



SHAMANISTIC SURVIVALS IN ANATOLIA: AN ANALYSIS OF CULTURAL CONTINUITY

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Abstract. This study aims to explore the cultural continuity of Shamanistic beliefs and practices within Turkish society living in Anatolia. The primary objective of the research is to examine how the Turks – who have interacted with various religions and cultures throughout history – have preserved and transmitted elements of their ancient Shamanistic traditions to the present day. A qualitative research method was employed, and a descriptive survey model was adopted as the research design. A literature review served as the main data collection tool. The central research question is defined as follows: *What Shamanistic practices and beliefs continue to exist in Anatolia today, and what role do they play in Turkish culture?*

The study is subject to certain limitations, including restricted source availability and regional variations in practices. Its originality lies in its presentation of concrete examples demonstrating the persistence of Shamanistic elements within contemporary Turkish culture. Key findings reveal that practices such as the use of the evil eye bead, red ribbons, lead pouring rituals, tying cloths on trees, reciting mevlit and hymns, and giving children nature-inspired names indicate the continuing presence of Shamanistic traditions in Anatolia. These results highlight that Shamanism is not merely a historical belief system but remains influential in Turkish cultural memory and daily life.

Keywords: Sociology of religion; Shamanism; Turkish culture; *kam*; cultural continuity; Anatolia; rituals and beliefs

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АНАДОЛЫДАҒЫ ШАМАНИЗМ ҚАЛДЫҚТАРЫ: МӘДЕНИ САБАҚТАСТЫҚТЫ ТАЛДАУ

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ШАМАНИСТИЧЕСКИЕ РЕЛИКТЫ В АНАТОЛИИ: АНАЛИЗ КУЛЬТУРНОЙ НЕПРЕРЫВНОСТИ

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Андратпа. Бұл зерттеу Анадолы аумағында өмір сүретін түрік қоғамындағы шаманистік нанымдар мен тәжірибелердің мәдени сабақтастығын зерттеуді мақсат етеді. Зерттеудің негізгі мақсаты – тарих бойы түрлі діндер мен мәдениеттермен өзара әрекеттескен түріктер ежелгі шаманистік дәстүрлерінің элементтерін бүгінгі күнге дейін қалай сақтап, жеткізгенін анықтау. Зерттеуде сапалық әдіс қолданылып, сипаттамалық шолу үлгісі зерттеу дизайны ретінде таңдалды. Негізгі дерек жинау құралы – әдебиеттерге шолу болды. Зерттеудің орталық сұрағы мынадай: Бүгінгі Анадолыдағы қандай шаманистік тәжірибелер мен нанымдар сақталған және олардың түрік мәдениетіндегі рөлі қандай?

Зерттеу белгілі бір шектеулерге ие, соның ішінде дереккөздердің шектеулілігі мен аймақтық тәжірибе айырмашылықтары бар. Оның өзектілігі – қазіргі түрік мәдениетінде сақталған шаманистік элементтердің нақты мысалдарын көрсетуінде. Негізгі нәтижелерге көз тиу моншағы, қызыл лента қолдану, қорғасын құю рәсімдері, ағаштарға шүберек байлау, мәуліт пен иләхі оқу, балаларға табиғатқа қатысты есімдер беру сияқты тәжірибелердің жалғасуы жатады. Бұл нәтижелер шаманизмнің тек тарихи сенім жүйесі емес, түрік мәдени жадында және құнделікті өмірінде әлі де ықпалды екендігін көрсетеді.

Түйінді сөздер: Дін социологиясы; шаманизм; түрік мәдениеті; қам; мәдени сабақтастық; Анадолы; рәсімдер мен нанымдар

Аннотация. Данное исследование направлено на изучение культурной преемственности шаманистских верований и практик в турецком обществе, проживающем в Анатолии. Основная цель работы – определить, каким образом тюрки, на протяжении истории взаимодействовавшие с различными религиями и культурами, сумели сохранить и передать до наших дней элементы своих древних шаманистских традиций. В исследовании использован качественный метод; в качестве исследовательского дизайна принят описательно-обзорный подход. Основным инструментом сбора данных выступил анализ литературы. Центральный исследовательский вопрос сформулирован следующим образом: Какие шаманистские практики и верования продолжают существовать в современной Анатолии и какую роль они играют в турецкой культуре?

Исследование имеет определенные ограничения, включая ограниченность источников и региональные различия в практиках. Его новизна заключается в представлении конкретных примеров, демонстрирующих устойчивость шаманистских элементов в современной турецкой культуре. Основные выводы показывают, что такие практики, как использование амулета «глаз от сглаза», красных лент, обрядов выливания свинца, завязывание лоскутков на деревьях, чтение мевлита и гимнов, а также дарение детям имён, связанных с природой, свидетельствуют о продолжающемся присутствии шаманистских традиций в Анатолии. Эти результаты подчёркивают, что шаманизм – не просто историческая система верований, но и поныне оказывает влияние на культурную память и повседневную жизнь турок.

