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‘May He/She Rest in Lights’: Reflection on Wishes in Funerary Folklore¹

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Abstract

In Turkish-Islamic culture, it is customary to convey blessings to the deceased, reflecting a broader spiritual framework that links death, memory, and the afterlife. One frequently employed expression is the phrase: “May he/she rest in light.” This notion, which draws on theological imagery rooted in Surah An-Nur of the Qur’an, is manifested symbolically in funerary culture through the motif of the oil lamp. During the Ottoman period, Nur—understood as divine light—was commonly represented on gravestones in the form of oil lamps. In the Republican era, this symbolic representation appears to have undergone a transformation, with electric lighting gradually supplanting earlier visual forms. This study also situates contemporary grave-lighting practices within this historical trajectory, analyzing modern examples such as solar-powered lamps and illuminated grave markers. These practices not only reflect technological adaptation but also the enduring resonance of light as a metaphor for divine presence and remembrance. From a broader historical and mythological perspective, the significance of light predates Islam in Turkish belief systems. In early Turkic cosmologies, light was closely associated with Tengri, the Sky God, and served as a symbol of divinity, transcendence, and cosmic order. Within this context, the lighting practices carried out by family elders can be interpreted as acts of care and devotion, intended to ensure that the deceased would

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rest in light—both metaphorically and literally. Drawing on ethnographic observations and visual documentation collected by Ali Işık in cemeteries in Konya, this article examines how such traditions continue to embody deep-rooted cultural meanings. Additionally, the study investigates the layered semantic and symbolic dimensions of the term Nur as it appears in grave inscriptions. The term is analyzed in relation to its associations with divine illumination, Qur’anic enlightenment, and the light of divine mercy and forgiveness. These meanings underscore the complex role that Nur plays in Turkish-Islamic commemorative culture. The symbolic representation of the deceased as either resting in light or ascending into a radiant afterlife is also addressed, revealing how metaphysical beliefs are visually and ritually articulated. In conclusion, the article reflects on the cultural and emotional significance of these practices for mourning families, and highlights their continued relevance in shaping contemporary commemorative rituals and understandings of the afterlife in Turkish society.

Keywords: “nur”, light, oil lamp, tombstone, grave folklore

“Nur/ Işıklar İçinde Uyusun” Dileğinin Mezar Folkloruna Yansıması

Öz

Türk-İslam kültüründe, ölen kişiye hayır dua iletmek yaygın bir gelenektir ve bu uygulama, ölüm, hafıza ve ahiret arasındaki daha geniş bir manevi çerçeveyi yansıtır. Bu bağlamda sıkça kullanılan ifadelerden biri “Işıklar içinde yatsın” sözüdür. Kur’an-ı Kerim’in Nur Suresi’ne dayanan bu düşünce, mezarlık kültüründe simgesel olarak kandil (yağ lambası) motifiyle temsil edilmektedir. Osmanlı döneminde Nur (ilahi ışık), mezar taşlarında kandil biçiminde somutlaştırılırken; Cumhuriyet döneminde bu sembolizm, giderek elektrik ışığının kullanımıyla yer değiştirmiş görünmektedir. Bu çalışma, söz konusu tarihsel gelişim doğrultusunda günümüz mezar aydınlatma uygulamalarını da ele almakta; güneş enerjili lambalar ve ışıklı mezar işaretleri gibi çağdaş örnekler üzerinden bir çözümleme sunmaktadır. Bu uygulamalar, teknolojik uyarlamaların ötesinde, ışığın ilahi varlık ve hatırlanma metaforu olarak süregelen etkisini ortaya koymaktadır. Daha geniş bir tarihsel ve mitolojik bağlamda değerlendirildiğinde, ışık kavramının önemi İslam öncesi Türk inanç sistemlerine kadar uzanmaktadır. Eski Türk kozmolojilerinde ışık, doğrudan Gök Tanrı (Tengri) ile ilişkilendirilmiş ve ilahilik, aşkınlık ve kozmik düzenin bir sembolü olarak görülmüştür. Bu çerçevede, aile büyükleri tarafından gerçekleştirilen mezar aydınlatma uygulamaları, hem değişmeceli hem de fiziksel anlamda ölen kişinin “ışık içinde yatması”nı sağlamak amacıyla yapılan sevgi ve bağlılık ifadeleri olarak değerlendirilebilir. Bu makalede, Ali Işık tarafından Konya’daki mezarlıklarda yapılan etnografik gözlemler ve görsel belgeler temel alınarak, bu gelenekle-rin kültürel anlamı incelenmektedir. Ayrıca çalışma, mezar kitabelerinde yer alan Nur kavramının çok katmanlı anlamsal ve sembolik boyutlarını araştırmaktadır. Nur, ilahi aydınlanma, Kur’an’ın nuruyla aydınlanma ve ilahi affın ışığıyla ilişkilendirilerek analiz edilmekte; bu çok yönlü anlamlar, Nur’un Türk-İslam anma kültüründeki karmaşık rolünü gözler önüne sermektedir. Ölen kişinin ışık içinde yatması ya da ışıklı bir ahrete yük-

selmesi gibi simgesel temsiller, metafizik inançların görsel ve ritüel yollarla nasıl ifade edildiğini de ortaya koymaktadır. Sonuç olarak makale, bu uygulamaların yas tutan aileler için taşıdığı kültürel ve duygusal önemi irdelemekte; günümüz Türkiye'sinde anma ritüelleri ve ahiret tasavvurları üzerindeki kalıcı etkilerine dikkat çekmektedir.

