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## Türkmen: Tradition, Lifestyle and Literature

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### Abstract

Türkmen is a member of the Oguz branch of Turkic which is closest to the language spoken in Turkey and Azerbaijan. The Turkmen are descended from an ancient people known as the Oghuz Turks, and it was the 7<sup>th</sup>-century literary developments of these peoples which set the precedent for modern Turkmen literature. They share a claim to western-Turkic (Oguz) heritage along with Azerbaijanis and Turks in Turkey. Türkmen literary tradition is a rich mosaic of pre-Islamic

Turkic elements fused with Islamic influences. A unified Turkic language Jadidism was not a set ideology; there were differing shades of jadidism throughout the Islamic world. One area where the Turkmen reformers differed from other jadids was on the topic of a unified- or pan-Turkic language. A unified-Turkic language had been a central tenet of Gasprinskii's philosophy.

**Keywords:** Turkmen, Türkmenistan, Oguz, Jadidism

### Introduction

Türkmenistan, with the Persian suffix "-istan" to indicate "land of the Türkmen," has been home to the Turkic people today known as Türkmen since about the tenth century. "Türkmen" was used to classify the Oguz who had adopted Islam, although this is not conclusive; the designation had earlier held political significance. Türkmenistan lies east of the Caspian Sea, north of Iran and Afghanistan. It shares a short northwestern border with Kazakhstan and its eastern border with Uzbekistan.

Türkmen is a member of the Oguz branch of Turkic. It is closest to the language spoken in Turkey and Azerbaijan, but mutual intelligibility with all Turkic dialects is high. There are many borrowed words from Arabic, Persian, and Russian, especially for technical and scientific terms. Türkmen writers shared a common Turkic literary language (Chagatai) with other Turks until the eighteenth century when a discernible Türkmen literary language began to emerge. The modern standardized language was developed in the 1920s from the Teke and Yomut dialects as a result of Soviet interest in creating a national literary language. The tribal dialects, which were always mutually comprehensible, now share a standardized written language and grammar. The Türkmen and other Turks, who had used an Arabic-based script for centuries, replaced it with an "international" Latin-based script in 1929. In 1940, when Soviet policy shifted again, the Türkmen were assigned a Cyrillic alphabet. The Türkmen chose to adopt a Latin-based script similar to the one they had used earlier.

At the turn of the nineteenth century, a small but influential number of Turkmen came to believe that literacy was the key to modernity. However, during the following century, in which becoming modern played out, the definition of literacy changed. Indeed, we may speak of literacies concerning reading/deconstructing texts and writing/reconstructing expression across media (Brian Street. 1995) <sup>[1]</sup>. Among pre-nineteenth century Turkmen "literate" generally meant possessing the ability to recite, or "read," religious texts. In the 1869 Russian Imperial census, literate meant the ability to sign one's name. In the late nineteenth century, progressive activists among Muslims called for an expanded version of knowledge in Central Asian schools. They proposed a "new method" (usul-i jadid) of schooling based on phonetic teaching to achieve functional literacy. Called "jadids" (proponents of a new method of teaching), these intellectual and social leaders did not wish to remove religiosity from learning. Rather, they wanted Muslims to obtain more general knowledge in combination with traditional content. In the process of experimenting with this method, social power shifted from the socially elite, "literate" clergy to the intellectual elites.

### Food in Daily Life

The diet shows a Russian influence and imported items are available at a high price, but Türkmen food generally remains traditional. Hot green tea ( gök çay ) accompanies most meals. Türkmen drink hot tea year round from shallow bowl-like cups called käses. Türkmen eat a lot of meat, primarily from sheep and cows but also from camels, goats, chicken, and despite the Muslim tradition, pigs. They also use milk from these animals. Meat is boiled or fried inside a casing of dough.

Manty is a popular version, eaten with yogurt on top. Soup usually is served with meat and/or noodles and may be eaten for breakfast. Türkmén also drink black tea, seltzer water, and imported sodas. Despite the ban on alcohol among some Muslim peoples, Türkmén drink wine, beer, and liquor;

### **Turkmen Carpets**

Turkmen carpets are as much a symbol of Turkmenistan as tulips is of Holland and cigars are of Cuba. Historically, nomadic tribes have used carpets as prayer rugs, decorative items, wardrobes, beds, heating for yurts and padding for camels. Carpet weaving skills have been passed down from mother to daughter for generations, and in addition to following specified techniques, the women must be careful in their selection of quality materials and dyes. Turkmen carpets are defined by their strict geometric patterns and varying shades of red, yet each tribe employs an individual design and unique ornamentation that is not duplicated elsewhere. Every rug takes an astonishing amount of time and incredible skill to complete

### **Turkmen Clothing and Jewelry**

Turkmen Clothing and Jewelry is designed to reflect a person's social status and region of origin, to protect from the evil eye and shield from the unforgiving climate. Even today, many people in Turkmenistan can still be seen in traditional costume, which for men includes embroidered shirts, custom shoes and sheep hats called telpek, and for women a robe and special headdress. Shades of red are especially common in Turkmenistan dress, for red is believed to have the ability to ward off evil. Jewelry is likewise valued as both an amulet and a sign of social status. It can be worn by men, women and even prized horses, and is traditionally made from silver. Turkmen jewelry often includes inserts of precious stones purported to hold magical properties and to include images of insects and animals, regarded as a link between man and nature.

