

MORTUARY CULT AND KÖR CEMETERY IN TURKISH CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

In Türkiye, the Yoruks, who have a nomadic lifestyle, migrate to a different region every season as part of their animal husbandry activities and bury their deceased relatives randomly anywhere during their migrations. This study focuses on the rare and interesting burial traditions of the Yoruks, as well as these cemeteries, which are called “blind”. In the article, the locations of these cemeteries were determined by field research method, the oral culture of the local people concerning these cemeteries was recorded and examined in the light of the mortuary cult that the Turks brought from the pre-Islamic period. With this examination, it has been observed that the Turks believe that the souls of dead people do not disappear and that the soul’s connection with this world is not interrupted, and that they created an ancestor cult around this belief.

Keywords: Mortuary cult, kör cemetery, ancestor cult, Yoruks, death.

THE MORTUARY CULT IN TURKISH CULTURE

Death is one of the phenomena that human beings have been questioning, and researching about since the beginning of their history. Questions such as “What is death, what will happen after death, is there a life after death, if so, how should we prepare for this, can death be avoided?” have always occupied the minds of human beings. It is actually natural for a person be constantly preoccupied with this issue, for the moment of death and its aftermath are processes that people cannot explain, and they have always been an enigma to those left behind. People have put forward many beliefs, rituals, practices, descriptions and narratives according to the geography and culture they live in, in order to make the abstract realm, that is, death and its aftermath, more understandable. Though human beings felt a little relieved through their endeavors to make it understandable, they always had to take into consideration the uncanny and mysterious side of death that they can’t concretize.

When viewed from today’s perspective (in the light of available data), it can be seen that almost every society has its own understanding of death and, in parallel, a belief in the other world. It is seen that the Turks, who lived a nomadic

steppe life and believed in the Göktenrı¹ (Sky God), had visions and various practices regarding death and its aftermath since the earliest detectable periods. Nomadic Turkish culture that develops around death manifests itself within a wide scope of concepts and practices such as death, burial, grave, the soul reaching its place where it belongs, and taking the necessary actions if it fails to do so. Hence, in order to understand the mortuary cult in Turkish culture, it is necessary to go back to the period of the Sky God religion and start the examination by looking at their beliefs and rituals concerning soul and death.

Like many nations, Turks, in the early ages of history, thought that humans consisted of two separate parts: soul and body. While the body disappears with death, the soul continues its existence after death. In this process, where and how the soul that leaves the body lives and what relationship it should have with this world are all interpreted and made understandable through various beliefs and rituals.

The soul, which is met with the words “spirit”, “kut” and “sur” by the ancient Turks, leaves the body after death and goes to heaven (sky), which is also called *uçmak*, or to the underground, which is the place of Erlik, the patron of evil spirits; depending on the deceased’s status being good or evil (İnan 2006: 178-179). However, this is a journey that needs to be supported by some rituals. Otherwise, it is believed that the soul will remain in this world and harm the relatives left behind. This belief, emanating from the idea that the relationship between the dead body and the soul continues, led to the emergence of ancestors’ cult and mortuary cult among the Turks, manifesting itself through various rituals.

Traces of the cult of ancestors are clearly seen in the religious ceremonies, rituals and some daily practices performed by the Turks from the ancient Turkish religion to the present day (Kabak & Köksal 2023: 109). Ancient Turks, who believed that the soul of the deceased person continues to live after the moment of death, held great ceremonies in which they sacrificed horses to show their respect for this soul, and buried the dead in high-topped, wide graves called kurgans. Again, based on the belief that the soul lives on after death, they buried the deceased person’s horse, valuable belongings and weapons next to him; They erected stones called “balbal” on their grave (İnan 2006: 178-179).

According to ancient Turkish beliefs, people cannot establish a direct connection with the highest heavenly beings. An intermediary is needed to establish this connection, and this intermediary is the spirits of their deceased ancestors. Thanks to these ancestral spirits living in heaven, people can express their wishes to the celestial spirits and ask for their help when necessary. For this reason, depictions representing nine ancestors who protect people were kept in every yurt (Radloff 1976: 221).

While the Sky God religion, which is the state religion, commands to respect the ancestors and do various tributes to them, there is a kind of rapture or trance technique, in Eliade’s terms, (Eliade, 2006: 30-31), especially effective among the

¹ Sky God is one of the ancient belief systems of the Turks and is the name of the religious structure in the Gokturk period.

people in periods when the central authority is weakened and is also practiced in shamanistic belief, through which some kind of bond between people and their dead ancestors is established. Belief in the strength of this bond made it necessary to constantly respect the ancestral spirits and perform various rituals for them (Radloff 1976: 232).