Ключевые слова: социология религии, шаманизм, турецкая культура, кам, культурная преемственность, Анатолия, ритуалы и верования

Сілтеме жасау үшін:

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Introduction

Throughout history, the Turks -like many other societies- have encountered various religions and belief systems, developing new meanings and interpretations within their own cultural structures as a result of these interactions (Çapçıoğlu & Alpay, 2022). During these processes of cultural exchange, they did not sever ties with their deep-rooted past; instead, they preserved the fundamental elements of ancient Turkish culture and maintained cultural unity and continuity. Among the belief systems that hold a significant place in the historical memory of the Turks is Shamanism. Dating back to prehistoric times, Shamanism is an animistic belief system centered around a shaman who is capable of communicating with the spiritual world. Known also as *Kamlik* among Eastern and Western Siberian as well as Central Asian Turkic communities, this belief system has left profound marks on the shaping of Turkish culture (Rayman, 2016). The continued existence of Turkic groups practicing Shamanistic traditions in modern-day Central Asia and Siberia demonstrates the persistence of this spiritual heritage.

Shamanism has long served as a powerful cultural component guiding the social and religious life of Turkish society. Rather than adopting this belief system in its original form, the Turks reinterpreted and integrated it into their own cultural framework, thereby creating a distinctive religious outlook. This process made possible the intergenerational transmission of Shamanistic elements, allowing them to survive within various customs, rituals, and folk beliefs to this day. Even after the adoption of Islam, the influence of this system did not disappear entirely; instead, many Shamanistic components continued to exist by being recontextualized within Islamic culture (Öğretici, 2019). During the Islamization of the Turks, the unconscious integration of certain traditions and rituals inherited from their pre-Islamic belief system into their new religion led to the perception of many Shamanistic practices as Islamic rituals (Gökdere, 2024). The persistence of certain behaviors – considered superstitious from an Islamic perspective – among Muslim Turks for centuries, and their continued observance in various regions today, demonstrate the enduring strength of the Shamanistic legacy and its place in collective memory (İnan, 1986). Thus, traces of Shamanism can still be observed within Turkish religion and culture today.

The influence of Shamanism on Turkish culture is not merely a historical phenomenon but also an important example in terms of socio-cultural continuity. From the Central Asian steppes to the Anatolian landscape, Turkic communities preserved and transformed their ancient beliefs and rituals despite encountering diverse civilizations along the way. The primary aim of this study is to examine the historical and contemporary impacts of Shamanism – which is regarded variously as a religion or a belief system – on Turkish religion and culture, and to evaluate its origins among Central Asian and Siberian peoples as well as its lasting traces in Anatolia. In this context, the cultural and religious reflections of Shamanism are analyzed through customs, traditions, and social practices, with an emphasis on identifying Shamanistic elements that remain observable in contemporary society.

The scope of the study is limited to a theoretical examination of the concept of Shamanism and an assessment of its impact on Turkish religion and culture from past to present. The focus lies

specifically on the relationship between the Turks and Shamanism; the influence of this belief system on other cultures falls outside the scope of the research. A qualitative research approach was adopted, and theses, articles, books, and scholarly works were reviewed to analyze the role of Shamanism in Turkish culture based on various academic sources.

Conceptual Framework

Religion

Religion is one of the fundamental phenomena that have persisted from the earliest periods of human history to the present day, shaping the socio-cultural structure of societies. Although it emerges in different forms across various communities, the phenomenon of religion appears to fulfill functions such as providing meaning to human life, establishing order, explaining uncertainties, and fostering social cohesion. However, perspectives asserting that religion is an essential requirement for humanity or the most fundamental element sustaining society are not definitive judgments accepted by all thinkers and researchers. Therefore, debates concerning the concept of religion encompass a broad intellectual spectrum (Yavuzer, 2023).

Throughout history, religion has been defined and examined from various perspectives by numerous scholars (Ari, 2021). These definitions generally reflect the influence of the culture, belief system, and scientific approach prevalent in their respective contexts. Consequently, the definitions of religion proposed by thinkers raised within the Islamic cultural milieu differ significantly from those formulated by scholars rooted in the Jewish-Christian tradition.

Definitions shaped by the Islamic cultural environment typically present a revelation-centered framework. Seyyid Sharif Jurjani describes religion as the totality of divine ordinances communicated to humanity through prophets. According to Tahanevi, religion consists of divine commandments that guide rational beings, through their free will, to righteousness in this world and salvation in the hereafter. Elmalılı Hamdi Yazır states that religion is the sum of divine laws that appeal to human reason and free will, commanding truth and goodness. These definitions underscore a structure grounded in revelation while simultaneously emphasizing the moral responsibility of the individual.

