

20. A Re-reading of the Sky God Belief¹

Gürkan ÇİL²

Emel KIRAT³

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Abstract

Within the scope of this study, it is aimed to re-read the “Old Turkish Belief” and the concepts related to it. We can say that conceptual qualities are taken into consideration in the study conducted on the subject. The first striking element from a historical perspective is the concepts of the pre-Islamic Turkish belief. The concepts used to express belief in “God” in the sources give us the first starting point on the subject. In order to understand the subject, attention is drawn to how concepts such as Tengri, Kök Tengri, Sky God (Gök Tanrı), Yağız Yir, Yir-Sub, Almighty God, Göktürk God and Öd Tengri are handled and how these concepts are used. We see that more than one concept was used within the Old Turkish Belief. Whether these concepts were used interchangeably or as separate concepts constitutes an important point in terms of the understanding of God. Because this constitutes the most critical point of the discussion on whether the Turks had a monotheistic understanding or a polytheistic understanding. In terms of religious practices, conceptual discussions again come to the fore. One of the most important issues here is how the concepts used appear in the sources encountered. In which sources and in which languages they are expressed is a remarkable evaluation in terms of understanding the subject. The subject has been tried to be explained through concepts such as Shamanism, Kamism, Theism and Tengrism. The reason why these concepts are important to us is that they have been used in similar ways in different sources. These concepts we have expressed and the practices of their religious representatives have been interpreted in different ways by researchers. It has been discussed which is referred to as the “Old Turkish Religion”. We have tried to explain that there are many discussions on the subject and which views are the most influential in these discussions.

Keywords: Sky God, Kök Tengri, Shamanism, Tengrism.

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² Öğr. Gör. Dr., Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart Üniversitesi, Bayramiç MYO, Pazarlama ve Reklamcılık Bölümü, Halkla İlişkiler ve Tanıtım Programı / Lect. Dr., Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University, Bayramiç Vocational School, Department of Marketing and Advertising, Public Relations and Publicity Program (Çanakkale, Turkey), **eposta:** gurkancil@comu.edu.tr, **ORCID ID:** <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3721-9810>, **ROR ID:** <https://ror.org/05rsv8p09>

ISNI: 0000 0001 0680 7807, **Crossref Funder ID:** 100009055

³ Dr. Bağımsız Arařtırımcı / Independent Researcher (Çanakkale, Turkey), **eposta:** emelkiratt@gmail.com, **ORCID ID:** <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5152-7214>

Gök Tanrı İnancını Yeniden Okumak⁴

Öz

Bu çalışma kapsamında “Eski Türk İnancı” ve ona dair kavramların yeniden okunması amaçlanmıştır. Konuyla ilgili yapılan çalışmada da kavramsal niteliklerin dikkate alındığını söyleyebiliriz. Tarihsel açıdan ilk dikkat çeken unsur İslam öncesi Türk inancına ait kavramlardır. Kaynaklarda “Tanrı” inancının ifade edilmesi için kullanılan kavramlar bize konu ile ilgili ilk başlangıç noktasını vermektedir. Konunun anlaşılması bakımından Tengri, Kök Tengri, Gök Tanrı, Yağız Yir, Yir-Sub, Yüce Tanrı, Göktürklerin Tanrısı ve Öd Tengri gibi kavramların nasıl ele alındıklarına ve bu kavramların nasıl kullanıldıklarına dikkat çekilmiştir. Eski Türk İnancı içerisinde birden çok kavramın kullanıldığını görmekteyiz. Bu kavramların birbirleri yerine mi yoksa ayrı birer kavram olarak mı kullanıldıkları Tanrı anlayışı açısından önemli bir noktayı oluşturmaktadır. Çünkü Türklerin tek tanrı anlayışına mı yoksa çok tanrılı bir anlayışa mı sahip olduklarına dair tartışmanın en kritik noktasını bu oluşturmaktadır. Dini pratikler açısından ise yine kavramsal tartışmalar karşımıza çıkmaktadır. Buradaki en önemli hususlardan birisi de yine kullanılan kavramların karşılaşılan kaynaklarda nasıl geçtiğidir. Hangi kaynaklarda ve hangi dillerde ifade edilmiş oldukları konunun anlaşılması bakımından dikkate değer bir değerlendirme olarak karşımıza çıkmaktadır. Şamanizm, Kamizm, Tanrıçılık ve Tengricilik gibi kavramlar üzerinden konu açıklanmaya çalışılmıştır. Bu kavramların bizim için önemli olmasının sebebi farklı kaynaklarda benzer şekillerde kullanılmış olmasıdır. İfade ettiğimiz bu kavramlar ve dini temsilcilerinin uygulamaları araştırmacılar tarafından farklı şekillerde yorumlanmıştır. “Eski Türk Dini” olarak ifade edilenin hangisi olduğu tartışılmıştır. Konu ile ilgili birçok tartışmanın olduğunu ve bu tartışmalar içerisinde etkili görüşlerin hangileri olduğunu açıklamaya çalıştık.