It is known that, under the influence of the Sky God religion and Shamanism, the Turkish people in the pre-Islamic period, Asian Huns, Tabgachs and Gokturks practiced sacrifices to the souls of their ancestors in front of sacred caves at certain times of the year (Kafesoğlu 1995: 291). In ancient Turks, various animals were sacrificed to both the Sky God and the ancestral spirits. The sacrificed animals were not ordinary animals, having a variety of specific qualities. Among the animals sacrificed, the most acceptable were horses, specifically the male ones. Hence, the biggest sacrifice ceremony of the Altai Turks was the *horse sacrifice ceremony*. During this ceremony, shamans performed a very serious ritual by beating their drums, accompanying various prayers. During these rituals, the spirit of each tribe's greatest ancestor was summoned and hymns were recited to him. As a remnant of this custom, many horse skeletons were found in kurgans belonging to Asian Hun emperors and in Hun and Avar tombs in Central Asia (İnan 1976: 48-51; Kafesoğlu 1995: 294). Apart from this, the tradition of cutting off the tail of the dead person's horse and planting it at the head of the grave is also very common among the ancient Turks (Ögel 1984: 199).

Altai Turks give various names to the spirit or soul such as *sune*, *yula*, *aldaçı*. After a person dies, his soul leaves the body and goes to another world. Erlik's messenger – the angel of death, that is, the *aldacı*, meets him there. The *aldacı* is the spirit of one of the deceased's long-dead relatives. *Sune* and the *aldacı* wander around the tent of *sune* and his relatives for a given period. There are various taboos concerning the yurt or the tent of the deceased during this period. For example, shamans do not enter the yurt of the deceased during this period; because they are afraid of their body being contaminated by the *aldacı* (İnan 1976: 94-95).

Within the scope of the death cult, there are various fetishes called *tös* among the Altai Turks, *tangara* among the Yakuts, *eren* among the Tuva-Uranhas, and *ongon* among the Mongolian-Burets. These fetishes are shaped like today's dolls, made of felt, beech bark or rags. Some of them consist only of the skins of animals such as foxes and rabbits. Some families would scatter dust on these *tösses*, which they kept in bags, and go hunting after praying. They would even start having their meals after smearing oil on the mouth of the *tös*. The name *tös* they gave to these items is important; because this word means root or origin in some Turkish dialects, the old Uyghur and Hakaniye dialects. It is clear that the Altai Turks call these doll-like items *tös* due to their ancestors' cult (İnan 1976: 59). There are other data that support this view of Abdülkadir İnan. According to old beliefs, every shaman has four protective *tösses*. These are called *aru tös*. The third of these *aru tös* is *kam-tös* which represents the spirits of their maternal or paternal ancestors who were *kam* (shamans) (Dilek 2014: 180).

In the old Turkish family system, the ancestors of the family are highly respected and revered. Ancient Turks believed that both the god of their father and goddess of their mother dwell in the hearth of the house. While the former was called *Od Ata*, the latter was called *Od Ana* (Fire Father and Fire Mother, respectively). For this reason – as Grenard stated – the ancient Turks believed that this fire in the hearth should never put out. The tradition of keeping the fire in houses asleep with ashes every evening and reviving it with the sacred juniper tree in the morning arose from the necessity of keeping this fire alive all the time (Ziya Gökalp 1976: 294).

Another reflection of the Altai Turks' beliefs about the soul and its state after death is the belief in *kormös*. According to the information given by İbrahim Dilek, *kormöses*, the good and bad spirits, are the spirits of deceased ancestors of the mother and father. According to the beliefs of the Altai Turks, every person has a *kormös* on their left shoulder and it accompanies the person throughout his life and writes down all the evil he has done. When a person dies, if the bad things he has done are more than his good deeds, the *kormös* will take him to the bottom floor of hell. Apart from this, each tribe has its own special spirits. The *Kormös* communicates their desires through the diseases and disasters they send to the people and people offer sacrifices to them to get rid of these diseases and disasters. The *kormöses*, apart from sending diseases and disasters to people, also act as protectors who help fight other evil spirits. When two clans establish relation to each other, their *kormös* also become relatives. Therefore, tribes respect other tribes' *kormöses* as well as their own. In addition, their belief has it that the souls of all deceased shamans turn into *kormös* with the ability to wander on earth. Just like when the tribes come together through the marriage of a girl to a boy, the *kormöses* of both families are considered to have moved to the newly established house and various practices are carried out to show that they are respected (2014: 115-116).

As can be seen, ancient Turks have a belief that the soul does not disappear after death and that it should be respected. This belief has pushed the Turks to constantly commemorate their deceased ancestors and to perform various rituals such as libation and offering sacrifices and reciting prayers to comfort their souls. These rituals in general revealed the cult of ancestors in the Turkish communities. The ancestor cult led to the emergence of the mortuary cult for similar reasons. It is necessary to respect the spirit of the deceased ancestor, be it a *tös* or a *kormös*; But this is not enough for the Turks, for showing full respect to the deceased ancestor, it is necessary to respect his body and grave, too.

