

## TRACES OF PRE-ISLAMIC BELIEFS AND MYTHOLOGICAL MOTIFS IN THE VOCABULARY OF DIVAN LUGHAT AL-TURK

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**Abstract.** *This research investigates the lexical traces of pre-Islamic Turkic beliefs, shamanic traditions, and mythological motifs preserved within the encyclopedic compendium *Divan Lughat al-Turk*, compiled by Mahmud al-Kashgari in the eleventh century. By applying a systematic etymological and semantic analysis to a corpus of selected vocabulary items, this study demonstrates that a substantial layer of archaic religious and cosmological terminology survived the Islamization process and remained embedded in the everyday speech of medieval Turkic communities. The research focuses on three principal thematic domains: shamanistic ritual vocabulary, animistic and totemic terminology, and cosmological lexemes associated with pre-Islamic Turkic mythology. The findings reveal that Kashgari, despite writing within an Islamic scholarly framework, inadvertently preserved a rich stratum of pagan vocabulary through his ethnographic and philological diligence. This paper argues that *Divan Lughat al-Turk* constitutes not merely a linguistic monument but also an irreplaceable repository of early Turkic religious memory, offering scholars a unique window into the spiritual worldview of pre-Islamic Turkic peoples.*

**Keywords:** *Divan Lughat al-Turk, Mahmud al-Kashgari, pre-Islamic Turkic beliefs, shamanism, Turkic mythology, historical lexicology, etymological analysis, religious vocabulary.*

### 1. Introduction

The relationship between language and religion constitutes one of the most fertile areas of historical linguistics, for vocabulary is among the most conservative strata of any human culture. Words pertaining to the sacred sphere tend to persist long after the communities that coined them have adopted new faiths, new rulers, and new cosmologies. This phenomenon is particularly evident in the textual heritage of the Turkic peoples, whose conversion to Islam during the ninth through eleventh centuries did not entirely erase the spiritual vocabulary accumulated over millennia of shamanistic practice and mythological storytelling.

*Divan Lughat al-Turk* (The Compendium of Turkic Dialects), composed by the Karakhanid scholar Mahmud ibn Husayn al-Kashgari approximately between 1072 and

1074 CE, represents the most comprehensive philological record of medieval Turkic languages available to modern scholarship. Compiled in Baghdad and addressed to the Abbasid caliph, the work was explicitly designed to demonstrate the richness, elegance, and communicative utility of the Turkic linguistic family. In pursuing this goal, Kashgari transcribed thousands of lexical items, proverbs, poetic fragments, and cultural observations that collectively preserve a unique ethnographic snapshot of Turkic civilization at a critical historical juncture—precisely the period when Islamic identity was consolidating itself among Turkic elites while older religious customs continued to circulate among common people.

The present paper addresses the following research questions: (1) What categories of pre-Islamic religious and mythological vocabulary can be systematically identified in *Divan Lughat al-Turk*? (2) What do these lexical survivals reveal about the spiritual and cosmological worldview of pre-Islamic Turkic peoples? (3) How does the persistence of this vocabulary illuminate the dynamics of religious transition in medieval Inner Asia? By engaging with these questions through close lexical analysis, supported by comparative Turkology and the broader scholarship on Central Asian religious history, this study contributes to a fuller understanding of Kashgari's monumental text as both linguistic and cultural document.

