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Buddhist Uighur Cultural Influence on the Development of Early Islamic Period of Turkic Culture*

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The acceptance of Islam by Qarakhanids in the Central Asia in the 10th century started a new development period in Turkic culture. The Turco-Islamic culture in Kasghar and its environs, one of the most important centres of Turkic Buddhism, was started to shape under the political sovereignty of the Qarakhanid State. There were long religion based struggles between the first Muslim Turks in Kashgar and the Buddhist Uighurs. Besides, the latter with a long-established cultural accumulation was the most significant element in the early Islamic Turkic culture. By looking at certain works, we can understand the fact that Turkic intellectuals of the early Islamic culture like Yūsuf of Balasaghun and Mahmūd Kāşgarī were really familiar with the Buddhist and Manichaeen Turkic cultures before Islam.

It is possible to strongly feel the effect of the Buddhist Uighur culture (the effects of the Buddhist philosophy) in a wide range from movements of Islamic sects and mysticism to Islamic architectural works, institutional structures (such as *madrasah*, and *ribad* etc.)¹. However, each of these headings is a topic of individual studies. In the present paper, I will try to present the effect of the Buddhist Uighur culture through a linguistic perspective together with concrete samples from written language traditions and the related terminology.

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¹ For further information see Osman Turan, "Türkler ve İslam", *Türkler*, Volume 4, p. 292; Emel Esin, *İslamiyetten Önceki Türk Kültür Tarihi ve İslama Giriş*, Edebiyat Fakültesi Matbaası, İstanbul 1978, p. 166-171.

Islam has been an important criterion in dating and classifying the historical Turkic language. After the acceptance of Islam, the Turks underwent a new religious and cultural atmosphere and faced a new alphabet and literary language tradition. Therefore, the terms of “Pre-Islam” and “Post-Islam” in Turkology literature were the two important criteria for the written language periods. As it is known, the first period of Islamic Turkic language was characterized by Qarakhanid Turkic which was largely based on the Buddhist Uighur written language. As a result, some Turkologists like Marcel Erdal considered Qarakhanid literary monuments such as *Dīwān lugāti’-Turk* and *Qutadgu Bilig* as the late language material of Old Turkic². Thus, these works are also considered as the texts of early Islamic period. In those Qarakhanid monuments, the traces of the Buddhist Uighur written language are so strong. The Uighur tradition in terms of both grammatical components and vocabulary and spelling is seen in Qarakhanid works.

The most remarkable change brought by Islam is the Arabic script. The Uighur alphabet that belonged to the Buddhist Uighurs was basically out of use as a non religious motive. On the other hand, as well as the Arabic script, the Uighur script was still in use both in correspondence tradition and literary tradition throughout Turco-Islamic geography until the 16th and the 17th centuries³. We know that in the historical eastern Turkic language many literary texts like *Qutadgu Bilig*, *Atabetu’l-Hakayik* were copied using the Uighur script. On the other hand, in Turco-Islamic states in the Central Asia, especially originated from Chinggis Khan, the Uighur writing was in use as a prestige script as well as Arabic script (occasionally the two scripts together) in diplomatic correspondence⁴.

² M. Erdal, *A Grammar of Old Turkic*, Brill, Leiden Boston 2004, 8-9; Şinasi Tekin, “Eski Türk Yazı Dillerinin Özellikleri Üzerine Düşünceler”, *İştikakçının Köşesi*, Simurg: İstanbul 2001, 121-138.

³ See. S. Tezcan, “Türklerde Yazı Kültürünün Başlangıcı ve Gelişimi”, *Harf Devriminin 50. Yılı Sempozyumu*, Ankara, 1981, 41-42; Hatice Şirin User, *Başlangıcından Günümüze Türk Yazı Sistemleri*, Akçağ 2006, p. 52-61.

⁴ See. A. Melek Özyetgin, *Altın Ordu, Kırım ve Kazan Sahasına Ait Yarluk ve Bitiklerin Dil ve Üslup İncelemesi*, Türk Dil Kurumu Yayınları, Ankara 1996.