When Jean-Paul Roux's book *Death in Altai Turks* (1999) is examined, it is seen that the ancient Turks had various burial techniques such as burning the dead, leaving them on a tree and burying them. Although the former methods were abandoned over time, the custom of burial became generally accepted (in parallel with the formation of the idea of the underworld) and became practiced in all Turkish tribes over time. With the general acceptance of the burial custom, places called cemeteries have emerged. Although it is believed that the soul and body are

separated from each other after death, the idea that the relationship between the soul and the body is not interrupted in the background has become dominant for the Turks. Hence, in Turkish belief, graves were seen as the temporary residence of the souls of the dead in this world. Some current practices support this point of view. For example, although Islam, the current Anatolian religion, supports the idea that the soul cannot return to this world, when we look at today's Turkish society, people keep visiting cemeteries on special days such as holidays and the anniversary of death and pray for and commemorate the deceased as if they were there with their soul. In connection with this, visits to the graves or tombs continue to be widespread. This is because when we look at ancient times, it can be seen that Turks gave importance to graves, for the connection between body and soul, according to them, was not interrupted after death and the place where the body was buried was considered as a kind of residence of the soul. The general use of the word "sın" instead of "grave" in Old Turkish and today's Anatolian dialects is related to this idea.

sın Friedhof, Grab, Grabmal || cemetery, grave, tomb

sın k(a)bra (c) Grabmal2, Grab2 || grave2, tomb2

sın oron Grabstätte || cemetery, burial place

sın supurgan Friedhof2 || cemetery2

sın supurgan oron Begräbnis2platz, Friedhof2 || burial2 place, cemetery2

sın supurgan yer Begräbnis2platz || burial2 place (Wilkins 2021: 609).

Apart from the word Sın, the words *kereksür* (Kyrgyz shelter), *Kür, ükeger, kegür* and the words *kür, kör, and gör*, which survived until the Ottoman Turkish period, were also used in place of grave and cemetery (Roux 1999: 294). Later, the word "mezar" (the place where the dead are buried) entered Turkish from Arabic and this word became generally accepted (URL: 1), and places where graves were built together began to be called "mezarlık". Just as the words used by the ancient Turks for burial places are known, there are also documents about the grave shapes they made. As a matter of fact, it is clear that the Ancient Turks knew about the flat stone tombs in Transbaikalia and Mongolia. Russian scientists divided these graves into three main groups. These groups are as follows (Tryjarski 2012: 21):

1. Graves lined with right-angled stone plaques. These stones clearly emerge from the soil and indicate stone blocks of a certain size and height in terms of their edge angles.

2. Graves surrounded by a lower quadrangular and flat pile of stones (also called right-angled graves).

3. Graves made of flat stone piles and surrounded by disproportionate, low-rise plaques, with large stone blocks at the corners (also called Figural graves).

It is extremely common for Turks to know about these graves and to perform peculiar burial practices in their own funerals. Although it is accepted that the Turks generally adopted cell-type tomb architecture after Islam, it should not be overlooked that niche tombs have been known in Asia since ancient times. This type of tombs can be found in the Zaman Baba necropolis in the Kızıl Kum deserts

west of Bukhara. Graves with cells or chambers were found in Turkmenistan, northwest of Ashgabat, north-east of Uzbekistan and some regions of Kyrgyzstan (Tryjarski 2012: 21-22).

Kurgan must also be taken into consideration as another type of grave in Turks. This is because the largest and most detailed tomb architecture of the Turks is kurgan. Kurgan is a Turkish word; However, it was Russian researchers who initially introduced the word to scientific literature. For this reason, the word passed into Russian and other Western languages – except German – as *kurgan*. This word means hill, mound, tumulus in Russian (Çoruhlu 2017: 77). In the Turkish Language Association Dictionary, the word is given two meanings. These are as follows (URL: 1):

1. *A small hill built by piling soil on a grave in the Antiquity*
2. *Hill-shaped grave*

Obviously, the meaning of the word in Turkish and Russian dictionaries is almost the same. However, the relevance of the word kurgan is not only related to the graves. In some dialects such as Kyrgyz, Kazakh and Uyghur ones, it also means castle, fortified place, settlement. This also shows that the word is related to city, settlement and home (Çoruhlu 2017: 79).

Kurgans can be divided into three groups in terms of size: small, medium and large. Small kurgans in the Pazırık region have dimensions of up to 13-15 m, medium-sized ones are around 20-24 m, and larger ones are around 30-46 m. There are burial chambers made of tree logs in the small kurgans in Pazırık, and they do not contain much furniture. Two or three horses are buried outside the room. Many horses were buried in medium-sized kurgans, and the corpses are in a coffin carved from wood in a separate room. Large kurgans have two floors. It has been designed with a pole system to carry the upper part. Kurgans with many more floors have also been unearthed in excavations carried out elsewhere. The actual burial chamber located under the mound can sometimes be a single room or pit. Sometimes much more complex structures can be seen. The section probably built above the main room or the room where the body is located is called kurgan, because this part hides and protects the actual burial chamber located on the lower floor. Sometimes the room where the body is found can be reached through a secret corridor, or it can be seen that the body is placed in a corner of the burial room and covered with stones and soil. Most of the time, especially in the Central Asian regions, the rooms, whether the part where the corpse is located or the upper part, are built from larch logs specific to the region. These logs are mostly constructed by interlocking them at the joints without nails, using the method called *çanti* (joinery) today (Çoruhlu 2017: 86).