## **2. Historical and Theoretical Background**

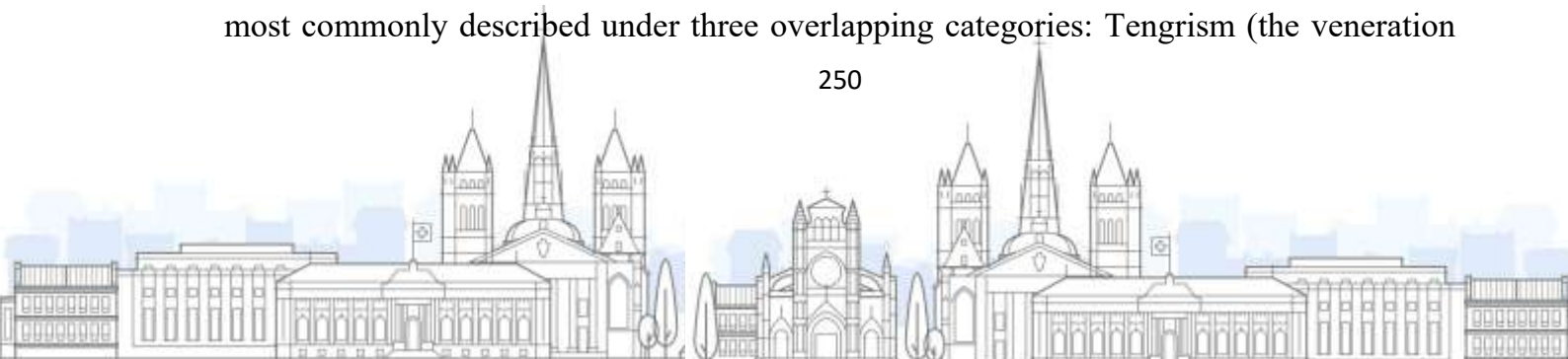
### **2.1 *Divan Lughat al-Turk* as a Cultural-Linguistic Monument**

Mahmud al-Kashgari's encyclopedic work stands apart from other medieval Islamic lexicographic traditions in its explicit ethnographic ambition. Unlike Arabic lexicographers who compiled dictionaries primarily for theological and literary purposes, Kashgari pursued a comparative and descriptive agenda that led him to record words and expressions regardless of their religious valence. His work encompasses vocabulary from multiple Turkic dialect groups—Oghuz, Kipchak, Uyghur, Chigil, Karluk, and others—thereby capturing a dialectal and cultural diversity that no subsequent medieval source replicated.

Modern Turkologists—from Wilhelm Radloff and Carl Brockelmann in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to Robert Dankoff, James Kelly, and Talat Tekin in more recent scholarship—have recognized the text's extraordinary value for reconstructing proto-Turkic lexical strata. For the purposes of the present study, the most relevant dimension of Kashgari's work is the degree to which it documents vocabulary that does not derive from Arabic or Persian loanwords associated with Islamic civilization but instead reflects indigenous Turkic semantic fields rooted in older belief systems.

### **2.2 Pre-Islamic Turkic Religion: Tengrism, Shamanism, and Animism**

Before the adoption of Islam, Turkic peoples subscribed to a complex of religious beliefs most commonly described under three overlapping categories: Tengrism (the veneration



of the supreme sky deity Tengri), shamanism (the practice of ritual specialists, known as *qam*, who mediated between human communities and supernatural entities), and animism (the attribution of spiritual agency to natural phenomena, animals, and sacred sites). These belief systems were not mutually exclusive but existed in dynamic, syncretic configurations that varied across time and geography.

The Old Turkic inscriptions of the Orkhon Valley (eighth century CE), the Yenisei runic texts, and numerous later ethnographic accounts attest to the sophistication and internal coherence of the pre-Islamic Turkic spiritual worldview. Central to this worldview were: the tripartite cosmic model dividing existence into an upper celestial realm, a middle terrestrial world, and a lower underworld; the concept of a world-axis or cosmic tree (the *qut* concept); the significance of ancestral spirits (*arvaq*); the role of fire as a purifying and protective agent; and the veneration of sacred mountains, rivers, and celestial bodies.

### **3. Lexical Analysis: Categories of Pre-Islamic Vocabulary in Divan Lughat al-Turk**

#### **3.1 Shamanistic Ritual Terminology**

Among the most significant pre-Islamic lexical survivals in *Divan Lughat al-Turk* is the term *qam* (shaman, ritual specialist). Kashgari records this word without suppressing its original referential meaning, noting it in the context of practitioners who communicate with supernatural beings. The root *qam-* also generates derivative forms attested in the *Divan*, including verbal constructions denoting shamanic ritual action. This lexical family represents a living vocabulary rather than a fossilized relic, suggesting that shamanic practice remained socially visible in eleventh-century Turkic communities despite official Islamization.

