a political heir, and the protector of the homeland. This feature derives from the nomadic-military structure of the Oghuz-Turkic epic system and helps explain the exceptionally high emotional intensity of the trauma of childlessness in the text.

From a methodological perspective, this study demonstrates that approaches such as trauma theory, affect theory, phenomenology, and comparative folklore studies provide productive analytical tools for examining the psycho-cultural structures of *Dede Korkut*. In particular, Grace M. Cho’s concept of “transgenerational haunting” and Kim Seong Nae’s notion of “affective emplacement” offer significant theoretical insights into the intergenerational and ritual dimensions of childlessness trauma.

In conclusion, the motif of childlessness in the *Book of Dede Korkut* is not a problem of biological reproduction; rather, it functions as a mechanism for safeguarding collective existence. The “son” becomes a metaphor for the future. Accordingly, the fear of childlessness is ultimately an epic articulation of the fear of disappearance, erasure from memory, collapse of social order, and loss of collective strength.

In this sense, the fear of childlessness in *Dede Korkut* is not merely the fear of lineage extinction; it is the epic expression of the loss of collective memory, social continuity, and the future itself.

8. DECLARATIONS

Ethical Considerations

This research did not involve human participants, animal subjects, or sensitive data. The study is based on the critical analysis of published texts of the *Book of Dede Korkut*. The research process was conducted in full compliance with academic integrity principles. All sources have been appropriately cited and referenced. No cultural appropriation or misrepresentation has occurred regarding the theoretical frameworks and comparative materials used in this study.

Author Contributions

Yasin Khalilov: Conceptualization, literature review, theoretical framework, interpretation of findings, and manuscript preparation.

Jala Zeynalli: Data collection and interpretation, validation of findings, and manuscript editing, literature review.

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No original datasets were generated or analyzed in this study. The research is based on published literary texts and scholarly sources cited in the manuscript.

Artificial Intelligence Statement

The authors declare that no artificial intelligence tools were used in the design of the study, data collection, data analysis, interpretation of findings, or preparation of the scientific content. Artificial Intelligence-supported tools were used only for limited language editing and formatting purposes. All intellectual content, analysis, conclusions, and interpretations remain the sole responsibility of the authors.

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