Some kurgans can even be larger. For example, Ibn Fadlan says that the Khazars dug a place large enough to build twenty rooms for the king. The information provided by Ibn Batuta in terms of interior equipment is also remarkable. Ibn Battuta compares Turkish graves to beautiful houses furnished with carpets. Archaeological excavations confirm this information (Roux 1999: 297-298). After the grave is completely closed, gravediggers generally perform

the following 2 acts. The first is to build a kurgan, that is, to raise the hill; The second is to make the grave unknown by completely flattening the ground. In fact, even if a kurgan is built, Turks, out of their taboos, do it with the idea of hiding who the grave belongs to. The second method is to achieve this physically. In fact, according to Plan Carpini, after the burial, the Turks secretly go to the steppes, pull out the grass with its roots and plant them on the grave. Thus, it becomes impossible to find the location of this grave later. However, this method is not applied to everyone, it is generally applied to khans (Roux 1999: 298-299).

The mound made of stone or soil constitutes the beginning or the simplest form of the temple of the dead. The things found on the grave are naturally thought to belong to the grave. Mahmud of Kashgar says that the grave was covered with a silk fabric called ashuk, and the fabric was later cut into pieces and distributed to the poor. Often a tent is set up over the grave. The aim here is to ensure that the resting place outside the grave is the same as the inside of the grave. Chinese annals provide detailed information on this subject. Accordingly, the Turks build a house on the grave, paint a picture of the deceased inside this house, and depict on the walls the wars he participated in when he was alive. Chinese chronicles state that among the decrees issued by Emperor Hiuan-Tsong, there was an order to build a temple after his death. The same situation is mentioned about Kül Tegin and it is stated that a grave temple was established and a stone statue was erected there, and the battles in which he participated were depicted on the walls of the temple. This information shows that Chinese tomb masters worked on tomb monuments; However, since there are no other findings, it shows that they built these graves according to Turkish culture, not Chinese art (Roux 1999: 301-302). This situation reveals that a grave architecture and rituals were formed in the Turks in earlier periods.

When we look at the gravestone architecture of the Turks, we see that there is a tradition of erecting a stone right next to the grave. It can be said that some of these tombstones were erected by others after the person died, and some were prepared by the person while he was still alive. The most obvious example of the second group is the Tonyukuk inscription. In this inscription, Tonyukuk constantly used the phrase "bitittim" (I had it written). On the other hand, the Bilge Kağan inscription was not designed by himself, but was written by his nephew Yolug Tegin. Regardless, it is known that these stones were inscribed while they were horizontal and erected thereafter (Roux 1999: 303-304).

Apart from these stones with inscriptions, there are also stones with pictures on them that are erected at the head-end of the graves. For example, on a hunter's headstone it is written that he is a hunter and a hunting scene is depicted. It is also necessary to mention here the stones called *balbal*. These stones represent the enemies the deceased killed while he was alive. In fact, all of these stones have the same purpose. It is to tell those who are left behind about the person lying in the grave. In later times, the tradition of planting trees at the grave was also formed. While the stone symbolizes eternal static life, the tree symbolizes eternal dynamic life (Roux 1999: 305-306).

After looking at the main types of graves seen in the Turkish world in the pre-Islamic period and their architectural features, it would be appropriate to look at their burial rituals as well. As a matter of fact, the disposal of the dead body in one way or the other is an essential need. Many factors, especially health, make this necessary; However, the fact that the Turks build their graves not in an ordinary way but with care, having different sections both inside and outside the tomb, and turning the tomb into an architectural work is a reflection of the mortuary cult of the Turks. This cult is a combination of pre-death and post-death practices along with burial ceremony and tomb architecture.

Funeral ceremonies in ancient Turks did not always adhere to unchanging rules. There were changes in the ceremonies depending on the period, the status of the tribes and even the status of the deceased. While excavations from the third millennium BC show that the bodies were buried, there is evidence that they were burned during the Andronova period of the second millennium BC. While it was seen in the Karasuk and Tagar excavations that the corpses were burned (in fact, the practice of burying the ashes after cremation was carried out), there are findings to the effect that there was a tradition of burying as well as burning in the following Tashlik period². It is said in both Herodotus and Chinese sources that Turks have the custom of both burning and burying. In some Turkish tribes, there is also a tradition of leaving the body on a tree, which is the most suitable place for the great souls to rest or to keep the body waiting until the funeral ceremony. The significance of this practice related to cleaning the bones of the corpse from the flesh and, in a sense, purify it (Roux 2002: 274-276).