Anahtar kelimeler: Gök Tanrı, Kök Tengri, Şamanizm, Tanrıçılık.

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Introduction

Our initial engagement with the concept of Tengri began with our work titled *Traces of Ancient Turkic Beliefs in Eastern Anatolia*. When examined from the perspective of the earliest written sources, a clear depiction of ancient Turkic beliefs emerges: the oldest records are found in Chinese chronicles, the Orkhon inscriptions, and various other sources. These elements of the Turkic belief system can be evaluated both within their historical context and in relation to their contemporary forms. The first information on this topic relates to the pre-Christian Hunnic Turks, who, according to these sources, made sacrifices to Tengri, the Yir-Sub spirits, Yağız Yir spirits, Kök Tengri (blue sky) spirits, and ancestral spirits. During the fifth month of the year, the Hunnic Khan would gather the people and perform a sacrificial ceremony. After a similar ritual in the autumn, the khan would reportedly lead a ceremonial procession through the forest." (Kafesoğlu, 1987: 90-91; Eberhard, 1942: 80).

Sources describing Turkic states after the Hunnic period similarly reference their religious practices, indicating that offerings were made to Tengri, Kök Tengri, Yağız Yir, Yir-Sub, the sun and moon, and ancestral spirits (Roux, 1989: 110-119).

Ancient Turkish Belief and Sky God / Tengri

One of the central themes in the study of pre-Islamic Turkic religion is the Sky God belief, a deeply ingrained concept within Turkic spiritual traditions. What exactly is this Sky God, so prominently mentioned across various sources? What attributes did it possess that earned it reverence among the Turks? In the history of religions, the Scottish scholar Andrew Lang identified a concept of "Great Gods" among some of the most ancient tribes, a notion later expanded by Wilhelm Schmidt in his work, *Der Ursprung der Gottesidee: The Origin of the Idea of God*. Schmidt argued that the belief in a "Great God" existed in early religions and that monotheism, rather than polytheism, was humanity's initial religious orientation (Eliade, 1990: 26). According to Schmidt, there was a belief in a benevolent, omniscient, eternal Creator, a "Great God" residing in the heavens. However, as human societies evolved, these original beliefs transformed, diversifying into various religious expressions (Aydın, 1997: 6).

As noted, Tengri was not limited to the creation of the earth, land, life forms, and humans. Tengri is described as possessing the authority to appoint a khan, ensuring the sacred Ötüken Mountains, as well as sacred lands and waters, would not be left unprotected and that the Turkic people would thrive. Over time, Tengri came to be regarded as the supreme creator under titles such as Bayat, Ogan, and Bir Tengri (Küçük, 1954: 59-80). In the 10th century, an Arab traveler documented interactions with the non-Islamic Oghuz Turks, noting in his travelogue that the Oghuz "believe in one God." (Şeşen, 1975: 31).

The religious history of the Turks is largely shaped by what can be termed the 'Sky God Belief' or Gök Tengri belief. It is, therefore, erroneous for some scholars, under the influence of Western researchers, to categorize this belief system as 'Shamanism.' The Sky God Belief is distinct from Shamanism, which is a rudimentary system of magic practiced more among Mongolic, Tungusic, and similar groups rather than the Turks. Shamanism lacks the attributes of a formal religion and is arguably closer to paganism, whereas the Sky God Belief aligns more closely with monotheistic principles (Kuzgun, 2000: 22-35).

