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“Smuggling a Dangerous Cargo” Discovery of a Hidden Treasure

Atalar Sözlərin Sözüne Baxan Pəşiman Olmaz!

**“He who pays attention to the words of ancestors (fathers)
will never repent [his actions]”**

Shahyar Daneshgar*

For those who have made the study of the folklore of the Turkish and Turkic world their focus, the name Professor İlhan Başgöz is not unfamiliar. Professor Başgöz is among the best-known scholars of Turkish folklore. He has devoted his entire life to the study of folklore internationally and Turkish folkloric materials specifically.² Professor Başgöz was among the handful of scholars who, while residing in America, could go to the Soviet Union in the 1960s during the cold war to carry out research on Turkic oral literature materials. Indeed, folklore scholars and researchers outside Başgöz’s country of his birth, Turkey, were aware of his work, especially those in Azerbaijan and the Turkic speaking world. His works have been published in the *Journal of American Folklore* and by the Turkish Studies Publication at Indiana University. Professor Başgöz’s *Turkish Folklore Reader* (1971)³ is a classic work for students of Turkish and international folklore.

I was fortunate when I came to Indiana University (IU) to pursue a degree in Turkic studies in the Department of Central Eurasian Studies, then called Department of Uralic and Altaic Studies, where Professor Başgöz was one of the main faculty. I had the opportunity to study with Professor Başgöz and took several courses on Turkish language and culture. He encouraged me to take courses on folklore studies to familiarize myself with this field

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of humanities. Later, Professor Başgöz served on my M.A. Thesis and Ph.D. Dissertation committees. In my first year of studies at the department, Professor Başgöz mentioned the existence of a large collection of Azerbaijani proverbs which he had in his possession. Because of my language skills both in Azerbaijani and Persian, he suggested that I look at the collection and assist him in making it available to readers of English. At first, the idea did not interest me. Then I began looking for a topic for my dissertation that would cover some aspects of the culture of Azerbaijani people in Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan. As a language student and enthusiast, the idea of devoting my thesis to the collection of proverbs became more appealing, because it would allow me to study various aspects of the culture, while also pursuing my linguistic interests.



Talk at the Archive of Traditional Music

While the study of the compendium of the proverbs has merit, the provenance of this collection is even more fascinating and significant. This collection sheds light on many aspects of the social history and life of the minority groups in a multi-ethnic society such as Iran. While researching my thesis, I could not help but think of the amount of work and difficulties that Azerbaijani writers and intellectuals living in Iran must have experienced while collecting the oral literature of their people.

Undoubtedly, these collectors/researchers were not seeking self-glorification and recognition. Rather, they aimed to safe-guard and preserve part of their disappearing culture and prevent it from being forgotten or intentionally destroyed on the pretext that it constituted “Subversive Activities.” At times individuals who published materials in Azerbaijani were accused of “being a threat to the existence of the ‘State’” and subjected to security harassment and investigations. Some individuals, like Samad Behrangi,⁴ a social activist and author, who championed the rights of mother tongue education for Azerbaijani children and other minority groups, were under the radars of Savak, the secret police of the Iranian Pahlavi regime based on unfounded accusations. At times, books by authors like Salam-allah Javid were confiscated and destroyed by the police.⁵ (see p. 25 of dis.). Aside from the intimidating tactics by the government, individuals such as Salam-allah Javid continued to work despite personal economic challenges. Indeed, the fact that this collection of proverbs ever came into existence is due to the heroic actions of many dedicated Azerbaijani researchers and laymen like the ones mentioned above and many more. The seriousness of their dedication was best summarized by Professor Başgöz: “...Whatever political developments may come in the future [in Iran] they [Azerbaijani intellectuals] will doubtlessly continue in their efforts to collect and study Azeri folklore, as an important means of cultural and ethnic survival within a dominant Iranian [culture]”⁶

