

## SOME NOTES on BUDDHISM STUDIES in TÜRKİYE

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As you know, the roots of Balkan and Anatolian Turks are in Asia. The north and west of present-day Mongolia is known as the homeland of the Turks. In known history, Turkic peoples lived and ruled the civilization centers in Asia for 2000 years until they reached Turkey and Europe. It is possible to rank these civilization centers from east to west as follows: China, India, Transoxiana, Afganistan, Iran, Mesopotamia, Anatolia we can say lands of Greek civilisation and Roman Empire and Egypt at Africa. In these civilization centers, Turks not only met with the divine religions like, Judaism, Christianity and Islam but also benefited from Eastern teachings like Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Manicheism etc. There have been many Turkish groups that have embraced these divine religions or adopted the eastern teachings. It is accepted by academic circles in Türkiye that Turks met Buddhism for the first time during the Hun period<sup>2</sup>. Later, there have been many Turkish groups that have accepted the teachings of Buddhism beginning from the 5<sup>th</sup> century. The effect of the Buddhism continued among the Turks at the T'o-pa or Tabgach State period too.

Today, there are Turkish-speaking peoples who believe in different religions other than Islam like Turkish speaking Krymchaks and Karaite Jews in Crimea, Lithuania and Türkiye, as the remains of the Khazar Empire (650-965 AC) or Christian Urums living in Türkiye, Ukraine, Russia, Kazakistan and Greece, Chuvashs, Hakas and Yakuts in Russia and Gagauz are in Moldova.

From historical records like Suishu 隋書 we know that during the First Türk Empire (Tokketsu) (542-581) at the 6<sup>th</sup> century, the Türk Mukan Kağan and later his elder brother T'a-po or Taspar-Tatpar Kağan believed in Buddhism and even built a Buddhist temple. He sent envoys to North China asking for the Buddhist canon. From the sources, we see that the Buddhist monk Hui Lin gave information to Taspar Kagan about Buddhism, and Taspar, who was very impressed by these, requested the Sutras called Nie-pan, Hua-yen, Ching-min and Shih-t'ung to learn more. The Northern Ch'i (535-577)

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<sup>2</sup> Yrd. Doç.Dr. Tilla Deniz BAYKUZU, "Hunların Kayıp Kitapları ve Sutralar", Sema Barutçu ÖZÖNDER, "Eski Türklerde Dil ve Edebiyat", Harun GÜNGÖR, "Eski Türklerde Din", Hans J. KLIMKEIT Çeviren: Mehmet T. BERBERCAN, "Türk Orta Asyasında Budizm".

emperor, who heard about the khagan's interest in Buddhism, had the Nirvana Sutra translated into Turkish by a monk named Liu Shih-ching, who spoke Turkish, to present it to Kagan<sup>3</sup>.

But the belief in Buddhism seemed very limited among the Early Türks. In the Second Türk Empire (582-744), the belief of Buddhism had already fallen into decay. When Bilge Kagan intended to build a Buddhist temple, he was immediately dissuaded by his consultant, Tonyukuk. The argument of Tonyukuk was that Buddhism and Daoism require their adherents to be compassionate and sympathetic, which are fatal characteristics for fighting soldiers<sup>4</sup>. After the collapse of the Türk Empire by Uyghurs, from the 9<sup>th</sup> century onwards, most of the Uyghurs accepted Buddhism and this continued until the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

Mahayana Buddhism (Uluğ kölüngü meaning “big chariot”) was widespread among the early Turks and adapted to the living conditions, historical traditions, ethnography and culture, and philosophical ideas of the early Turks. Due to Buddhism, ancient Indian philosophy and culture penetrated the early Turkic world. In this period, works containing religious, philosophical and didactic materials were translated into the old Turkic language like Uyghur Turkish. Usually these materials were translations from Sanskrit, Tokharian, Sogdian and Chinese<sup>5</sup>. These texts which were taken from Kizil, Bezeklik, are existing in the libraries of many countries such as Germany, United States of America, Korea, Japan and China.

With the spread of Islam among the Turks of Asia, Buddhism lost its power as a belief, but the remnants of the Buddhist culture continued to live among the culture of some small group of Turks in Asia. Today, some of the Tuvan Turks in Russia and the Yellow Uyghurs or Yugurs in China are still Buddhists.

In the Ottoman era, information about Buddhism in Turkish literature is mostly within the scope of world religions or history of religions. Until the 19th century, -like European countries- it is almost impossible to find a study that directly examines Buddhism using academic methods in Turkey. But, Buddhism seems to have started to be wondered by Ottoman Turkish intellectuals in the 19th century, apart from the clergy. One of these intellectuals is Şemsettin Sami and in his work "Esatir", which he wrote in 1878, he gave information about

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<sup>3</sup> Tilla Deniz BAYKUZU, “V. Yüzyılda Hunlar Ve Budhizm”, A.Ü. Türkiyat Araştırmaları Enstitüsü Dergisi, Sayı 34, Erzurum 2007.