In definitions reflecting the Jewish-Christian tradition, however, greater emphasis is placed on human experience, the relationship with the sacred, and the social functions of religion. Rudolf Otto explains religion on the basis of "the experience of the sacred," arguing that it emerges when human beings encounter a reality distinct from the ordinary world and not fully comprehensible through rational means (Mirzaoglu, 2023). E. B. Tylor considers religion the most basic belief system centered on spirits, supernatural forces, and the idea of a universal order (Coşkun, 2022). Max Müller situates rituals and acts of worship directed toward entities regarded as sacred at the core of religion (Karataş, 2013), while É. Durkheim views religion as a symbolic system that reflects shared social values, unites individuals, and strengthens collective consciousness (Yenen, 2015).

Taking these diverse definitions into account, religion generally encompasses fundamental elements such as belief, a sacred being or power, revelation or inspiration, forms of worship, moral principles, prophetic or founding figures, sacred texts, communal consciousness, and benevolence (Küçük et al., 2020). Although it is not possible to confine the phenomenon of religion to a single definition, the shared features across various perspectives highlight its powerful and influential role in both individual and social life.

Belief: Conceptual Framework and Functions

The concept of belief is a fundamental element that shapes human behavior, thought patterns, and value systems at both individual and societal levels. In its lexical sense, belief refers to the trust and commitment one feels toward a person, an idea, an entity, or a principle (Işıkdoğan, 2022). In this respect, belief is not confined solely to a religious context; it also encompasses ideological, cultural, and personal convictions, making it a broad and multifaceted concept (Eroğlu & Çiğdem, 2010).

Beliefs can emerge through various pathways, including:

- Rational processes (Mehmedoğlu & Aygün, 2006),
- Societal and religious authority (Ari, 2021 & 2024),
- Emotional and intuitive experiences (Karaca & Aytemiz, 2024).

Thus, belief is not merely a phenomenon grounded in logic but a multidimensional structure shaped by personal life experiences, cultural environment, and emotional disposition.

From a societal perspective, beliefs evolve within the influence of the culture in which individuals are situated, and these beliefs may weaken if not reinforced over time. Cultural transmission channels – such as religious and national festivals, ceremonies, rituals, liturgical practices, literary works, and moral publications – play a significant role in the intergenerational transfer of beliefs (Güleç & Yalçın, 2025). These activities strengthen a society's collective memory and function as social mechanisms that reinforce the beliefs of individuals.

Belief is not limited to religion; it also encompasses accepting the validity of an idea system, adopting a set of values, or affirming the existence of a certain truth. In this sense, belief constitutes an essential aspect of human psychology, directly influencing an individual's thinking, behavior, and emotional responses (Eroğlu & Çiğdem, 2010).

Culture: Definition, Components, and Social Functions

Culture is a multilayered structure that encompasses a society's accumulated heritage, shared ways of life, values, and worldview throughout history. In this regard, culture is a fundamental element that shapes the identities of both individuals and societies. Determining people's interactions, modes of thought, and lifestyles, culture represents the totality of social, spiritual, and intellectual components (Oğuz, 2011).

Broadly defined, culture can be examined under two main categories: material culture and non-material (spiritual) culture:

- Material culture includes the tangible elements produced by a society, such as buildings, technological tools, clothing, food, artworks, and all other physical items (Sarıtaş, 2019).
- Spiritual culture consists of intangible elements such as beliefs, values, norms, rituals, philosophical ideas, and symbols – components that represent the inner spirit of a society (Avcioğlu, 2020).

Ziya Gökalp offers a significant perspective by distinguishing between *culture (hars)* and *civilization*. According to Gökalp (2020), culture refers to the unique emotional, intellectual, and behavioral characteristics of a nation, whereas *hars* represents its folkloric and local features. Civilization, on the other hand, encompasses elements that may become universal and shared among different societies (Arslanoğlu, 2000). In this sense, culture contains both historical and modern components, while *hars* reflects traditions ingrained in the collective memory.

Culture is also a social inheritance transmitted from one generation to the next through learning (Saçıkaraklı, 2018). Individuals internalize cultural elements through family, educational institutions, social interactions, and broader community structures. Therefore, culture is sustained not through biological inheritance but through social transmission.

Ibn Khaldun's concept of 'umran', formulated in the 14th century, similarly points to the societal dimension of culture (Gedik, 2024). According to Ibn Khaldun, umran denotes the process of social formation, the development of civilization, and cultural evolution. He emphasizes that culture plays a decisive role in the advancement of societies and their capacity to establish civilizations (Günay, 2021).

In summary, culture is a comprehensive concept composed of numerous elements, including language, art, music, architecture, culinary traditions, clothing styles, customs, beliefs, values, and behavioral patterns. Wherever there is a society, the presence of culture is indispensable. Culture provides social cohesion, strengthens the sense of identity, and helps individuals interpret the world around them.