Anahtar sözcükler: "nur", ışık, kandil, mezar taşı, mezar folkloru

Introduction

Most religions, whether monotheistic or polytheistic, agree on life after death. The last three major faiths particularly have similar ideas on this subject. In Islam, the afterlife begins with death and is eternal. In mythology, death is one of the three significant transitions, like birth and life. Sedat Veyis Örnek (1971) also draws attention to this fact and emphasizes not only the celebrations of these 'transitions', but also the dangers during the transition phase.

There are three important 'transitions' in human life: Birth, marriage, and death. Within the framework of these three 'transitions', many customs, rituals, ceremonies, religious and magical procedures combine and regulate them. They all aim to celebrate and bless the new state of man, as well as protect him from the dangers and harmful influences that are believed to intensify during the 'transition'. (Örnek, 1971, s.11)

The importance of belief in the grave for the transition from life to death is undisputed in Turkish culture from early times to the present. The Islamic belief system, which refers to the time from the moment of death to the resurrection as the 'life of the grave', provides information in verses and hadiths about what the deceased will experience here and states that the person will be exposed to the torments and blessings of the life of the grave depending on their state in the earthly world. Toprak (1986: 393 f.) lists the first four blessings of the grave in the following order: 1) 'The soul of the believer is taken from Azrail by the angels of mercy and raised to the seven layers of heaven'; 2) 'After he is laid in the grave, the angels of inquiry show the believer his position in paradise and open a door from the grave to paradise, from which the fragrances of paradise come'; 3) 'The expansion of the grave'; d) 'The illumination (brightening) of the grave'.

Since the reward for good deeds is to be blessed, light is also a blessing given in return for the deeds, and Allah commanded the Prophet (S) to offer it to the believers. It is also the greatest of all blessings. Just imagine, that dark and narrow grave is expanded and illuminated as far as the eye can see and becomes a completely different world. (Toprak, 1986, s. 396)

Due to these promises, which have a great influence on the faithful, particularly through the fear of death and the grave, it has become a duty and tradition that, as Örnek (1971) also emphasizes, the deceased is sent to the afterlife by his relatives and loved ones with good wishes. The oldest known examples of burying the deceased with ceremonies and wishes among the Turks date back to the 3rd century BC (cf. İnan

1986, s. 177 f.). In this article, we will focus on the phrases in Turkish, 'Let him/her rest/sleep in the lights', in which these wishes are expressed, and discuss their impact on funerary folklore. Firstly, it is convenient to explain what is meant by the terms 'ışık' and 'nur' as light in the context of 'grave folklore', which we will use below.

1. The Term 'Nur'

The Turkish dictionary (1988, p. 1093) explains this word, which was borrowed into our language from Arabic, as 1. brightness, light, splendor, 2. brightness believed to be sent by a divine power". Although it means 'light, brightness' as seen in the second meaning, it is also ascribed to a divine connotation (cf. Güneş, 2004, p. 523). It should be noted that 'the source of light is also referred to as light in a figurative sense' (Güneş, ibid.), and in the Qur'an, Allah is referred to as the light of the heavens and the earth. This meaning of the word 'nur' is based on Surah 24 of the Qur'an.

Allah is the holy light of the heavens and the earth. The representation of His light is as follows: A cell on the wall, a lamp in it, and the lamp in a glass lantern. The lantern is like a star that shines like a pearl. It is lit by a blessed tree, namely the olive tree, which belongs neither to the East nor to the West. The oil of this tree is so clear that it almost glows even when the fire does not touch it. Light upon light. Allah guides whom He wills to His light. Allah gives people examples. Allah is the All-Knowing. (*Holy Qur'an*, 24, s. 35)

In fact, Celal Kırca, who refers to the term 'nur' as 'light, brightness, inner splendor that shows the truth', explains that the surah takes its name from the 35th verse, in which the divine light of Allah is described (cf. Kırca, 1988, c. II, p. 76).

In verse 35, as Ali Işık (2005, p. 68) emphasizes, the comparison of the light with the lamp in verse 46 of Surat al-Ahzab is repeated, but this time the luminous being is the Prophet [Muhammad]: 'Prophet! We have sent you as a witness, as a bearer of good news, as a warner, as an inviter to His way by the permission of Allah, and as a light' (*Holy Qur'an*, 3, ss. 45, 46).

