

### Turkmenistan: Epics in Place of Historiography\*

With the disintegration of the USSR in 1991 the former Soviet Socialist Republics of Central Asia became independent states. Throughout the region the old Soviet elites remained in power. All five Central Asian republics developed strong presidential systems and everywhere the heads of state have personally been actively involved in the creation and propagation of the new state ideology, also through the writing of books on politics and the histories of their respective republics.<sup>1</sup>

Among these post-Soviet leaders in Central Asia, Turkmenistan's president Saparmurat Niyazov (in power 1985–2006) stood out as a peculiar figure. Already from the beginning of the 1990s a cult of personality was being established around the president, who, in 1993, named himself "Turkmenbashi" (Father of the Turkmens) and then declared himself president for life. Niyazov's figure featured prominently everywhere around the country, and museums, memorial parks and statues were constructed or renamed to honor Niyazov.<sup>2</sup> Slogans celebrating "Independent and Neutral Turkmenistan" and symbolizing the inextricable link between the nation and the president (*Halk, Watan, Beýik Türkmenbaşy!* – "People, Homeland, Great Turkmenbashi!") replaced the old Soviet slogans.<sup>3</sup> All this happened in an atmosphere of repression, with the Turkmen administration quickly developing into the most authoritarian regime of the region.

But the president acquired his international reputation for eccentricity mainly with the publication of the "Ruhnama" ("Book of the Spirit", 2001; second volume 2004), which served as the centerpiece of the new Turkmen state ideology and was used as the main tool for political propaganda by the Niyazov government. The "Ruhnama" was the president's personal account of the essence of the Turkmen nation, presented as a work of literature.

Outside Turkmenistan, the "Ruhnama" has been largely discarded as a politically inspired piece of fiction by an authoritarian statesman. However, some authors have rightly

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- 1 All the Central Asian presidents have published several books. Uzbekistan's president ISLAM KARIMOV's publications include *Nasha tsel'* (1994), *Uzbekskii narod* (2005), and *Obespechit' postupatel'noe i ustoiichivoe razvitie* (2009). Kazakhstan's president NURSULTAN NAZARBAEV published, among other books, *Na poroge XXI veka* (1996), *V potoke istorii* (2003) and *Kazakhstanskii put'* (2006). Kyrgyzstan's former presidents likewise published their thoughts on their country (ASKAR AKAEV *Kyrgyzskaia gosudarstvennost' i narodnyi epos "Manas"*, 2002; *Pamiatnoe desiatiletie*, 2002; and *Istoriia, proshedshaia cherez moe serdtse*, 2003; KURMANBEK BAKIEV *Kazhdomu kyrgyzstantsu – dostoinuiu zhizn'!* [2006]), as did Tajikistan's president EMOMALI RAHMON (*Tadzhiki v zerkale istorii*, 1999, and *Nezavisimost' Tadzhikistana i vozrozhdenie natsii*, 2006–2007). Niyazov published books on politics as well as many volumes of poetry. Titles include the "Ruhnama" (*Book of the Spirit*, 2001, 2004) *Türkmeniň baş eýýamynyň ruhy* (*Five Eras of Turkmen Spirituality*, 2003), and *Divan* (a collection of previously published poems, 2005).
- 2 For a discussion of the cult of personality in monuments see for instance ŠIR *Cult of Personality in Monumental Art and Architecture*, pp. 203–220.
- 3 According to a Turkmen 'analysis', this slogan does "reflect the ideas and desires of the Turkmens during thousands of years"; AMANSARIYEV *Nation! Motherland! Great Leader!*, pp. 36–49.

pointed to the political purpose of the leader cult, and the function of the “Ruhnama” within this cult.<sup>4</sup> And certainly, the “Ruhnama” gained an important role in Turkmen public life. Building upon this idea, this article seeks to find new clues to understanding the “Ruhnama” and its resonance in Turkmenistan – not by scrutinizing its claims to truth before the background of historical facts, but by looking at the book as a modern epic that draws heavily on the Central Asian epic tradition.

### *The “Ruhnama”*

The “Ruhnama” defines the “national essence” of the Turkmen, and it establishes Niiazov’s special link with the Turkmen nation through the creation of a specific image of the history, culture and religion of the Turkmen.

The book is a mosaic of different literary genres. It makes frequent use of legends, short stories and proverbs accompanied by Niiazov’s explanatory notes in order to give a picture of the customs and values of the ancient Turkmen. Essays on the modern history of Turkmenistan are intertwined with the personal history of Niiazov and important treatises and declarations signed by him. There is regular use of poems by the president expressing his love for the Turkmen nation and homeland. Throughout the book, the reader is directly addressed (“My dear Turkmen!”; “Boys and girls!”; “Mothers!”, etc.), and told how to behave (“Keep your houses clean!”; “Never make your parents cry!”; “The Turkmen woman is gentle and forgiving!”).

According to the “Ruhnama”, Turkmen history had long been distorted due to Soviet oppression.<sup>5</sup> The “Ruhnama” now intends to rectify this. Through appropriating their proper history, and the values and ethics promoted through this history, the Turkmen are to re-establish themselves as a great people, morally and spiritually as well as in terms of statehood.<sup>6</sup> According to this narrative, Turkmenistan’s independence made it possible to enter a new phase of blossoming that is modeled according to the bygone Golden Age of the period of Oghuz Khan, the mythical forefather to whom all Turkmen supposedly trace their ancestry. This future Golden Age will be reached by following the proper conduct of the Turkmen of ancient times.<sup>7</sup> Niiazov guides the Turkmen to that Golden Age, with his “Ruhnama” as the guidebook.

- 4 See DENISON *Führerkult in Turkmenistan*, pp. 209–223, and KADYROV *Polittekhologii v sovetskoi i postsovetskoi Tsentral’noi Azii*. See also BROWN / SHEIKO *Soviet Legacy*.
- 5 TURKMENBASHY *Rukhnama* (English edition), pp. 44–45; 142; 205–206; 259–260; and TÜRKMENBAŞY *Ruhnama* (Turkmen edition), pp. 44; 145; 210; 269. The English translation is fairly close to the Turkmen original. By contrast, in the Russian translation some paragraphs appear to be missing or shortened. My thanks to Michael Kemper for his help with analyzing Turkmen language texts.
- 6 TURKMENBASHY *Ruhnama* (English edition), p. 74; (Turkmen edition), p. 74.
- 7 This idea resonates with other ideologies which promote the re-establishment of a bygone ‘Golden Age’. Especially the similarities with the theories of the Turkish preacher Fethullah Gülen are worth mentioning in the Turkmen case, also due to the privileged position of the Bashkent schools of the Gülen movement which were allowed to continue functioning when other foreign educational institutes were closed in Turkmenistan under Niiazov. For more on Gülen schools in Turkmenistan see CLEMENT *Turkmenistan’s New Challenges*, pp. 572–584.

Epic stories and the heroic deeds of the legendary Turkmen forefathers explain what would constitute proper conduct. These stories are derived from a number of well-known Turkic epic cycles. Many stories can be traced back to the “Oghuznama”, the epic cycle on the mythical forefather of the Turkmen, Oghuz Khan. Other stories are deduced from the Book of Dede Korkut [Gorkut Ata] and from the *dastan* (Turkmen: *dessan*; a [part of an] epic dealing with an event or the life of a hero) of Görogly.<sup>8</sup> In the “Ruhnama”, the references to epic figures serve to promote a certain (moral) behavior and values – such as the love and protection of the homeland modeled upon the ancestors’ defense of their lands against raids by the infidels, the importance of toys (feasts) based on the banquets described in the epics after each adventure, the importance Turkmen attribute to horses as shown by the story of Görogly and his wondrous horse Kirat, and the code of honor for a wife and mother based on the story of Lady Burla who refuses to reveal herself to the infidels who want to use her in order to bring shame upon her husband, even when the infidels threaten to kill her son (in the Book of Dede Korkut).<sup>9</sup> Secondly, proper behavior is derived from the “wisdom” of the ancestors, such as the “advice” of Görogly that misfortune comes from disagreement, egoism and taking things which are forbidden by religion (*haram*),<sup>10</sup> or of the poet Magtymguly Pyragy (1733–1797) who “once said” that it is best to be polite and restrain one’s anger.<sup>11</sup> And, thirdly, epics are also used to make historical claims, for instance that the Turkmen have a history of 5000 years and that their genealogy goes back to Yaphet, the son of Noah (as mentioned in the “Oghuznama”). In this way, epic materials are used to promote a primordialist image of the Turkmen as a distinct and ancient ethnic group. The significance attached to the longevity of the nation is a feature shared with other Central Asian states, and the sustained emphasis on ethnogenesis is, of course, a legacy of Soviet historiography.<sup>12</sup> By depicting the past and present Turkmen as brave, hospitable and honest, Niiazov’s account dismisses widespread negative stereotypes about the Turkmen, especially the nineteenth-century view of the Turkmen as tribes who raided travelers and traded hostages as slaves.<sup>13</sup> It also stands in contrast to the view prevalent in the Soviet period that before 1917 the Turkmen had been a primitive people who eventually benefited from the Soviet efforts to bring them progress.<sup>14</sup>

Niiazov’s version of history in the “Ruhnama” also serves to underline the importance of unity. It is suggested that, when unified, the Turkmen were always a strong people, and only due to later tribal discord they lost their power and succumbed to invaders. This tribal discord resulted from the absence of a strong and accepted ruler, as Oghuz Khan and several of his descendants had once been, and, between the lines, as Niiazov was at the

8 Turkish: Köroğlu. In the article I will use the Turkmen spelling as used in the “Ruhnama”, except where I am explicitly referring to the Görogly tradition in other countries.

9 TURKMENBASHY Ruhnama (English edition), pp. 105–106; (Turkmen edition), p. 106. This episode is part of the legend “How Salur Kazan’s House was Pillaged”, from the “Book of Dede Korkut”. (See for an English translation LEWIS The Book of Dede Korkut, pp. 42–58).

