

The Tale of the Epic Cycle of “Kitab-i Dedem Korkut” in Turkish Folklore of the 20th Century

Tatiana A. Anikeeva

Until very recent times, some tales related to the medieval epic cycle of “The Book of Dede Korkut” continued to exist on the territory of modern Turkey and the South Caucasus. These include, first of all, the tale of Bamsi Beyrek, which preceded its further existence within the framework of a completely different, much later genre of Turkish traditional literature – the *hikâye*.

Turkish folk narrative form called *hikâye* which is a special genre of Turkish folk literature. It has been existing for a long time mainly in the South of Turkey and in the Eastern Turkey since the Middle Ages. *Hikâye* is a prose text that includes folk songs and verses, that can be transmitted orally by story-tellers-*aşiks* or *meddahs* in coffee houses. The main peculiarity of this genre is its existence both in oral and written traditions at the same time; this genre occupies a borderline between oral and literary traditions. These are prosaic texts of novelistic or fantastic content that once were performed exclusively in oral form; sometimes they are often folklorized versions of literary plots widely known in the Middle East, or, as in the case of the tale of Bamsi Beyrek, are the part of a large epic cycle (“The Book of Dede Korkut”). These folk narratives include the stories of the prosaic version of the epic legend about Köroğlu, which has become widespread in Asia Minor and well-known in the Caucasus, the Middle East and Central Asia, as well as a number of other plots, such as “İlbeylioğlu”, a story about Shakh-Ismail (“Şah-Ismail”), “Celali Bey ile Mehmet Bey”, “Kırmanşah”, etc. Most of these stories are genetically related to the oral epic tradition as well as to the fairy-tale. Also, as the Turkish folklore in general, these folk stories consist of many interacting components connected with different cultures: pre-islamic Turkic tradition of the Oghuz tribes, Persian and Arabian connected with Islam (mainly in its Shiite branch) and its very interesting and significant for a scientific research. There are two types of *hikâye*:¹ “heroic” type (for example, “Köroğlu hikâyesi”, the narrative about Beyrek and many others) and “romantic” type (like “Gül ile Mir Ali Şir hikâyesi”, “Leyla ile Mecnun” and so on; as a rule, its plot is constructed on the basis of a love-story).

1 That classification was made by P.N. Boratav (Boratav 1946).

The documented evidence of the oral performance of the *hikâyes* dates back approximately to the period from the 18th to the middle of the 20th centuries, although researchers tend to trace the origins of the *hikâye* as a genre of Turkish folklore to an earlier time.

The folk narrative of Bamsi Beyrek in Modern Turkey

For the present, studies devoted to the *hikâye* of Bamsi Beyrek in the form of a folk narrative are practically absent. Various versions of the tale about Beyrek, which existed in one form or another in Turkey were collected in the edition of the Turkish Linguistic Association (*Türk dili kurumu*) in 1939 by the famous folklorist Pertev Naili Boratav (1907–1998) and have not been republished since then: now even this edition (Boratav 1939) is a bibliographic rarity.²

This edition includes the so-called “Beyşehir” (“Beyşehir rivayeti”) and “Meydan” (“Meydan rivayeti”) tales, which are different versions of the folk narrative about Beyrek recorded in town of Beyşehir and in the village of Meydan respectively, from informants, also two handwritten texts of the tale about Beyrek that have been kept in the library of Istanbul University under one inventory number (No. 239), as well as several small texts discovered by Boratav in *cönks* – the anthologies of Turkish folk song poetry. The latter relating to the geographic area are originated from Konya. Boratav notes that he found these collections there (Boratav 1939). One of them contains the dates 1252 and 1282 A.H. (respectively, 1836 and 1865 A.D.).

The Beyşehir version of the folk narrative about Beyrek was recorded by Boratav in 1934 from a resident of Beyşehir in the South West Turkey. According to the informant of Boratav, a merchant named Karabet-aga, he heard this *hikâye* from his friend Arakel-aga, who had already died at that time. Where, in turn, Arakel-aga recognized this tale, the informant did not know, but he was sure that Arakel had “read it” somewhere. According to Karabet-aga, Arakel also played *saz* and “composed some poetry”; poetic fragments of this text, according to Karabet-aga, Arakel also accompanied by playing *saz* (Boratav 1939: 5). Thus, even the history of the origin of this particular text given by Boratav – from an unknown possible book source (it could