Shamans and Kam: Spiritual Mediator Figures in Turkish Culture

Shamans are multifaceted figures in traditional societies with both spiritual and social functions (Kalaycı, 2021). Their primary roles include performing rituals for healing illnesses, communicating with spirits, entering trance states to gain information from the unseen realm, maintaining social order, and providing spiritual guidance to individuals. Shamans are believed to be effective in addressing spiritual and physical ailments through songs, dances, prayers, incense, and herbal remedies. In this respect, they serve both as healers and advisors. Additionally, shamans are responsible for divination, resolving social problems, interpreting natural events, and preserving communal morale and identity during crises (Bayat, 2006). Consequently, shamans are regarded as respected and sacred figures in many societies.

The term shaman originates from Tungusic languages, particularly among Tungusic-speaking communities in Siberia. The term entered Western scientific literature through Russian researchers and gradually gained widespread usage (Rayman, 2016). It is also influenced by Buddhist terminology during the south-to-north spread of shamanism. Therefore, claims that shaman or shamanism have Turkish linguistic origins are inconsistent with scholarly evidence. Regarding the etymology of the word shaman, two interpretations exist. The first suggests a Manchu origin, meaning a person constantly moving and dancing ecstatically. The second proposes a Sanskrit origin (Çamurcuoğlu Tosun, 2024). The introduction of this term into the Turkic culture of Central Asia is attributed to Tungusic shamans (Şen, 2019).

In Turkish communities, the equivalent term is kam. A kam mediates between humans and spirits, serves as a sacred leader, prophet, and healer. The word kam corresponds to seer, diviner, or physician in Turkish. Kaşgarlı Mahmud defines kam as prophet in *Divanü Lugat'it-Türk*, while Yusuf Has Hacip equates kams with otacilar, i.e., healers, highlighting their communal benefit (Mandaloğlu, 2011).

Kams manage religious ceremonies, perform divinations, ward off evil spirits, heal diseases, and maintain societal balance. During rituals, they engage with the spiritual realm through drum playing, singing, dancing, and entering trance states (Aslan, 2009). These practices address both spiritual needs and the reinforcement of cultural cohesion.

The kam tradition still continues among some Turkish communities in Central Asia and Siberia, reflecting its deep-rooted presence in Turkish cultural memory.

GENERAL INFORMATION ABOUT SHAMANISM

History of Shamanism

According to Nadya Yuguşeva, an Altai kam, shamanism has mythological origins and is contemporaneous with the sky, the moon, the sun, and the stars, implying that it dates back

to the creation of the world itself (Yuguşeva, 2001). This view reflects the cultural memory, indicating that shamanism emerged in the earliest periods of human history.

Abdulkadir İnan notes that the earliest references to shamanism are found in Chinese and Byzantine sources. In his work *History of Shamanism in Past and Present*, he cites evidence extending to pre-Christian eras, emphasizing shamanism as a very ancient belief system (İnan, 1986). Ünver Günay and Harun Güngör argue that shamanism became an organized system among Turks in the 10th–11th centuries, with the Mongol era marking its most dynamic and vibrant period (Güngör, 2023; Günay, 2021).

Although a precise origin date for shamanism is impossible to determine, scholars assert that it has existed since very ancient times, particularly developing within the nomadic cultures of Central Asia. Its persistence in Siberia, Central Asia, Native American cultures, certain regions of Africa, and Arctic populations demonstrates its enduring presence in human history (Yıldırım, 2004).

The Issue of Shamanism

Shamanism is a belief and practice system centered on the shaman, shaped by rituals and spiritual experiences. The term shaman originates from Tungusic languages and generally corresponds to prophet, magician, or sorcerer. Western ethnologists and anthropologists have described shamans as priests, magicians, healers, or spirit hunters. The term entered European languages through Russian in the latter half of the 17th century and became part of scientific terminology (Güngör, 2023).

Among Turkish communities, the equivalent term is kam (gam) (Özparlar, 2017). Other steppe and Siberian societies have different equivalents: *oyun* in Yakut, *böge/bö* in Mongolian, and *baksi/bahsı* in Kyrgyz and Kazakh (Çam & Bayat, 2025). Female shamans are called *utagan*, *udagan*, *ubakan*, *utugan* (Güzel, 2024).

Several theories exist regarding the etymology of shaman. Some researchers link it to Buddhist traditions, associating it with Sanskrit *śramaṇa* (wandering monk). Its Pali form *saṃṭaṇa* passed into Chinese as *sha-men* and eventually into Manchu-Tungusic languages as *shaman/haman*. There is also a view that the Arabic *ṣe(ū)meniyye* derives from shaman (Güngör, 2023). These debates indicate the term's multi-layered and unresolved origins.

Shamanism is based on a nature-centered worldview (Ender & Demirel, 2025). Central to the belief is that kams can communicate with spirits, gods, and the unseen world. Shamans enter trance states to connect with spiritual beings, mediate between spirits and humans, and maintain social order (Tosun, 2024). Rituals are conducted to harmonize humans with benevolent spirits, while malevolent spirits are avoided, as they are considered threats to life.