Although it is obvious that the burial place is specially chosen among the Turks, these places are not always similar in character. There is no uniformist approach in selecting the place. Sometimes even a riverside or river bed can be chosen as the burial place. However, usually a high hill or a very high mountain was chosen as the burial place. Care was taken to ensure that these places were generally very far from main roads. For this reason, sometimes very long distances were traveled to transport the corpses. Funeral ceremonies are generally held in spring or autumn. These periods are thought to be periods when the doors between this world and the other world are open for the soul's coming and going. After a person dies, he first goes through a preliminary preparation period in the tent where he died or in a newly built tent. After this, the corpse is shrouded in a shroud called *eshiik* and placed in a coffin. It is known that during the period when the funeral is awaited, horse races are held and people who participate cry and scar their faces with a knife. When it is time for burial, the body is placed on a car and taken to the grave, and this car is often accompanied by a funeral procession. When the grave site is reached, the main ceremony begins. This practice, which Turks call *yog*, maintains the basic rituals, such as crying, stamping, scarring the body parts and horse races are also held at the graveside. In the horse races held here, horses circle

² Regions such as Andronova, Karasuk and Tashlik in the west of Central Asia contain the cultural accumulations of the Turks in the pre-Islamic period and elements of material culture through archaeological excavations.

around the grave hundred times or so and this race continues until the horses are exhausted. It is known that professional mourners are also kept present in these ceremonies, especially in the funeral ceremonies of great statesmen (Roux 2002: 280-283).

The climax of the funeral ceremony in the ancient Turks was the feast called *yog*. It is seen that the feast, which has been detected in every period, attracted the attention of all observers and therefore entered both travel books and state documents such as Chinese chronicles. It is clear that the feast ceremony has a distinct social value and sometimes turns into an exuberant ceremony with musical accompaniment. According to some observations of archaeologists, this ceremony ends at the graveside just before the covering the grave; However, Kaşgarlı Mahmud states that this feast was also performed on the third and seventh days after the burial (Roux 2002: 283; Kaşgarlı 2018: 979).

Turning them into a part of cult over time, the Turks gave so much importance to the graves that they considered attacking ancestral graves a reason to wage a war. For example, one of the reasons for Atilla's First Balkan expedition was the plunder of his family cemetery by the Byzantine bishop of Margos. A similar act of plunder was carried out by the Mongols and this triggered the Turkish ruler Tanhu to campaign against the Mongols in 79 BC (Kafesoğlu 1995: 291).

The Turks created the mortuary cult in question in thousands of years and did not abandon it after accepting Islam. While the Muslim world, especially in the early periods of Islam, chose not to do anything on the graves, caring not about losing them, allowing no rituals around them, and not building ornate ones, for they considered such things as dangerous through associating them with paganism. On the contrary, the Turks continued to keep various rituals, beliefs and practices around the graves by adapting them to Islamic motifs. In other words, among the Turks, the mortuary cult continued to be kept alive under an Islamic image.

During the Islamic period, Turks built their cemeteries in the center of the settlement, close to the mosque in the center, in order to remember death every time they saw the graves. The cemeteries were surrounded by walls high from the ground, trees such as cypress, beech and poplar were planted inside them, and charity fountains were built for passers-by to drink water. These cemeteries were visited on religious holidays and death anniversaries. In addition, many practices such as gathering in cemeteries to read the Quran, especially during holidays, distributing food to children, leaving water at the graves for animals, and pouring feed have become widely practiced (Artun 2005: 170-180).

Some of the practices that can be considered within the mortuary cult of the Islamic period are related to the soul of the dead remaining in the cemetery. Turks, under the influence of their beliefs in the pre-Islamic period, believed that contact between the dead and the living should be cut off. For this reason, it is forbidden to cut trees from the cemetery and bring them home or use them in a job, to bring stones from the cemetery to their houses, to bring tools such as pickaxes and shovels from the cemetery, and to bring the coffin home. In some regions, there are

customs such as returning home by a different route after burying the dead in the cemetery, and changing clothes and washing hands and face as soon as they arrive home after the burial (Artun 2005: 170-180).

In this context, the tradition of balbal in old graves was continued by the custom of erecting gravestones among Muslim Turks. Since the Seljuk and Ottoman periods, Turks have not neglected to erect inscribed and decorated tombstones, large and small, on the graves of their deceased ancestors or statesmen. Tombstones with prayers and meaningful words written in Arabic letters are found almost everywhere in Anatolia, some with pictures of tree, bird etc. These tombstones are generally rectangular in shape. Apart from these, there are also tombstones made in various shapes such as a ram's head and a turbaned human head. More recent tombstones contain prayers, various pictures, meaningful words written in Latin letters (Erikoğlu 2024: 247-254; Gündoğdu & Şeyban 2020: 444). Apart from these, there are also poems of literary value on some tombstones. These poems are poems that deal with many subjects such as the troubles, longings, happiness, things the deceased longed for during life, one's expectations from the afterlife, and one's will to those left behind. There are even poems, some of which contain humorous subjects and make the reader smile (Abalı 2019: 114-123).

There are many forms of cemeteries in today's Turkey, from small cemeteries such as family cemeteries, neighborhood cemeteries and village cemeteries to large and famous cemeteries such as Karacaahmet cemetery. These cemeteries are usually in residential areas. Apart from these, there are also cemeteries located on migration routes in Turkey. These cemeteries belong to the nomadic Yoruk Turkmens who migrated with large herds of animals between summer pastures and winter quarters, especially in Anatolia during the Seljuk and Ottoman periods. Yoruk Turkmens are Turkmens whose main source of income is animal husbandry. They migrate with their large animal herds to the high regions of Central Anatolia in the summer, which they called *yaylak*³, and in the winter they migrated to the coastal areas close to the sea, which they called *kışlak*⁴, thus constantly moving their herds according to seasonal and pasture conditions. These migration routes are quite long and last for weeks as they move on foot with large herds. For example, Bayburt-Elâzığ-Diyarbakır-Kirkuk, Mersin-Karaman-Konya, Antalya-Isparta-Denizli-Aydın are some of these migration routes (Oğuz 2016; Beşirli & Erdal 2007).