10 TURKMENBASHY Ruhnama (English edition), p. 262; (Turkmen edition), p. 272.

11 TURKMENBASHY Ruhnama (English edition), p. 155; (Turkmen edition), p. 158.

12 See e. g. LARUELLE The Concept of Ethnogenesis in Central Asia, pp. 169–188; and KHALID Nation into History, pp. 127–145. For a case study on Tajikistan, see LARUELLE The Return of the Aryan Myth, pp. 51–70.

13 TURKMENBASHY Ruhnama (English edition), p. 179; (Turkmen edition), pp. 182–183.

14 TURKMENBASHY Ruhnama (English edition), pp. 259–261; (Turkmen edition), p. 269–270.

time of writing. The “Ruhnama” gives an account of the many states that were allegedly founded by the Turkmens. Next to “the Ancient Oghuz State” (reportedly 5000 years ago), the Oghuz Turkmen and Gök Turkmen states, also the Seljuk and Ottoman Empires are claimed for the Turkmens; this line culminates in the “Independent and Neutral Turkmenistan” of today. Unity of the tribes is also communicated by national symbols, such as the flag in which the carpet patterns of the five largest tribes of Turkmenistan are displayed. With this, the complex history and relations of many more different tribes and sub-tribes are discarded. And although propaganda does not explicitly mention the dominance of the Ahal-Teke tribe, from which Niiazov stemmed, this is still clear in personnel policies of the state as well as the concentration of money in the Ahal-Teke areas of Ashgabat and its surroundings.<sup>15</sup> Almost completely absent are references to what we would call the modern era. Thus, the whole eighteenth century is omitted except for the praising of the Turkmen poet Magtymguly. Similarly, the nineteenth century is represented only by the Battle of Gök Tepe (1881), in which the Tsarist Russian army under General Skobelev dealt a decisive blow to the last resistance of the Ahal-Teke Turkmens against the colonization of their lands. That the Iomud Turkmens by that time had already accepted Russian rule and fought on the side of the Russian army remains, however, unmentioned.

History resumes with Niiazov himself, who perfectly embodies the modern Turkmen nation.<sup>16</sup> By a close link between the history of the Turkmens and his personal biography, we learn about the heroic character of Niiazov’s father Atamurat who died in the Great Patriotic War (WW II); about his mother and brothers who perished during the devastating Ashgabat earthquake of 1948, leaving Niiazov an orphan; about Niiazov’s feelings of attachment to the Turkmen land, especially during his studies in Leningrad (where he graduated from the Polytechnic Institute in 1967); and about his “struggle” for Turkmen sovereignty, culminating in the declaration of independence on 27 October 1991.

From the personal history of Niiazov, and also from his many poems on the Turkmen motherland, the president emerges as a staunch patriot who always fought for the independence of his homeland. This independence, moreover, is presented as the outcome of a centuries-long struggle of the Turkmen people, who have always shared a common sense of belonging. In contrast, nothing is being said about the importance of the Soviet nationalities policy in the creation of a national Turkmen identity.<sup>17</sup> Instead, in Niiazov’s view the Soviets denied the Turkmens their sought-after independence in their common homeland, a wrong which has finally been righted by Niiazov personally when declaring Turkmenistan’s independence. Allegedly, this had already been his ultimate goal when he was still First Secretary of the Communist Party of Turkmenistan (1985–1991).

The “Ruhnama” mentions several of Niiazov’s specific policies, such as the reconstruction of Ashgabat and the free supply of energy and water to the population. The July 1992 agreement between Yeltsin and Niiazov on regulating debts and credits of the former

15 KADYROV *Turkmenbashizm. Chast’ 3: Vse dorogi vedut v Ashkhabad.*

16 That Niiazov’s life story is embedded in the national history, in which he is also depicted as the guarantor of national unity, has also been pointed out by DENISON *Führerkult in Turkmenistan*, p. 217.

17 For Soviet nationality policies and the construction of Turkmenistan, see EDGAR *Tribal Nation: The Making of Soviet Turkmenistan.*

USSR is reproduced in the book,<sup>18</sup> as is the constitutional law on Turkmenistan's independence of 26 October 1990.<sup>19</sup> The decision by the United Nations to grant Turkmenistan the status of permanent neutrality in December 1995,<sup>20</sup> which allowed Turkmenistan to remain aloof of international involvement, and thus also to avoid foreign critique, is presented to the readers as an expression of the nation's peaceful character.<sup>21</sup> And particular attention is given to the importance of the education and upbringing of the New Generation that will lead the country to the Golden Age.<sup>22</sup>

History is thus being told on the basis of a small cast of epic characters exemplifying the Turkmen nation. Even the periodization of world history is connected to Turkmen individuals who reportedly introduced new "ages of the Turkmen spirit". Thus, ancient history starts with "the epoch of Oghuz Khan" (5000 BC – 650 CE), followed by "the epoch of Gorkut Ata" (Dede Korkut, 650 CE – 10th century CE); "the epoch of Görogly" (10th – 17th centuries); and "the epoch of Magtymguly" (17th – 20th centuries). This periodization underlines the importance of the major Turkmen epics for Niiazov's understanding of Turkmen, Central Asian and even world history.<sup>23</sup> Finally, starting with independence Turkmenistan has reached "the age of maturity for the Turkmen spirit."<sup>24</sup> Although not specifically stated, it is clear that Niiazov should be seen as the leading spiritual figure of this period, and his "Ruhnama" as the guiding book.

In a way, this personified history can be seen as a continuation of the Soviet style of presenting history as it had been introduced into school education under Stalin and as it was continued after the Khrushchev-era education reforms of 1958, which focused on great individuals as a personification of the nation's struggle towards socialism. This seems to be a broader Central Asian trend. Shoshanna Keller, in her study on the Uzbek history curriculum, has argued that the form of Soviet historical narrative has remained intact, while the meaning of this narrative has completely been altered by "replacing the tale of sacralized struggle toward communism with a tale of sacralized struggle toward national independence."<sup>25</sup> In Turkmenistan, this nationalist reading of history provides an easy entrance gate for adding Niiazov to the list of extraordinary figures. Through persons it is also easy to exemplify what would be correct moral behavior for the individual Turkmen; history's purpose is reduced to moral and patriotic education. Moreover, the heroic figures are meant to embody the Turkmen nation in its entirety, thus making a historiography

18 TURKMENBASHY *Ruhnama* (English edition), pp. 52–53; (Turkmen edition), pp. 52–54.

19 TURKMENBASHY *Ruhnama* (English edition), pp. 46–50; (Turkmen edition), pp. 47–50.

20 TURKMENBASHY *Ruhnama* (English edition), pp. 236–237; (Turkmen edition), p. 244.

21 For a study of the function of neutrality in Turkmenistan's foreign policy, see ANCeschi Turkmenistan's Foreign Policy.

22 Passages hinting at the importance of moral upbringing and education can be found throughout the "Ruhnama". For a longer paragraph on Niiazov's Bilim [Knowledge] policy (in the English translation: "New Science Policy"), supposedly the centerpiece of the new Turkmen education, see TURKMENBASHY *Ruhnama* (English edition), pp. 334–344; (Turkmen edition), pp. 342–350.

23 Only Magtymguly is not an epic character, but as a Sufi poet he is still in some way linked to the poetic and mystical tradition of the epics.

24 TURKMENBASHY *Ruhnama* (English edition), pp. 279–287; (Turkmen edition), p. 290–297.

25 KELLER *Story, Time, and Dependent Nationhood in the Uzbek History Curriculum*, pp. 276–277.

based on different tribes or regions obsolete. A social history would challenge the idea of a unified Turkmen history before the creation of the Turkmen SSR.<sup>26</sup>

### *The end of historiography*

Over time, the “Ruhnama” became the main reference book on Turkmenistan within the country, and alternative visions of history, and a scholarly discourse on Turkmenistan’s past, were gradually made impossible. Although the “Ruhnama” was not the only book on history any other publication on the Turkmen past had to take into account the “Ruhnama”. Specific institutions under the authority of the Presidential apparatus were set up to safeguard the elaboration and even more so the dissemination of the view of the past as expounded by the president.<sup>27</sup> Already in 1998, before the publication of the “Ruhnama”, the scholarly apparatus of the Soviet-style Academy of Sciences was abolished, and eventually replaced with several scholarly institutes working directly under the auspices of the president. The year 2000 saw the establishment of the “State Institute for the Cultural Heritage of the Peoples of Turkmenistan, Central Asia and the Orient under the President of Turkmenistan”, which became the main institute responsible for the writing and dissemination of history. In 2004, the “Miras [Cultural Heritage] National Center for the Cultural Heritage of Turkmenistan” was established to supplement the earlier institute. In an opening speech, Niiazov maintained that the new center should focus not on history, but on the culture of the past, specifically mentioning the “wisdom of our forefathers” as an object of study, and *dastans* as the main literary source to be studied in order to “give back” to the people their “spiritual memory”.<sup>28</sup> The Miras Center also closely cooperated with the “Saparmyrat Turkmenbashi National Institute of Manuscripts of Turkmenistan”, which is responsible for the preservation of old Oriental manuscripts. Together these three institutes started to organize popular-scientific international conferences related to the history and archeology of the Turkmen people. Through the choices of topics for history writing and for conferences, the institutes were able to exert influence on the view on Turkmen history at home and abroad. The topics of the conferences reflect the content of the “Ruhnama”, several conferences were held on the “Ruhnama” itself (2003, 2005, 2006, etc.). Next to that, events were held on archeology and archeological sites (Anau, 2004; ancient Merv, 2006; Nisa, 2007), (ancient) Turkmen material culture (horses, 2001, 2009; carpets, 2001, 2009; dogs, 2005; jewelry, 2009), and a number of “great Turkmens”, including poets (Magtymguly, 2008; the Islamic grammarian Zamahshary who is portrayed as a “scientist, poet and writer”, 2004, 2007); “scientists” (the *hadith* scholar Dhahabi, 2008), and Sufi saints (Najmaddin Kubra, 2008; Iasavi, 2010). The conferences also serve to ‘claim’ these figures as Turkmens, since Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan also regard some of them as part of their national heritage.