A strong connection is believed to exist between living people and the spirits of deceased ancestors. Shamans are thought to be chosen by these spirits, and the role is often considered a spiritual obligation. Shamanism is often hereditary, with certain families producing more apt candidates for the role (İnan, 1986).

Today, shamanism persists in various forms across many societies, demonstrating the sustainability of its philosophy, which emphasizes harmony with nature and the universe. Shamanism is not merely a belief system but a holistic lifestyle encompassing social memory, rituals, healing practices, and cultural continuity.

Qualities of Shamans and the Path to Becoming a Kam

Shamanism is a profession requiring special abilities and a direct connection with the spiritual world. Becoming a kam is not self-taught but involves specific paths, primarily through family lineage or innate spiritual talents.

Lineage-based path: In some societies, shamanism is passed down within families. Certain family members are considered candidates, believed to be disturbed by the spirit of an ancestral shaman. This involves a preparation illness or initiation process, conceived as a death-and-rebirth experience symbolizing spiritual purification and readiness for the shamanic role (Bayat, 2006; İnan, 1986).

Natural talent path: Individuals with a natural inclination toward shamanism may display signs such as daydreaming, visions, seclusion, or even pathological symptoms (Bozdemir, 2019). Fainting, seizure-like episodes, or self-harm are interpreted as manifestations of this talent (Bayat, 2006). Candidates are trained under an experienced shaman, learning spirit names, prayers, and ritual procedures. The kam bakşı toy ceremony officially authorizes the young shaman to perform rituals publicly (Yüksek, 2024).

The training and spiritual preparation of shamanic candidates involve both societal knowledge transfer and spiritual maturation. The candidate undertakes spirit journeys, descends symbolically into the underworld, undergoes ritual purification, and is reintegrated. Guided by a master shaman, the initiate ascends sacred heights and attains spiritual empowerment (Güngör, 2023).

Although family concerns or societal pressures sometimes resist shamanic training, those who complete their education under a master and begin serving the community (Bayat, 2006). The role encompasses healing, conducting rituals, divination, and spiritual guidance.

In summary, shamanism combines innate spiritual abilities with knowledge and skills acquired through ritual training, enabling kams to perform vital roles at both individual and societal levels.

Shamanic Ritual Attire, Headgear, and Drum

Abdulkadir İnan notes that all religious specialists historically wore special garments for ceremonies, a tradition also followed by shamans. Among the Altai, the garment is called *manyak*, among the Yakuts *kumu*, *ereni*, or *oyun tangasayani* (Güngör, 2023). Materials are provided by the shaman's family and community, with garments often sewn by women.

Shamanic robes are typically jackets made from deer hide or white sheep skin. Although individual designs vary, common features include open fronts without buttons, leather belts, and symbolic motifs such as birds or carts. Iron or copper ornaments, mirrors, badges, and round cutouts help the shaman perceive spirits and navigate the underworld. Chains on the shoulders symbolize power and determination, while iron pieces ward off evil spirits (Rayman, 2016).

Garments are created according to the instructions of protective spirits; incomplete attire limits ritual efficacy. The drum (*dümbek*) is the most important ritual instrument, with ownership granted only by spiritual approval (Albayrak & Çetin, 2025). Shamans verify the acceptance of their garments through rituals like *yelbü çıkar* or *manyak arüla* (İnan, 1986).

Shamanic headgear (*börk*) distinguishes shamans from other community members and serves as a social and cultural symbol, while also conferring magical protection. Among Kopdin shamans, the headgear is cylindrical and covered with yellow fabric; Tuva shamans' headgear is blue with copper eye and nose decorations. Feathers and red fabric (*Kuş Pörük*) add symbolic meaning to the costume and rituals (Rayman, 2016).

Duties of Shamans

Shamans play critical and multifaceted roles within their communities. By mediating between humans and spiritual realms, they maintain the influence of benevolent spirits and prevent harm from malevolent ones. They provide guidance in difficult situations, allowing spirits to enter or leave their bodies during rituals for communal benefit.

Shamanic duties include:

- Sending wandering spirits to the afterlife,
- Healing serious illnesses believed to originate from evil spirits,
- Ensuring success in hunting,
- Maintaining balance between good and evil spirits.

When illness is believed to be caused by evil spirits, the shaman identifies and returns the spirit to its owner, expending great energy. Offerings are made to spirits during rituals. Despite economic hardship, shamans hold influential positions and do not charge fees, sustaining themselves through personal work and serving as regulators within the community (İzgi, 2012).

The manifestation of Shamanism in Turkish culture and religious Practices

Many elements of shamanic beliefs and practices continue to exist today. Individuals often maintain certain traditions of shamanic origin in their daily lives, frequently without conscious awareness. Notable examples include the use of the evil eye bead (nazar boncuğu) and the belief in the evil eye, the ritual of pouring molten lead, sprinkling water behind travelers, tying red ribbons around the waist of postpartum women, newborns, and brides, performing prayers and recitations accompanied by drums and kopuz during religious ceremonies or mevlits, conducting commemorations and prayers on the 41st day after birth or death, and supporting the head with the hand while drinking water (Karabağlı, 2021).