<sup>4</sup> [http://acta.bibl.u-szeged.hu/64043/1/altaica\\_052\\_015-020.pdf](http://acta.bibl.u-szeged.hu/64043/1/altaica_052_015-020.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Kasımcan SADIKOV, Eski Türklerin Komşu Doğu Halklarıyla Kültürel İlişkilerinde Budizmin Yeri.

the religions of India and he partially addresses the subject of Buddha and Buddhism as well. Another work written at that time is Tarihi-i Edyan “The History of Religions” by Ahmet Mithat Efendi in 1910<sup>6</sup>. In the last part of his book, he talks about Buddhism among Indian religions<sup>7</sup>. He especially focused on the moral teachings of Buddhism. After Ahmet Mithat Efendi, some scholars also wrote books on Religion History and talked about Buddhism like Mahmud Esad SEYDİŞEHİRİ's (Tarih-i Edyan, 1914), Mehmed Esad's (Tarih-i Edyan, History of Criticism), Edyan, 1917) and M. Şemseddin GÜNALTAY (Tarih-i Edyan, 1922)<sup>8</sup>.

Another important aspect of Ahmet Mithat Efendi is that he wrote the first book that focused directly on Buddhism. His work titled, “30.000 Budhists in Paris” was published in 1890. Apart from these pioneering studies, it is possible to see articles about Buddha and Buddhism in Ottoman period journals like *Sebilürreşâd* (later Sırat-ı Müstakim).

It is possible to say that academic research on Buddhism increased in Turkey in the Republican Period. We can say that, after the First World War, with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of the new Turkish republic, a new nation-building process was started. One of the most important foundations of this process was academia, in other words history.

As an intellectual leader, Mustafa Kemal ATATÜRK has also read many books, especially on the history and history of religions. During the first 15 years of the new Republic, he established faculties for history, language and religion studies. One of them is Ankara University Faculty of Language, History and Geography, of which I am teaching. When it opened in 1936, one of the first departments in our faculty was the Indology Department, where the Sanskrit language was taught and Buddhism studies were conducted, German Professor Walter RUBEN was appointed as its director<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Ali GÜL, Ahmet Mithat Efendi'nin Dinler Tarihi Kitabı Ve Dersleri Üzerine Bazı Tespitler, <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/2706274>

<sup>7</sup> Cengiz BATUK, Ahmed Midhat Efendi ve Tarih-i Edyan, MİLEL VE NİHAL, inanç- kültür-mitoloj, <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/109421>

<sup>8</sup> Ali GÜL, Ahmet Mithat Efendi'nin Dinler Tarihi Kitabı Ve Dersleri Üzerine Bazı Tespitler, <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/2706274>

<sup>9</sup> Derya KESKİN, “Türk Hindolojisinin Kurucusu: Prof. Dr. Walter Ruben”, <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/download/article-file/2022243>

Atatürk predicted that for understanding the Göktürk and Uyghur periods, deep researches on Turkish history should be made. For this reason, both the language and religion of these periods had to be understood well. Researching the Buddhist texts, especially written in Uyghur, would be useful to understand the sources of both Turkish language and culture.

It is understood that Atatürk was especially interested in Buddhism. We see the proof of this in a telegram he sent to İsmet İnönü for the opening of Izmir Fair in 1934. At the end of the telegram, Atatürk said “Namo İsmet”. It is the presence of the phrase “respect to İsmet” as it is known, religious Buddhist works begin with “Namo but, Namo drama, Namo sang”<sup>10</sup>.

Hilmi Ömer BUDDA (1894-1952), is the most important and interesting researcher of the republican period, who focused on Buddhism among the researches on the history of religions. He is the first Historian of Religions in Turkey and you can see that his surname is Budda. He chose Budda as his surname. Hilmi Ömer associated Buddha with the Saka Turks and even claimed that Buddha might be of Turkish ancestry. One of the most important contributions of Buddha to the field of History of Religions is the book History of Religions, which he published in 1935 by working on it for many years. Hilmi Ömer in this book; focused on Indian religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism), Tibetan religion (with the title Lamaism), Chinese religions (Primitive religion, Taoism, Confucianism, Chinese Buddhism), and finally Japanese religion and Japanese Buddhism.

One of the first important studies on Buddhism in Turkey is the book “Gotama Buddha According to Pali Texts” written by Asaf Halet ÇELEBİ in 1946. Today, Prof. Korhan KAYA, Prof. Yalçın KAYALI Vice Director of Asia-Pacific Research Center (APAM), Prof. Derya CAN are the leading academics studying on Buddhism. As APAM, we are focusing on the Buddhist history and effect of the Buddhist culture on Asian countries.

## **Conclusion**

It is possible to say that Buddhism studies in Türkiye are mainly carried out in Theology Faculties and Turcology Departments of universities. Moreover, studies on the history of Chinese and Japanese Buddhism have begun to increase with the increase in the

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<sup>10</sup> Özkan İZGİ, “ Orta Asya Türklerinin Kültür Kaynakları”, <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/152069>

number of academics who speak Chinese and Japanese. As a sample, researcher Mr. İbrahim Emre ŞAMLIOĞLU from Ankara University Faculty of Divinity is making his PhD study on Japanese Buddhism and he will be in Japan next month.

Some Turkology Departments are working intensively on the Buddhist Uyghur Period and Uyghur Buddhist manuscripts, religious texts are analyzed and translated to contemporary Turkish. Prof. Sema Barutçu ÖZÖNDER and Prof. Mehmet ÖLMEZ are the two of the leading academics in this field. In addition, studies on Buddhism and Buddhist culture are continued in the Departments of Indology, Sinology and Japanology. Interest in Buddhism and Buddhist culture in Turkey is increasing day by day. I hope there will be opportunities to conduct joint research projects with important universities such as Ryukoku University.