The Uighurs of the golden age of Turkic culture played an important role in spreading the use of script and paper. Therefore, they deeply influenced the creativity in Islamic period literary works and correspondence tradition. The effects of the Buddhist Uighur cultural accumulation on Turco-Islamic world largely arose after the establishment of the Qarakhanid and Turco-Mongolian States. On the other hand, thanks to Turco-Mongolian states that were based on the Uighur culture in terms of state organization and many other aspects, the Buddhist Uighur culture was influential across the area where Turco-Mongolian states were located.⁵

The well-known oldest civil documents dating back to the Qarakhanid period were land sale documents written in the Uighur script, which were found in Yarkand and belonged to 1080 and 1090⁶. These Qarakhanid sale documents were considerably similar to the Uighur sale documents in terms of style. As it is known, there are collected works of civil documents that enlight the social, legal and economic state of the Uighur period, including rich materials in terms of social history and language. This similarity shows us the Uighurs influenced the Qarakhanid legal order.

The effects of the Buddhist Uighurs are particularly remarkable in one field. The Uighurs during the acceptance of Buddhism showed a notable attitude concerning Turkic language while translating the main works of this religion into Uighur language. They meticulously worked on finding Turkic terms that corresponded to basic and philosophic concepts of Buddhism, but used foreign equivalents of the terms that were not found in their own culture. With their long-established cultural accumulation, they employed all the possibilities of the Uighur language for their new religion (For instance; Skr. *Tripitaka*: Uig. *Üç agılıg nom*, Pagoda: Uig. *ediz ev*). Besides the Turkic terms found in Buddhist texts, metaphoric expressions significantly took place. From these points, the

⁵ Osman Turan “Türkler ve İslamiyet”, *Türkler*, Volume 4, p. 290-304.

⁶ Şinasi Tekin, “Bilinen En Eski İslami Türkçe Metinler: Uygur Harfleriyle Yazılmış Karahanlılar Devrine Ait Tarla Satış Senetleri (473, 483=1080, 1090)”, *Selçuklu Araştırmaları Dergisi* IV, Ankara 1975, p. 157-186; Marcel Erdal “The Turkish Yarkand Documents”, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, University of London, Vol.47, No. 2 (1984), p. 260-301.

method through which the Quran was translated into Turkic during the early period of Islam and the one used for the translation of Buddhist works overlap. During that period, the Persian influence to increase later was not so strong. As in the Buddhist texts, Turkisation of religious terms in the translation of the Quran were considered.

It is believed that the first Qarakhanid Turkic interlinear translation of the Quran dates back to the 11th century⁷. The only copy of this interlinear translation of the Quran (TİEM73) is in Turco-Islamic Works Museum in İstanbul (registered in no: 73). According to a *katabah* record in Turkic translation of the Quran, this work was copied by Şirazlı Muhammed b. El-Hācc Devletşah in 1334. This work was prepared as a doctorate thesis by Abdullah Kök and Suat Ünlü in 2004.⁸ Kök and Ünlü completed a very successful work in their thesis. Both of them suggested that the related interlinear Turkic translation of the Quran was similar to the language of the two Qarakhanid texts; *Dīwān lugāti'-Turk* and *Qutadgu Bilig*, based on their grammatical and vocabulary studies in the thesis. In this work, the appearance of Turkic terms derived in order to correspond to Arabic terms, particularly in religious terminology, is remarkable. Turkisation of the new religious terms appeared in the language after Islam can undoubtedly be viewed as the continuation of the tendency observed in Turco-Buddhist tradition during the Old Turkic period. On the other hand, it is possible to think that there were Uighur translators in the team that translated the Quran. As a matter of fact, Şinasi Tekin suggested that two Turkic originated members in “the translation commission of the Quran into Persian and Turkic languages”

⁷ For Turkish translations of the Kor'an see Güliden Sağol “Kur'an'ın Türkçe Tercüme ve Tefsirleri Üzerinde Yapılan Çalışmalar”, *Türklük Araştırmaları Dergisi*, Sayı: 8, İstanbul 1997.

