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## **An Analysis on the Origin Myth of the Başkurts and Its Variants in the Turkic Cultural Ecology**

**Özkul Çobanoğlu**

Hacettepe Üniversitesi, Ankara

**Abstract:** The aim of this paper is to show thematically, functional, and structural characteristics of “the motif of the guide grey wolf” as one of the origin myth of Başkurts (Bashkirs) in the context of chance and continuity. In addition to that a special comparative attention is given to the motif’s variants in the contexts of Turkic cultural ecology.

**Key words:** the motif of guide grey wolf, the origin myth of Başkurts, Başkurt folklore, Turkic mythology, Turkic cultural ecology.

The subject of this study is the identification of the structural and functional elements that show comparative continuity of the archaic and recent examples in the Turkish cultural history of the motif of “the guide grey wolf”, which is one of the origin myths of the Başkurts.

As the great Başkurt scholar Abdülkadir İnan (1968: 74) indicates, one of the origin myths of the Başkurts is related to the motif of ‘the guidance of the grey wolf’ or ‘the leadership of the grey wolf’. Abdülkadir İnan quoted Nazarov from an article written in 1862 as follows to point out the origin myth from which the etymology of the name ‘Başkurt’ originated: ‘The Prophet sent three of his companions to the Ural Mountains to teach Islam. A grey wolf acted as a guide to these companions until the Ural Mountains. After the people in the Ural Mountains accepted Islam, they were named ‘Başkurt’ (literally the head wolf)’ (İnan 1968a:74).

As it is known, ‘the cult of the guide grey wolf’, which is considered to be a ‘Turkish cult’ since the time of the great Russian scholar Potanin and thanks to his work, has an important place in the common mythol-

ogy of the Turkish peoples. Especially ‘the sacred guide grey wolf’ or “kök böri”<sup>1</sup>, which we see in the Uighur variant of the Oğuz Kağan Epic –which we will mention below- and which acts as a guide to convey the wish of God, can be said to be the oldest example or prototype of this cult. Undoubtedly, those that are older than this are the myths and legends related to the Turks having been derived from the grey wolf which are conveyed by the Chinese chronicles.

Within this context, many motifs such as “the sacred mother who enabled the derivation, wolf mother, the sacred light that assumed the appearance of a wolf” (Ögel 1971: 40-52), “the savoir wolf” (Sinor 1982: 224), ‘the spirit of the ancestors who helps’ (Özarslan 1997) were uncovered in the studies conducted with regard to the wolf, which is the most important symbol of the Turkish mythology. One of these and perhaps the most important of them is the motif of ‘the guide wolf’ which guides the Turkish ruler or the person who acts as a leader of the community.

The motif of “the guide wolf”, which is deemed to be sacred because of its having been sent by the God and whose guidance is believed to bring success, has a significant place in both the historical socio-cultural context of the Turkish culture and the Turkish socio-cultural context of today.

We see the oldest example that is commonly known of ‘the motif of the guide grey wolf’, which is one of the origin myths of the Başkurts indicated above, in the Uighur variant of the Oğuz Kağan Epic (Bang 1936). The grey wolf, which acts as a guide in the epic in which the military campaigns of Oğuz Kağan in many different areas and his subjugating his enemies and the process of emergence and being named are narrated, also gives advice to Oğuz Kağan (Reichl 1992: 35). Although it seems that the guide grey wolf motif, which is mentioned five times, takes up little space, it is in fact the main element in the formation of the epic personality of Oğuz Kağan, who is the hero of the epic, due to its origin, character, nature and its functions that are based on these.

It is seen that the source of the guide grey wolf motif in the Oğuz Kağan Epic is divine. Sky God (Gök Tanrı) sends a guide grey wolf inside a

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<sup>1</sup>For names “böri”, “kurt” and “kaşkı” see (İnan 1968b).