26 KELLER also points to this feature in the case of Uzbekistan: *Story, Time, and Dependent Nationhood*, p. 268.

27 According to a publication in the *Miras Magazine*, these institutes were established to “implement the Great Leader’s cultural heritage teaching”; ASHYROV *Cultural Heritage-Oriented Policy*, p. 145.

28 TURKMENBASHI *The People Should Be Given Back Their Spiritual Memory*, p. 9.

Next to conference volumes about the great Turkmen individuals of the ancient and medieval periods, the Miras Center published books on topics like ancient weaponry, historical sites and ancient cities in Turkmenistan, the historical role of horses and dogs with the Turkmens, ancient customs of the Turkmens, the history of the city of Ashgabat, and modern translations of historical works by 'great Turkmens' (mostly translations of Oriental materials from the manuscript institute). All these publications should be seen as popular history, intended for a broad domestic audience rather than for a critical international community of professionals. The Institute for Cultural Heritage also published a popular scientific journal, the above-mentioned Miras Magazine, about four times a year. In this trilingual magazine, most attention has been given to the work and findings of archaeological expeditions in Turkmenistan. Other historical journals did not exist in the country at that time.

Given the status of these scholarly institutes, independent history writing became impossible in Turkmenistan. In contrast to the other Central Asian states, where government pressure on historians is also great but where a minimum of debate still takes place at least within the small circle of professional historians,<sup>29</sup> in Turkmenistan debates about the interpretation of history seem to be wholly absent.

As S. M. Demidov has argued in his "Postsovetskii Turkmenistan" (2002),<sup>30</sup> there was no established reading of history in the early days of independence. Between 1988 and the early 1990s Turkmen historians and ethnographers were repeatedly assigned the task of producing a new survey of Turkmen history. However, the manuscripts of their collective volumes were regularly discarded by the government and never went to press; the continuous revisions of the manuscripts during this period testify to the changing demands by the state, with the result that academic research was constantly in flux and its results eventually disappeared forever in the drawer.

Also school textbooks for history education remained unpublished until after Niiazov's demise. Up until 2008, Niiazov's "Ruhnama" served as the main source for government-approved history in the country. Yet the reliance on the books of Niiazov for teaching world history must have been rather artificial, considering that little is being said on world history in his writings except for an appraisal of the alleged contributions that Turkmenistan has made to "world culture". It is likely that teachers made use of Soviet and Russian textbooks as additional guidelines; in those years, used Soviet and post-1991 Russian history books were the only historical literature still available in the few book corners of Ashgabat's big markets and were also available in the libraries of secondary schools in Ashgabat. Turkmen history, which constituted an important part of history education, is, however, not extensively covered by these Russian publications, leaving much room that could be filled with the president's writings. The ideological component of the "Ruhnama" (including the expounded views on history) in education was furthermore strengthened by a specific "Ruhnama" course taught to pupils of all classes.

29 It should be noted that even when a minimum of debate is still possible, self-censorship and the tendency to focus on less problematic eras (comparable to the focus on archeology and ancient history in Turkmenistan) are also present in other Central Asian republics; see ADAMS Cultural Elites in Uzbekistan, pp. 93–119.

30 DEMIDOV Postsovetskii Turkmenistan.

It thus becomes clear that already from the late 1980s, the Nijazov administration sought to establish tight control over history production in Turkmenistan. What little debate existed about the correct interpretation of history over time became more and more subdued by the presidential apparatus, and finally ceased completely with the establishment of the “Ruhnama” as the main authority on the history of Turkmenistan. Many historians, ethnographers and scholars of political studies left the country. Therewith, the “Ruhnama” replaced historiography in the country altogether.

*The political functions of epics*

However, to assume that Nijazov intended to write a coherent history of Turkmenistan is problematic, and this for a number of reasons. In the first place, the many gaps in historical coverage make the “Ruhnama” incomplete as a historical narrative. Secondly, the lack of references to source material beyond the circle of epics leaves the reader pretty helpless. Thirdly, the many epics used and quoted may indeed give clues on the past customs of the Turkmens, but they do not tell us much about historical events and processes. This must also be obvious to students and teachers. I would therefore like to argue that the “Ruhnama” was not meant as a history book, and certainly not as a school textbook; rather, it was written as an epic. This assumption can be supported by numerous allusions in the “Ruhnama” that the president’s book is indeed a new epic, and “the ‘Oghuznama’ of the Third Millenium”<sup>31</sup>, being written “in the same tradition as the ‘Oghuznama’”<sup>32</sup>. The “Ruhnama” also mirrors the political functions of traditional epics. It might therefore be instructive to look at the “Ruhnama” as an endeavor to provide a new central *legend* to the Turkmens.

Devin DeWeese has argued that in Inner Asian epics or conversion legends, factual ‘distortions’ of the past are not necessarily problematic. It is a misunderstanding of the character of such legends if we want to analyze them as if they were historical works. According to DeWeese, underlying the idea that epic accounts amount to a ‘distortion’ of history is the false assumption “that individuals and communities tend to organize and articulate their experience first and foremost as ‘history,’ or at least in ways amenable to historical analysis”. DeWeese suggests a different approach, stemming from the assumption “that people more often cast and recast their experience in ways reflexive of their fundamental values”.<sup>33</sup> Legends of origin are specifically meaningful to the societies in which they take shape because they “articulate a community’s understanding of its identity”.<sup>34</sup> Accordingly, our task is not to try and find a reflection of historical facts in these legends, but rather to find out what these tales about the past meant to their community.<sup>35</sup>

The function of oral tradition is to establish the sacral integrity of a particular collectivity on the basis of identity of origin, and to articulate the norms of that community. Legends of origin revolve around the establishment of a community or ‘nation’ by a mythical ancestor. The formation of such “national mythologies” often takes place in a time of

31 TURKMENBASHY Ruhnama (English edition), p. 71; (Turkmen edition), p. 72 (italics mine).

32 TURKMENBASHY Ruhnama (English edition), pp. 61–62; (Turkmen edition), p. 62 (italics mine).

33 DEWEESE Islamization and Native Religion in the Golden Horde, p. 321.

34 DEWEESE Islamization and Native Religion, p. 5.

35 DEWEESE Islamization and Native Religion, p. 12.



political and / or social change to explain and justify a newly-formed group on the basis of well-known stories, episodic narratives and ‘floating’ themes that were meaningful to the community.<sup>36</sup> The values and norms reflected in these narratives help to make sense of new events. This counts for both legends of origin and conversion legends, and in Inner Asia, the two getting frequently intertwined when the communal ancestor is gradually taking on more and more Islamic features (as we will see with the example of Oghuz Khan), or when an Islamizer turns into the communal ancestor.<sup>37</sup> Such legends are cloaked in religious symbolism with a focus on sacred communal and ancestral values.

Spirits which are regarded as the ancestors of the family and its community are at the center of many Inner Asian religious rites.<sup>38</sup> The appropriation of sacred ancestors, together with the idea of adhering to the norms of these ancestors, is therefore a powerful tool in the construction and sanctification of new communities.<sup>39</sup> Additionally, the legends also lend legitimacy to the political leader of the community. Just as the entire community is imagined in terms of a sacred father’s action, the contemporary khan and his ancestors come to represent the community in its present form.<sup>40</sup> By establishing a direct genealogical link with the community’s ‘founder’, a ruler made claims to political loyalty on the basis of norms which are supposed to be sacred and eternal. Such a claim invests the leader with both religious and political legitimacy, going beyond opportunistic loyalty or submission based on mere military power or economic advantage.<sup>41</sup>

The political nature of the interpretation of epics in the twentieth century has been documented on several instances in the case of the Turkish Republic. Folk music and the epic tradition formed an important building block in the promotion of a national identity in the early days of the Turkish Republic. This was based on the ideas of the nationalist theorist Ziya Gökalp (187–1924), who had been Atatürk’s main inspiration on this matter. Gökalp advocated the need to bridge the cleavage between Arabic- and Persian- influenced Ottoman elite culture and popular culture in order to form a new national culture based on ancient cultural traditions of their presumed lands of origin, Central Asia. These traditions could be found in the “unspoiled Turkish folk culture, its legends, proverbs, epics, and poetry.”<sup>42</sup> On this politically inspired ground, conservatories and special schools were established to train folk music performers, and with the foundation of state radio in 1937 the promotion of folk music became a priority for the Turkish state.<sup>43</sup> However, folk music could also be perceived as a threat to the state. In 1948 the professor for Turkish Folk Literature Pertev Naili Boratav was on trial for discouraging nationalism and promoting communism in his classes, based partially on his positive appraisal of the epic outlaw-hero Köroğlu, whom the Turkish historiography of that period saw as a rebel against the state.<sup>44</sup> And after the adoption of the 1961 constitution guaranteeing human rights and freedom of speech, epic singers used their performances to attack “social injustice, economic inequal-

36 DeWeese *Islamization and Native Religion*, pp. 161–162.

37 As DeWeese shows in his book based on the example of Baba Tükles.

38 DeWeese *Islamization and Native Religion*, p. 37.

39 DeWeese *Islamization and Native Religion*, pp. 506–507.

40 DeWeese *Islamization and Native Religion*, pp. 220; 326.

41 DeWeese *Islamization and Native Religion*, pp. 382; 525.

42 MARKOFF *The Ideology of Musical Practice*, p. 129.

43 MARKOFF *The Ideology of Musical Practice*, p. 131.

44 ÖZTÜRKMEN *Folklore on Trial*, pp. 200–201.

ity and American imperialism.” Apparently, this political activism of epic performers in some cases led to their harassment by conservative audiences.<sup>45</sup>