Equally revealing is the vocabulary associated with the shamanic ritual performance itself. The *Divan* records terms for the ceremonial drum (*qobuz* in broader usage; various percussion instruments associated with ritual), for the trance state, and for the categories of supernatural entities with whom the shaman interacts. The word *yalbaq* (supplication, entreaty to supernatural beings) and related forms illuminate the pragmatic dimension of shamanistic communication—a communicative logic organized around petition, exchange, and reciprocity rather than the submission and obedience central to Islamic theological discourse.

The concept of *qut* deserves particular attention. Appearing repeatedly across the *Divan's* entries, *qut* denotes a form of sacred, divinely granted life-force or charismatic power associated with sovereign legitimacy, prosperity, and fertility. Its roots lie in the Tengrist notion of celestial bestowal of ruling authority—the idea that legitimate power flows downward from Tengri to the ruler. While the term is also accommodated within Islamic political theology in Kashgari's usage, its semantic core remains visibly pre-

Islamic, connecting to the Old Turkic inscriptional tradition where qut appears as the ultimate sanction of khagan authority.

### 3.2 Animistic and Totemic Vocabulary

A second major category of pre-Islamic lexical survivals in the Divan concerns the animistic attribution of spiritual significance to natural entities. The term yer-sub (earth-water), denoting the collective spirits of land and water that must be propitiated by human communities, appears in contexts suggesting continued practical relevance. This compound concept, documented also in Old Turkic runic inscriptions and later Mongolian sources, reflects a landscape-oriented spirituality in which geographical features are understood as inhabited by numinous agencies demanding respect and ritual attention.

Animal-associated vocabulary in the Divan also reveals totemic dimensions of pre-Islamic Turkic thought. The wolf (bori) occupies a privileged semantic position, appearing in contexts that echo the mythological centrality of the wolf as ancestral protector and totemic symbol for certain Turkic confederations. Similarly, the eagle (toghri, qarcighai in hunting contexts) carries semantic weight beyond its purely zoological denotation, appearing in compound formations and proverbs that preserve traces of its role as a celestial messenger or royal emblem in pre-Islamic symbolic systems.

The vocabulary of fire veneration constitutes yet another animistic stratum. Terms related to the hearth fire and to fire-purification rituals suggest the persistence of practices in which fire functioned as a protective spirit requiring propitiation. Kashgari's recording of compound expressions involving od (fire) and related ritual actions demonstrates that fire cult vocabulary had not yet been entirely displaced by Islamic terminology for purification and divine protection.

### 3.3 Cosmological and Mythological Lexemes

The cosmological vocabulary recorded in Divan Lughat al-Turk reflects the tripartite model of the universe characteristic of Tengrist thought. Terms denoting the upper world (uluq yer, literally 'great place,' or variants designating the celestial realm), the middle world of human habitation, and the underworld (yeraltı conceptual cluster) together construct a cosmological map that corresponds to shamanic accounts of spirit journeys and to comparative Inner Asian religious typologies. These terms appear not in theological discourse but embedded in proverbs, poetic lines, and practical expressions, indicating their integration into everyday cognitive frameworks.

Mythological beings documented in the Divan include the albasti (a malevolent female spirit associated with childbirth and illness) and the erlik (the ruler of the underworld in Turkic mythology). The term albasti in particular demonstrates semantic tenacity: recorded by Kashgari without Islamic reframing, it preserves a pre-Islamic demonological concept that subsequently survived for centuries in Turkic folk belief across Anatolia, Central Asia,

and Siberia. The continued circulation of such terminology in vernacular speech—as evidenced by Kashgari's ethnographic recording—demonstrates that Islamic theological categories had not fully colonized the Turkic imaginary by the eleventh century.