light 'bright like the sun', which symbolizes sacredness and blessing, - just as he had sent his first wife to him- in order to show that he agrees with the wish -which can also be considered to be a supplication- of Oğuz Kağan, who declared the national wishes and made an attempt to be a world conqueror by saying 'I became your ruler: let us take the bow and the shield, let the 'buyan' be a sign for us, let the wolf be a 'uran' (symbol) for us, let the forest be a spear, let the subjects walk to the hunting place: more sea, more rivers, the sun is the flag and the sky is the tent.' (Bang 1936: 17) and supports him. The sending of the guide wolf and his mission is stated as follows in the epic: 'Oğuz Kağan became angry and wanted to charge towards them, he unfolded the flag and marched towards him with his soldiers. After forty days he came to the bottom of a mountain named Muz Tağ. He had his tent pitched and slept silently. At the dawn time a light like the sun entered Oğuz Kağan's tent. A large wolf with a sky-blue mane appeared from that light. This wolf addressed Oğuz Kağan and said: "O Oğuz! You want to march towards the Urum: O Oğuz! I would like to walk in front of you". Then Oğuz Kağan had his tent folded and left. He saw that a male wolf that had sky-blue hair and sky-blue mane was walking in front of the troops and the army was following the wolf.' (Bang 1936: 15).

As it is clearly seen in the text, the guide grey wolf, which was sent by the God, knows the future plans of Oğuz Kağan and informs him by talking to him that he would like to walk in front of his army in a mission of guidance whereby he would show him the path and direction which the God decreed and he has to follow. So the guide grey wolf is nothing other than the will of God "being embodied" and reaching Oğuz Kağan. So Oğuz Kağan follows it without disobeying this divine command that reached him. The war, which takes place after the divine command is complied with, the guide grey wolf is followed and which is waged against enemy 'Urum Kağan', who is encountered at the place where the grey wolf stops and thus the army stops meaning at the place chosen by the grey wolf, ends with victory. This event is narrated in the epic as follows: "This male wolf, which had sky-blue hair and sky-blue mane, stopped after a few days. Oğuz Kağan also stopped together with his troops. AT that place there was a sea named İtil Müren. The war started in front of a black mountain near İtil Müren. They fought with

arrows, spears and swords. The waters of İtil Müren became totally scarlet like vermillion. Oğuz Kağan defeated Urum Kağan and the latter ran away.” (Bang 1936: 15-21).

However the guide grey wolf, which is appointed and sent by the God, is not always together with Oğuz Kağan. It appears in those situations that are required by its mission, leads Oğuz and his army, takes them to where the enemy is and gives advice to Oğuz. Thus, in the epic, the reappearance of the guide grey wolf after it was found to have disappeared in the aftermath of the war against Urum Kağan, his appearing to Oğuz Kağan and his talking to and acting as a guide to Oğuz Kağan is told as follows: “Then Oğuz Kağan saw the wolf with sky-blue mane. That wolf said to Oğuz Kağan: ‘Now Oğuz, you march from here together with your troops, take the people and the begs. I will show you the way at the front’. At dawn Oğuz Kağan saw that the male wolf is walking in front of the troops. He rejoiced and moved forward.” (Bang 1936: 23).

Another statement as to the guide grey wolf not being with Oğuz Kağan all the time but appearing and disappearing depending on its mission is repeated when the war of Oğuz Kağan against Çürçet Kağan is narrated: “Again one day the male wolf with the sky-blue hair and sky-blue mane stopped. Oğuz Kağan also stopped and had his tent pitched. This was an arid place with no fields. It was called Çürçet. It was a large country: it had lots of horses, oxen, calves, gold, silver and jewellery. Here Çürçet Kağan and his people confronted Oğuz Kağan. Fighting started. They fought with arrows and swords. Oğuz Kağan was victorious.” (Bang 1936: 25-27).

Oğuz Kağan sees the existence of the wolf, which is sent by God to him to act as a guide and which shows the way by appearing when necessary, as a proof of his being blessed, ‘found blessing’ by God. He does not hide his joy when the wolf, which leads him and his army from victory to victory, appears and this fact is noted in the epic. When all the military campaigns conducted by Oğuz Kağan and the wars he won are narrated in the epic, for the reasons we indicated above it is especially mentioned that the guide wolf was present in all of them: “Then he walked towards India, Tangut and Syria together with this male wolf with sky-blue hair and sky-blue mane. He conquered them after a lot of

fighting and battles and annexed them. He subjugated them and made them his subjects.” (Bang 1936: 27).

At the end of the epic, while distributing his country among his sons Oğuz Kağan says that the things he did during his life was a result of a divine mission and that what he did was only paying his debt to the Sky God. He states these as follows: “Then Oğuz Kağan distributed his country among his sons and said: O my sons! I have been through a lot: I have seen a lot of battles, I have thrown a lot of spears and arrows, I have ridden horses a lot. I have made my enemies cry and I have made my friends laugh. I have paid my debt to the Sky God. Now I give my country to you.” (Bang 1936: 33).

