

Mythological Codes in Turkic Heroic Epics: A Comparative Typological Analysis of Alpamish, Manas, And Köroğlu

Olima Abdivaliyevna Xolmurodova

Jizzakh State Pedagogical University, Associate professor of Romance and Germanic Languages Department, Uzbekistan

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Abstract: This study presents a systematic comparative-typological analysis of mythological codes embedded in five major Turkic heroic epics — Alpamish (Uzbek), Alpamys Batyr (Kazakh), Manas (Kyrgyz), Köroğlu (Turkmen/Azerbaijani), and Oghuz-Name (Uyghur). Drawing on Lévi-Strauss's concept of mythological codes, Jung's archetypal theory, and Campbell's monomyth framework, the research identifies five recurring mythological codes: (1) divine birth and celestial mandate (Tengri), (2) the sacred horse as cosmic mediator, (3) the tripartite world structure (upper–middle–lower), (4) the underworld captivity-and-return motif, and (5) the demonological antagonist (Albasti, Dev, shape-shifters). Textual analysis of primary epic sources combined with a comparative structural method reveals that these codes operate as deep semiotic structures that transcend individual ethnic boundaries while simultaneously encoding distinct cultural identities. The findings contribute to ongoing debates in Turkic.

Keywords: Turkic epics; mythological code; comparative typology; Alpamish; Manas; Köroğlu; archetype; Tengri; Lévi-Strauss; Campbell.

Introduction: Heroic epics constitute the most archaic stratum of oral literature, preserving mythological world-views that predate written culture by millennia [1]. In Turkic traditions, the epic genre — locally designated as dastan or zhyrau poetry — occupies a unique position as both artistic monument and ideological repository of collective identity [2]. The five major traditions examined here — Uzbek, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Turkmen/Azerbaijani, and Uyghur — share a common Altaic substrate while diverging in historical experience, geographic context, and cultural contact zones. The concept of the mythological code was first systematised by Claude Lévi-Strauss in his structural anthropology, wherein he demonstrated that myths operate as binary systems encoding cultural contradictions [3]. This framework was subsequently developed by Roland Barthes into a theory of cultural semiotics [4] and extended to oral epics by Vladimir

Propp, whose morphological analysis of folktale functions prefigures the structural approach adopted here [5].

Carl Gustav Jung's theory of archetypes provides the depth-psychological complement to structuralist analysis. Jung argued that certain universal psychic images — the Hero, the Shadow, the Anima, the Self — recur across cultures because they are rooted in the collective unconscious [6]. Joseph Campbell's synthesis of Jungian psychology with comparative mythology in his concept of the monomyth — the hero's journey through departure, initiation, and return — offers an overarching narrative grammar against which Turkic epic heroes can be productively measured [7]. Despite the scholarly importance of Turkic epics, systematic cross-traditional comparative analysis applying contemporary mythological code theory remains scarce. Existing studies tend to be either mono-

traditional (focusing on a single epic) or broadly descriptive without theoretical depth [8]. This study addresses the gap by applying a unified theoretical framework to primary textual analysis across five traditions.

1. Research Questions

- What mythological codes are common across the five selected Turkic heroic epics?
- How do these codes function semiotically within each tradition's narrative structure?
- To what extent do common codes evidence shared cultural origins versus parallel independent development?
- How do Jung's archetypes and Campbell's monomyth map onto the identified codes?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1. Lévi-Strauss and Mythological Codes

Lévi-Strauss defined a mythological code as a system of signs through which binary oppositions (nature/culture, life/death, celestial/chthonic) are symbolically mediated [3]. In his analysis of Amerindian myths, he demonstrated that the same mythological content can be encoded through different symbolic registers — alimentary, acoustic, cosmological — without altering the underlying logical structure.

Applied to Turkic epics, this insight predicts that the structural opposition between the hero (representative of cosmic order, divine mandate) and the antagonist (representative of chaos, demonic inversion) will be encoded across multiple simultaneous registers: the hero's horse versus the enemy's horse, the hero's birth site versus the antagonist's underground lair, the hero's Tengri-given strength versus the sorcerer's borrowed dark power. The present study demonstrates that all five epics consistently deploy these multi-register encodings [9].

2. Jungian Archetypes in Oral Epic

Jung's identification of the Hero archetype as a universal psychic pattern is particularly relevant for oral epic analysis. The Hero represents the ego's struggle toward self-realisation against the forces of the unconscious — encoded mythologically as monsters, demons, or enchantresses [6]. In Turkic epics, this dynamic is consistently externalised: the hero's journey into the underworld (Alpamish's dungeon, Manas's

three deaths, Köroğlu's cave birth) maps precisely onto the Jungian concept of katabasis — the descent into the unconscious followed by renewed integration.