2 According to V.M. Zhirmunsky (Zhirmunsky 1962: 209), it is also known about a certain Armenian version of the story originated “from Caesarea”, which was published in Macler 1928: 150–158. In addition, “there is a legendary Bey-Beyrek tomb in Bayburt. The name Böyrek was widespread among the inhabitants of the villages surrounding Bayburt. Among the Armenians who lived before the First World War in the village of Almyshka located in this region, some families considered themselves the descendants of Beyrek and the Armenian princess, the ruler of Bayburt” (Zhirmunsky 1962: 209).

be either a manuscript of this text, or a lithographic edition of the folk tale³) – to a certain “storyteller” and then, orally, to his “student” – clearly illustrates the peculiarity of the genre of the Turkish *hikâye*, specifically the existence between the written and oral traditions.

The version of the Meydan story about Beyrek was written down (indirectly, by Boratav’s student Ahmed Harmanji) from Şerif Kadın, a half-literate 55-year-old peasant woman from Meydan, a village near Konya. Boratav especially notes that she barely knew how to read and has never in her life left the vicinity of Konya (Boratav 1939: 54), and she learned various *hikâye* and, in particular, *türkü* (folk songs) of aşık Karacaoğlan from her father.

Genre features of the folk narrative of Bamsi Beyrek

At first glance, the folk narrative about Beyrek is entirely within the framework of Turkish *hikâye* genre with all its features: traditional formulas for the beginning and ending of the story, stylistic clichés, poetic fragments,⁴ characters, geography and plot twists.

The plot of the folk narrative about Beyrek are the adventures of the son of “padishah of the Oghuz *il*” named Bey Beyrek (turk. *Bey Bira*, *Bey Beyri*, *Bey Böyre*, *Bey Böyrek*): accompanied by his horse, he overcomes many obstacles, fights insidious enemies and gets himself a bride named Al Kavak Kızı (turk. *El Kavak Kızı*, dialect. *Dalgavaq Gızı*). In other words, the plot of the story is quite traditional and typical of the Turkish folk narrative, which plot basis is the presentation of the heroic deeds and wanderings of the protagonist.

At the same time, the folk narrative about Beyrek retains a number of plot features that allow it to be ascended to the epic prototype of the tale of Bamsi Beyrek in “The Book of Dede Korkut”. First of all, the main character of the story, Beyrek, is born simultaneously with the foal, which will become his magic horse. Here it is possible to see the implementation of the most ancient motif of the Turkic epic: the companion of the hero Alpamysh is his winged horse *Tulpar Baichibar*, and Bamsi Beyrek of

3 Speaking about the written forms of Turkish folk narratives-*hikâyes*, we can mean, first of all, handwritten various versions of the plots of the *hikâyes* (see, for example, a large number of such copies in the collection of the IOM RAS: “Arzu ile Kanbar” 1779, “İsmail-Şah” of the end of the 18th-19th centuries, “Tahir ile Zuhra” dated 1266 AH, “Farhad ile Şirin” from 1757-1758 (Dmitrieva 2002: 454-479), then *hikâyes* existed for a long time in the form of lithographs, printed for a wide range of readers, primarily in cities. Such lithographed editions of those narratives enjoyed considerable popularity and were very widespread in Turkey in the 19th and first decades of the 20th centuries (for more details see: Anikeeva 2011: 112-114).

4 The *hikâye* is also closely associated with Turkish folk poetry — an *aşık* often becomes the main hero of a *hikâye*. Main sources of the *hikâye* are first of all Turkish folklore and folk poetry which is based on the syllabic metre. In its versified portions, the *hikâye* shows a definite affinity with various forms of folk poetry, and it is poetic fragments that are the stablest and at the same time the most flexible and liable to variations throughout the existence of those narratives as a genre.