Therefore, in the Holy Qur'an, both God himself and his last prophet Muhammad are depicted as a light (whose source is the lamp). The light in question here does not refer to a mere external (physical) illumination, but rather to an inner (divine=spiritual) enlightenment (for a detailed explanation see '*Kubbealtı Lugatı.online*').² A similar meaning can be found in the 40th verse of the surah 'Nur'.

r (the state of the unbelievers in unbelief) is like darkness in a deep sea; waves upon waves cover it, and clouds are over it. Darkness upon darkness. When a person stretches out his hand, he can hardly see it. For whom Allah gives no light, there is no light. (*Holy Qur'an*, 24, s. 40)

In the contrast between darkness and light in this verse, the concept of 'light' in the sense of 'light' functions as both physical illumination and spiritual 'enlightenment' for the human/individual.³

1. 2 The Concept of Light

In Turkish cosmogony, on the other hand, light is associated with 'uçmak', i.e., the sky, and references to the deity. Beydili (2004) emphasizes the mythological axis of understanding the world in the equation of light and flight.

According to ancient Turkish belief, the heaven thought to be in the sky and then called 'Uçmak' (= [flying to paradise]) is also a world full of light. The opposition between light and darkness is the oldest and most deeply rooted opposition that stands in the way of mythological decomposition to comprehend the world. (Beydili, 2004, p. 255)

As we see, the existence of light is generally seen as a force against darkness and evil, so light refers to positive cultural values. In this context, Beydili also points out that the heroes of Turkish epics are born from a divine light. In traditional stories and Turkish mythology, light is often associated with heroic figures, as in the case of Oğuz Kagan.

Oguz's sons named 'Gün', 'Ay', and 'Yıldız' (day, moon, and star)⁴ [] were born from a blue light that descended from the sky, breaking through the darkness. Thus, *kut*, which falls to earth in the light of the sky, is also one of the sacred and heavenly beings of Turkish mythology, which is linked to light. Oguz also tries to conquer the world under the leadership of Bozkurt [Grey Wolf], who emerges from the sunlight. According to one version of the epic, 'Köroğlu'/'Goroğlu' also descended through the sunlight into his mother's womb. (Beydili, 2004, p. 255)

Another point that needs to be emphasized here is the relationship between the celestial bodies and light, which also means (holy) light.

'Of the two main elements of the universe, the earth was characterized as dark (*kararık*) and the sky as light (*yaruk*). It is seen that the symbolism [relating to the sky and celestial bodies] 'emerged in the earliest known phases of Turkish cultural history. In this context, the ancient Turks, like many other peoples, thought of the sky as a deity and attributed sacredness to the sky, which they called *tengri*, initially with the attribute of color. [...] This deification of the sky changed over time into the conceptualization of the root *tengri*, which expresses a more abstract understanding of a sky god. [...] The existence of the belief in an afterlife during the period of the Sky God worldview is known from the construction of *balbal* and the placement of personal items of the buried in the graves. Furthermore, 'it was believed that the souls of the descendants of the Kagans flew to the sky or the lost star, that is, the pole star, the place of the Sky God'. In fact, the idea that the deceased reach heaven and are resurrected there is reflected in the Turkish inscriptions written in later centuries with 'certainty' and absolute faith, such as 'as you are resurrected in heaven where you fly'. It was believed that all these stars revolved around the Pole Star, which was considered the seat of the Sky God, and that these stars were carried by a celestial wheel. [...] According to this understanding, the sky was thought of as a tent, inside of which the stars in the nearby sky were on the wheel of fortune, which was called the celestial wheel. (Çobanoğlu, 2004, pp. 76, 78 passim)

It is, therefore, no coincidence that in the history of Turkish culture, the names of celestial bodies in the nearby sky frequently appear in the naming tradition, just like the word 'nur':⁵ *Güneş* (Kün, Kuyaş, and Yaşık); *Ay* (Yalçık), *Burç* (Ükek, Ülgü); *Çağrı* (Gök çağırısı = Çığrı = Felek = Çerh-i felek); *Sancar*, (Zuhâl), *Ongay*, *Öngay* and *Karakuş*, *Merih*, *Sevit*, *Çolpan*, *Zühre*, *Arzu*, *Dilek*. Today, *Işık*, *Işıl*, *Işılay*, *Işıl*, *Parla*, etc. have been added, and *güneş* [sun], *ay* [moon], and *yıldız* [star] are used as noun-forming suffixes in many nouns (as a prefix or suffix). Looking at the meanings attributed to the stars in Turkish cosmogony, 'light' appears to be a concept of value that goes back to the pre-Islamic belief in the Tengri. In modern Turkish, the expressions 'he/she rests in the light' and

'he/she sleeps in the lights' are almost synonymous but may seem conceptually different in terms of their intended content. However, it is easy to say that the former comes from the Islamic religion, while the latter (not only a reflection of a more secular worldview but on the contrary) is derived from the belief in the Sky God. In this regard, it will be necessary to reflect on the manifestation of the concepts of 'nur' and light in relation to death and funerary folklore within the Turkish-Islamic belief system.