The Origin and Significance of this Collection: The collection contains some eight thousand items consisting of proverbs, proverbial and idiomatic expressions, similes, weather proverbs, dialogue and anecdotal proverbs, and riddle proverbs which were presented to Professor Başgöz during a research trip that he undertook to Iran in 1972. In one of my

conversations with Prof. Başıöz, he related to me that due to the fear of the confiscation of this collection by Savak, the Iranian secret police, he smuggled this collection out of Iran. Furthermore, he stated that this “dangerous cargo” could only be carried out of Iran after he succeeded in establishing a bond of mutual trust between himself and the Azerbaijani writers and intellectuals. The following story related to me by him in one of the interviews sheds light on the existence of the origin of this “dangerous cargo”, and how he came to possess this collection of proverbs: “One day, Sahand Qarachurlu, [a famous Azeri poet] informed me that Mahammad Ali Farzaneh, another famous Azeri intellectual, had collected 8000 proverbs and proverbial expressions which were hidden for the fear of confiscation and destruction by the secret police.” He continued narrating: “it was only on my last night stay in Tehran, the capital of Iran, prior to my departure that Sahand Qarachorlu received a collection of proverbs, consisting of hundreds of hand-written pages, which was collected by Mahammad Ali Farzaneh. That night, despite Sahand Qarachorlu’s heart condition, he and several Azerbaijanis stayed up the night, reading and dictating the entire collection while recording them on cassette tapes. A few hours prior to my ride to Tehran airport, the cassette tapes, not the transcription of the words, labeled “Iranian Songs” reached me, and I smuggled this dangerous cargo out of Iran (Başıöz,1985).”⁷ After the safe arrival of the collection in Bloomington, Indiana, prior to my examination of the proverbs, two individuals worked on the collection. After listening to the cassette tapes, the two collaborators wrote down each proverb on index cards.⁸

When I began working on this collection, I encountered numerous challenges understanding many of the proverbs. The reason was that many of the words & phrases on the index cards, prepared by the previous individuals, were not comprehensible. The problem arose from not including and adding the diacritic marks during the transfer of the sound recordings from the cassette-tapes on the index-cards. Furthermore, it should be noted that the collaborators did not provide English translations of the proverbs which could have made the understanding of the proverbs easier.⁹ Since these proverbs or proverb-looking or sounding items were valuable for linguistic work for future studies, it was necessary for me to re-examine the entire proverb collection by going through each tape for clarification. Therefore, I listened to the entire set of tapes of 8000 proverbs to figure out their accuracy and facilitate a way for presenting them in an organized system. However, the re-examination of the proverbs turned out to be challenging as well, because of imperfect quality of the sound recordings, which were made during the fieldwork in 1973. Hence, I myself, like the previous collaborators could not decipher many of the items in this collection.

The classification and organization of the collection: Before being able to examine the proverbs, I needed to come up with a classification system for organizing the proverbs. of the 8000 proverbs which I investigated, only 2835 seemed to qualify as real proverbs. The rest were mostly sayings and maxims and idiomatic expressions. An organizational system was necessary so that the future readers or researchers could easily locate the proverbs they were interested in. Two methods seemed to be viable for the organization of the collection: a) thematic and b) alphabetic methods. After consulting with several international proverb collections and dictionaries, I realized that the thematic system would be problematic because some proverbs could be classified/ listed under numerous subject headings. However, with the alphabetical system, one could simply organize the proverbs according to which each proverb begins in the Azerbaijani language, as in a dictionary. By doing this, any individual

familiar with the Azerbaijani language could easily find the desired proverb. After organizing the collection in alphabetical order, to make the proverbs easily available to non-speakers of the language, I also decided to list them thematically under keyword topics in English at the end of the dissertation. Finally, each keyword was given a reference number that would take a researcher to a specific proverb where s/he could read the English translation and commentary about the meaning and message of the proverb.

Style, Forms and Content of the Proverbs: In the fourth chapter of the dissertation, I discuss the style, forms, linguistic and structural features of the proverbs. Poetic devices, especially versification, are a distinctive feature of the Azerbaijani proverbs. The use of devices such as rhyme, rhythm, alliteration, and meter have a practical function besides being euphonious. In this collection several of proverbs or idiomatic expressions come in the form of quatrains. In such cases, the rhymes used in the proverbs or idioms help the users to recall the proverbs easier.