⁸ Abdullah Kök, “Karakhanlı Türkçesi Satır-Arası Kur'an Tercümesi (TİEM 73 1v-235v/2), *Giriş-İnceleme-Metin-Dizin*”, Ankara Üniversitesi, Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü, 2004, Unpublished Doctorate Thesis; Suat Ünlü “Karakhanlı Türkçesi Satır-Arası Kur'an Tercümesi (TİEM 235v/3-450r/7)”, Hacettepe Üniversitesi, Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü, 2004, Unpublished Doctorate Thesis

that formed by Mansur bin Nuh I., one of the last Samanid emperors in the late 10th century were most probably Uighurs⁹.

There are three notable points in the first Qarakhanid interlinear translation of the Quran: 1. Turkisation of the religious terminology according to the Buddhist Uighur tradition; 2. Adding Islamic content to Buddhist terms and concepts in translation; 3. Use of metaphorical expressions for significant concepts, as in Buddhist texts. We can explain them with concrete samples as follows:

1. The Turkic terminology that was used in the interlinear translation of the Quran was soon changed under the influence of Persian and Arabic languages. We can suggest the following as the examples of the Turkic religious terms in the first Qarakhanid translation of the Quran:

The Turkic word *qızgut küni* was used for “Doomsday” (Tiem 168v/8=011/066). *Kızgut* in this compound word meant “punishment, hardship, fatigue, torture” in the Buddhist Uighur literature. (ED681b). Similarly, *qopmaq küni* is another Turkic equivalent used for “doomsday”. The word *qop-* in Turkic means “stand up” and use of *qopmaq küni* is derived in accordance with the understanding of doomsday in Islam.

In the interlinear translation of the Quran, the Turkic word *Oqıgu* is also used for the word “the Quran”. It is derived from the verb *Oqı-* (which means “to read”) with the participle *-gu*. This word is frequently used in the Quran text: *bir oqıgu keltür-* “Kur’an getirmek” (Tiem 154v/1=010/015), *oqıgu indür-* “Kur’an indirmek” (Tiem234r/2=020/113), *oqıgu indürül-* “Kur’an indirilmek” (Tiem92r/7=005/101), *oqıgu oqu-* “Kur’an’ı okumak” (Tiem 209r/7=017/045).

Saınuı means “pious” (ehl-i takva) (Tiem 224r/1=019/018). It is derived from the Turkic verb *saın-* “to think” (ED814a). The same word was also used in *Qutadgu Bilig*. The word was used in the works of the middle Turkic period with a meaning of “a man who fears God”. Again, *aymaqlıı* “to praise (God) (in Arabic hamd)” (Tiem 154r/1=010/010) is derived from the Turkic verb *aya-* “respect, show respect, glorify” (ED267b). The term *Bitig idileri* was used for the

⁹ Şinasi Tekin, “Eski Türk Yazı Dillerinin Özellikleri Üzerine Düşünceler”, *İştıkakçının Köşesi*, Simurg: İstanbul 2001, p. 137.

concept of “people of the book, i.e., Muslims, Christians, Jews” (ehl-i kitāb) (Tiem 73r/3=004/123) in Islam. This term is a combination of *bitig* “writing, book” + *idi* “owner”. Some Turkic words used for “God” before Islam were also in use after Islam. In the interlinear translation of the Quran, the words **Tengri**, **Ugan** and **İdi** were used for “Allah, God”. The word *idi*, which merely meant “owner” during the Old Turkic period (ED41a) was used to refer to “God” after Islam, thinking that God is the owner of all beings. Again, the word **muysuz** (< Tu. *muḡ*+*suz*) is used as one of the names of God (Allah). (Tiem317r/6=035/015).

During the Old Turkic period, **yalavaç** meant “Originally a diplomatic envoy from one ruler to another ambassador”; adopted in Manichaeism and Moslem terminology for ‘Prophet’. (ED921a). During the Islamic period, the word was used to mean “prophet” since a prophet is “the ambassador and the messenger of God” (Ar. al-rasul; Pe. peygamber).