Both this statement and the extraordinary birth and growing of Oğuz Kağan reflect the belief that he was someone chosen by God. What is the most important here is that beyond his being chosen by God his conquest of the world and the arrangements he made were approved by God and moreover, the source of all the military victories that were won was the help of God which was obtained through the sacred guide grey wolf which was sent by God.

In the light of these explanations, the functional characteristics of the motif of guide grey wolf, which gives advice to Oğuz Kağan and guides him, can be listed as follows:

1. The person to whom the guide grey wolf appears and helps is a leader with extraordinary personality and mission who displayed extraordinary states at his birth, childhood and adult life and who thought of conquering the world when he became the Kağan.
2. The source of the guide grey wolf is divine. It is sent by God to Oğuz Kağan, who is a sacred person chosen by God.
3. The grey wolf, which is the sacred being showing the path to the Kağan, walks in front of Oğuz and his army and shows them the location of the enemy and the war. In addition, the guide grey wolf talks to Oğuz Kağan and sometimes gives him advice and encouragement as well as guiding him.
4. Since the grey wolf reflects the transformed (embodied) form of the will of God, one always has victory on the path that it shows. The Guide Grey Wolf, which is explained through an embodiment that reflects the will of God, is the proof of the Kağan, who encounters such an

embodiment event, having attained blessing in the eyes of God and this exalts him. The Kağan starts his mission with the sending of the Guide grey wolf and starts the process that will make him eternal. As such, with the guidance of the grey wolf Oğuz Kağan assumes the personality of a saint who is able to communicate with God and who acts in compliance with his consent in everything he does.

In this way ‘the motif of the guide grey wolf’ appears in front of us in the old Turkish belief system as one of the most concrete forms of the bond established between “the God –who is the protector and the giver of Kağans- and the Kağan” through the grey wolf so that the Turkish nation will not vanish and the ongoing bond between God and the nation is established through compliance with the commands of God’ (Yıldırım 1992a: 355). Furthermore, the fact that all the things that God does through the guide grey wolf manifest themselves as Oğuz to whom he gave ‘blessing, power’ (Divitçioğlu 1987) and made a Kağan paying his debt to God by making the Turkish nation, and thus the rule of God dominant in the world displays the old Turkish ‘ideology of being a Kağan’ (Yıldırım 1991; 1992b) and the belief system or world view.

It is known that motif of the guide grey wolf continued to exist among the Turkish tribes also after the acceptance of Islam. In this issue it will be useful to repeat both the naming of the Başkurt Turks and the legends narrated by Abdülkadir İnan (1968: 74) regarding their coming to the territories they lived in and adopting them as their country. According to a narration, which was compiled from Başkurt oral sources in the 19th century and was conveyed by Abdülkadir İnan after being summarized by him, the source of the name “Başkurt” is as follows: “The Prophet sent three of his companions to the Ural mountains to teach Islam. A Grey Wolf acted as a guide to these companions until the Ural Mountains. The people who were in the Ural Mountains took the name ‘Başkurt’ (i.e. Head Wolf) after accepting Islam.” (İnan 1968a: 74). It is not possible to reconcile a “wolf” acting as a guide to the companions, each of whom are accepted as “guiding stars to reach the true path” according to the belief of the Prophet, with Orthodox Islamic beliefs.

However a legend that was compiled among the Başkurts and that was narrated by Abdülkadir İnan indicates that non-Islamized forms of the guide grey wolf motif exist among the Başkurts as well. The main

parts of the legend that talks about how the Başkurts discovered their country through the wolf that acted as a guide and how they settled there was narrated by Abdülkadir İnan as follows: “In the olden times the Başkurt, Nogay, Kazakh and Kirgiz people used to live on the high mountains in the Far East as the children of a single father. At that time, there were no names such as Başkurt, Nogay, etc. Once disagreement and struggle emerged among them. One day a wolf appeared in front of a tribe leader when he was setting off for hunting. The leader followed this wolf and reached great mountains which had forests and rivers like a paradise. Then the wolf suddenly disappeared. The leader realized that the wolf which acted as a guide was a ‘blessing: fortune’ appointed by God to this people. The leader returned to the eastern country. He took his tribe and his people to the Ural Mountains. So this tribe which left its other brothers was named ‘Başkurt’ meaning ‘the people for whom a wolf became a head and brought them’” (İnan 1968a: 74).