As evidenced by Chinese records and Göktürk inscriptions, Göktürk rulers consistently oriented themselves eastward, a direction symbolically tied to the sacred. These rulers were described as 'sacred' (or 'heavenly') and perceived as divinely appointed, 'created by the sky,' and 'sent from heaven.' It was

also believed that their rule was divinely sanctioned by the sky god Tengri, who held a high and blue position in the heavens, imbuing the people with strength and authority. Tengri, as the supreme deity, sanctioned life, prosperity, and, when necessary, retribution in the form of death to those who defied the rightful ruler. Additionally, inscriptions reveal the presence of a 'time god' (öd tengri), a deity perceived as part of Tengri yet with independent attributes (Baldick, 2000: 52).

With the establishment of organized domains and empires within the Turkic world, the monotheistic character of the Gök Tengri belief became more universal. In times of chaos and the absence of imperial unity, Gök Tengri assumed a form similar to a Deus otiosus, or an inactive, withdrawn deity (Aydn, 1997: 8).

Shamanism, Kamism and Theism / Tengrism

Shamanism, both in its internal and external structures, is a complex system encompassing traditions, rituals, and socio-cultural expressions that has long drawn scholarly interest (Arvas, 2014). Since the early 20th century, ethnologists have applied terms like 'shaman,' 'medicine man,' 'sorcerer,' and 'magician'—often interchangeably—to describe individuals with special spiritual authority found in 'primitive' societies. In religious studies and ethnology, 'shaman' typically refers to a figure who acts as a kind of healer, diviner, or person in a state of trance, thus encompassing a multifaceted and ambiguous concept. Given that terms such as 'sorcerer' or 'magician' already carry vague associations with 'magic' or 'primitive mysticism,' adding the term 'shaman' does little to clarify these meanings (Eliade, 1999: 21-22).

This terminological approach has extended through semantic broadening to apply even to the religious histories of 'civilized' societies. Consequently, we now hear of 'shamanism' in contexts ranging from Indian and Iranian to Germanic, Chinese, and even Babylonian religious systems. This terminology aims to capture 'primitive' elements that are prominent within these belief systems.

It is more accurate to clarify the term as follows: the label 'shamanism' is often used to describe the religious practices of Turkic and Mongol societies; however, this arises from a misunderstanding (Roux, 1998: 49). Furthermore, there exists considerable ambiguity regarding both the origins and scope of the term, creating difficulties in fully understanding its significance (Eliade, 1999: 21).

To avoid these misunderstandings and to gain clearer insight into the historical roles of 'magic' and 'sorcery,' it is prudent to limit the usage of terms such as 'shaman' and 'shamanism.' A shaman is a healer and a diviner, often believed to cure illnesses as a doctor might and to perform extraordinary feats akin to other mystical practitioners (Eliade, 1999: 22). The term 'shaman,' as misunderstood in Anglo-Saxon interpretations, does not merely signify a medicine-man or healer, nor does it imply a magician in the conventional sense. It is evident that the term has been assigned excessive significance and scope (Roux, 1998: 49). Alongside its connotations of priesthood, mysticism, and storytelling, the concept also encompasses the role and function of a 'psychopomp.'

Structurally, Shamanism can be distinguished as follows: Amidst the 'gray mass' of beliefs and magical practices that characterize archaic societies, Shamanism in its narrowest sense reveals unique structural features that affirm its distinct 'history' (Eliade, 1999: 22). Hence, Shamanism:

Although its manifestations are found partly or wholly across various regions of the world, Shamanism's fullest, clearest, and most consistent expression is rooted in Central and Northern Asia. While variations

in religious practices exist across Altai societies, Shamanism remains relatively uniform, displaying only minor distinctions that can be considered peripheral. This consistency supports the notion of its ancient origins (Roux, 1998: 49)

The ancient Turkic belief system is commonly labelled as 'Shamanism' by researchers and scholars; however, the foreign suffix '-ism' contradicts both the language of the followers of this belief and the foundational philosophy of the belief itself (Arpacı, 2012: 14).