### **Turkmen Akhal-Teke horses**

In addition to traditional costumes, carpets, and oral traditions, one of the most important Türkmen cultural symbols is the horse, especially the Akhal-Teke breed. Turkmen Akhal-Teke horses are among the rarest and most highly prized breeds in the world. Believed to be descended from the extinct Nisean horse of modern-day Iran, their name is a reference to an oasis called Akhal and a local tribe known as the Teke. These one-owner stallions have been the tireless helpers of local nomads and soldiers for centuries, yet their value goes beyond speed and agility: Graceful, thin-legged and beautiful, they look like statuettes come to life. In the 20th century, the Akhal-Teke horse gained international renown after proving its abilities in international competitions, and one even joined the stables of Queen Elizabeth II.

### **Turkmen Music and Dance**

The ancient roots of Turkmen music and dance are evidenced in centuries-old household items which are decorated with images of musicians and in the historic tales of skilled songwriters preserved in local folklore. Most notable among local dances is the kushtepdi performance, endemic to the Yomut tribe of the Caspian Sea coast but now popular at national festivals around the nation. Now a UNESCO-recognized performance, kushtepdi is carried out with

precision in order to convey a special meaning. Such dances are often accompanied by traditional polyphony, ritual instruments and many types of bells. Other popular instruments today include the stringed dutar and the tuyduk, a wind instrument which is tied to shamanistic ceremonies that are reminiscent of ancient Turkmenistan religions and still performed at local celebrations.

### **Turkmen Folklore**

One of the most beloved embodiments of Turkmen folklore are bakhshi, itinerant orator-musicians who wandered from village to village carrying few possessions save eating utensils and a stringed dutar instrument. Performing for hours on end, the bakhshi's songs recounted folk legends and popular literary works. Over time, bakhshi became so highly revered in the culture of Turkmenistan that they now have their own national holiday. Equally important were romantic folk songs and tunes called aydimi which centered on everyday themes ranging from motherhood and children's play to weddings, manual labor, carpet weaving and milking camels. The originality of Turkmen folk music can be heard in the unique manner of singing with great tension of the vocal cords and a high-pitched voice, traits which developed in response to the country's landscape and the people's nomadic way of life.

### **Literature**

Türkmen literary tradition is a rich mosaic of pre-Islamic Turkic elements fused with Islamic influences. Examples of folk traditions still highly valued today include the dastans Gorgut Ata and Göroglu which illustrate early Turkic culture overlaid with Islamic values. A dastan is a combination epic tale and lyric poem which formed the basis of oral tradition. The dastan was sung by a bagşy who memorized thousands of lines and sang them while playing various instruments. In addition to being a pastime which all members of the society could enjoy, the dastan was an oral record of Türkmen history, values, culture, and language. Dastans have played such an important role in Türkmen identity (as for all Turks) that enormous efforts are currently being made to revitalize them (after decades of Soviet suppression) in order to bolster the sense of Türkmen identity and unity.

Throughout the past century, Turkmen intellectuals sought to situate their Türkmençilik (Turkmen-ness/self) within cultural paradigms learned from Islamic, Russian, and western communities, even while striving to protect their traditional identity. In the late nineteenth-century, in great part as a result of Russian conquest, Turkmen recognized that the world around them was changing as they encountered the forces of "modernity"—that complex of economic, political, and cultural changes that evolved initially in Western Europe but quickly reverberated throughout the rest of the world with European imperial domination (Wallerstein, 1974) <sup>[7]</sup>.

A unified Turkic language Jadidism was not a set ideology; there were differing shades of jadidism throughout the Islamic world. One area where the Turkmen reformers differed from other jadids was on the topic of a unified- or pan-Turkic language. A unified-Turkic language had been a central tenet of Gasprinskii's philosophy. Turkmen gratefully acknowledged Gasprinskii's contributions, but disagreed with his proposal to unify the Turkic languages because they wanted to emphasize their Turkmen identity (Gelidew, 1926) <sup>[4]</sup>. They saw the written language as reflective of their group identity and insisted on denoting the peculiarities of their

regional speech in their written language. Modern Turkmen society identified itself as both Islamic and Turkic, as well as a Russian colony; but in reforming their alphabet, they asserted their Turkmen identity (Türkmençilik). The Turkmen's concern to accentuate Türkmençilik, and to do it through the alphabet, was one important effort that carried over into the national debates of the 1920s. Related efforts in literacy, education, language standardization, and the use of each to express a modern identity were early Soviet goals that expanded upon late-nineteenth century progressive movements. Jadidism was not the only cultural influence among the Turkmen. Jadids believed that education and literacy were keys to modernity, while the qadimçi (traditionalists) saw change as a threat to social structures and Islam itself. The end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries was a time when Muslims around the world debated and experimented with forms of modernity (Carter, 2005).

The Turkmen are descended from an ancient people known as the Oghuz Turks, and it was the 7<sup>th</sup>-century literary developments of these peoples which set the precedent for modern Turkmen literature. Local narrative reached a pinnacle in the 18<sup>th</sup> century with the works of Magtymguly Pyragy, the Father of Turkmen Literature. Magtymguly Pyragy used folk songs and a new style of poetry to compose over 800 poems which brought him fame throughout Central Asia. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a slew of Turkmen writers used their voice to share stories of brave folk heroes and to highlight pressing social issues. Despite these strides, most of the traditionally nomadic population remained illiterate until the modern Turkmen language began to develop in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century based on the Tekin dialect of Turkmen. Decades of Russian rule limited the content of Turkmen literature yet also helped to solidify the local language in written form.

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