The *Divan* also contains vocabulary pertaining to mythological narrative cycles, particularly in its proverb and verse citations. Formulaic expressions invoking ancestral heroes, cosmogonic events, and calendrical-ritual practices collectively preserve fragments of a pre-Islamic narrative tradition that has no direct parallel in Islamic literary genres. These fragments, while not systematically organized by Kashgari, can be reconstructed through comparative analysis with other Old Turkic textual sources and ethnographic data from later periods.

#### **4. Discussion: Religious Transition and Linguistic Memory**

The lexical evidence assembled in Section 3 invites a broader interpretive reflection on the mechanisms by which religious transitions occur within speech communities. The persistence of pre-Islamic vocabulary in *Divan Lughat al-Turk* is not an anomaly but a predictable consequence of the uneven pace at which different social strata absorb ideological change. Elite Islamization—the adoption of Islamic names, titles, jurisprudential frameworks, and court ceremonial—proceeded considerably faster than the transformation of vernacular vocabularies embedded in agricultural cycles, pastoral practices, birth and death rituals, and healing traditions.

Kashgari's own position in this dynamic is illuminating. As a member of the Karakhanid dynastic elite and a learned Muslim scholar writing for the Abbasid caliphate, he was thoroughly embedded in the Islamic cultural sphere. Yet his philological commitment to comprehensiveness led him to record vocabulary that a strictly Islamic censoring instinct might have suppressed. The result is a text that embodies the very tension it documents: Kashgari simultaneously advances an Islamic civilizational argument (Turkic is worthy of study; the Turks are God's chosen instrument) and preserves the pre-Islamic cultural memory that Islamic universalism sought to supersede.

This interpretive framework has significant implications for the historiography of Islam in Inner Asia. Rather than viewing Islamization as a decisive cultural rupture, the lexical evidence of the *Divan* supports a model of gradual, stratified, and contested transformation in which older semantic layers coexisted with newer Islamic frameworks for generations. The concept of religious syncretism as a historical process, rather than a theological aberration, best accounts for the patterns observed in Kashgari's vocabulary.

Furthermore, this study underscores the methodological importance of lexical analysis as a tool for cultural history in contexts where direct documentary evidence of religious practice is sparse. When material evidence of shamanic ritual and pre-Islamic cosmology

is fragmentary, the vocabulary recorded by scholars like Kashgari provides an indirect but reliable testimony to the living presence of those practices among communities who left no theological treatises or ritual manuals of their own. In this respect, *Divan Lughat al-Turk* functions as what might be termed an involuntary ethnography—a record of cultural reality that the author documented without necessarily intending it as such.

### 5. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that *Divan Lughat al-Turk* contains a substantial and systematically identifiable layer of pre-Islamic Turkic religious and mythological vocabulary organized around three principal thematic categories: shamanistic ritual terminology (including the *qam* complex and the concept of *qut*), animistic and totemic vocabulary (including *yer-sub*, fire-related terms, and animal symbolism), and cosmological-mythological lexemes (including spirit-being designations and cosmographic terminology). These lexical strata collectively reveal that the spiritual worldview of pre-Islamic Turkic civilization remained actively present in vernacular discourse during the eleventh century, even as Islamic theological categories were progressively colonizing formal registers of Turkic intellectual life.

Mahmud al-Kashgari, through his philological diligence and ethnographic attentiveness, inadvertently created a monument of pre-Islamic cultural memory within a text explicitly framed by Islamic scholarly conventions. This paradox is itself historically significant: it demonstrates that the boundaries between Islamic and pre-Islamic cultural spheres in medieval Inner Asia were more permeable, and more contested, than a simple narrative of conversion and transformation would suggest.

Future research should extend this lexical analysis to the full corpus of Kashgari's entries using digital humanities methodologies, enabling the construction of a comprehensive semantic map of pre-Islamic vocabulary in the *Divan*. Comparative studies drawing on contemporaneous Uyghur Buddhist texts, the Orkhon inscriptions, and later Mongolian religious vocabulary could further illuminate the diachronic trajectory of the semantic fields identified in the present study. Such work would significantly deepen our understanding of the religious and cultural history of the Turkic world during one of its most transformative historical periods.

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