It has been reported that Kōroğlu (Turkmen: Görogly) was also regarded as a spiritual leader by the Basmachi insurgents fighting against Russian and then Soviet domination in Central Asia (1916 – ca. 1930). Reportedly, these resistance groups in what later became Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan gathered at night to read Görogly and other *dastans*. However, such practices seem largely to have ceased already by 1918, and seemingly they were not characteristic of the more influential Basmachi groups operating in the 1920s.<sup>46</sup>

At any event, in the Soviet Union the ‘national’ epics of the various Turkic nationalities were often seen as politically suspicious. Under Stalinism, it was argued that such epics aroused in the Turkic peoples’ feelings of nationalism which opposed to Soviet internationalism. The epics were deemed to have a feudal and imperialist character, focusing only on the deeds of a small nomad aristocracy. The fight against internal and external infidels was explained as Muslim fanaticism as well as racial hatred.<sup>47</sup> This eventually led to the banning of epics, starting in 1944 with the “Idigey” epos which is part of the folklore of several Turkic peoples that once were part of the Golden Horde.<sup>48</sup> The prohibition of the “Idigey” was perceived as a malicious blow against Tatar national heritage, aiming “to declare the Golden Horde a ‘parasitic’ and wild state formation [...] that lacked any culture, and was incapable of progressive development.”<sup>49</sup>

The campaign against the Turkic epics reached its peak with the condemnation of most legends in the period 1951–1952.<sup>50</sup> The “Oghuznama”, the “Book of Dede Korkut” / “Gorkut Ata”, and “Görogly” were all banned, as were epics of the other Central Asian nationalities, such as the Kyrgyz “Manas”. The banning of “Korkut Ata” provoked protest by national intellectuals, including high-placed Party officials, also in Turkmenistan. The objections to the condemnation of the “Manas” epic in Kyrgyzstan were especially fierce. Only after several months of heated polemics between two Kyrgyz newspapers (both issued by the Central Committee of the republic’s Communist Party), the controversy was resolved by the denunciation of all defenders of the “Manas” epos as “bourgeois nationalists”.<sup>51</sup> After Khrushchev’s denunciation of Stalinism, the various epics were slowly rehabilitated, although still regarded in some way as politically sensitive. In 1956 a regional conference on the Uzbek “Alpamysh” *dastan* was held in Tashkent, in order to explore how the study of the national epics could be reconciled with party directives. Although the conference rehabilitated the epic as a “magnificent popular progressive work” this was done quietly, and it would still take another three years before the proceedings of this conference were published. The rehabilitation of the last epics took place only with the onset of Glasnost’ in the mid-1980s.<sup>52</sup> This period saw a flood of scientific as well as popular

45 BAŞGÖZ Digression in Oral Narrative, pp. 9–10.

46 PAKSOY The Dastan Genre in Central Asia.

47 BENNIGSEN The Crisis of the Turkic National Epics, pp. 466; 469; 472.

48 DEWEESE Islamization and Native Religion, p. 415.

49 USMANOV The Struggle for the Reestablishment of Oriental Studies in Twentieth-Century Kazan, pp. 169–202; 175.

50 BENNIGSEN The Crisis of the Turkic National Epics, p. 464.

51 BENNIGSEN The Crisis of the Turkic National Epics, p. 472.

52 The Idigey epos was published in Kazan’ only in 1988. See USMANOV The Struggle for the Reestablishment of Oriental Studies.

publications on epics, however still published in a socialist framework. The ‘revival’ of epics would continue with the onset of independence, when the socialist framework for interpreting epics could finally be abandoned.

*A short outline of the Turkmen epics*

The “Ruhnama” builds on this rehabilitation, referring, in the first place, to the “Oghuznama”, “Görogly”, and the “Book of Gorkut Ata”. This makes it necessary to have a closer look at the epic tradition of the Turkmen.

The epic cycles were originally transmitted orally, and the exact beginnings of these legends are unclear. First variants must have spread amongst different Turkic tribes over time and in the course of migrations. Most of the epics share their symbolism, and one can easily detect “floating narratives” based on common mythic accounts or themes known to various groups; these elements have been incorporated into the epic narratives over and over again. While the existing written forms of the epics certainly go back to early oral traditions, oral and written material must also have continued to influence each other over time.

*The “Oghuznama”*

Niiazov’s main point of reference is the epic cycle about Oghuz Khan, the alleged ancestor of all the Oghuz (“Western Turks”, including Turkmen, Azeri and Turks). In what is regarded as the original version,<sup>53</sup> Oghuz is born the son of the leader of the Turks, Qara Khan. Right after birth he starts to talk, rejecting the milk of his mother and demanding raw meat and *kumuz* instead. In only 40 days he grows into a young man, and sets out to kill the dragon that terrorizes the Oghuz at that time. After this feat, Oghuz becomes a hero and forms his own group of 40 noble warriors. Thereupon, his jealous stepmother and half-brother convince Oghuz’ father that his son plans to dethrone him. Qara Khan decides to kill Oghuz during a hunting trip, forcing Oghuz eventually to commit patricide and assume the title of Khan. He then goes out to pray to Tengri (the Sky God). Oghuz Khan subsequently marries two supernatural beauties, and has six sons with them. After this he sets out to conquer the four corners of the world; on their campaigns the Oghuz are guided by a grey sky-wolf. At the end of his life, Oghuz Khan passes his lands to his sons and specifies the political hierarchy between his sons and grandsons.

In Rashid ad-Din’s later Persian version,<sup>54</sup> Oghuz equally rejects the milk of his mother, yet without demanding raw meat and alcohol. In a dream his mother learns that her son will only take her milk when she accepts monotheism, which she does. In every moment Oghuz remembers the name of God (Tengri). In this version, Oghuz does not encounter supernatural maidens. Instead, his father gives him three brides, but Oghuz rejects two of

53 An early fifteenth-century copy of an Uigur manuscript is kept in the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris. It is thought that this copy was made from an original Uigur manuscript dating from ca. 1300. For a Russian edition and translation of this manuscript see SHCHERBAK *Oguz-name – Muhabbat-name*. See also MELIKOFF *Oghuz-nama*, pp. 163–164.

54 Preserved in RASHID AD-DIN’S (1248–1318) great historical compilation, *Jami’ al-Tavarikh* (ca. 1300). Russian translation by Shukiurova (Baku, 1987). This is the oldest manuscript that has been preserved, but is seen as later than the Uigur version. See also MELIKOFF *Oghuz-nama*.

them because they refuse to take on the belief in one god. The third one does accept the belief and bears him his sons. Oghuz' and his wife's conversions anger his father and his family, and they decide to kill Oghuz during a hunting trip. This fight turns into a battle of seventy-five years during which Oghuz eventually kills his father and uncles and conquers huge territories in Central Asia, whose populations convert to monotheism. It is likely that Niiazov used this version of the "Oghuznama" (in translation), which was the most widespread in the USSR due to a popular Russian translation.<sup>55</sup> In later versions of the "Oghuznama" the Islamic element becomes stronger, as Oghuz starts to refer to God not as Tengri but as Allah.<sup>56</sup>

*The "Book of Dede Korkut" / Gorkut Ata*

The second major epic referred to in the "Ruhnama" is the "Book of Dede Korkut".<sup>57</sup> The narration of the legends is largely in prose, with most of the dialogues in verse. The epic cycle contains several legends on a cast of Oghuz beys (lords), and including the figure of Dede Korkut (in Azerbaijan and Anatolia), or Gorkut Ata (as he is known in Turkmenistan). Both Dede (grandfather) and Ata (father) are honorific names for elders. Gorkut Ata of the Baiat tribe of the Oghuz is the purported composer of the legends, and combines the roles of wise man, religious leader and minstrel. He is divinely inspired, provides suitable names for boys who reach maturity, gives advice to the Oghuz in times of crisis, and has prophetic power as well as the ability to perform miracles. Most of the stories revolve around hunting trips and battles with neighboring infidels (Christians). All stories end with a large banquet, at which Korkut plays his *kopuz* (a lute-like instrument) and composes a heroic tale of the events that have just taken place, closing with a prayer for the khan for whom the legend was apparently recited.

Originally, the "Book of Dede Korkut" was part of the "Oghuznama", which then still comprised more legends of the Oghuz people.<sup>58</sup> Later, this epic cycle came to stand on its own, still sharing materials with the other Oghuz legends.

55 In the "Ruhnama", Niiazov mentions that Oghuz Khan came into conflict with his father after he abandoned his father's religion (English edition, p. 157; Turkmen edition, p. 161), and that Oghuz married a wife who converted to monotheism, after which he forgot his former wives (English edition, p. 106–107; Turkmen edition, p. 107).

56 This is found in several versions of the "Oghuznama" that have been written in Central Asia between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries. See MELIKOFF *Oghuz-nama*.

57 This work is known in two written records which were copied in the 16th century: A manuscript in Dresden which consists of twelve legends, and a smaller Vatican manuscript consisting of six legends. It has been published and translated several times in many languages, including Turkish, Azeri, German, Italian, English and Russian. Parts of the "Book of Dede Korkut" were published in the late nineteenth century by the Russian Orientalist V. V. BARTOLD, and a complete translation of his hand (*Kniga moego Dede Korkuda*) was published by the Academy of Sciences in Moscow in 1962. A Turkmen version seems to have been published in 1951. The best known English edition and translation was published by Geoffrey Lewis in 1974. See also KADYROV *Kniga moego deda Korku'ta (VI–XII vv.)*, p. 189.

58 MELIKOFF *Oghuz-nama*.

*Görogly*

The *Köroğlu* / *Görogly* epos is well-known not only amongst nearly all Turkic peoples, but also amongst Tajiks, Afghans, Georgians, Armenians, and Kurds.<sup>59</sup> It is possible to roughly divide the various versions of the *dastan* into a western and an eastern group, with the Turkmen version containing elements of both these groups.

Although the exact origins of the *Köroğlu dastan* are subject to debate, the figure of *Köroğlu* seems to go back to a historic rebel of the Anatolian Jelali movement in the 16th century, which fought against Ottoman authorities, and he is also believed to have been a soldier-bard who took part in Özdemiroğlu Paşa's campaign in the Caucasus (1584–85).<sup>60</sup> Over time, more heroic stories were attributed to this figure, which together would form the eventual epic.