In this legend, which includes probably an older variant of the naming of the Başkurts, it seems that the “guide wolf”, which acts as a guide to the leader of a tribe who is in trouble due to the struggles with the other tribes and shows him the location where they can settle, is a continuation of the motif of the guide grey wolf in the Oğuz Kağan Epic which shows the location of the enemy to be fought and that the function of this motif remains the same as a cultural pattern of thought and behaviour even though changes took place parallel to the change in the need to be met in terms of the working of this motif.

We see that the guide grey wolf motif, which is in the Uighur variant of the Oğuz Kağan Epic, which reflects the Turkish world view prior to Islam and which has an extremely important role in Turkish cultural history in many aspects and in the Başkurt legends, and whose functional characteristic we have given above continues to live in the legendary anecdotes narrated in the oral culture environment among the Anatolian Alevi-Bektashi Turkmens today as well.

The guide grey wolf motif that exists in the legendary anecdotes obtained in a work of compilation (Ahi 1997) conducted among the Turkmens of Ankara-Çubuk Dağkalfat Village who have Bektashi-Alevi beliefs indicates the continuity of the guide grey wolf motif in the Oğuz Kağan Epic up to today in terms of structure and function.



Before we address these structural and functional elements that exhibit continuity, it will be useful to introduce the hero of the second example event. It is believed that Seyit Süleyman, who was born in Yeniköy, which is connected to the Çubuk county of Ankara, and who was a “Lover of God” and who was also known with the nicknames “The one without water” or “Lover”, drank the wine of love in 1893 and that he told all his sayings in the last seven years of his life after that (Çağlayan 1996).

It is seen that “the gathering of the forty”, which had the characteristic of a rite de passage which ensures Seyit Süleyman’s being transformed from a plain personality to an artist who recites poems extemporaneously and a spiritual leader personality who is a “saint” and the wolves that ensured his entry to this rite had the characteristic of the “guide grey wolf” in Turkish cultural history. In addition to the “dream motif” (Günay 1986) that we commonly see in the lover style literature tradition and the continuity of which is shown in the old Turkish belief system, a rite de passage based on the guide grey wolf motif emerges. Seyit Süleyman, who is invited to a gathering being conducted in the village of Dağkalfat by being informed spiritually, joins the Gathering of the Forty through the guidance of three wolves who appear in front of him while he is responding to the invitation and one of them takes its place in front of him, the second one on his right and the third one on his left. A legendary anecdote that was identified in this subject is as follows: “It is narrated that when the crops were being sown in the cold weather in November, a gathering was being conducted in Dağkalfat in the evening. Lover Süleyman, who was conducting the gathering called Seyit Süleyman of Yeniköy (the one without water) saying ‘Come quickly, we are in trouble as lovers’. This call became evident to Seyit Süleyman. He kept the oxen waiting until then. He went home and said ‘My lady, it seems that they are in trouble in a gathering in Dağkalfat, they are calling me’ and set off. Three wolves appeared in front of him on the way. The wolves lifted their hands to him. Two of them walked on the two sides of him and one of them walked in front of him like soldiers. They walked and they entered a state near the Evelek Rock and in the Hill of Üçbaş according to another narration, they entered an ocean and the wolves disappeared there. He entered the vicinity of a gathering.

He entered the gathering of saints and they gave him a cup of wine. Wine of the God<sup>2</sup>. He was unable to drink all of the wine, he drank half of it and he started to recite poetry right there after drinking half of the wine. Towards dawn he left that place, arrived in Dağkalfat and he entered through the door tired and exhausted.' (Ahi 1997: 51-52)

According to the belief, Seyit Süleyman, who drank the wine of love after attending the Gathering of the Forty under the guidance of the guide wolves and who recited sayings as a lover of God, is a great saint whose "eye of of the heart is open" and he talks to the forty. Understanding those characteristics of the guide wolves narrated above that are related to the guide wolves becoming "an embodiment" is possible through another legendary anecdote compiled from the same region. In the first legendary anecdote the wolves that bring Lover Seyyit Süleyman to the Gathering of the Forty and include him there disappear. However in another Lover Seyyit Süleyman legendary anecdote, it is seen that the forty take the appearance of a wolf or a grey wolf and they wander around like that, and Lover Seyyit Süleyman sometimes meets them: "While Lover Seyit Süleyman and his friend İbiş of Sarısu were going to their village, İbiş says: 'Lover! You haven't taken me to the Forty, you haven't shown me the gathering of the forty'. Seyit Süleyman says: "All right İbiş, I will take you to the gathering of the forty".