1. 3 The Concept of Funerary Folklore

Cemetery customs are part of funeral folklore. Elements such as gravestones, cemetery design, and funeral ceremonies can reflect the view of the society on death and the dead. Funeral folklore is often passed down from generation to generation through folk tales, legends, songs, and other traditional narratives. This folklore reflects the way people deal with death and mortality, how they try to make sense of their lives, and the rituals they practice in connection with death.

İbrahim Aczi Kendi (1959, p. 3), who (in our opinion) was the first in our country to include this term in his 1959 book entitled 'Mezar Folkloru' [Gravestone Folklore], distinguishes between 'funerary literature and folklore' (1959, 3) and categorizes the texts engraved on the stones into two categories: those with known and unknown poets. 'The stone on the head of each dead person tells of his profession, his/her life in the world, and his civilizational status, which is a subject of folk poetry. It is such a field [that] is a serum [...] of teaching, contemplation, and reason [...]' (1959, p. 45) and deals only with poetic epitaphs. Hikmet Turhan Dağlıoğlu is one of the names that adopted the term 'funerary folklore'. In this context, he presented a lecture entitled 'Mezar Folkloru' [Gravestone Folklore] with visual examples dealing the tombstone inscriptions (see Dağlıoğlu, 1976, pp. 31-37).

From a semiotic, semantic, and pragmatic point of view, gravestones are used to transmit messages; just like the laments of the deceased, the symbols, texts, and related practices engraved on the stones should be considered as indicators reflecting the feelings and thoughts of the relatives. Considering the anonymity and prevalence (variation feature) of folklore products, we can consider these messages on the gravestones as a lament engraved in the stone. In this lament in verse or prose, one can recognize the personality of the deceased, his condition, and his expectations of the visitor (Fatiha, Prayer). In addition to the variation of anonymous lines in the texts (Işık, 2015, p. 144), the variation of lines quoted or inspired by poets such as Abdülhak Hamit Tarhan and Ali Ulvi Kurucu is also observed (cf. Işık, 2015, pp. 458, 461). Based on these explanations, in this article, we will use 'funerary folklore' to refer to the symbolic and textual arrangements reflected on tombstones.

To this end, the following section first analyses how the terms 'nur' and 'ışık' (representing 'light' in Turkish) are reflected in samples of gravestones and inscriptions from the city of Konya. Subsequently, the resulting dimensions of meaning are classified, and an attempt is also made to create a map of meaning. Through the

screening method, some publications of Ali Işık (2015) and Ibrahim Aczi Kendi (1959) are analyzed, and an answer to the question of our work is sought.

2. Light As 'Nur' And 'Işık' in Funerary Folklore

2.1 Cosmic Motifs: Ray of Sunlight

According to the findings of Ali Işık, the sun is one of the cosmic motifs used as an ornament on the tombstones of Konya. The sun, as a symbol of the infinite power and might of the Almighty Creator, was used as a long-petalled flower motif on tombstones in the Ottoman period, when it was stylized and used as a headdress on the tombstones in the Republican period (see Işık, 2015, Nu. 386, 307-3). Although the Seal of Solomon, a six-pointed star, is widely used as a symbol of the Prophet Solomon, in Islamic mysticism, it is the symbol of the Prophet and was used on tombstones with the wish for intercession (cf. Işık, 2015, Nu. 229). The other cosmic motifs are the lunar and stellar motifs that symbolize our state in the Republican period (see Işık, 2015, p. 67 f.). 'In the capitals of this period, in addition to the crown and radiant sun capitals, there are also popular figures such as jugs placed on the top of the stones'. (Işık, 2015, p. 51; Nu. 75b, 81b, 88b, 282b) (See Fig. 1)



Figure 1: Gravestones with sun and jug motifs (Işık, 2015, p. 60)

According to Işık, an ornamental element that is mainly seen on female and rarely on male tombstones from the Ottoman period was used quite frequently in the Republican period; in fact, it became the dominant headdress in Konya cemeteries until five to ten years ago. This headdress consists of a stylized sun motif with rays. This composition, which in the Ottoman period featured long leaves emanating from a flower in the center of women's and men's graves, was transformed in the Republican period into rods of rays emanating from a small circle in the center and gradually expanding. (cf. Işık, 2015, p. 51; Nu. 396a) (see Fig. 2)



Figure 2: Gravestones with rays of sunlight (Işık, 2015, p. 61)

2.2 Oil lamp⁶

Işık goes on to say that lamps are one of the most significant object motifs on gravestones and explains this with the corresponding suras and verses in the Holy Qur'an: It is of great significance that Allah describes himself as 'the light of the heavens and the earth' in the 35th verse of Surah Nur in the Qur'an, and the lamp is given as a representation of this characterization. On the other hand, Allah compares the Prophet to a lamp in verse 46 of Surah Ahzab. In this respect, the lamp was used on tombstones to symbolize Allah and His Messenger (cf. Işık, 2015, p. 55; (Nu. 31) (See Figure 3).