METHOD

Two methods were used in this study. The first of these is the interview method, which is one of the methods of compiling folklore products in the field. In this context, before going out into the field, information about the field was

³ Yaylak: Summer-abode; a high altitude plateau where nomads go in the summer to feed their animals on fertile pastures.

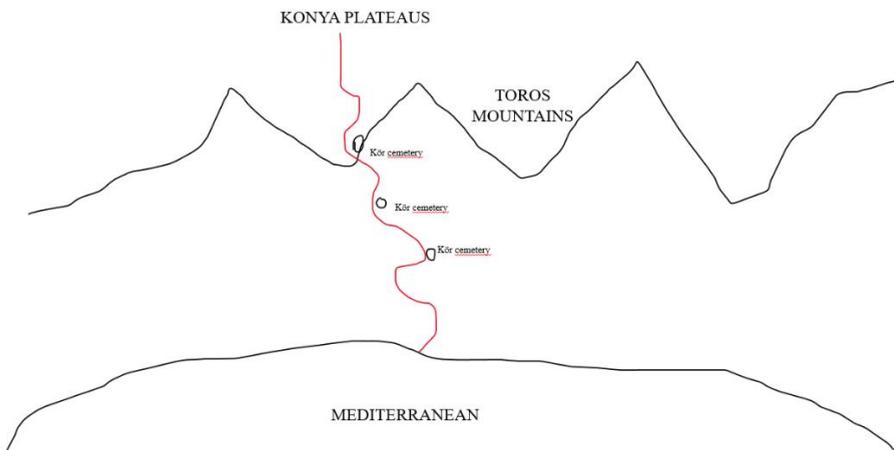
⁴ Kışlak: Winter-abode; seaside or low altitude areas where nomads migrate during the winter months to protect their animals from the cold.

collected and people who could be resource persons were identified. Then, interviews were made with the resource people, and the data they had about the kör cemeteries⁵ was compiled and recorded. During the field research, visuals of the kör cemeteries that could be identified were also taken. The data obtained was then deciphered and made usable (Goldstein 1964).

The second method used in the study is the document analysis method. In this context, works on Yoruks relating to Turks' spirit belief, death customs, ancestor and mortuary cult were consulted and the data required for the study were identified and made available by scanning the literature on this subject (Miles & Huberman 1994). Then, the data obtained from the field research and the data obtained from the document analysis were combined and analyzed to obtain the results of the study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION: KÖR CEMETERY AMONG THE YORUK TURKMENS OF TURKIYE

Yoruk Turkmens, who are the subject of this study, spend the winter in the seaside regions of Silifke, which is within the borders of Mersin province located at the foothills of the Taurus Mountains, and migrate in the summer to the high plateaus of Karaman and Konya. This migration route is about 250 km as the crow flies. However, since this journey is made through deep valleys winding through the Taurus Mountains, it approximately doubles through the land. In addition, the journey includes small cattle such as sheep and goats; Since it is done on foot with cattle such as horses, donkeys and camels, it takes days or even weeks for the Yoruks to reach their destination. These difficult roads passing through deep valleys in the Taurus Mountains have been used for migration for thousands of years. The migration route is outlined as follows:



Visual 1: Migration Route with Kör Cemeteries

⁵ Although the word “kör” is used in Turkish in its first meaning as “blind”, it also includes the meanings of “ownerless”, “unkempt” and “no road”, as will be seen in the analysis section of the article.

As we mentioned above, since this migration route passed through the mountainous region, journeys lasted days and sometimes weeks. During this difficult journey, some Yoruk Turkmens would die due to reasons such as illness, old age, falling (falling from animals or falling from rocks). Deaths during migration were a common occurrence. The person who died during migration had to be buried as soon as possible, there are various reasons for this. First of all, carrying the dead is very difficult during this difficult migration. Since there are no cars, it is almost impossible to transport a corpse for a long time. There is also the possibility that the corpse will smell and rot and cause disease. Therefore, the body should be buried as soon as possible. Another reason is religious. As Dastur said, a corpse is a being stuck between this world and the afterlife. He must be buried as soon as possible so that his soul journey from this world to the other world can begin as soon as possible and those left behind can fulfill their mystical duties towards him (such as praying) (2019: 13). The Islamic faith also has a parallel thought. According to Islamic belief, the deceased should be buried as soon as possible. For this reason, Muslims try to bury their dead as soon as possible, following the funeral prayer to be performed right after the nearest daily prayer. Due to those reasons, burying the person who died during migration in the nearest suitable place has become a tradition among the Yoruks over time. This situation was even reflected in a joke. The anecdote called “This is How Yoruks die” is as follows (Kılınç 2010: 99):