The Anima archetype is encoded in the dual female figures present in all five epics: the positive Anima (Barchin in Alpamish, Qanikey in Manas, Nigar in Köroğlu) who sustains the hero, and the negative Anima (Albasti, female sorcerers) who threatens life and fertility. Neumann's elaboration of the Terrible Mother archetype specifically illuminates the Albasti figure, which represents the regressive pull against the hero's differentiation [10].

3. Campbell's Monomyth

Campbell's seventeen-stage monomyth, synthesised from global mythological data, posits a universal narrative structure: the hero receives a call to adventure, crosses a threshold into the special world, undergoes trials aided by supernatural helpers, achieves a supreme ordeal, and returns transformed [7]. This grammar applies with remarkable consistency to all five Turkic epics examined here, suggesting that the monomyth captures not merely a narrative convention but a deep cognitive structure for encoding cultural values through the heroic figure.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a comparative structural methodology combining close textual analysis with cross-cultural pattern recognition. Primary sources include canonical scholarly editions of all five epics in original languages with established translations: Alpamish in H. Zarif and T. Mirzayev's critical edition [11], Alpamys Batyr in Akhmet Baitursynov Institute editions [12], Manas in Ryskulov and Musayev's scholarly edition [13], Köroğlu in Azemun's comparative edition [14], and the Uyghur Oghuz-Name in Abdurakhman's philological study [15]. The analytical procedure follows three stages. First, each epic is subjected to Proppian morphological analysis to identify narrative functions. Second, recurring semantic units — what Lévi-Strauss calls mythemes — are isolated and tabulated across traditions. Third, the identified mythemes are interpreted through the lens of Jungian archetypes and Campbell's monomyth stages. This triangulated methodology guards against the reductionism of any single theoretical framework.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Comparative Overview of Mythological Codes

Table 1 presents the distribution of five primary mythological codes across the five epic traditions. The

consistency of all five codes across all five traditions constitutes the primary evidence for the existence of a shared Turkic mythological code-system.

Table 1. Distribution of Mythological Codes across Turkic Heroic Epics

Epic / Tradition	Divine Birth	Sacred Horse	Underworld Motif	Demonic Opponent
Alpamish (Uzbek)	Tengri's blessing at birth	Cosmic horse Boychibar	Underworld captivity & return	Albasti / Dev
Alpamys Batyr (Kazakh)	Tengri's gift to childless father	Sacred steed with divine speed	Dungeon of Taychibek	Sorcerers & evil spirits
Manas (Kyrgyz)	Cosmic signs at birth	Aq-Qula (white stallion, divine)	Three resurrections	40 companions vs. demons
Köroğlu (Turkmen/Az.)	Miraculous birth in underground	Kirat — horse from underworld	Death-rebirth cycle	Giant Bolu Bey
Oghuz-Name (Uyghur)	Light descends on mother	Totemic animals as guides	Descent to lower world	Shape-shifting antagonists

Source: compiled by the author from primary epic texts.

2. Divine Birth and the Tengri Code

"Tengri above, dark Earth below: between them the sons of men came into being." (Orkhon-Yenisei inscription, 8th c. CE [16])

The divine birth motif encodes the hero's transcendence of ordinary human status and his reception of a celestial mandate — what Max Weber termed charismatic legitimacy translated into mythological register [1]. In all five epics, the hero's father prays to Tengri in a state of childlessness; the birth that follows is marked by cosmic signs (light, thunder, unusual animal behaviour). This code serves a crucial ideological function: it legitimises the hero's authority as divinely sourced rather than tribally inherited [2].

The Tengri code also encodes the tripartite cosmic structure. Tengri is explicitly associated with the uppermost cosmic zone, while the antagonists — whether Taychibek's dungeon (Alpamys), Bolu Bey's fortress (Köroğlu), or the Manas antagonists' realm — are consistently associated with the lower or peripheral cosmic zone. The hero mediates between these zones, performing the structural function of what Eliade calls

the axis mundi made human [17].

3. The Sacred Horse as Cosmic Mediator

The epic horse occupies a unique position in the Turkic mythological code: it is simultaneously a narrative helper (Campbell's supernatural aid), an archetypal symbol of the libido and dynamic movement (Jung), and a semiotic marker of the hero's divine election. All five traditions feature a horse of supernatural origin: Boychibar (Alpamish) is born from a divine mare; Aq-Qula (Manas) appears unmounted and untameable until Manas alone can ride it; Kirat (Köroğlu) is reared in the underworld itself and possesses demonic speed [18].