In the western versions, the outlaw-hero *Köroğlu* (“son of a blind man”, from Turkish *kör*, ‘blind’) acquires his name when his father, a stableman, was blinded for angering his employer, the local ruler. *Köroğlu* then swears to avenge his father. He gathers a group of followers and establishes a fortress-hideout from where he conducts raids and fights the local rulers. *Köroğlu* sets out on bold campaigns, which he manages to complete successfully due to his enormous size, his ability to trick people, and his supernatural horse *Kırat*. Frequently posing as an *aşik* (minstrel), he composes the *dastans* about his adventurous feats himself.<sup>61</sup> In some of the eastern versions, *Gurughli/Gorogli* (“son of the grave”, from Persian *gur*, ‘grave’) is the wise and just ruler of a mythical kingdom, miraculously born in a grave after the burial of his pregnant mother.<sup>62</sup> He is eventually found as a young boy after a shepherd misses several of his sheep which *Gorogli* has eaten. In the Turkmen version, *Görogly* is born from the grave and he also has a grandfather (a Turkmen tribal leader) who was unjustly blinded. *Görogly* is a (Teke) Turkmen tribal leader<sup>63</sup> who protects his lands and is still personally engaged in raids and combat. Here as well he is himself the singer of his stories. Supernatural elements to the Turkmen version include *Görogly*'s marriages to fairies and his powerful (religious) allies such as “the Forty Pirs” (Sufi spiritual teachers; “invisible saints” to help overcome especially difficult problems)<sup>64</sup> – attesting to the Islamization of *Görogly*.

59 Manuscripts circulate in all these countries and in several languages. BORATAV *Köroghlu*, p. 270. In Soviet Turkmenistan, an edition of the *Görogly* epic appeared in 1941, edited by A. KAUSHUTOVA and M. KOSAeva. A new edition by GOVŠUDOV (*Görogli. Türkmen xalk eposi* [*Görogli: The Turkmen national epic*]) appeared in 1980, along with the publication of several studies on *Görogly* in the early 1980s. See also KADYROV *Körogly' (XV–XVII vv.)*, pp. 186–187.

60 A person named *Köroğlu* appears in late sixteenth-century Ottoman state reports on the Jelali movement, but in how far this person is connected to the epic hero remains subject of debate. See BORATAV *Köroghlu*.

61 BORATAV *Köroghlu*. See also HUART *Kör Oghlu*, pp. 1138–1139.

62 WILKS *The Persianization of Köroğlu*, p. 313.

63 And in fact also in the Turkish and Azeri versions *Köroğlu* is portrayed as a Teke Turkmen.

64 WILKS *The Persianization of Köroğlu*, p. 311.

*The "Ruhnama" as an epos*

Building upon these well-known epic stories, the "Ruhnama" is presented as the next milestone in the Turkmen epic tradition. The title of the "Ruhnama" in itself hints to the intended role of the book. The word *ruh*, of Arabic origin, can be translated as spirit or soul, and has in Central Asia the connotation of a mystical invocation of the ancestral spirits which forms the core of the mystic-religious component of epic legends.

This link is also established through Niiazov's mentioning of visions that he had, in which the souls of the Turkmen ancestors appealed to him to write the "Ruhnama". Oghuz Khan, Gorkut Ata, Görogly and Magtymguly all called upon him to "show the way of the golden life to the Turkmen nation. This will be your task [teaching]; this will be your way".<sup>65</sup> Thereafter, according to Niiazov:

"The spirits of my father who is my Qibla, and of my mother who is my Ka'ba [said to me]: God the exalted put the burden of prophethood on those four bearers of the truth – Oghuz Khan the Turkmen, Gorkut Ata, Görogly and Magtymguly. Today, this burden of God the exalted went over to you. Devote your life to maintaining the unity of the Turkmen nation and to maintaining the continuity of the golden life-circle".<sup>66</sup>

There is obviously a strong Islamic connotation to these visions. They suggest that Niiazov was divinely inspired to write the "Ruhnama" and that he was in fact a prophet. Also Oghuz Khan, Gorkut Ata and Görogly, who according to this text should be regarded as prophets as well, receive visions in their respective epics, and the Sufi poet Magtymguly was linked to mystic experiences as well. Receiving visions in a 'dream-initiation' is the most common way to become a *bagsy* (Turkmen minstrel of epic songs), who are often described as bearers of shamanistic (religious) functions.

Throughout the "Ruhnama", epic themes are either copied directly from their epic context or presented as important customs, norms or values of the Turkmen. Virtues which are commonly displayed in epics and praised in the "Ruhnama" include bravery, generosity, humbleness, hospitality, patience, honesty, fidelity, and honoring (the legacy of) the parents. In many epics, women play an important role as mothers and wives, but also as counselors to their husbands and in some cases even as warriors. There is frequent ridiculing of men who do not have children, or who have only daughters. In the story of Bugach Khan,<sup>67</sup> forming part of the "Book of Dede Korkut", Dirse Khan prays for a son after having been shamefully placed in the special tent for those having no children at the annual feast of the ruler, Bayindir Khan. Children aid their parents and honor them. Family values and virtues mentioned in the "Ruhnama" are directly derived from these epic stories. The many descriptions of the richness of the Turkmen soil, even when much of Turkmenistan in fact consists of desert areas, reflects the appreciative consciousness of nature in the older epics. Horses, dogs, camels and sheep are frequently mentioned as the pride of

65 TURKMENBASHY *Ruhnama* (English edition), p. 144; (Turkmen edition), p. 148. In the Turkmen version, "this will be your teaching [*taglymat*]", p. 148.

66 TURKMENBASHY *Ruhnama* (Turkmen edition). The quote is a translation from the Turkmen text (p. 148), which differs from the published English edition (pp. 144–145) in that it puts the Islamic element of the apparent vision much more to the fore. The Qibla is the direction for prayer in Islam, i. e. the orientation towards the Ka'ba in Mekka.

67 In LEWIS' edition (Book of Dede Korkut): "Boghach Khan Son of Dirse Khan", pp. 27–41.

the Turkmen. All of these, and especially horses, have an important place in many Turkic legends, undoubtedly rooted in the historical importance of horses for the nomadic peoples who composed these *dastans*. The close bond of Görogly with his wondrous horse Kırat, which is always at his side, is a good example. Hospitality is another common theme of epics, as is the banquet as a place to celebrate and eat (large quantities) together, reflected in the “Ruhnama” by the emphasis put on the virtue of hospitality and the ‘holiness’ of the dining table, resembling unity and plenty.<sup>68</sup>

The frequent use of proverbs and sayings in the “Ruhnama” likewise reflects the style of *dastans*. Proverbs have a special value because they are deemed to have been transferred to the present from previous generations (in Turkmen: *atarlar sözi*, “speech of the fathers”), thereby reflecting the ways and norms of the ancestors.<sup>69</sup> The “Book of Dede Korkut” contains a long list of wise sayings of Gorkut Ata, specifying the most important virtues (bravery, generosity, humbleness, hospitality), things worthy of praise (Allah, the Prophet, family members, camels), as well as important (family) relations.

Stories and proverbs are typically introduced or concluded with explanatory remarks from Niiazov’s side, aiding the reader with the interpretation of the presented story. This resembles what folklorists call “digressions”: explanatory and rationalizing remarks by the minstrel, personal identifications with the epic characters and especially personal opinions on the (current) political, religious or social situation. Such remarks can also be found in the written versions of the epics.<sup>70</sup> In the “Ruhnama”, the importance of the remarks is notably increased, as the epic stories form a vehicle for voicing Niiazov’s opinions rather than the other way around.

The synchronization of Niiazov’s life with the life-cycle of the nation forms another important aspect of the “Ruhnama”. As the father of the modern Turkmen nation, Niiazov takes over the function of epic heroes. Not only is the “Ruhnama” the “Oghuznama of the third millennium”, it can also be concluded that Niiazov is in fact the Oghuz Khan of our days.<sup>71</sup> The passages on Niiazov’s life reflect the theme of going through various ordeals in order to lead the community to independence. Having lost his family early on, Niiazov grew up in a Soviet orphanage before being put into the care of a distant relative. In the “Ruhnama”, Niiazov elaborates on his feelings as an orphan, using the “Turkmen saying”:

68 TURKMENBASHY *Ruhnama* (English edition), p. 149; (Turkmen edition), p. 153. For a short list of themes recurrent in Turkic epics, including specifically the Köroğlu *dastan*, see JANSEN *A Culture’s Stereotypes and Their Expression in Folk Clichés*, pp. 184–200.

69 JANSEN *A Culture’s Stereotypes*, p. 193. For a study of proverbs used in epics how they develop over time, see BAŞGÖZ *Proverb Image*, pp. 127–142.

70 BAŞGÖZ *Digression in Oral Narrative*, p. 5–10.

71 Associating current presidents with historical figures who are deemed ‘national heroes’ is another feature that is common to several Central Asian states. In Uzbekistan, many statues have been erected in honor of Amir Timur (1336–1405) in what Laura Adams has described as a “cult of personality by proxy” for President Islam Karimov. See ADAMS *The Spectacular State*, pp. 40; 147. Similarly, in Tajikistan, President Emomali Rahmon is equated with the Samanid ruler Ismail Somoni (d. 907). In present-day history textbooks, the role of the current president in unifying the nation after the Tajik civil war (1992–1997) is compared to the role of Somoni who “once unified the Tajik people” in the “first Tajik state”. BLAKKISRUD / NOZIMOVA *History Writing and Nation Building in Post-Independence Tajikistan*, p. 178.