Since 'Shaman' designates a religious leader, naming the belief system after this figure is at odds with its true essence. The belief in the Sky God (Gök Tengri) has been examined and interpreted by those influenced by priest-centered or theistic religions. Yet, this terminology does not reflect the core nature or purpose of the Sky God belief. A 'Kam' (shaman) is not a mere transmitter of religious knowledge. As Akay Kine observed, 'In Tengriism, there are no masters or disciples; each individual learns directly from God.'

N. Yugsuva's views on the introduction of the term 'Shaman' and the Christianization efforts led by Russian and other Western missionaries around Shamanism are noteworthy. Shamanism and Gök Tengri belief appear to be contemporaneous systems. Shamanism, which incorporated forms of magic and sorcery, coexisted with the Gök Tengri belief, where 'Kam' served as the religious leader. Over time, these two systems' geographic regions overlapped, resulting in semantic shifts and interchangeable usage of the terms. Elements of ancestor worship, nature worship, and spirit veneration surfaced in various contexts. In present-day 'Altai Belief System,' rigorously studied as 'Akdin' in the Gorna Altai region, a structure that emphasizes the role of 'Ak spirits' (benevolent spirits) is being developed (Kalafat, 2004: 6).

Terms like Ak Cang, Gök Tanrı, and Tanrıçılık (Tengriism) are more accurately used to denote this belief system. Contrary to many researchers, Akay Kine articulates Shamanism as follows: 'Our true belief is Ak Cang, or Tengriism. Shamanism is the expression of Tengriism within other religious frameworks.' According to Akay, the blending of Tengriism with other religious systems, such as Christianity, Islam, or Buddhism, is what constitutes Shamanism (Arpacı, 2012: 14).

Examining the matter from the perspective of Kamism, ancient Turkic religious figures were known as 'kam.' In some Turkic tribes, the term 'oyun' was also used. Chinese records from the 8th century and Islamic sources from the 11th century document this term. Németh, researching the origins of the word 'Shaman,' linked it to the Turkish word 'kam,' which appears across various Turkic dialects, suggesting it has Turkish roots, and offered interpretations of the term's second syllable.

According to Banzarov, who explored the ancient roots of shamans, the earliest reliable information about shamans among Central Asian peoples is found in Chinese records from the 6th century. Pelliot, drawing on a Chinese text, identified the word 'shanman' (=shaman), meaning 'sorcerer,' in the Rouran language of Manchuria, dating back to the 12th century.

Among Turkic peoples, the term 'kam' (also spelled 'gam' or 'ham') is commonly used for shamans, with the Yakut word 'hammakh' meaning 'to perform as a kam.' The word 'kam' typically conveys meanings like 'soothsayer' or 'sorcerer,' but it can also denote 'expert physician,' 'scholar,' or 'philosopher.' In ancient Turkic texts, it occasionally appears as 'pagan priest' or 'sorcerer.' Eberhard notes a Chinese source describing that the Kyrgyz referred to a shaman as 'gan,' likely a variant of 'kam.' Similarly,

Radloff recorded that in the 11th century, the Khakas Kyrgyz used 'kam' for shamans. Harva further noted that the 13th-century European traveler William of Rubruck recorded 'ham' (=kam) as meaning 'sorcerer.' (Çukurova University Turkology Research Center, n.d.).

The term 'kam,' signifying shaman, remains in use today among Altai Turks and has likely been in usage since the 5th century. During the Hunnic period in Europe, individuals named Ata-kam and Eş-kam are recorded, suggesting that religious figures among European Huns were also known as 'kam.' If shamanistic practices had existed among ancient Turks, Latin and German writers, who documented many customs and traditions of the Huns in detail, would have mentioned shamanic rites rather than stating, 'the Huns had no religious ceremonies.' The word 'shaman' was not part of the Turkic lexicon and only became known in Turkish towards the end of the 18th century (Gömeç, 1998: 40).