As in the interlinear translation of the Quran, there are similar Turkic religious terms in the first known text of the Islamic Turkic literary: *Divanü Lügati't-Türk*. For example, **yükünç** “namaz” (DLT I 171), **alqış** “prayer and *salavat*” (DLT I, 97), **biti** “each book that was sent from the Heavens, the holy book” (DLT, III 217), **savcı** “ambassador, prophet” (DLT III, 154), **tapın-, yinçgelen-** “worship” (DLT III, 450) etc. Mahmūd Kāşgarī recorded in *Dīwān* that most of the Muslim Turks called god (Allah) “**Tengri**”, and that some of them called god (Allah) “**Ugan Tengri**”, whereas Argus used the word **Bayat**. Moreover, he stated that in some of the Turkic settlements, the Turkic word **savcı** was used instead of the word **peygamber** borrowed from Persian and that Qarakhanids used the word **yalavaç** under the influence of Uighur Turkic.

2. The second remarkable point in the interlinear translation of the Quran is that Buddhist technical terms were given a new Islamic content: For instance, the word **qılınç** (Tiem 309r/4=033/053) in order to correspond to “deed (Ar. amel)” in Islamic terminology is used. The word **qılınç** in the Buddhist and Manichaean Uighur religious texts was an equivalent for Sanskrit *Karma*. This word was later used during the Islamic period to mean “mood, nature, character” in general vocabulary.

Another word is **muynan**, which means “religious recompe (Ar. sevāb)” (Tiem 133v/9=008/028). The word comes from the Sanskrit word *punya*. That word which was *buyan* in the Manichaean and the

Buddhist Uighur texts became *muyan* in the Islamic period. Furthermore, we know that the expression *muyanlıq* (Tiem 86r/2=005/045) was used in the Islamic literature in order to correspond to “pious foundation (Ar. *sabil*, *waqf*)”.

The word *ajun* originated from Sogd is one of the Buddhist technical terms. It means “state of existence; one of a series of lives in the process of birth, death, re-incarnation (=Sankr. *Gati*)” (ED28a). The word in the interlinear translation of the Quran was used to refer to “the world” which is the counterpart of “life to come” in the Islam (Tiem 234v/9=020/128). Still, the term *ajunlug* in the interlinear translation was used with a new Islamic content “worldly” (Tiem 103v/4=006/090).

Another term originated from Sogd is *tamu* ~ *tamug*, which means “Hell” (ED503a). This word was used in the Buddhist and the Manichaean texts to refer to the word “Hell”, the counterpart of “Heaven” in Islam. *Uçmah* ~ *uçmaq* < *Uştmax* (ED257b), again originated from Sogd, was used for “Heaven” in Islam. That word was adapted by Muslims during the early Islamic period. On the other hand, it is possible to relate this word to the verbs *uç-* and *uça bar-* in Old Turkic, which mean “die”. Another derivative of the word or *Uştmaḥçı* “people of heaven” was used in the translation (Tiem 262r/7). Another word in the Buddhist Uighur texts or *yumuşçı* was used in the interlinear translation of the Quran in order to refer to “ambassador, prophet”.

Use of the Buddhist terminology with Islamic contents takes place in *Dīwān lugāti’-Turk*. On the other hand, there were some verses that were indicators of insult and hatred against the Buddhists, who were considered as pagans in *Dīwān*. However, it is noteworthy that certain religious content terms that belong to the Buddhist Uighur period were used with Islamic meanings. *Nom* “religion” *Teyri nomu* “God’s religion” (DLT III, 137), *uçmaq* “heaven” (DLT I, 118), *tamu* “hell” (DLT III, 234) in *Dīwān* are examples of such a use. Although these words were originated from Buddhism, they were not excluded from the language thinking that they were foreign words or non religious words after Islam, since they came into use and well adopted¹⁰.

¹⁰ Robert Dankoff “Kaşgari on the Beliefs and Superstitions of the Turks”, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 95.1, (1975), p. 69-70.