“fatherless, I am orphan; motherless, I am captive.”<sup>72</sup> He describes orphanhood as material deficiency, and captivity as spiritual lack.<sup>73</sup> According to Niiazov, the Turkmen nation was also an orphan and a captive until it reached independence.<sup>74</sup> This episode of Niiazov’s life in some ways connects to the theme known as “protective abandonment”, which is also common to legends of origin: When the father of the hero (usually a khan or bey) and his people are taken prisoners, the boy is taken care of by others and grows up to eventually free his people. However, there are obvious differences. Niiazov’s father was not the leader of his people, and Niiazov was taken care of by the Soviet state that is now portrayed as the enemy. At the same time, it is instructive that Niiazov does not mention his time in the orphanage, and it is clear that he saw himself as having grown up to free his people, and his status as an orphan as being helpful for making him realize the needs of the Turkmen nation already as a boy.<sup>75</sup> Niiazov also explicitly compares Görogly’s birth in the grave to his own biography.<sup>76</sup>

There are, of course, also important differences between traditional epics and the “Ruhnama”. The “Ruhnama” is not a coherent legend but rather a moral guideline on the basis of fragmentary references to legends.

Another characteristic feature of the “Ruhnama” is that it ‘rationalizes’ the old epics. Names and events mentioned in the original epics are presented as facts, while their mythical context remains largely unmentioned. Only in passages presented as “stories”, mythical and magical beings and events play a role. Thus one story in which a boy marries a fairy girl is only presented as a story Niiazov listened to as a child, and not as a story of the epic ancestors.<sup>77</sup> Such a process of demystification and rationalization is already well known from the development of the old epics over the centuries. Often much of the original religious and mythic language was lost as the epics were historicized and concretized.<sup>78</sup> Given that the “Ruhnama” was written at the beginning of the twenty-first century in a country which has been markedly influenced by the Soviet experience in all aspects of life, including religion as well as education, it is not surprising that the book is largely demystified and rationalized.

Another important difference from the Turkmen epic tradition is how violence is dealt with in the “Ruhnama”. As seen above, wars are at the center of the old epics. Also the “Ruhnama” alludes to warfare and weaponry, and there is a long passage about the ways in which the Turkmen were able to defeat their enemies through tricking them. In general, however, the theme of warfare is significantly downplayed in favor of references to the peace-loving character of the Turkmen nation. Instead of waging war in order to crush the infidels and to become the rulers of the world, modern Turkmenistan respects its neighbors’ borders and is officially tolerant of different religions.<sup>79</sup> An emphasis on negotiation instead of warfare also makes sense because of the nature of Turkmenistan’s transition to

72 TURKMENBASHY *Ruhnama* (English edition), p. 309; (Turkmen edition), p. 319.

73 TURKMENBASHY *Ruhnama* (English edition), p. 310; Turkmen edition, p. 320.

74 TURKMENBASHY *Ruhnama* (English edition), p. 150; Turkmen edition, p. 154.

75 TURKMENBASHY *Ruhnama* (English edition), pp. 150–151; (Turkmen edition) p. 154.

76 TURKMENBASHY *Ruhnama* (English edition), p. 150; (Turkmen edition), p. 154.

77 TURKMENBASHY *Ruhnama* (English edition), pp. 366–367; Turkmen edition, 372. Marrying fairy girls is in fact a common theme in Turkic epics, including in earlier versions of the *Oghuznama*, as mentioned before.

78 DEWESE *Islamization and Native Religion*, pp. 160; 277.



independence by negotiation and the declared state policy of 'Eternal Neutrality' (i. e. non-interference and non-alignment on the international stage).

Also, whereas most epics consist of genealogical cycles, in the "Ruhnama" there is no attempt at creating a dynasty. To be sure, the parents of Niiazov are frequently mentioned. His father, of whom it is not clear whether Niiazov actually knew him, is depicted as a hero of the Second World War (he was posthumously rewarded the title of "Hero of Turkmenistan"). His mother, "Gurbansoltan Edje" (Edje is the Turkmen word for mother) is praised as the embodiment of a good wife and mother, and Niiazov had the month of April being renamed in her memory, just like a district and the national carpet museum.<sup>80</sup> The "Ruhnama" also briefly mentions Niiazov's grandfather as a just and wise man: reportedly he was a shopkeeper and elected chief of his village before being sent to exile in 1932 and then declared an enemy of the people in 1937.<sup>81</sup> Niiazov did not use the fact that little was known about his parents to claim a more noble ancestry, as was frequently done in epics by and about royal lineages. However, in a way, Niiazov's allusions to the greatness of his family members can be seen as a means to create a 'noble' ancestry for the president, if not in blood than at least in terms of morality. Thus, according to Niiazov, everybody who had known his father and grandfather praised them.<sup>82</sup> Yet while the "Ruhnama" attaches special importance to family values,<sup>83</sup> Niiazov's wife (who is ethnic Russian) and two children are never even mentioned. It is speculated that they were in fact not very close to Niiazov: they took no part in Turkmen public life, and apparently spent most of their time outside of the country, in marked contrast to the presidential families in other Central Asian countries.<sup>84</sup> That his descendants are entirely left out of the picture reflects the fact that Niiazov obviously did not want to establish a hereditary leadership. At the same time, this reduced the political danger that Niiazov's family members could constitute to his position. As Michael Denison points out, "to share the public space with long-dead family members relieved the monotony of the Niiazov-cult, without curtailing his personal authority."<sup>85</sup> In the "Ruhnama", Niiazov speaks about Oghuz Khan as the father, Gorkut Ata as the teacher, Görogly as the brother and Magtymguly as the advisor of him-

79 In fact, the religious tolerance of the Turkmen state can be doubted. Apart from the dominant Sunni Muslim and Orthodox Christian religious organizations, which are both state-controlled, all other (allegedly "non-traditional") religious groups and organizations are being repressed. However, this does not prevent the state from proclaiming religious tolerance as an official dogma, probably mainly in order to denounce Muslim extremism as "un-Turkmen".

80 Niiazov's mother, Gurbansoltan Edje, is said to have been a carpet weaver, which can be seen as almost the epitome of a 'Turkmen' job for women, considering the great pride Turkmen take in carpets.

81 TURKMENBASHY *Ruhnama* (English edition), pp. 36–37; (Turkmen edition), pp. 36–38.

82 TURKMENBASHY *Ruhnama* (English edition), p. 40; (Turkmen edition), p. 41.

83 In the "Ruhnama", it is stated that the straightening [revival] of family relations and family values is "the basis [or "main objectives"] for creating anew the Turkmen nation in the Golden Age" TURKMENBASHY *Ruhnama* (Turkmen edition), p. 328; (English edition), p. 319.

84 In Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, members of the presidential family are well-known by the public and hold important and lucrative positions in business. In Kyrgyzstan, the same was true for family members of presidents Akaev and Bakiev, who were both ousted from their posts by street revolutions.

85 DENISON *Führerkult in Turkmenistan*, p. 219.

self and of all Turkmen.<sup>86</sup> Building upon this, we can speculate that all Turkmen should also be seen as his ‘children’, although they are certainly not understood to be continuing his blood line.<sup>87</sup>

Despite these differences with the epic tradition, there is good reason to assume that Niiazov saw himself as an epic composer, with the “Ruhnama” as his most important work. In epic stories, it is fairly common that the hero is also the minstrel. Epic tales were performed primarily for religious-magical purposes, and the epic reciter (Turkmen: *bagşy*) had an essentially sacred status. Epic reciters were perceived to be persons chosen into the profession from above, usually by a saint (*pir*) who gave them a special gift for poetry in their sleep.<sup>88</sup> This resembles Niiazov’s vision of the ancestors summoning him to write the “Ruhnama”, even though apparently not during slumber. Also the frequent use of the word *yol* (journey, path) in the “Ruhnama” points to this direction. This word also has the magical-religious connotation of “a road leading to god” or “a shaman’s journey”, and is frequently used in Turkmen musical tradition to denote the initiation of the *bagşy* as well as his individual performances in connection to the divine inspiration during his recitals.<sup>89</sup> In the “Ruhnama”, Niiazov talks both about the Turkmen path (the second chapter of the “Ruhnama” is called “The Turkmen’s path”) as well as about his own “way”, and in the end he even concludes that the “Ruhnama is our way!”<sup>90</sup>

But the most important clue is Niiazov’s emphasis on poetry and the musical aspect of literature. Poems are a part of many Turkic epics, including the “Book of Dede Korkut” and the tale of Görogly. Several of the president’s poems are included in the “Ruhnama”. Although mostly not as a direct part of a continuing narrative, they are closely related to the theme of the “Ruhnama”, singing the praise of Turkmenistan, and as such form a logical part of the book. Several times Niiazov mentions that he is himself a poet,<sup>91</sup> and he has indeed published several volumes of poetry in the form of books and CDs,<sup>92</sup> where his verses are accompanied by traditional instruments such as the *kopuz* or the *saz*.<sup>93</sup> Songs of Niiazov furthermore make up about half of the repertoire in which young *bagşys* are trained at the state conservatory,<sup>94</sup> indicating how central Niiazov’s writings are in the state-directed epic education in Turkmenistan.

86 TURKMENBASHY *Ruhnama* (English edition), pp. 151–152; (Turkmen edition), p. 156.

87 Immediately after Niiazov’s death, there were wild speculations that the new acting president, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, was in fact his illegitimate son. This is however highly implausible. By now, statues have appeared of Berdimuhamedov’s actual father, Malikguly Berdimuhamedov, as well as of his grandfather, Berdimuhamedov Annaev.

88 ŽERAŇSKA-KOMINEK *The Concept of Journey (Yol)*, p. 267.

89 ŽERAŇSKA-KOMINEK *The Concept of Journey (Yol)*, pp. 279–280.

90 TURKMENBASHY *Ruhnama* (English edition), p. 398; (Turkmen edition), p. 405 (italics mine).

91 Thus at one point NIIAZOV writes: “To create poems was for many years something characteristic to me. Since my youth I have written poems in my diary.” *Ruhnama* (Turkmen edition), p. 76. In the English edition the claim is even stronger formulated: “I have always been a poet.” (p. 76).