Figure 3: Gravestone with candle motif (Işık, 2015, p. 67)

As can be seen, these concrete objects (cf. Işık, 2015, p. 110; nu 423),⁷ which are reflected in the decoration of the stones, express the expectation of the deceased / the owner of the deceased (the deceased should sleep in the light / in the light) on the symbolic level in grave folklore. Viewed from the outside, it is abstract, i.e., sleeping 'in the light' is not a physical expectation of light but the expectation of the deceased for a 'luminous' grave life. It can be said that 'brightness' means that the deceased is subject to the 'mercy of Allah' in the context of the prayer 'May Allah have mercy on him'. On the other hand, Ali Işık describes in his book some moments when light is physically important in Konya funeral rites as follows:

Whether in summer or winter, the room window where the deceased is lying is open, and *the light is left on*. Only the cat is carefully watched so that it does not enter through the window and eat the nose and ear of the deceased. *In the meantime, incense is burnt both in the deceased's room and in some parts of the house during the night.* (Işık, 2015, p. 471)

On the first evening after the funeral, *all the lights in the house of the deceased are switched on*. The light in the room remains on until the morning. According to tradition, the reason for this is that the spirit of the deceased visits his room on the first night of the funeral. *When he comes, his room is lit up so that he does not see his room in darkness and get upset, and so that he can find the place where he was washed.* The spirit of the deceased would visit his room for forty nights. (Işık, 2015, p. 474)

In the house where the deceased is washed, *the light burns for three days*. (Işık, 2015, p. 475) (Ed. by the author)

The deeper dimensions of the idea behind the night-time illumination of the grave, to which Işık draws attention, can be traced back to the belief in *kara iyeler* [black good spirits] in early Turkish history. This refers to the idea that the deceased is protected from evil spirits in some way.⁸

3. The Layers of Meaning of the Word “Nur” in Funerary Inscriptions

To uncover the dimensions of being luminous by leaving the symbolic realm and examining what expectations are expressed in language, it is necessary to analyze the tombstone inscriptions, which have been increasing in number from the Ottoman period to the present. For this purpose, we will try to classify the layers of meaning of the word only in the vernacular language products reflected in the inscriptions of the tombstones referring to the life of ‘nurani’ / shining grave.

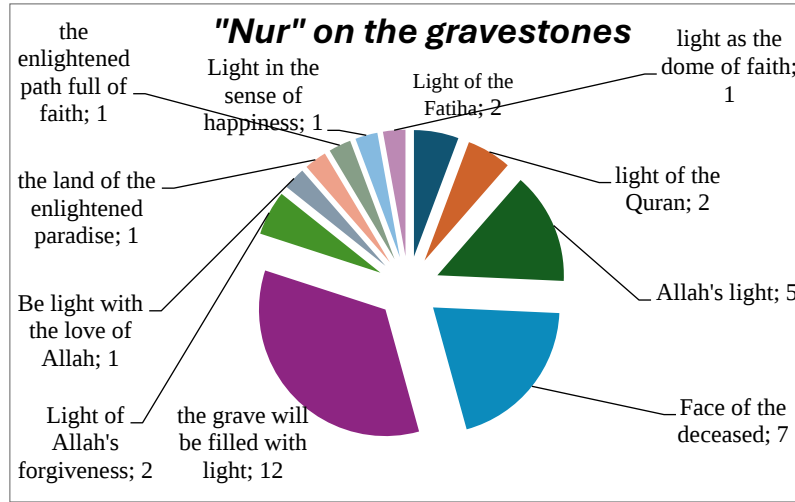
Manifestations of the word <i>Nur</i>	Number
<i>Fatiha'nın nuru</i> [the light of prayer „Fatiha”]	2
<i>nûr-ı Kur'ân</i> [the light of the Qur'an]	2
<i>Allah'ın cemali</i> [the beauty of Allah]: ➤ “ <i>Allah nurlandırсын, aydınlatsın</i> ” = <i>nevverel-lahü</i> [“May God enlighten and illuminate”] ➤ <i>en-Nur</i> resp. <i>Allah'ın nuru</i> = <i>nur</i> as the name of Allah	5
The (radiant) face of the deceased: ➤ Seeing the son as a light. ➤ The deceased rises in the light. ➤ Ascend into the luminous realm of the spirit world. ➤ He was a light (= beloved, pure of heart). ➤ Be a light with a pure heart. ➤ Call the child ‘nurum’, in the sense of ‘my light/child’.	7
Filling the grave with light: ➤ lying in the light / sleeping in lights	12
The light of forgiveness / intercession: ➤ <i>Mazhar-ı nûr-ı nevâlin ola yâ Rab kabri</i> [May the grave be the light of your light oh Rab/Lord]	2
Becoming light (nur) out of love for Allah.	1
Land of the enlightened paradise.	1
The enlightened path, filled with faith.	1
Light in the sense of happiness.	1

Light as the dome of faith.

