

Archive of Turkish Oral Narrative

An Introduction

By HB Paksoy

Editor's Note: Readers can visit the fall online supplement to directly access the links in the chronological order that they appear in the Notes section.

The Archive of Turkish Oral Narrative (ATON) (<http://aton.ttu.edu>) is located at Texas Tech University. The ATON website currently contains fifteen million words arranged in documents of varying lengths, mostly in PDF format. There are also over forty hours' worth of music files in MP3 format. The ATON website's main page offer links to eight mutually supporting subgroups: Guides, Stories (Öyküler), Narratives, Epics, Music, Images, History of the ATON website (Uysal Walker ATON), and Folklore; and is fully searchable. All paper materials and deposits were digitized between 2001 and 2004 within the Texas Tech Libraries, Southwest Collection/Special Collections Library, where I served as the Unit Head of the ATON during that period. Work toward an archive began in 1961, culminating in the Uysal-Walker Archive of Turkish Oral Narrative we know today. During that year, the three original founders (Ahmet E. Uysal, Warren S. Walker, and Barbara K. Walker) first began collecting materials from the field when they met in Ankara as a result of Warren Walker having been awarded a US Fulbright Grant in the Turkish Republic. After the first two decades of fieldwork in many villages, the task of organization and the need for a permanent place began occupying their thoughts. With these concerns in the background, the original founders eventually donated their holdings to Texas Tech University in 1980.

The ATON website also contains full-text materials from Central Asia, namely original-language novels and historical analyses and epics grouped under Guides and Epics. One of the epics appears in an English translation.¹ These materials, that I collected, were later digitized and added to the website. They demonstrate the depth of the subject under study, because the origins of Turkish literature and history emanated from Central Asia. All interested readers are invited to link the ATON website to their web pages. The following sections detail some of the areas of interest that may be useful in sparking class discussions.

Narratives

The translated narratives on the ATON page (subgroup Narratives) were originally collected by Professors Ahmet Uysal and Warren Walker and his wife, Barbara, and bound into 73 green volumes. There are roughly 2,200 narratives in this section, all translated into English by native Turkish speakers studying at Texas Tech. This segment was digitized first, initially compromising the majority of the ATON website. In these narratives, one can discern biblical stories, as well as the individual, personal tastes being layered upon the originals. The entire website contains approximately fifteen million words.

These narratives may put long-running "soap operas" to shame with their variety and complexity. In fact, these may be the original soap operas. One such narrative may be seen as a precursor to Cinderella.²

Benjamin Franklin was known to quote Turkish stories—without providing his source—which he collected while he lived in England. On Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanack*, Historian H.W. Brands in his book *The First American: The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin* notes:

Every Almanack offered pearls of wisdom on personal conduct and related matters of daily life, that the pearls had been retrieved from other oysters bothered no one except perhaps the owners of those other oysters, who in any event had no recourse in the absence of applicable copyright laws. The trick for writers like Franklin was to polish the pearls and set them distinctively.

The reader may decide.³

Mark Twain also quoted Turkish stories in English translation. The quintessentially American rodeo usually contains a segment where a herd of calves (usually young bulls) are brought in and let free. Rodeo participants are encouraged to catch and drag a calf into a box drawn by chalk in the middle of the arena, with winners receiving prizes. That is a more recent iteration of the game called *Kok Boru* (contest for the blue wolf) from Central Asia, played on horseback.⁴

A short explanation of how a country seemingly named after an American bird, even before Columbus reached the new world, is found in the article "Happy Meleagris Gallopavo Day."⁵ The bird was named after the country before the seventeenth century, even though the said turkey is American by origin and spread across the world through Spanish and Portuguese merchants.