“The Book of Dede Korkut” rides a “gray [sea] stallion” (*bir deniz kulunu boz aygır*), which was acquired to him at birth. *Tulpar* in the mythology of various Turkic peoples (among the Bashkirs, Kazakhs, Tatars, Kirghiz) is a magic winged horse that appears in the epic and fairy tales; in the epic of Alpamysh *tulpar* is “capable of transformations and endowed with superhuman intelligence” (Zhirmunsky 1962). As for the “gray [sea] stallion” (*Boz Aygır*) of “The Book of Dede Korkut”, this image is not completely clear (in particular, the nature of its connection with water/sea is not quite clear; for more details see: Anikeeva 2018: 189–192). It is likely that this image of a “water horse” (dragon?) in general has non-Turkic origin, and in the tales of “Kitab-i dedem Korkut” it is contaminated with the ancient image of a magical heroic horse endowed with wonderful abilities, traditional for Turkic epic. In the Beyşehir version of the folk narrative about Beyrek, as well as in handwritten versions and in the version of the same tale from Meydan, Beyrek’s horse is also called Benli Boz, or Bengi Boz, which, according to some researchers, directly goes back to Boz Aygır of Bamsi-Beyrek in the “The Book of Dede Korkut”.⁵ It is noteworthy that the horse receives its name at the same time when the name is given to its owner, the son of the padishah.

Moreover, both the rite of giving a name to the hero and the motive of the ruler’s childlessness and the miraculous birth of the hero himself⁶ are the most archaic and dating back to the most ancient examples of Turkic epic folklore. Both motives are somehow implemented in “The Book of Dede Korkut”: the childless Bayundur Khan (the leader of the Oghuz tribe) prays to the Almighty God about the birth of a child, and Bamsi Beyrek gets his name immediately after performing his first feat – protecting merchants with their goods from attack of infidels (Kniga moego deda Korkuta 1962: 32–35).

As it was already mentioned, the *hikâye* from Beyşehir as well as the version recorded in the village Meydan, and also handwritten versions, contain a large number of stylistic clichés which are peculiar to the genre of Turkish folk narrative and associated with its existence both in oral tradition and in the written form. Turkish *hikâye* has a rather distinct formulaic structure based on the following compositional principle: the initial formulas, the formulas that mark the change of episodes and those which enter verse passages are clearly distinguished; as for the endings, they usually consist of several elements that have stylistic parallels in other genres of Turkic folklore. Being quite stable, over time, this structure can undergo significant changes or even sometime break down, as it happens with new editions of Turkish folk narratives (for example, the initial formulas or endings change or disappear); however, it is practically the same for both oral and written/printed forms of *hikâye*.

⁵ See, for example: Gökyay 2000: 331.

⁶ The motive of the ruler’s childlessness is also often found in the world fairy-tale folklore, see, for example: Propp 2001: 110.

Versions of the narratives about Beyrek start with the traditional beginning of the Turkish *hikâye*:⁷

Evveli vaktını birinde... “In earlier times ...” (the Beyşehir version)

Râviyân-i ahbâr ve nâkilân-i asâr ve muhaddisat-ı ruzigâr şöyle rivayet ederler ki... “Those who transmit [tell] news and old legends tell that...” (the Istanbul manuscript).

Poetic fragments (as a rule, those are the appeals of the main characters of the *hikâye* to each other, their speeches) are also introduced with special stylistic cliches:

Aldı Bey Böyre “Bey Beyrek said...”

Aldı koç; bakalım Bey Böyreye ne diyecek “[and] the sheep said, let’s see what he says to Bey Beyrek”

Aldı kız “The girl said..”

The purpose of such cliches is to mark poetic fragments (*beyt*) in the prosaic text of the Turkish *hikâye*. The presence of such a cliché in the text of the narrative clearly refers to the oral tradition, to the oral aspect of its existence, when the narrator, or performer (*meddah* or *aşık*) is required to designate the verses (*beits*) pronounced by the heroes of the story. These fragments, as a rule, are distinguished by a special font and ornamentation in lithographed editions of a folk narrative and are often introduced by a special title (for example, *Beyt-i Tahir*) in handwritten copies.

Zhirmunsky notes that “the Anatolian tale” (as he calls the story about Beyrek) “has preserved such verses of a dialogical nature, partially overlapping with each other in its various versions and in the epic: the dialogue between Beyrek and the head of the merchant caravan, which brings to the prisoner some news from his homeland, his dialogue with the daughter of *kâfir* (“the infidel”), with his sister, who recognizes the missing brother in a disguised wanderer, with his wife while singing wedding ditties, etc.” (Zhirmunsky 1962: 209), but this statement does not have any grounds (as well as references to the sources): if in different versions of the *hikâye* about Beyrek the verse fragments do quite naturally coincide, certainly there is no question of any coincidence of this *hikâye* with the epic text of “The Book of Dede Korkut” besides some motives.