The Evil Eye Bead (Nazar Boncuğu) and the Evil Eye Concept

The evil eye bead occupies an important role as a protective symbol in Turkish culture and is widely used. This practice, rooted in shamanic beliefs, has maintained historical continuity and continues to be adopted by society today. The concept of the evil eye is based on the belief that some individuals possess an extraordinary and powerful gaze capable of disturbing, harming, or bringing misfortune to the observer. Emotions such as jealousy, envy, or excessive affection are thought to transmit energy to living or non-living beings through the eyes.

Accordingly, the evil eye bead functions as a tool to neutralize these negative effects. Typically blue and shaped like an eye, it is believed to absorb harmful energy and render it ineffective. Consequently, it is widely used in homes, vehicles, infant belongings, jewelry, and everyday objects. In Turkish society, the evil eye bead serves as both a traditional cultural element and a protective talisman, symbolically shielding against negative energies (Soyguder Baturlar & Yaylagül, 2019).

Supporting the Head with the Hand While Drinking Water

The practice of supporting the head with the hand while drinking water has a deep-rooted history in Turkish culture and continues in some communities today. This practice originates from shamanic beliefs, where it was thought that water consumption could affect mental balance and clarity. Shamans believed that the mind could be distracted while drinking water, and therefore, they supported their heads with their hands.

Over time, this behavior evolved into a protective ritual aimed at maintaining mental focus, preventing distraction, and imbuing the consumed water with health, abundance, and positive energy. The belief that holding the head prevents energy from dispersing during drinking reinforced the cultural continuity of this practice. Consequently, the tradition of supporting the head while drinking water has survived into modern times, practiced consciously or unconsciously as a cultural behavior (Karabağlı, 2021).

Pouring Molten Lead (Kurşun Dökme)

The ritual of pouring molten lead is a widely practiced tradition in Turkish culture with origins in shamanic beliefs. In shamanic tradition, this ritual, known as *kut dökme* or *kut koyma* (Aslan & Yücel, 2025), is performed when it is believed that the *kut*, representing an individual's

fortune, happiness, and life energy, has been stolen or weakened by evil spirits. The primary aim is to restore or strengthen the *kut*.

Today, the lead pouring ritual is primarily employed to protect against the evil eye or cleanse the negative effects attributed to it. During the practice, lead is melted and poured into a container of water. The rapidly solidifying shapes formed by the lead are interpreted by the practitioner, providing insights into the individual's future, health, relationships, or life challenges. In this sense, lead pouring also serves as a form of divination. As a shamanic belief, it has maintained cultural continuity, serving purposes such as cleansing negative energies, increasing fortune, and obtaining information about the future (Alagül, 2014).

The Practice of Striking Wood (Tahtaya Vurma)

The custom of striking wood is considered to reflect traces of shamanic beliefs and remains prevalent in Turkish culture. Early Turks, due to their nomadic lifestyle and close connection with nature, were believed to strike wood three times when entering a new area or expressing an unfavorable situation, so that evil spirits could not hear them. The primary objective was to repel malevolent spirits, neutralize negative energies, and protect the individual from invisible dangers.

Additionally, this practice served as a warning to nature spirits, inviting their protective powers. In this sense, striking wood represents the shamanic understanding of maintaining balance between the natural and spiritual worlds. However, the link to shamanism is largely based on folklore and popular belief rather than concrete evidence. Today, the practice persists in Turkish society and is similarly observed in various European cultures, demonstrating the transmission of belief-based rituals across generations (Ayten & Köse, 2009).

Significance Attributed to the Number 40

In Turkish culture, the number forty (kirk) symbolizes a continuity from shamanic beliefs to Islamic traditions (Yeniasır, Gökbüyük & Öger, 2020). According to shamanic belief, the soul departs the body in forty days, during which ceremonies are performed to ensure its peaceful transition. In Islamic practices, on the fortieth day after death, Qur'anic recitation, prayers, and mevlits are conducted to provide spiritual support to the deceased and social solidarity to the family.

The number forty also holds significance in Turkish epics and folk narratives, appearing frequently in *Dede Korkut* tales, *Manas Epic*, and *Semavidin*. Likewise, Prophet Muhammad received prophethood at the age of forty; Moses received divine guidance on Mount Sinai over forty days and nights; and in Christianity, forty days of Lent are observed before Easter. In Anatolia, practices such as 40-day baby ceremonies and the forty columns and forty windows in Hagia Sophia highlight the spiritual and cultural significance of the number (Tosun, 2024).

The symbolism of forty extends beyond death rituals to oral culture, where it often represents abundance, quantity, strength, or long duration. Phrases such as forty days and forty nights, forty thieves, or forty lines and forty mules illustrate its function as a symbolic amplification of quantity or effect (Bozkurt & Bozkurt, 2012). Overall, the number forty has acquired deep symbolic value in Turkish cultural consciousness, reflecting a continuity of shamanic and spiritual traditions (Can, 2015).