In *History of Religions* (1993), Tümer and Küçük argued that ancient Turkic religion was not Shamanism. They stated, 'The late Hikmet Tanyu, who argued that the Turkish religion was the monotheistic belief in Sky God (Gök Tengri), demonstrated that the term shaman was foreign to the Turks and that they never practiced a religion called Shamanism; this designation is an error.' In this study, while examining the distribution of the Gök Tengri belief among Turkic peoples, we emphasize the system's manifestations, highlighting the differences between the term 'shaman' and its usage compared to 'kam,' and defining the roles of shaman and kam within the belief system. According to our findings, the shaman served as an intermediary between humans and the spirit world, while the kam mediated between humans and Tengri's divine command (Kalafat, 2004: 5).

The Altai people, who are believed to have held nature sacred, practiced Kamlık (the practice of the kam). Today, only a small number of Turks continue to live according to the Kamlık tradition. The region where the Altai Turks resided 2,000 years ago is known as Ötüken, the land of the Bengü stones, inscribed and erected by the Göktürk Khan Kutlu Bilge Khan along the Orkhon River. According to Altai Turks, these stones declare, 'The Turk should return to his ancient homeland.' The Altai people identify themselves not as Russian, Christian, or Jewish but as a Turkic people adhering to a contemporary yet suppressed and forgotten belief system. They practice what Western scholars refer to as Shamanism, although they call it the Kam Religion. Kamlık is deeply rooted in ancestor veneration. In this belief, the spirits of ancestors provide strength, and one of the most symbolic practices in honoring them is the celebration of Nevruz. For the Altai people, Nevruz, or Yılğayak (New Year), has been celebrated for 3,000 years. The festival marks the melting of snow and ice, revealing the earth's green, signifying life and vitality. As the earth rejuvenates, animals feed on fresh grass, and humans benefit from the abundance. The belief is that God commands humanity to 'Work with the earth and take what it yields.' Additionally, ancestor spirits are believed to urge, 'Take care of your homeland, the land, animals, and plants.'

In Kamism, where belief in spirits is strong, natural forces like wind and gusts are considered spirit entities. For example, after sunset, people must cover their heads as a form of protection against the wind spirit, which is thought to first strike the head. Men and women alike cover their heads and hair to avoid harm from this spirit. When a family member dies, covering one's head becomes obligatory; no hair should be left exposed on the ground, as the spirit of the deceased may attach to it. It is believed that if someone who loses a family member neglects these rituals, the deceased's spirit may bring harm. According to tradition, if a Turk born in Turkey dies in Altai, their spirit will wander for 40 days in search of any hair left behind (Kalafat, 2004: 59-60). Such beliefs illustrate the reverence for spirits inherent in Kamism.

In summary, the belief system is widely recognized as Tanrıçılık (belief in God), and its followers are called Tanrıçı (believers in God), with 'kam' being the most commonly used term for a religious official (Arpacı, 2012: 15). Based on this information, our main objective is to explore the relationships and distinctions between Shamanism, Kamism, and Tanrıçılık.

The challenge in categorizing the traditional Turkic religion within one of the systems proposed by religious theorists arises from the complexity and variability that the belief has shown throughout history, reflecting both enduring and evolving elements (Günay and Güngör, 1998: 126).

By placing the Gök Tengri (Sky God) belief at the heart of this system, we observe how it persisted as an archetypal religious structure. We also attempt to show the existence of secondary and extended sacredness associated with the Deus Otiosus concept through historical examples. Ancestor worship is similarly integrated within this framework. Consequently, it is reasonable to suggest that ancient Turkic religion was a unique system centered on Gök Tengri. Although, as J.P. Roux noted, there were shifts over time between folk religion and official religion within Turkic religious history, driven by various social, economic, cultural, and particularly political factors, both types were fundamentally rooted in the same religious-cultural foundation, evolving over time around the Gök Tengri belief. In this sense, defining traditional Turkic religion as 'an original system centered around Gök Tengri' is justified and valid (Günay and Güngör, 1998: 126-127).

However, it would be overly simplistic to equate this system with Hanifism. Although the available information does not allow a complete reconstruction of all developmental stages of ancient Turkic religion, we know that the Gök Tengri (Sky God) concept was specific to steppe cultures. Religious history also teaches us that territorial sacredness, tied to land, is typically absent in nomadic societies. Hence, the vatan (homeland) and Yer-su (earth-water) cults, which relate to the land, likely developed as the Turks transitioned from nomadism to settled or semi-nomadic lifestyles. As in other societies, the ancestor cult in ancient Turkic religion was likely connected to familial and social structures in early Turkic communities.