The question of the relationship between Turkish fairy tale and *hikâye* is one of the most important in the study of Turkish folklore and literature: it is still not entirely clear to what extent one can talk about the relationship of these genres and whether one can talk about the existence of continuity between them (Spiess 1929, Boratav 1946). In addition, some Turkish folk narratives include various episodes that reveal

7 Unlike the traditional beginning of Turkish fairy tales (*bir varmış bir yokmuş*: “whether it was, or it was not”), this formula gives an indication of the truth of the events referred to in the folk narrative (even if these events occurred “in immemorial times”).

a clear plot relationship with a fairy tale (such narratives are allocated to a special category of the so-called “framed” stories).⁸

Among the features absolutely peculiar for a fairy-tale that can be found in Turkish folk narrative, researchers have also decided to distinguish a number of characters that appear both in Turkish fairy tale and in the plot of *hikâye*. These are: the Saint *Hızır/Hizr*, *dev/div*, an old witch, a dragon, *Arab/Arab* (“*Arab Pahlavan*”), dervish, *Keloğlan* - the baldheaded man. As a rule, these characters in the Turkish folk narrative perform the same functions as in the fairy tale, that is, the function of magical assistants of the main hero. Thus, *Hızır*⁹ (or *Dervish*, *Derviş-baba*), appearing in the guise of a white-bearded old man, both in Turkish folk narratives and in a fairy tales, performs the role of *deus ex machina*, miraculously contributing to the overcoming of obstacles by the hero of the story. In the tale of *Beyrek*, it is *Derviş Baba* (in other versions – *Hızır*) who helps the miraculous birth of a son to a childless ruler by giving the padishah an apple with the order to give half of the apple to his wife,¹⁰ eat half of it himself and give the stalk to the mare.

The geographic names mentioned in Turkish folk narrative can be more indicative of its relationship with a fairy tale. The peculiarity of the *hikâye* is that its text contains such traditional countries for Turkish folklore as Hind, Çin, Yemen, Kandahar, Hindustan, Çin-Maçin, the city of Badakhshan, Karadağ.¹¹ As a rule, in *hikâye*, these geographical names are used in the same way as in Turkish fairy tale – these can be the places of residence of the main characters, heroes or those of them through which the hero of a fairy-tale wanders. However, unlike Turkish fairy tale, these fabulous place names in the text of the folk narrative are used along with real-life geographical

8 Quite often we can find the inclusion of fairy-tale episodes in the text of *hikâye*. The famous Turkish folk narrative “*Şahmeran*”, for example, contains a story about the cave of the prophet Suleiman, a story about the land of monkeys and the land of ants – i.e. plots widespread in the fairy-tale folklore of the Middle East.

9 The image of *Hızır* in Turkic mythology appeared under the influence of Islam (Ögel 2002; Basilov 1980: 536–541). *Hıdır*, *Hizr*, or *Hızır* is a character of Muslim mythology who has absorbed the features of various mythological characters of the pre-Islamic Middle East and is widespread in both Muslim literary tradition and folklore; he is considered the patron saint of travelers by the sea, a protector from fires, floods and thefts, etc. In Turkish folklore (fairy-tale, folk narrative), the image of *Hızır* often merges with the image of *Dervish* (*derviş*, *derviş baba*), who is endowed with magical, supernatural powers and/or magical objects (Stebleva 2002: 17–19).

10 This motive is very widespread in Turkish fairy tales, probably as a kind of motive the type 183 III in “Types of Turkish fairy-tales” (the index) by Eberhard and Boratav – “*Hızır* as a donator of a magical thing” (Eberhard, Boratav 1953).

11 As it is possible to see, almost all the names given are geographical names of real-life areas (Kandahar, Yemen, Badakhshan), however, in the folklore of the Middle East, they usually play the role of fabulous toponyms.

names of the Central and Eastern Anatolia and neighboring Iran¹² – for example, the Engerus fortress¹³ in the manuscript version of the story of Beyrek, as well as in the text recorded from a resident of the village Meydan.