Two Yoruk brothers begin the migration to return from the plateau in November. Meanwhile, their old and sick father falls ill. The two brothers take turns carrying their father and set out to the nearest village to refer to a hodja for prayers. After a while, they get tired and take a break under the shade of a tree for a short rest. At that moment, they see that their father is having difficulty breathing. One of the Yoruk brothers, tired of the situation, says, “Brother, my father is dead, there is no need to carry it any further. I think we should bury it here.” The older brother, who is already ready for this, says “Okay” and they start burying their poor father. Realizing the situation, the old man turns to his children and furiously says, “My child, I’m not dead yet, what are you doing? Stop!” Since the migration was ready on the way, the Yoruk boys who were in a hurry to set off with the convoy, turned to their fathers hastily and said, “Father, you aren’t to decide on your own. The legend has it that “this is how Yoruks die in the autumn months” and they bury their father alive to catch up with the migration convoy.

As can be seen from the anecdote, Yoruks do not have the opportunity to carry the corpse, take care of it, and hold large funeral ceremonies, especially during times of migration. This is because migration is a vital event that requires constant movement, does not allow being late, and cannot be postponed. For this reason, Yoruks, whose family member died during migration, tried to bury the deceased person as soon as possible. The situation is the same for the Yoruks, who live in the research region of this article. The region covers the Mediterranean coast, lies across the Taurus Mountains and reaches the Karaman and Konya plateaus. The migration routes of these Yoruks are not random. There is a main migration route that has formed over time through the most suitable areas of the

mountains and valleys. All Yoruk tribes follow the same path and go back and forth between the summer pasture and winter quarters. Over time, small cemeteries were created along the road to bury the people who died while traveling on this road, and these were called *kör* cemeteries (this expression was compiled from source people) by the local people. *Kör* cemeteries have features that distinguish them from ordinary cemeteries in residential areas. While ordinary cemeteries are located in the center of the settlement or somewhere around the center, *kör* cemetery is usually located right next to secluded roads. Ordinary cemeteries are surrounded by walls and planted with trees, flowers, etc. This is not the case in *kör* cemeteries. They have no protective walls, trees etc. inside them. While town cemeteries are well-maintained and their interiors are clean, these cemeteries are generally neglected. While visitors come to town cemeteries to recite prayers on holidays and other times, no one calls on *kör* cemeteries. Sometimes sensitive citizens driving by can be seen reciting prayers. The most important difference is that in ordinary cemeteries, the name and surname, birth and death dates of the person buried in the grave are written on each grave stone. These stones are marble or fancy stones. Most graves in *kör* cemeteries do not have headstones. The tombstones of the roadside are unprocessed, flat, sometimes square and sometimes rectangular stones that the local people call *tamtır*. Some of them have stones shaped like normal gravestones. There are no names written on most of these stones, so it is not known who the person lying in a specific grave is and when he was buried there. So, in a sense, these cemeteries and the graves in them are abandoned. There is no one coming or visiting. In addition, most of the places where these graves are located are uninhabited, deserted and rarely used roadsides today. While these roads were used extensively by nomads in the past, these roads have become almost unusable today, as there is no longer any migration on foot as in the past, and the busy highways that provide intercity transportation pass through other locations.

It is also necessary to examine the origin of the name of the *kör* cemeteries, which are like guardians of lonely roads. When we focus on the word “*kör*” as it modifies roadside cemeteries, there may be two reasons for the name given to these cemeteries. First of all, the word “*kör*” have figurative meanings in addition to its literal meaning – blind – in the dictionary. Those meanings are as follows: (for a road, street, etc.) not frequented, out of the way (URL: 2). Abandoned for dwellings. There are some words in the local dialect where the word *kör*/blind is used in this sense. For example, a sentence that reads “the house has become blind” can refer to an abandoned house, and “the beautiful garden has become blind” to an uncultivated vineyard and garden. All of these words have the meaning of being abandoned or neglected. Similarly, in Turkish, wells that have begun to collapse and that cannot hold water because they are no longer used are called “blind wells”.

As we mentioned above, considering that *kör* cemeteries are located on lonely roadsides, neglected, and abandoned, it can be thought that the term *kör*/blind is given due to dereliction and abandonment. So, from this perspective, a *kör* cemetery means a derelict, abandoned, dilapidated cemetery.

Another possibility is related to the Persian word *gūr*. The word *Gūr* means “grave, grave” (URL: 3). This word has changed into *gor-gör-kör* in Turkish over

time. Even though the word has changed in terms of form, it has managed to preserve its meaning. There are many examples in Old Anatolian Turkish texts that the word was used with the sense grave in Turkish. Some researchers even claim that the name of the famous Turkish epic hero *Köroğlu*⁶ comes from *Gor-oğlu*, meaning the son of the grave. If this meaning is considered, we encounter a weird reduplication between Persian and Arabic, both of which have the same meaning, ie grave cemetery. There are reduplications consisting of Arabic-Persian words in Turkish, although they are few in number. For example, *pey-ender-pey* (*peyderpey*) is one of them, meaning step by step (URL: 3; Ekici 2004: 63-100).