Over time, the enduring archetypes within Turkic religious history, combined with external influences, gradually coalesced into a system that can be described as religious-mystical-magical, often referred to as Shamanism. Notably, this system transcended the ancient Turks and adopted a universal dimension (Günay and Güngör, 1998: 127).

In our view, this complexity in traditional Turkic religion stems from its distinct internal structure and external influences from various religious and cultural systems, forming a deep-rooted but intricate belief system. This complexity makes it difficult to understand solely through one theory or model, as it comprises multiple overlapping or intertwined layers of belief and cultural elements. A scientific analysis must consider both its uniqueness and complexity. In this form, traditional Turkic religion stands as an original religious phenomenon specific to the ancient Turks. Although it may seem that external influences and complexities disrupted this originality, our findings indicate that the archetypes have preserved their integrity, maintaining continuity throughout history. While external influences and the historical-cultural dynamics of internal transformations brought diversity and richness to this religious history, the complexity mentioned also signifies this richness and diversity (Günay and Güngör, 1998: 127-128).

In essence, as we will see, this continuity and richness persisted even after the Turks gradually

transitioned away from their traditional religion and embraced the great universal religions, particularly Islam. Hence, archetypes in Turkish religious history and numerous elements of traditional religion continued to evolve, merging with and adapting to new motifs (Günay and Güngör, 1998: 128).

In general, it can be observed that within Ural-Altaic communities, the concept of a 'Supreme God,' or Gök Tengri (Sky God), retained its 'original form' better than in other societies. In the Turkic world, this 'Supreme God' did not transform into a deity of storms or thunder but maintained sovereign and omnipotent qualities. This God, without oversimplifying the matter, closely resembles the 'One God' concept that Hanif Muslims believe in. This belief is thought to have facilitated the Turks' transition to the Islamic concept of Allah, as pre-Islamic Turks firmly believed that cosmic, social, and worldly order, along with the fate of humanity, was dependent on Tengri. Every Turkish ruler was required to receive the honor and mandate of Gök Tengri, as recorded in the Orkhon inscriptions (Eliade, 2000: 66)

Conclusion

Although we have limited resources on the Old Turkish Belief, we can say that most of the information obtained belongs to old Chinese sources and some inscriptions. We find the opportunity to evaluate the information we obtain from these sources dating back to the years before Christ in the rituals of this form of belief.

We see that the most important discussions on the subject are etymological and theological. Etymologically, concepts such as Kök-Tengri, Gök Tengri, Tengri, Great God, Almighty God and God of the Gokturks come to mind. Together with this, we can say that all the concepts we encounter have great similarities in essence.

If we make an etymological assessment as a form of belief, it can be said that we are faced with the concepts of Shamanism, Kamism and Godism/Tengrism. The similarities and differences between these concepts can be commented as follows. As the source of the similarities, we see that they are generally used with similar expressions in certain sources. However, we can say that there are great similarities in the belief and worship styles of the believing communities.

The basis of the differences is the use of concepts found in the language to which the expressions given in the sources belong. The important element here is that the language has many cultural and historical substructures. The fact that the sources encountered do not have concepts that will express the concepts belonging to the Old Turkish Belief in terms of the structure of the language to which they belong makes it difficult to explain the subject.

The most important issue we encounter theologically is whether this belief, which we will call the Old Turkish Belief, is monotheistic or polytheistic. We can say that the fundamental distinction here stems from conceptual differences. We can say that the factors that create these conceptual differences are geography, culture and forms of belief.

In the final analysis, we find it useful to say that it would not be right to define the belief system we call the "Ancient Turkish Belief/Religion" with simple similarities. While we state that this belief system was formed with a "Supreme God" at its center, the most important element that distinguishes it from Hanifism is to compare it with other religions that have an understanding of holiness attached to the land. This attachment to the land can be explained not in terms of nature but rather in terms of territorial understanding.

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