In the Beysehir version of the folk narrative about Beyrek, along with Çin (China), we find mentions of Japan, Paris and London (“*Benim evlat Çin’de mi, Çapunda mı, Paris’te mi, Londura’da mı arayıp bulacaksınız*”), but at the same this folk narrative has also preserved the memory about the epic “padishah of the *Oğuz eli*”/“Land of the Oghuz” (or “*Oğuz padişah*” in the Meydan version): “*Oğuz eli padişahi*”. In “The Book of Dede Korkut” Bayundur Khan is the supreme khan of all Oghuz tribe, and the “country of the Oghuz” (*Oğuz eli*) designates not only and not so much the specific habitat of the Oghuz tribes in Asia Minor, but also the place opposite to the hostile land of the infidels. It is quite obvious that “the land of the Oghuz”, as well as Japan, London and Paris (to which the mythological geography of Turkish *hikâye* is expanded) are fabulous conventional names, testifying, on the one hand, to the deep antiquity of this plot, and on the other, to its relatively late forming into the genre of Turkish folk narrative *hikâye*.

Thus, “Kitab-i Dedem Korkut” being a medieval written epic in relation of the plot and some motives is closely related with the other genres of Turkish folklore and literature, which received much later development and existed until very recently.

References

- Anikeeva, T.A. 2011. *Tureckaya gorodskaya povest’ 19 veka*. Moskva: Vost.lit.
- Anikeeva, T.A. 2018. Ob obraze “serogo morskogo konya” v tyurkskom fol’klore. *Journal of the Institute of Oriental Studies RAS*. 3, 189–192.
- Basilov, V.N. 1980. Mifologiya tyurkoyazychnykh narodov. In: *Mify narodov mira. Enciklopediya*. Vol. 2. Moskva: Sov. enciklopedia. 536–541.
- Boratav, P.N. 1939. *Bey Böyrek hikâyesine ait metinler*. Ankara: Türk dili kurumu basımevi.
- Boratav, P.N. 1946. *Halk hikâyeleri ve halk hikâyeciliği*. Ankara: Milli eğitim basımevi.
- Dmitriyeva, L.V. 2002. *Katalog tyurkskikh rukopisej Instituta vostokovedeniya Rossijskoj akademii nauk*. Moskva: Vost.lit.
- Eberhard, W., Boratav, P.N. 1953. *Typen der Türkischer Volksmarschen*. Wiesbaden: Steiner.

12 For example, in the folk narrative about Sümmani and Gülperi, aşık Sümmani overcomes on the way to his beloved, who lives “in the country of Çin-Maçin, in the city of Badakhshan in the palace of Abbas Khan”, such countries as Iraq, Iran and Mazandaran, India and Afghanistan, but at the same time on his way there are such real cities of the North-East Anatolia, such as Kars, Erzurum, Nariman and the villages of Samikale (the native village of the real aşık Sümmani), Pıtkar, Poshof, Çıldır and many others.

13 The Engerus fortress also appears in late Turkish historical legends: “During the war, Sultan Bayazid Yıldırım could not take the Engerus fortress; then he vowed to build twenty mosques, and in a dream the gates of the fortress were opened for him” (Gordlevsky 1960: 481).

- Gökyay, O.Ş. (ed.). 2000. *Dedem Korkudun Kitabı*. İstanbul: Milli eğitim basımevi.
- Gordlevskiy, V.A. 1960. Osmanskije skazaniya i legendy (seriya pervaya). In: Gordlevskiy, V.A. 1960. *Izbrannye sochineniya*. Vol. 1. Moskva: AN SSSR. 321–488.
- Kniga moego deda Korkuta. Oguzskij geroicheskij epos*. 1962. Transl. by V.V. Barthold. Eds. V.M. Zhirmunskiy, A.N. Kononov. Moskva, Leningrad: AN SSSR.
- Macler, F. 1928. *Contes, legendes et epopee de l'Armenie*. Paris.
- Ögel, B. 2002. *Türk mitolojisi* (Kaynakları ve Açıklamaları ile Destanlar). II Cilt. Ankara.
- Propp, V.Ya. 2001. *Morfologiya volshebnoj skazki*. Moskva: Labirint.
- Spies, O. 1929. *Türkische Volksbücher*. Leipzig: Hermann Eichblatt.
- Stebleva, I.V. 2002. *Očerki tureczkoj mifologii: Po materialam volshebnoj skazki*. Moskva: Vost. lit.
- Zhirmunskiy, V.M. 1962. Oguzskij geroicheskij epos i “Kniga Korkuta”. In: *Kniga moego deda Korkuta. Oguzskij geroicheskij epos*. Transl. by V.V. Barthold. Eds. V.M. Zhirmunskiy, A.N. Kononov. Moskva, Leningrad: AN SSSR. 131–258.