3. Another point where the Buddhist Uighur literary tradition influenced the translation of the Quran is that religious concepts are presented with metaphorical expressions. As it is known, Buddhism is a doctrine with a dominant philosophy. Buddhism presents its own peculiar cultural world in a world of concepts full of metaphores. In the Turkic Buddhist texts, there are many metaphores from the original Buddhist culture¹¹. As it is known, a metaphor is explaining a concept with another concept, based on the similarity and the relationship between the two. We can find these expression features in the Buddhist texts, and similar metaphor models in the first interlinear Turkic translation of the Quran. For example, *yürüñ tonluglar* (ED 233b) in Manichaeian texts, which meant “white-robed elect” was used as *ürüñ tonluglar*, which meant “apostle” in the translation (Tiem 93v/8=005/112). Moreover, *arig tonlug* with the same meaning was used in the translation (Tiem 93v/7=005/111)¹².

agırlıg äv (Tiem 191r/6=014/037), *ärklig äv*, as a metaphorical use, meant “respected house”, “mighty, strong house” in order to refer to “Kaaba”, the holly place in Islam. In the translation, the expression *Tängri ündükçileri* was used for prophets. It is derived from the Turkic verb *ünde-*, which means “call”. At this point, we see a use to indicate the main task of prophets. Furthermore, metaphorical uses in the translation of the Quran for prophets’ names are remarkable¹³. For instance, the word *tolun* was used for Muhammed, the prophet (Tiem 228v/3=020/001). The Turkic word *tolun* means “the full moon, the moon filled with light”. It is an alternative expression to refer to Muhammed’s characteristic to enlight his environment and heavenly light around him. This metaphor model is also seen in the Buddhist texts. One of the metaphors used for Buddha is the image of light based on the enlightenment theories of Buddhism. In the image, Buddha is similar to the moon, since he is the one to enlight darkness. Therefore, the similarity to

¹¹ Mağfıret Kemal, “Buddhist Türk Çevresi Eserlerinde Metafor”, Ankara Üniversitesi, Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü, Unpublished Doctorate Thesis, Ankara 2004.

¹² See Abdullah Kök, “Türkçe İlk Kur’an Çevirilerinde Özel Adlar”, *V. Uluslararası Türk Dili Kurultayı Bildirileri II*, TDK Yayınları, Ankara 2004, p. 2040.

¹³ See Abdullah Kök, *ibid.*, p. 2035-2050.

the moon is an alternative expression of this feature¹⁴. Again, there are two metaphores for the first human being and the first prophet Adam. The first one *yalıuq* (ED930b) was used for “mankind, being” in the Buddhist and the Manichaeic texts. The second one is *bugday enlig* (Tiem, 113r/7=007/011) For Yunus, the prophet, the term *balıq idisi* “the owner of fish” was used (Tiem 240v/3=021/087). As it is well known, the prophet who offends morals falls into the sea and a fish swallows him, but since God forgives him and does not let him die, the fish lets him go and takes him to the shore. The metaphor for Yunus, the prophet is related to this meaning. In the translation of the Quran, *bitimiş bitig*, which meant “written book” for holy books was used for the Torah (Tiem 318v/7=035/025). *Yarug bitig*, which meant “the book of heavenly light” was used for the New Testament (Tiem 56r/4=003/184). We can certainly increase the number of these examples.

As a result, the Uighurs, who experienced a high culture with Buddhism, became a part of Qarakhanids after Islam, and again created a long-established high culture with Islam. We see that Buddhism lived among the Uighurs until the 14th and the 15th centuries. We can say that the Buddhist tradition was long established in a society with a certain culture like the Uighurs and continued its influence in some aspects after Islam. The Turks considered their belief as an indispensable part of their culture and kept pre-Islam elements thanks to their vast religious tolerance. It is possible to see examples of pre-Islamic beliefs in certain fields in today’s identity and tradition of Muslim Turks. In a sense, Turkic culture has been able to keep its integrity uninterruptedly in different religious atmospheres.

¹⁴ Magfired Kemal, *Ibid.* p. 98.