1

Table 1: Manifestation forms of the word *Nur*

As Table 1 shows, the word has only eleven nuanced meanings: With twelve occurrences, the most frequent use is the wish that ‘the grave be filled with light’, followed by the variants ‘to rest in the light’ and ‘to sleep in lights’.⁹ This is followed by the depiction of the deceased with ‘light’ in seven cases. Here the face is equated with light, the son is seen as light, he ascends as light (or ascends to the light-emitting horizon of the spirit world), he is ‘light’ as a loved one, he is a person with a pure heart, and the child is described as ‘my light’. In third place (with five examples), Allah is seen as “light.” The light (nawwara’l-lahü) of Allah, who is called “an-Nur” among the Asma’ul-Husna [the beautiful names of Allah], and His countenance are also “nur” (light). Two examples each are given for the light of the Fatiha, the light of the Quran (Nur-ı Quran), and the light of Allah’s forgiveness. One example each is provided for “being light with the love of Allah,” “the land of the illuminated paradise,” “the illuminated path full of faith,” “light as the dome of faith,” and “light in the sense of happiness” (“You have let me live with lights”) (see Graphic 1).

**Graphic 1:** Meanings of ‘nur’ on gravestones

If we try to gather them all into a common framework (the depiction of the deceased/the person lying in the grave surrounded by light/being exposed to light, ascending to the heavens with light, wandering into the heavenly realm with light), it becomes clear that they all refer to a spiritual state – not to “brightness, radiance” in the physical sense, but rather to “attaining the mercy of Allah.” It is a metaphorical expression of the wish that the person who has departed from this world may receive Allah’s forgiveness.

At this point, we should note that the term is to be understood in the sense of “light” or “illumination.” It is known that the use of the wish “May he/she rest in light,” understood as “May he/she sleep in light” or “May the stars be his/her companions,” has been the subject of public debate. It is not our intention to delve into this issue,

which can also be observed on social media, as it would go beyond the scope of this contribution. However, we would like to highlight three individual examples that reflect the serious practice of physical illumination.

4. Practices of Grave Illumination

Grave illumination generally refers to the tombstone lighting of grave sites in cemeteries. This is usually to make the grave more visible and noticeable during cemetery visits and to facilitate times of remembrance or prayer. Sometimes, the lighting also serves to keep the memory of loved ones alive and to make the grave site appear more dignified. Solar-powered lamps, built-in lights, candles, or lanterns can be used to illuminate the grave, and this may be an aesthetic decision to enhance the appearance of the cemetery and provide visitors with a more appropriate atmosphere. It is also customary to illuminate graves on special occasions in some cultures (see Figures 4 and 5).¹⁰



Figure 4: Solar-powered cemetery lamp **Figure 5:** An example from Germany (<https://www.amazon.com.tr/>)

In the following section of our contribution, we would like to focus on three examples of grave illumination practices that we have observed in our country to tribute the deceased.

4.1 Example: Mükerrerrem Azaklı (Ordu)

On February 14, 1963, Mükerrerrem Azaklı died because of a fire, unable to take her final breath in this world. Despite the time that passed during her transfer from the city of Samsun to her hometown Ordu, her condition did not deteriorate. In the hope that “her daughter would come back to life in the grave,” her mother had a ventilation pipe and lighting installed at the grave.¹¹ In addition to the lighting, the family built a mausoleum to console the soul of Mükerrerrem Azaklı and added a fountain. A nine-stanza poem was engraved on a marble column (see Fig. 7). Until recently, an illuminated Turkish flag plaque stood at the head of this mausoleum, where she lies alongside her parents (see Fig. 6).



Figure 6: The mausoleum of Mükerrerrem Azaklı (overall view) (Photo: AOÖ)



Figure 7: Mükerrerrem Azaklı's Mausoleum (Details) (Photo: AOÖ)

4. 2 Example: Berna Şallı (Antalya)

Berna Şallı, an agricultural engineer at a logistics company, wanted to lose the fat on her hips a month before her wedding. Weighing 65 kg, Berna underwent liposuction, during which 7 kg of fat was removed from her body. However, after the operation, the 28-year-old became ill. She had to undergo a second surgical procedure and sadly passed away during the operation. On August 3, 2003, with special permission, the family made special arrangements for their daughter's burial. The Şallı family purchased a house near the cemetery and installed a lighting system at their daughter's grave (see Fig. 8).

Berna Şallı's grave at Andızlı Cemetery in Antalya has been illuminated for exactly 12 years. Visitors, especially at night, are often surprised when they see the lit grave. Ayşe Şallı, the mother who illuminated her daughter's resting place, explained that Berna had been afraid of the dark and could not sleep when she was alive. She said:

"My daughter was afraid of the darkness. I wanted to light up her grave so she could sleep well in her resting place. At first, we installed a motion-sensor lamp, but passersby were startled because the light turned on with every movement. Then, we installed a regular lamp. My mother's house is right next to the cemetery, and we illuminate the grave using cables running from her house." (Source: Radikal.com.tr, 2015)¹²



Figure 8: Berna Şallı's Grave¹³

4. 3 Example: Gülten Düzgün (Antalya)