The concept of justice in Turkish history and literature

Outlaws rebelling for equality have played an important role in Turkish history. There may even be similarities among Turkish and American outlaws and other events and recipes the readers may be able to glean from the corpus contained in ATON. Islamic historical narratives often include Central Asians and Turks, but Turks followed a wide variety of belief systems, including Buddhism by the Uyghurs, Judaism by Karaites, Christianity by Tatars, and Zoroastrianism by Azeris, among others. Even today, when a Turk introduces himself as a Muslim, one cannot be certain if that

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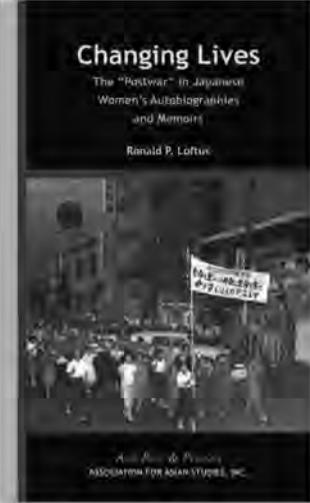
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is a political identity or if he is a true believer; a deeper discussion with him may be required for a full understanding. That behavior has deep historical roots; in the past, the questioner may have been a tax collector of another state, an anthropologist of sorts, or a new invader trying to conquer part of a unitary nation. Thus, there is the need to show a different identity. The theme of justice is important in Turkish history; there is a sacred, old tradition of rebellion in the cause of equality. This is demonstrated in comparative fashion in "Views of the 'Outlaw Concept' in Comparative Perspective: 'The American West' and the 'Zeybeks in the Turk Lands.'"⁶

Ethnic Turks have sought justice through rebelling against foreign invaders from at least the eleventh century and in the early twentieth century, in particular. The theme of justice is also found in a more wry fashion in shadow puppet theater. Readers are encouraged to investigate this art form by visiting the curriculum guide *Turkish Shadow Puppet Theater: A Window on Turkey*. Readers familiar with "Punch and Judy" will see many parallels in Turkish puppet shadow theater. The shadow puppet theaters stories are not only didactic, but also humorous.⁷

Sports, Food, and Music

Sports were of great importance, not only as entertainment but also preparation for the defense of the homeland as demonstrated in "Two Altaic Games: 'Chelik-Chomak' and 'Jirid Oyunu.'" The triumphs of the participants would easily put current sports heroes to shame.⁸

Food is one of the universal languages. One of the cookbooks, *The Art of Turkish Cooking*, is in English in the "Folklore" section in several files. Most of these recipes adorned the table of the Ottoman emperor and were cooked especially for him to enjoy. Some of the dishes were ingeniously simple but with an amazing taste. Some recipes are many years old. The dish called "Hittite Soup" might even be 4,500 years old.

The Music Section contains not only a traditional bard competition, the origins of which are lost in the fog of earlier eras, but also melodies in the ancient form, as well as those converted into polyphonic music performed by orchestras. The performances presented may be streamed directly from the server or downloaded and saved.

The ATON website has been in use in university language and culture studies for more than ten years. I hope you will enjoy the contents as much as those who compiled them. You are welcome to link the ATON website to your courses. ■

NOTES

1. See a short description of the epic Alpamysh with an introduction by the author at <http://tiny.cc/q7pc1w>.
2. See "The Stepdughter and the Demons" at <http://tiny.cc/faqc1w>.
3. See "Benjamin Franklin and Nasreddin of Asia Minor" at <http://tiny.cc/ibqc1w>.
4. See "The Traditional Oglak Tartis among the Kirghiz of the Pamirs" at <http://tiny.cc/4dq1w>.
5. See "Happy Meleagris Gallopavo Day" at <http://tiny.cc/ucqc1w>.
6. See "Views of the 'outlaw concept' in comparative perspective: 'The American West' and the Zeybeks in the Turk lands" at <http://tiny.cc/bfqc1w>.
7. See *Turkish Shadow Puppet Theater: A Window on Turkey* at <http://tiny.cc/jtuf2w>.
8. See "Two Altaic Games: 'Chelik-Chomak' and 'Jirid Oyunu'" and "The Traditional Oglak Tartis Among The Kirghiz of the Pamirs" at <http://tiny.cc/7fqc1w> and <http://tiny.cc/kgqc1w>.

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