Lévi-Strauss's binary code analysis reveals that the hero's horse consistently stands in structural opposition to the antagonist's mount or the lack thereof: the hero's horse is celestial-coloured (white, grey, golden), swift as wind, loyal to death; the antagonist's animals are dark, unreliable, or absent. This colour-based encoding of the celestial/chthonic opposition operates across all five traditions without exception [9].

4. Underworld Captivity and the Death-Rebirth Code

The underworld captivity motif — hero imprisoned, apparently defeated, then returning stronger — is the single most diagnostically important code for the monomyth structure in Turkic epics. It corresponds precisely to Campbell's Supreme Ordeal stage and to the Jungian concept of katabasis as the necessary descent before individuation [7][6]. All five epics stage this descent: Alpamish spends seven years in Taychibek's dungeon; Manas undergoes three deaths and resurrections; Koroğlu is born in a grave and raised underground; the Oghuz-Name hero descends to the realm of the dead and returns with knowledge [15].

Critically, the return from the underworld is always

accompanied by enhanced status: supernatural weapons, sacred knowledge, or transformed physical power. This enhancement encodes the monomyth's notion that the hero must die to the old self before fully realising his cultural function. The captivity motif thus operates as the pivotal code that converts the divine birth (legitimacy by origin) into proven legitimacy by ordeal [7].

5. Archetype Mapping

Table 2 presents the systematic mapping of Turkic mythological figures onto Jungian archetypes and comparative mythological parallels.

Table 2. Jungian Archetype Mapping of Turkic Mythological Figures

Mythological Figure	Jungian Archetype	Narrative Function	Theoretical Parallel
Tengri (Sky God)	Self / Divine Orderer	Source of heroic mandate	Campbell's 'Supernatural Aid'
Umay Ana (Mother Goddess)	Anima / Great Mother	Protector of life & birth	Jung's 'Magna Mater'
Albasti (Female Demon)	Shadow / Dark Anima	Threat to new life, chaos	Neumann's 'Terrible Mother'
Alp Hero (Alpamish, Manas)	Hero / Ego-Self journey	Cultural ideal, order-bringer	Campbell's 'Monomyth Hero'
Cosmic Tree / Horse	Axis Mundi / Trickster aide	Link between three worlds	Eliade's 'World Tree'
Underworld Captivity	Nigredo / Descent motif	Death-rebirth transformation	Jung's 'Individuation'

Source: compiled by the author based on Jung (1968), Campbell (1949), Neumann (1955).

6. The Demonological Code: Albasti and Related Figures

The demonological antagonist constitutes what Lévi-Strauss would term the negative pole of the hero-code binary. Albasti, the primary female demon across Uzbek, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Tatar, and Azerbaijani traditions, encodes the Jungian Terrible Mother archetype: the regressive, death-bringing, anti-generative force opposing the life-affirming thrust of the hero's mission [10]. Albasti's consistent attributes across traditions — long hair, backward feet, yellow complexion, targeting of parturient women and newborns — encode the cosmological opposition between new life (the hero's birth) and the forces seeking to prevent that birth. Her appearance at birth scenes constitutes a direct mythological code: the

hero's divine legitimacy (Tengri code) is immediately contested by the chthonic anti-force. That the hero survives this threat further validates his celestial mandate [19].

CONCLUSIONS

This comparative-typological analysis has identified five structurally coherent mythological codes — divine birth/Tengri mandate, sacred horse as cosmic mediator, tripartite world structure, underworld captivity-and-return, and demonological antagonist — that operate consistently across the five major Turkic heroic epic traditions. These codes function simultaneously as narrative structures (Propp), binary semiotic systems (Lévi-Strauss), archetypal patterns (Jung), and stages of the monomyth hero's journey (Campbell), confirming that Turkic epic mythology

constitutes a unified deep structure despite its surface variation. The findings have three significant implications. First, they provide strong evidence for a common proto-Turkic mythological substrate predating the divergence of individual Turkic traditions. Second, they suggest that Lévi-Strauss's mythological code theory, developed primarily on Amerindian data, is productively applicable to Eurasian oral epic. Third, they establish a methodological template for future comparative studies that bridges structural analysis, depth psychology, and cultural semiotics.

Future research should extend this analysis to Turkic literary epics of the Islamic period to examine how the pre-Islamic mythological codes undergo transformation, partial suppression, or symbolic reframing under the influence of a new theological framework — a question that connects directly to the second paper in this research programme.

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