Gülten Düzgün, the 32-year-old partner of Ahmet Düzgün, a [77-year-old] retired teacher from Antalya, passed away in 1999. After 23 years, Düzgün fulfilled his promise to his wife, who had been an incredibly happy life companion, by building the most beautiful grave for her. He surrounded the family grave at Uncalı Cemetery with an iron railing. He also covered the top of the grave with a railing and attached a minaret-shaped metal cone to the iron structure surrounding the grave. Ahmet Düzgün had an iron gate made for the family grave, secured with three padlocks, and even prepared his own grave next to his wife's. The grave, which Düzgün painted and decorated with flags and a lighting system, stood out due to its monumental appearance.¹⁴ (See Yıldırım, 2023) (See Fig. 9)

Of course, one cannot claim that these practices are folkloric, but one can assume that they reflect the auspicious blessings and the “illuminated” good wishes spoken for the deceased.



Figure 9: Gülten Düzgün's Grave¹⁵

Discussion and Conclusion

Regarding grave and burial folklore, we can observe that the concepts of light (ışık) and flight (uçmak), rooted in the belief in the Sky God (Gök Tanrı), were gradually integrated into Islamic values. Over time, this transformation led to the association of divine mercy (Allah's compassion) with light, ultimately converting it into the notion of *nur* (divine light). The findings of this research indicate that, with the onset of Islamization among the Turks, gravestone motifs featuring candles and oil lamps (from the Seljuk and Ottoman periods) or solar patterns and sun-like flowers (until the 1970s–80s in the Republican era) symbolically expressed the phenomenon of *nur* as divine illumination. The image of a torch on modern gravestones (while it does represent

illuminating light) is mostly regarded as an emblem, for example, in connection with the teaching profession.¹⁶ When examining epitaphs on gravestones in Konya, it becomes apparent that linguistic texts (text semantics) increasingly replace semiotic signs (symbols) as they approach the present. While the semiotic distinction in the case of the lamp and the sun is limited to 2–3 examples, it is noteworthy that the term *nur* is used in at least 11 different meanings within textual contexts, despite remaining lexically unchanged.

Since *nur* in Turkish is equivalent to “light,” the expression of the wish “to lie/sleep in light” seems to have transformed over time into “to lie/sleep in illuminations,” naturally as part of secularization. The addition of “May the stars be his companions” can be regarded as a novel element in this wish. However, drawing from Turkish cosmogony, we have seen that celestial bodies—including stars, the sun, and the moon—carry profound significance as value systems, inherited from the ancient Turkish belief in *Gök Tengri* [Sky God], for both the living and the deceased. Furthermore, in the gravestone inscriptions of Konya, the sun, as a celestial body and source of light, can also be understood metaphorically as a direct reference to the star itself. For example, the line “My faith is my dome of light / Its lamps are my tears” (Işık, 2015, p. 324), (“We have made the sky a protected canopy. Yet they turn away from the signs of the heavens”; Qur’an, Anbiya: 32, as in the first sentence of the verse), reminds us that faith serves as a shield, protecting humans from the devil, the jinn, evil—in short, from sin. While the practices of face-scratching and shedding bloody tears (cf. İnan, 1986, p. 177 ff.), once part of mourning rituals in pre-Islamic Turkish death and burial traditions, are increasingly fading, the prevailing belief seems to be that offering prayers and supplications with tears enhances sincerity, and thereby the degree of genuine devotion.

Considering that the relationship between tears and lamps (metaphorically “stars”) is established here as well, faith is therefore a protective sky, as described in verse Anbiya 32 (Qur’an), and its shining stars are its tears, meaning that stars serve as lamps representing the source of light.

In summary, the wish “May he/she sleep in light, and may the stars be companions” should not be understood as a purely secular translation of the prayer “May he/she rest in light.” Rather, it implicitly carries traces of the belief in the Sky God (Gök-Tanrı).