Mevlits and Hymns

In the shamanic belief system, music is a fundamental element of ritual practice. Shamans extensively used instruments such as drums and kopuz during ceremonies (Gömeç, 1998). Music facilitated entering a trance state and served as a means of communication with the spiritual realm. Therefore, in shamanism, music and ritual were inseparable.

Islamic attitudes toward music vary. While some scholars view melodic Qur'anic recitation positively, others adopt a more cautious approach. In Turkish culture, influenced by shamanic tradition, music continued to play a significant role in shaping religious narratives. This gave rise to the mevlit and hymn tradition in Anatolia, performed in specific modes and rhythms, narrating the lives of Prophet Muhammad and Imam Ali (Metin, 2022).

However, within Islamic thought, opinions differ regarding musical mevlits. Some groups regard them as religiously inappropriate, while others encourage recitation, prayer, and Qur'anic reading (Metin, 2020). Overall, the prominence of music in Turkish religious practice reflects the historical interplay between shamanic cultural remnants and Islamic religious interpretations (Can, 2015).

Dog Howling

In shamanic belief, dogs were regarded as animals capable of communicating with spiritual entities. The howling of a dog, particularly from a distance or continuously, was interpreted as a sign of an approaching spirit, often considered the spirit of death (Kalafat & Güven, 2011).

In contemporary Anatolia, dog howling is still associated with misfortune. Folk belief holds that dogs can sense impending danger, death, or other adverse events, and announce it through howling. These beliefs reflect the spirit-centered cosmology of shamanism and persist intertwined with local folk practices (Akdoğanoglu & Yayan, 2021; Can, 2015).

Red Ribbon

Certain traditional rituals originate from pre-Islamic belief systems, particularly shamanism. In this context, the use of **red ribbons** in Turkish culture serves as a symbol of luck and protection against evil spirits. Shamanic belief emphasizes interaction with nature and spirits, linking individual protection, fortune, and destiny. Practices such as tying red ribbons are interpreted as cultural reflections of these ancient beliefs (Tosun, 2024).

Today, these rituals continue in some communities. Individuals may use the red ribbon as a genuine protective tool or merely as a traditional practice, demonstrating the ongoing presence of shamanic-origin cultural symbols in modern Turkish society (Aslan & Yücel, 2025).

Tying Cloths and Rags (Bez ve Çaput Bağlamak)

In the shamanic belief system, trees were considered important elements of nature and the spiritual world. Showing respect to trees and interacting with them became a cultural tradition. In shamanic practices, small pieces of cloth or rags were tied to tree branches to transmit wishes to the spirit world (Kılıç, 2011). This act was seen as a means for wishes to reach the spiritual realm and be fulfilled.

For example, women without children would pray under a tree and tie pieces of cloth to express their desire for a child. This ritual reflects shamanism's respect for nature and spirits and its symbolic communication. Even today, some Muslim Turkish communities continue similar practices, tying rags to trees they consider sacred. The ways people show respect and communicate wishes to trees vary depending on personal belief, cultural heritage, and social traditions (Alagül, 2014).

Motifs Used in Carpets and Kilims

In ancient Turkish societies, shamans were considered individuals who had close relationships with nature and animals, communicated with spirits, and guided their communities spiritually. Shamans decorated clothing, ornaments, and daily items with symbols of animals in nature. These symbols were chosen to represent the shaman's spiritual power, abilities, and protective capacity for the community (Balci, 2012).

For instance, the snake symbolized power, transformation, and healing, while the scorpion represented protection and defense. Similarly, motifs of wild animals were believed to keep these creatures away from communal living spaces. These practices reflect shamanic beliefs in living harmoniously with nature, ensuring community safety, and maintaining natural balance (Özkartal, 2012).

Thus, the use of animal symbols in ancient Turkish carpets and kilims was not only aesthetic but also served as a tangible representation of the community's relationship with nature and the spiritual world, the shaman's protective role, and social values (Çağlar, 2019).

Tombstones

In some Anatolian communities today, practices such as communicating with spirits after death, consecrating, and decorating graves can still be observed (Tanrısever, 2025). These rituals may stem more from local cultural and pre-Islamic traditions than from Islamic beliefs. Pre-Islamic beliefs, such as shamanism, were blended with local traditions after the adoption of Islam and continued in various forms.

Although Islam strictly prohibits idolatry, some local practices have persisted within cultural continuity even if they do not align directly with Islamic teachings. Funerary rituals and grave traditions are shaped by the belief systems, cultural values, and local customs of societies (Can, 2015). Consequently, there is diversity in grave ceremonies and ritual practices across different regions and communities.

Making Wishes (Dilek Dilemek)

In some regions of Anatolia, the practice of lighting candles to make wishes continues today. This ritual, not part of Islamic practice, is believed to survive due to the continuity of local culture and pre-Islamic belief systems. In Islam, worship and prayer are directed solely to Allah and follow specific rules, meaning that lighting candles is not religiously sanctioned (Can, 2015).