92 See e.g. TURKMENBAŞY *Türkmen ilim aman bolsun*, a volume of poems by the president including 10 CDs on which these poems are performed accompanied by Turkmen musical instruments.

93 Both are lute-like stringed instruments. It is thought that the *saz* descended from the *kopuz*.

94 Stone, “Bakhshi of Turkmenistan”, p. 364.

We may, thus, in the light of the altering political situation after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, see Niiazov's re-interpretation, or re-writing, of the past as an attempt to symbolize the birth of a 'new' Turkmen community on the basis of the old Turkmen epic tradition. In this light, it is even possible to look at the cult of personality around Niiazov as an attempt to make the president a new 'communal hero', responsible for constituting the 'new community', as should be derived from his claim to be the person solely responsible for Turkmenistan's independence. This practice coincides with the earlier development of legends, which were re-interpreted, expanded or changed when the community experienced a new social or political situation, thus allowing the story to give meaning to the community in a new (political) environment.

*"Ruhnama" II: the development of the presidential cult*

And in his own way, the 'founder' of the new Turkmen nation was also 'islamized' to become the religious leader of his community.

In 2004 the second volume of the "Ruhnama" was published, which took on a much more explicit religious aura. To be sure, the first volume of the "Ruhnama" was already announced as a "holy book" (*Mukaddes Ruhnama*, "Holy Ruhnama"), and Niiazov's alleged vision clearly reveals that the Islamic element was already present. However, this holiness was established primarily through its link with the epic tradition of the ancestors, with Niiazov as the successor of the "Turkmen prophet" Oghuz Khan. In "Ruhnama II", Niiazov no longer focuses on his link to the ancestors, probably because he felt he had already acquired this sort of legitimacy. Instead, "Ruhnama II" was produced in comparison to the Quran. This is clear from passages where Niiazov encouraged his readers to only take the "Ruhnama" "into your hand after you purify your heart and body", and to read it "on something like a prayer rug", and "as if you are saying prayers [*doga*: an invocation of God]."<sup>95</sup> He furthermore admonished his audience to "attach great importance to the "Ruhnama" and to "never let it lie in an improper place", as well as to continuously re-read it, in order to find new "pearls of meaning" in it in every phase of life.<sup>96</sup>

The second volume of the "Ruhnama" is also different in style. It is topically structured, consisting of 21 chapters dealing with manners and morals for specific target groups ("Parental affection", "Manners for neighbors", "Knowing a person by his friend") and specific situations ("Funerals and commemorations"). It is thus first and foremost a book of ethics, and in this the focus is solely on Niiazov's ordinances for the population. Epic stories are used to support his orders, but now even more in a secondary position. It is Niiazov personally who is talking to the Turkmen population, and his thoughts are important in their own right, whether or not with inspiration from epic materials.

This far-going sacralization of the president and his writings was also reflected in the place that the "Ruhnama" came to occupy in Turkmen state-controlled religious practice. After the publication of the "Ruhnama", the government ordered imams to place copies of the "Ruhnama" in their mosques with the same prominence as given to copies of the Quran, and to cite passages from the "Ruhnama" during sermons. In 2004, a huge mosque

95 TURKMENBASHY Rukhnama II (English edition), p. 31; TÜRKMENBAŞY Ruhnama II (Turkmen edition), p. 31.

96 TURKMENBASHY Rukhnama II (English edition), p. 32; (Turkmen edition), p. 31.

was inaugurated in Kipchat, Niiazov's native village, with texts of the "Ruhnama" inscribed on its walls and minarets. Now his chosen role became close to that of a Prophet. After his death in December 2006, Niiazov was buried in a special mausoleum next to this mosque.

#### Turkmen Ideology and Historiography after Niiazov

Under Niiazov's successor Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov (Niiazov's former minister of public health), the cult of personality around Niiazov has gradually been reduced, and the "Ruhnama" seems to have lost its comprehensive prominence. The Academy of Sciences has been re-established, and a new Institute of Archeology and Ethnography as well as an Institute of History have been formed out of the former presidential institutes. At the same time, the "Ruhnama" has not yet been denounced. In 2007, a conference was dedicated to the "Ruhnama", and the aforementioned history and "Ruhnama" school curricula were published as late as 2008. So far, it seems that the new president is not trying to dispose of Niiazov's legacy altogether, but rather to build his own ideology, which is dubbed "The Era of Great Revival", on top of it; Berdimuhamedov poses as the inspirator of what is now called a Turkmen "Renaissance" that will lead to the Golden Age. This notion of a new and more advanced era starting with Berdimuhamedov naturally comprises a covert critique of the policies of his predecessor.

It is too early to write a comprehensive account of the developments in ideology under Berdimuhamedov. However, a first assessment of the way in which ideology has changed, as well as its influence on education, can be made.

#### *Ideology*

Both continuities and changes can be distinguished in the state ideology of Turkmenistan. Under Berdimuhamedov, the ideology has remained strongly focused on the figure of the president as the 'national leader'. The new president, a former dentist who rose to power after having been the longest serving minister under Niiazov, promotes the image of a learned man. He authored several publications in his area of studies, and has in the few years of his presidency published several books. These are, however, of a different nature than the books of his predecessor. In line with his academic image, he has published an encyclopedia of Turkmen medical herbs,<sup>97</sup> and he opened several new hospitals. Reportedly, a new oncology center in Ashgabat was opened by Berdimuhamedov himself performing the new institutes' first surgery.<sup>98</sup> Several volumes of his speeches have also appeared, as well as a book on Turkmen (*Ahal Teke*) horses, which so far seems to be his only work on what is seen as one of Turkmenistan's national prides. Books praising the president and his ancestors have been published as well, albeit not under his own name. These include a biography of his grandfather (a teacher who is said to have died during the Ashgabat earthquake), as well as a book which links Berdimuhamedov's policies to his ancestors. This later book, published in English as "The Grandson Realizing His Grandfather's Dream",<sup>99</sup> resembles the "Ruhnama" in several ways.

97 BERDIMUHAMEDOV *Lekarstvennye rasteniia Turkmenistana*.

98 JURDEKOV *The Grandson Realizing his Grandfather's Dream*; see pp. 204–206, including a 2-page large picture of the event.

99 The book has been published in several languages, including Turkmen, Russian, English, German and French, apparently with the purpose of reaching a wide international audience. This

Like Niiazov's in the "Ruhnama", also Berdimuhamedov's family history is linked to the history of the Turkmen nation as a whole. The author, a certain Tachmammot Jurdekov, claims that he wrote the different chapters of the book over a time-span of 3 years (2007–2009), during which the author became ever more fascinated by the family history of the Berdimuhamedovs. Reportedly, on several occasions Jurdekov visited the home village of the family where he spoke with elders about the President's family. Berdimuhamedov's grandfather, Berdimuhamet Annaev, who perished in the 1948 Ashgabat earthquake, has been posthumously awarded for his heroic activities in WW II, during which he allegedly cited the poems of Magtymguly in order to inspire his comrades, and suffered serious injury.<sup>100</sup> Remember that also Niiazov's father was celebrated as a war hero. Berdimuhamet Annaev's brother is said to have been an Ahal-Teke horse breeder whose horses were greatly admired by all,<sup>101</sup> and Berdimuhamedov's love for these Turkmen thoroughbreds is well-documented. His grandfather is furthermore said to have been a very wise man, widely respected, and even on his deathbed caring more of others than himself. It is suggested that these qualities are all automatically inherited by Berdimuhamedov, as it is a Turkmen custom to judge someone by his family. The title of the book furthermore suggests that Berdimuhamedov is directly working to "realize his [wise] grandfather's dream". And this, in fact, is supposed to mean the dreams of all Turkmen ancestors: "The Highly Esteemed President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov was destined to make our ancestors' dream come true, to realize our forefathers' vision."<sup>102</sup> The vision is of course that of a prosperous independent Turkmenistan.

Several of Berdimuhamedov's policies are discussed, and the great improvement they bring to the lives of the Turkmen. These passages are clearly critical of the former president. A good example is the chapter on art, which discusses the re-opening of the circuses. Here, the circus is presented as a typically Turkmen form of art in which horses take central stage. According to the book, the Turkmen people are delighted with the re-opening of the circus which "has been revitalized after the long years of 'silence'".<sup>103</sup> In fact, the circus had been closed by Niiazov, who deemed it 'not Turkmen'. It is also mentioned several times how the new Turkmen president has managed to secure growing international recognition for himself and his country.

At several places in the book, Jurdekov uses epic tales, sayings and poems to support his line of argument. This adds to a similarity in form with the "Ruhnama". The author also urges his readers to be grateful to the new president, who has been "chosen by God"<sup>104</sup> and has been granted by God the "wisdom of forty men"<sup>105</sup> as well as "a connection with the motherland and the nation"; who has a "heart as big as the head of a horse",<sup>106</sup> and who "has taken the destiny of the Turkmen people in his hands".<sup>107</sup> As a

also resembles the "Ruhnama", which was published in many languages with the help of international companies seeking access to Turkmenistan.

100 JURDEKOV *The Grandson Realizing his Grandfather's Dream*, p. 51.

101 JURDEKOV *The Grandson Realizing his Grandfather's Dream*, p. 207.

102 JURDEKOV *The Grandson Realizing his Grandfather's Dream*, p. 55.

103 JURDEKOV *The Grandson Realizing his Grandfather's Dream*, p. 216.

104 JURDEKOV *The Grandson Realizing his Grandfather's Dream*, p. 71.

105 JURDEKOV *The Grandson Realizing his Grandfather's Dream*, p. 113.

106 JURDEKOV *The Grandson Realizing his Grandfather's Dream*, p. 137.

107 JURDEKOV *The Grandson Realizing his Grandfather's Dream*, p. 85.

doctor and as a president, Berdimuhamedov takes “paternal care” of his people, and it therefore does not come as a surprise that apparently the Turkmen’s “words of gratitude sound prayer-like”.<sup>108</sup> At one point, readers are even urged to read the president’s book on horses, which is “a God-sent book” and “a spiritual wealth for eternity”.<sup>109</sup> However, it should be noted here that the book in which this is being said is explicitly not written by the president himself. In fact, the person of the author is very present in the book, telling about his encounters with the inhabitants of the president’s native village of Yzgant, and Jurdekov even mentions his past as a propagandist for the Communist Party. And although the allusions to religion are obvious, it has nowhere been suggested that we should regard Berdimuhamedov as anything like a prophet. Instead, we are supposed to look at him as a doctor – with the dual quality of a scholar and a life-saver.