Endnotes

- ¹ This article is derived from an oral paper presented in Turkish at the ‘10th International Turkish Folk Culture Congress’ held in Ankara between 11-13 December 2023. We would like to express our sincere gratitude to Mr. Ali Işık, who supported us with his resources and ideas in preparing this contribution.
- ² For a detailed discussion of the concept of light, see Ay (2014), pp. 97–107. Another difference pointed out by dictionaries is that the light of the sun (shams) is referred to as ‘ziyâ’, while the light of the moon is known as ‘nûr’ (see, for example, Yeniterzi, 2006, p. 395; ‘Ayine-i cemali şu’ânından erişen / Ay u güneş yüzündeki nûr u ziyâ hakı’, İspir, 2008, p. 117).
- ³ The book ‘Karanlık Gecelerin Nurlu Sabahı’ (Istanbul: Nuruosmaniye Matbaası) by Sami Arslan, the then Mufti of Denizli, which was first published in 1963 and met with great acclaim among Turkish readers and has been reprinted several times to this day, was designed according to this concept.
- ⁴ In this context, it is not surprising that names such as Gün, Ay and Yıldız frequently appear in Turkish names, either alone or as prefixes, suffixes or synonyms like Güneş, Günhan, Güneşhan, Ayhan, Aynur, Dolunay, İlkay, Sonay, Gülay, Mutluay, Doğanay, Dilberay, Hilal, Kamer, Aysima, Aydın, Yıldızhan, Gökçe, Göksel, Günseli, etc.
- ⁵ It can be seen that religious and secular meanings are interwoven in the word ‘nur’, which is often used as a noun or noun suffix, particularly in Turkish naming traditions. The following examples show that the name ‘Nur’ can be used alone or in combination with Turkish, Persian and Arabic words, taking on new forms. As a woman’s name: Gülnur, Binnur, Sefanur, Günnur, Mahinur, Selvinur, Ayşenur, Sennur, Nuray, Esra Nur, Aleyna Nur, Nimet Nur, Kübra Nur, Havva Nur, Öznur, Tennur, Semanur, Ebrunur, Yurdanur, Ülkenur, İlknur, İncinur, İsmiñur, Zinnur, Parlanur, Sabahnur, Beyza Nur. Nurdan, Nurhan, Nuran, Nurcan, Nurgül, Nurhayat, Nursema, Nuriye, Nursel, Nursal, Nurdide (Gözümün Nur’u), Nur Hilal, Nursaç, Nurşah and Münevver, among others. As a man’s name: Nuri, Nurettin, Nurullah, Enver, etc.
- ⁶ On the oil lamp motif on Anatolian gravestones, see also Özçelik, 2019, pp. 354-363; Aslan Kalay, 2020, pp. 13-26 and Biçici, 2012, pp. 637-661.
- ⁷ In this context, gravestones bearing the torch symbol can also be considered. For now, we are excluding torch and book symbols that indicate the deceased’s identity as a teacher (see Işık, 2015, p. 110; no. 423).
- ⁸ As our contribution is limited to the terms ‘light’ and ‘nur’, the mythological significance of the belief content is not discussed in depth here and should therefore be discussed on a separate platform. For more information on the significance of the idea of *kara iyeler* (black spirits) in Turkish popular belief, see Ozan, 2015, pp. 41-51.
- ⁹ The lines “Yattım beni kaldır Allah / Nur gölüne bandır Allah” [“Lift me up, Allah / Let me drown in the lake of light, Allah!”] from the text “Yattım sağıma döndüm soluma” [“Lay me on my right side and turn me to my left”], which appears in various versions of Turkish sleep prayers, can be considered in this context. In another variant, “nur gölüne bandır” [“let me drown in the lake of light”] is replaced with “rahmetine bandır” [“let me drown in Your grace”] (see Öztürk, [2020], p. 288, 293, and Ayaz, 2020, p. 79).
- ¹⁰ Ali Işık witnessed that solar-powered lamps were lit on graves in Australia, where he had traveled for the funeral of his brother-in-law (a telephone conversation from 24 November 2023).
- ¹¹ I would like to thank Mr Yusuf Günaydın, the deceased’s cousin, for the information. I passed this grave almost every day during my secondary school years and it has left a deep impression on me. It was illuminated by a flag-shaped plaque. In subsequent years, it was said that the deceased’s mother, who had died from burns, had a dream in which she said she was disturbed by the lighting. As a result, this practice was discontinued. (AOÖ)
- ¹² “‘Kızım karanlıktan korkar’ diye 12 yıldır mezarında ışık yakıyor...”. In: *Radikal Gazetesi*. Radikal.com.tr 06/01/2015 (Available online: <http://www.radikal.com.tr/>) Türkiye >(/turkiye/) (last access: 01.12.2023)
- ¹³ “‘Kızım karanlıktan korkar’ diye 12 yıldır mezarında ışık yakıyor...”. In: *Radikal Gazetesi*. Radikal.com.tr 06/01/2015 (Available online: <http://www.radikal.com.tr/>) Türkiye >(/turkiye/) ‘Kızım karanlıktan korkar’ diye 12 yıldır mezarında ışık yakıyor... (last access: 01.12.2023) [“Meine Tochter hat Angst vor der Dunkelheit”, deshalb zündet sie seit 12 Jahren ein Licht auf ihrem Grab an...]
- ¹⁴ Cf. “Eşine ‘türbe’ gibi mezar yapıp, aydınlatma direğinden çektiği elektrikle aydınlattı.” (Yıldırım, 2023) (<https://www.dha.com.tr/foto-galeri/esine-turbe-gibi-mezar-yapip-aydinlatma-direginden-cektileri-elektrikle-aydinlatti-2184902/1>) (03.12.2023). The video for this news item is available at: <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x8gu6pc>. (last access: 03.12.2023)
- ¹⁵ “Antalya’da eşinin mezarını türbeye çevirip kaçak elektrik bağlatı”. In: *www.ensonhaber.com*. Available online: <https://www.ensonhaber.com/yasam/antalyada-esinin-mezarini-turbeye-cevirip-kacak-elektrik-baglatti> (last access: 03.12.2023)
- ¹⁶ Işık confirms it in the interview from 23/11/2023.

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