The origin of lighting candles and fire is largely attributed to shamanism, where fire was considered sacred, mediating communication with nature spirits and aiding in wish fulfillment. Fire rituals thus served both protective and wish-transmitting functions. The tradition of lighting candles at tombs is seen as a continuation of this ancient belief. Similar practices existed in ancient Greek and Roman societies, later adopted by Christianity (Karaçoban, 2021).

Historically, this practice was applied not only to saints' tombs but also to ordinary graves as a symbolic offering. Among Muslim Turks, candle-lighting traditions may have been influenced by earlier Christian communities. In Kyrgyz and Kazakh cultures, practices include preparing forty candles for the deceased and lighting one daily, sometimes considered more important than Qur'anic recitation. Despite eventual prohibition due to conflicts with the Islamic principle of monotheism, candle-lighting persists in some areas of Anatolia (Ölmez & Gökmen, 2005).

Small Water Containers Placed at the Foot of Graves

In shamanic culture, it was believed that spirits needed water when thirsty. Spirits were thought to require water as a source of energy and strength in the afterlife. Therefore, small water containers or vessels are placed at graves or monuments. Birds and insects drinking from these containers are considered a ritual that benefits the spirit of the deceased (Kalafat, 2004).

In shamanic rituals, helper spirits often appear in bird form (Küçük, 2020). These bird spirits guided shamans in spiritual journeys and facilitated communication with the spiritual realm. The role of birds in shamanic experiences reflects the close relationship between shamanism and nature, using natural elements' energy in spiritual practices.

Such beliefs and practices are observed in different societies and illustrate the continuity of grave rituals and the connection between nature and spirit (Can, 2015).

Stepping Out the Door with the Right Foot First

Stepping out with the right foot first is a belief originating from shamanic culture. It is thought that starting with the right foot brings good fortune, while starting with the left foot brings misfortune. In shamanism, the right side symbolizes positive energy and power, whereas the left represents negative energy and weakness. Hence, stepping with the right foot signifies a strong and positive beginning, while the left foot implies a weak and adverse start (Ünal, 2022).

These rituals reflect shamanism's symbolic relationship with nature and spirits. Their continuation in some communities today demonstrates the persistence of cultural continuity. The practice may vary depending on individual preference, cultural habits, and societal context (Karabağlı, 2021).

Names Inspired by Nature

Central Asian communities, particularly ancient Turks, believed in the hidden and sacred powers of nature. Nature was crucial for these societies and influenced daily life through interactions with natural forces. Mountains, seas, rivers, storms, fire, thunder, the sun, moon, and stars were revered and sometimes feared. Shamans observed natural phenomena to understand their powers, promoting a life in harmony with nature.

Ancient Turks considered nature the dwelling of divine beings. Respect for natural phenomena and caution against their unpredictability influenced the naming of children. Many names were derived from natural elements, plants, animals, or natural events, symbolically reinforcing the relationship between humans and nature (Dündar, 2022).

These practices left a lasting impact on Central Asian culture and continue to appear in certain traditions and naming practices today (Karabağlı, 2021).

Conclusion

This study holistically examines the historical and contemporary impact of shamanism on Turkish culture, highlighting surviving shamanic remnants in Anatolia. The research demonstrates that shamanism is not merely a historical belief system but a fundamental component of cultural continuity, social memory, and ritual practice.

Findings reveal that shamanic elements in Turkish culture have persisted from pre-Islamic times to the present through a process of interaction and transformation. Practices such as the evil eye bead, red ribbons, lead pouring, and supporting the head while drinking water continue to influence social identity and spiritual life. This underscores the Turkish culture's ability to interpret and integrate diverse beliefs and rituals.

The study's original contribution emphasizes that shamanism in Turkish society is not only a folkloric element but a living system ensuring cultural and religious continuity. Unlike previous studies, this research links historical shamanic remnants with contemporary cultural practices through both theoretical and practical examples, establishing a direct connection between historical heritage and modern lifestyles.

The study demonstrates that shamanism plays a central role in the study of cultural continuity and is a key to understanding social rituals, symbols, and values. Future research could compare shamanic remnants across regions and examine local adaptation processes in

more depth. Additionally, the interaction of this heritage with modern social practices provides significant insights into the future shaping of cultural identity and traditions.

In conclusion, shamanism remains a living cultural heritage, encompassing the spiritual, social, and symbolic dimensions of Turkish culture from past to present. Recognizing and understanding this heritage is critical for both historical awareness and the strengthening of cultural identity.

Authors' contributions

Medine Arslan – formulation of the research findings and identification of the general directions of the research activity and conclusions.

Yılmaz Ari – systematization of the article's content, primary idea, research conclusions, and thesis.

Conflict of interests

The authors declare no relevant conflict of interests

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