### *History Education*

With the new president’s apparent insistence on adopting the image of a learned man coming “from a family of pedagogues”,<sup>110</sup> it should come as no surprise that education is listed as one of his purported top-priorities. And indeed, significant changes have been made in the field, such as the reinstatement of eleven-years of general education (which under Niiazov had been brought back to nine years). In the field of history education, textbooks have been published for the first time since independence, which allow us to assess the topics dealt with in class today.

A year after Niiazov’s demise, the first history textbooks, together with a guideline for history classes, were published by the Ministry of Education of Turkmenistan in 2008. These give a mixed picture on present-day history education in the country. On the one hand, the guideline leaves us with the impression that historiography is still firmly based on the “Ruhnama”. History education starts in the fourth grade with a program called, in Soviet style, “Moia Rodina” (“My Homeland”), which is “to evoke in the young generation [the feeling] of patriotism, devotion to the homeland and the nation” as well as moral values based on the examples of the “heroic past of our ancestors”<sup>111</sup> After two years of world history (taught in classes 5, 6, and 8–10), Turkmen history resumes in class 7 to 10, on the “scientific fundament”<sup>112</sup> of the “Ruhnama”, including the periodization of history (the ages of Oghuz Khan, Korkut Ata, etc.).<sup>113</sup>

According to the teachers’ guide, the world history program taught in classes 5 and 6 as well as 8 to 10 similarly builds on the historical information and periodization given in the “Ruhnama”. It is stated that “[t]he methodological basis of the program of general [world] history is the historical concept of Saparmurat Turkmenbashi the Great, as explained in the Holy Ruhnama: ‘[...] for fifty centuries the Turkmen were a leading nation of the world, their contribution to world culture is priceless ... (Ruhnama II, p. 66) [...] it is necessary to reveal the character of the manifestations of the creative genius of the nation in its indissoluble connection with concrete historical conditions [...], this is necessary [...]

108 JURDEKOV *The Grandson Realizing his Grandfather’s Dream*, p. 95.

109 JURDEKOV *The Grandson Realizing his Grandfather’s Dream*, p. 101.

110 Cited in JURDEKOV *The Grandson Realizing his Grandfather’s Dream*, p. 16.

111 Ministerstvo Obrazovaniia Turkmenistana, *Uchebnye programmy*, p. 5.

112 Ministerstvo Obrazovaniia Turkmenistana, *Uchebnye programmy*, p. 16.

113 Ministerstvo Obrazovaniia Turkmenistana, *Uchebnye programmy*, p. 17.

for the restoration of historical justice, for the restoration of the glory of [our] ancestors [...]’ (Ruhnama I, p. 67).<sup>114</sup>

On the other hand, the textbooks themselves are of a different character. A picture of the late president still features prominently on the first pages of all the new textbooks. However, far from copying the “Ruhnama”, Niiazov’s works are in fact hardly ever mentioned; only in the textbooks for classes 4 (“Moia Rodina”) and 10 (on Turkmenistan since independence) Niiazov is accorded a prominent role, while he is largely absent in classes 5 to 9. What is more, the content of the books in some cases shows remarkable digressions from the “Ruhnama’s” reading of history. Epic figures are hardly mentioned, and where they are, they are mostly described as just that – epic figures.<sup>115</sup> Soviet history is not being neglected, and seems to be dealt with fairly evenly in class 8. Both good and bad aspects of Soviet rule are being discussed, among the former the role of the Soviets in creating the Turkmen national state.<sup>116</sup> This is a significant break with the previous accounts of history under Niiazov, which maintained that Soviet rule was an act of aggression against the Turkmen nation which was longing for independence. The historical epochs named after great Turkmens are still used in the textbooks for earlier classes, but do no longer play a prominent role in the textbooks for higher grades.<sup>117</sup> Moreover, the textbooks are not named after these epochs, but instead are simply classified as “Ancient”, “Medieval” and “Modern History”. Writings by Niiazov are also not mentioned as study materials in the textbooks. This hardly comes as a surprise, considering the lack of information in his works on most topics that need to be discussed in class. To be sure, the teachers’ guide always mentions a discussion of Niiazov’s work as one of the core components of the general overview class (*obobshchaiushchii urok*) to end each single topic (or chapter in the textbooks), even on subjects about which obviously little can be found in his works. The textbooks, however, never refer to Niiazov’s work as additional study materials.

This striking contradiction between the textbooks and the teachers’ guide is especially remarkable since it can be assumed that they were written in interconnection, around the same time and by the same authors. Moreover, study topics mentioned in the guide correspond neatly to the chapters and paragraphs in the textbooks.

We can safely assume that for the actual history education, the content of the textbooks is of greater importance than that of the teachers’ guide. It is therefore telling that it is precisely in the textbooks that Niiazov and the “Ruhnama” no longer play a significant role. We might suppose that history education in fact takes place largely without the writings of the former president. The reason for the prominence given to Niiazov in the guideline remains unclear, but one might guess that the Ministry, in 2008, was not yet ready to let go of Niiazov’s heritage altogether. Interestingly, the same year also saw the publication of a new teacher’s guide on the “Ruhnama” course,<sup>118</sup> which apparently has not been abol-

114 Ministerstvo Obrazovaniia Turkmenistana, Uchebnye programmy, p. 84.

115 See e.g. AŞYRMÄMMEDOW / BAŞIMOWA (eds.) Türkmenistanyň Taryhy, 8, p. 34.

116 HOMMADOW (ed.): Türkmenistanyň Taryhy, 9, p. 231.

117 Thus, whereas the teachers’ guide depicts history education in grade 8 to be the study of the “epoch of Gorogly bek Turkmen” (p. 17), the textbook itself (simply called ‘Turkmen history’) does in fact not refer to this periodization.

118 Ministerstvo Obrazovaniia Turkmenistana, Uchebnaia programma.

ished. Surely, some things have remained the same. Even world history classes remain for a large part Turkmenistan-centered,<sup>119</sup> and especially medieval history retains the “Ruhnama’s” characterization of all Turkic states and empires, and even the Ayyubids and Mamluks, as “Turkmen”.<sup>120</sup> But it can be questioned in how far this is the influence of the “Ruhnama” specifically, or of nationalism more general.<sup>121</sup> Nevertheless, the new history textbooks suggest that history education underwent tremendous changes since the demise of Niiazov.

Although history as propagated by Niiazov is nowhere discarded, it seems that in fact his writings have subtly been moved into a corner of ‘epics’, which have now been separated from what is seen as ‘true’ history. To be sure, the class on patriotism for grade 4 can easily be full of epics, and the textbook for class 10 on independent Turkmenistan does naturally include a lot of material on Niiazov (as does the course on the “Ruhnama”, which, if it is still being taught, seems to focus mainly on the cultural and moral aspects of the customs and traditions of the Turkmen ancestors). Yet Niiazov’s writings are no longer deemed relevant for the study of other, unrelated, historical events. The ‘epification’ of Turkmen history has therewith been largely reverted.

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119 See especially BÄŞIMOWA (ed.): *Orta Asyrlar Taryhy*, 6, which discusses the Seljuks (p. 108), Ottomans (p. 238) and Moghuls (p. 246) all as Turkmens and claims, amongst others, Ahmed Yasawi and Alisher Navoy as Turkmens (p.120).

120 See AŞYRMÄMMEDOW / BÄŞIMOWA (eds.), *Türkmenistanyň Taryhy*, 8, about the Ayyubids, p. 126; and for the Mamluks, p. 131.

121 And as mentioned before, other Central Asian states also appropriate prominent Central Asian historical figures as ‘theirs’.



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*Summary***Turkmenistan: Epics in Place of Historiography**

This article analyzes the “Ruhnama”, the “Book of the Spirit” of Turkmenistan’s late President Saparmurat Niyazov (d. 2006), and its influence on history writing and teaching in Turkmenistan. I argue that the book was initially not intended as a history book but as an epos: it describes the customs and values of the ancient Turkmens and the epical heroes of the Turkmen tradition (like Oghuz Khan, Dede Korkut, Görogly) as models for the nation of today. Consistent with the traditional political functions of epics, the “Ruhnama” (2001) projected a unified identity of the Turkmen tribes back into the past, and legitimized the political order of the country after independence. Niyazov himself referred to his Ruhnama as the “Oghuznama of the Third Millennium”, and presented himself in forms reminiscent of traditional bards, and as a Father of the Turkmens (“Turkmenbashi”) like Oghuz Khan; and next to the “Ruhnama” Niyazov also published poems and songs in epical style. In the second volume of the “Ruhnama” (2004) Islam takes a stronger position, and we see a strong sacralization of the President; at that time Niyazov also ordered the construction of a huge mosque with “Ruhnama” quotations on the minarets.

Under Niyazov no Turkmen history schoolbooks were published, and the “Ruhnama” served as a guiding text for history teachers who had no other ‘official’ materials. Under Niyazov’s successor, President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, new course books came out in 2008. In the new history books for lower classes the “Ruhnama” continues to be important, and history is still organized according to the vague epic epochs as described in the “Ruhnama” (“the Age of Oghuz Khan”, “of Görogly”, and so forth). By contrast, the new textbooks for upper classes largely bypass the “Ruhnama” and its author, and teach history again according to European/universal epochs (ancient, medieval, modern times). Yet while Niyazov is thus gradually removed from the realm of all-pervasive political leadership into the corner of epics, current president Berdimuhamedov’s public representation still draws on narrative structures and techniques reminiscent of the “Ruhnama”.



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