There is a possibility that the explanation for the name of the cemetery could go either way. However, in our opinion, the first possibility is more likely to be valid. This is because the state of the graves in deserted areas today, being abandoned, neglected and many of them destroyed, strengthens this possibility. During our field research, we were able to identify at least seven kör cemeteries between Uzuncaburç village, which is 30 km away from the center of Silifke and at an altitude of 1200 m, and the Mersin-Karaman-Konya border. These are: Uğra area (1), Abdurrahman's creek (This is a deep valley and there are 2 at both the entrance and exit of the valley), Armutözü (two on a wide plain) and on the Mersin-Konya-Karaman border (2). Only four of these have survived to the present day and were photographed by our research team. The existence of others is known to local people. However, these three cemeteries have disappeared for various reasons. Today, they survive only as a location name. The owners of the graves in the surviving cemeteries are unknown and they are called nomad graves.



Visual 2: The kör cemetery in boundary of Mersin, Konya, Karaman

⁶ Köroğlu is known as an epic hero born in a grave, especially in the stories of the Central Asian Turks.



Visual 3: The another kör cemetery in the same region



Visual 4: Old migration route and kör cemetery, which is now a highway



Visual 5: The kör cemetery in Bozağaç region, Silifke



Visual 6: Another view of kör cemetery in Bozağaç region



Visual 7: A Yoruk grave in kör cemetery



Visual 8: A standard cemetery in today's Türkiye (Silifke)

These Yoruk graves are not only found in Silifke and its surroundings. It is possible to see them in all regions of Anatolia where Yoruk Turkmen tribes lived for many years and used them as migration routes. For example, the graves in the Beşkaza region, one of the settlements in the Taurus Mountains of Burdur province are, in fact, very similar to kurgan and obo type graves, which are pre-islamic Turkish grave types (Erođlu 2017).



Visual 9: A kör cemetery including square graves in Beşkaza (Eroğlu 2017: 64)

There are Yoruk cemeteries in the style of kör cemeteries also in the Aydın region of Anatolia, where Yoruk Turkmens live densely. Some of these were even reflected in the visual media and were requested to be protected (URL: 4). Because the graves are neglected, they disappear over time under the influence of natural conditions. It is possible to increase these examples. However, even these examples show that kör cemeteries belonging to nomadic Yoruks can be found in many regions of Anatolia.



Visual 10: A kör cemetery in Kuşadası, Aydın province (URL: 4)

CONCLUSION

Turks lived in a wide geography from Central Asia to Anatolia. Turkish tribes living in this wide geography have adopted different belief systems depending on time and geography, mainly having the belief in the Sky God. Thus, the idea of the spirit, death and the belief system developed around these concepts by the Turks who have managed to have a very deep-rooted and rich cultural accumulation that includes differences, are really worth examining.

As can be seen from this study, the thoughts and beliefs of the Turks regarding the soul and death have formed an ancestors' cult specific to themselves over time, and this cult has led to the emergence of a mortuary cult over time. The mortuary cult, whose roots go back to the early periods of history, shows that the Turks used different grave architectures, built their graves as a place for the continuation of life after death, protected them carefully, and visited the graves from time to time and performed various rituals. This situation did not change after the Turks accepted Islam. Turks, who are Muslims, unlike other Muslim nations, have always given importance to their graves and have never neglected to visit them on important days, especially religious holidays, read prayers and make various ceremonies. Hence, Turkish cemeteries are tidy and well-kept places surrounded by walls, where various trees and flowers are planted, and charities such as fountains are built. The main reason why so much importance was given to graves in the Islamic period and why the grave cult continued to exist is that Turks believe that the relationship between the soul and body of the deceased is not completely severed. Since the relationship between the body and the soul continues, the grave, which is the place where the body is buried, has become, in a sense, the temporary residence of the soul in this world. Although people know that there is only a corpse in the grave, and Islamic belief dictates that the soul of the deceased cannot return to this world, under the influence their ancestors' cult in the collective consciousness, Turks continue to think of graves as places where the soul-body duo coexists, just like in a person's life. Hence, their cemeteries are important and sacred places. However, the situation is slightly different in the case of *kör* cemeteries, which are the subject of this study.

Since *kör* cemeteries are on migration routes that were busy in the past but are not used much today, and the names of the deceased were not written on the tombstones due to the majority of the Yoruks being illiterate in the past, and because the Yoruks who used these roads gradually settled down and no longer used those roads, it is now impossible to know who the people lying in the graves are. Their existence has been forgotten and these cemeteries have become neglected, and abandoned. Some of these cemeteries have been destroyed and their places turned into agricultural land. Although *kör* cemeteries are about to disappear due to both human and natural reasons, these cemeteries continue to live in the oral culture and narratives of the people.

This study recorded folk knowledge about *kör* cemeteries in the region between Silifke and the Konya-Karaman Plateaus. In addition, it has been revealed that these cemeteries, which have been known by general names such as

cemetery/Yoruk cemetery until today, have their own names and that the local people call these cemeteries kör cemeteries and distinguish them from the regular cemeteries built in their residential areas.

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