When they are on their way, wolves pass in front of them, make them turn, and give them hot sweets. They take them and eat them. Then the wolves leave, and they set off on their way. Since Seyit Süleyman knows that the wolves were the forty, he is aware that they sat with them . When they are leaving İbiş says "you said that you were going to show me the forty, why haven't you shown them to me?". Seyit Süleyman says:"we sat together, haven't you seen them?". İbiş is surprised. Seyit Süleyman says: "Then the eye of your heart is closed" (Ahi 1997: 56).

It clearly seems that there are structural and functional similarities that have continuity between the guide wolves motif in the legendary anecdotes we have given above and the guide grey wolf motif in the Oğuz Kağan Epic and the Başkurt legends. If we compare the structure

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<sup>2</sup>For more information on falling in love by drinking wine and acquiring the talent for reciting poems extemporaneously see (Günay 1987).

and functions of the guide wolf motif in the legendary anecdotes narrated in relation to Lover Seyit Süleyman<sup>3</sup>, who lived in the Çubuk county of Ankara in 19th century with the guide grey wolf motifs in the historical contexts, we can list them as follows:

The person to whom the wolf or wolves appear and help is a seyyid, he is a descendant of the Prophet. According to the belief, he is a personality who lived in this world seven times, who was married and earned his livelihood through farming, who was able to communicate through his heart with the sheikh of the tariqah to whom he was affiliated with, and who was an elite person like the companions of the Prophet, the leader of the Başkurts and Oğuz Kağan.

The wolves that appeared in front of Seyit Süleyman, that took their place on the right, left and in front of him and brought him to the Evelek Rock or Üçbaş Hill where “the Gathering of the Forty” was being conducted by guiding him were sent by God with a divine mission. Again the guide grey wolf acted as a guide in front of the army of Oğuz Kağan and ensured him being a world conqueror who conquers the world and being a saint who has paid his debt to the Sky God. In one of the Başkurt legends Başkurdistan is discovered and it is settled, in another one the companions who were appointed and sent by the Prophet made the Başkurt Muslims.

The forty themselves take the appearance of wolves, but only those whose “eye of the heart” are open are able to see and recognize them and can communicate with them. The wolf with sky-blue mane who comes to Oğuz Kağan from within a light as bright as the sun is the will and help of God that is embodied in a grey wolf by God, it appears from time to time depending on its mission, acts as a guide and then disappears. In Başkurt legends also the guide grey wolf disappears after he fulfils its mission. This disappearance when the mission is realized is a characteristic whose existence in many legends, legendary anecdotes and memoirs related to those personalities who are deemed to be saints who are “the friends of God” in today’s popular beliefs and especially those related to Khidr is very remarkable and parallel.

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<sup>3</sup>For more information on Seyit Süleyman see Çağlayan 1996.

Seyit Süleyman, who communicated with the saints of “the assembly of the forty” who appeared as wolves, who was accepted in the assembly of the forty and who “drank wine”, was given the rank of a “lover of God” and he recites all of his poems in the last seven years of his life which he lived after that. So he became the spiritual leader of the drive maintained by the Alevi-Bektashi Turkmens who lived in Çubuk and its vicinity. Undoubtedly, this value, which is considered as the deepening towards the inside and getting exalted towards God by transcending one’s own ego within the Turkish-Islamic world view here is in the form of an expansion vis-à-vis the outside world in the person of Oğuz Kağan, who reflects the Turkish world view and an internal deepening that is obtained through paying “the debt to God” by transcending one’s own ego during this expansion to the outside world. Within this context, Oğuz Kağan conquers the world thanks to the guide grey wolf and thus he becomes a saint who has paid his debt to the Sky God.

In conclusion, it is seen that in all the examples of events, “the guide grey wolf motif” that appears as one of the origin myths of the Başkurts is a guide that means the acceptance and approval of the wishes of the people who are or will be the leaders of their communities by God and that is sent as a guide who has the mission of directing them towards the right place and direction. The guide grey wolf motif displays variations in terms of sex, colour, number in the events that were addressed, but they have continuity in terms of structure and function. What is important in them is their taking part as sacred beings assigned by God in the events that have the nature of rite de passage in the process of transformation from a plain personality to an identity of a leader who has the personality of a saint who is in communication with God.

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