Significance of this collection for the study of proverbs: One of the major contributions of this collection is the light it sheds on Azerbaijani culture and society within the Turkic and Middle Eastern belief system and culture. As such, this collection can be used as an ethnographic source for the study of Azerbaijani culture. Anthropologists and folklorists maintain that the culture of a society is reflected in its verbal art. Since the Azerbaijanis in Iran __ due to the restriction of the use of the mother tongue __ produced insignificant written literature, their proverbs are our best choice for understanding that society's worldview or 'Weltanschauung'. Indeed, their proverbs function as oral literature and verbal art. Donald Simmons maintains that folklore may be an important source of ethnographic data on a culture.¹⁰ If we agree that proverbs as a genre of folklore can reflect certain aspects of a culture, then the proverbs in this collection will help us understand the philosophy and *Weltanschauung* of the Azerbaijani people. Their proverbs reveal their beliefs and attitudes concerning religion, family relationships, men, women, superstition, mythology, other ethnic groups, the relationship between nature and man, the role of humans in preserving or challenging the norms and values of their society, etc. Several of the proverbs also reveal the nomadic traits of many of the Turkic people who migrated from Central Asia to present day of Iran, Azerbaijan, Turkey and Iraq. (See proverbs 389-407 and many more in the dissertation).¹¹

The content and the functionality of the proverbs: By studying the content of the proverbs, we can learn about the social norms and how the society works. Sometimes, people use proverbs to give advice, especially when they don't want to hurt or insult the individual they are addressing. This advice-giving function is evident in several of the proverbs in the collection. In the Turkic languages the words used for "proverb" are *Atalar Sözü* (words of the forefathers/ancestors). Indeed, several of the proverbs begin with the opening statement *Ata babalar demişkən* – "as the ancestors have said (advised)." In terms of content, many of these proverbs demonstrate the important role that God plays in everyday matters in Azerbaijani society. Beliefs and attitudes concerning religion, the creator, faith and predestination abound. According to the proverbs, or maxims which are encapsulated in these proverbs, a Muslim individual's destination/ faith is determined without his or her will. Hence, *Allah Yazanı, bəndə pozamaz* 'That which has been written (ordained) by God, cannot be destroyed (changed) by a man.' The collection contains sixty proverbs just dealing with the word "God." Other themes/ topics in the collection refer to domesticated animals and husbandry, a reminder

of the Azerbaijani people's nomadic and pastoral lifestyles. In many of the proverbs, dogs, camels, wolves, donkeys are used to convey a message of advice or warning to humans about certain actions or behavior (See the following examples in the dissertation: camels, nos. 1021-1047; dogs: nos. 1915-1956; wolves: nos. 1575-1600). Not surprisingly, "man/human" is also a recurring theme. There are close to two hundred proverbs talking about personal characteristics. (See nos. 11-60 & 1869-1883 in the dissertation). Other themes used in the collection deal with human body parts; names of cities (Baghdad; Mecca), nature, the weather, friendship and animosity, generosity, stinginess, kindness and evil acts, the attitudes towards women, children & their education, neighborliness and the treatment of other ethnic groups. In short, the proverbs in this collection cover almost every aspect of life. Besides offering us a glimpse of Azerbaijani society, this collection is also significant from a linguistic point of view. For instance, linguists can conduct comparative linguistics in Turkic languages. The collection can also provide great examples for studying different dialects of Azerbaijani spoken in Iran, the Republic of Azerbaijan, Turkey and Iraq. In addition, the collection will enable a researcher to do comparative research on international proverb studies and help us to find the origins of many of the proverbs in the Turkic, Middle Eastern and international collections, some of which can go back centuries. Such a comparison can only be achieved after careful comparative proverb studies are carried out first among the Turkic cultures. Once that task is achieved, the next step would be to locate the existence of some of them in other Middle Eastern sources and other societies which shared the same living space, or they came in contact via trades, wars, or religious contacts. The last phase of the comparison would be to search for the existence of the proverbs in the world culture. Finally, after thorough comparative study, we should be able to identify the origins of many of these proverbs.

To my surprise, after the completion of my dissertation, in 2014 on one of my visits to Berlin, Germany, I discovered that Mahammad Ali Farzaneh, who had collected the 8000 proverbial collection, managed to publish his proverb collection in its entirety as a book in Europe, after moving to Sweden. Considering the period that these proverbs were collected and had to be hidden for the sake of preservation and in a time when the Azerbaijani intellectuals and oral literature collectors had to endure tremendous pressure for safe-guarding this "valuable cargo," it is ironic that today one can easily study or find Azerbaijani proverbs on social media. There are several Wikis for Azerbaijani proverbial studies, one of which is hosted on The Full Wiki, titled *Azerbaijani Proverbs: Wikis*. A second site on internet is *A-dan Z-yə Atalar Sözü* 'Proverbs from A to Z'. There are even proverb entertainers and actors who put on their work on YouTube to help the public understand the content of many proverbs which would be hard to comprehend.

As we can discern from the above short narrative, Professor Başgöz's action led to the discovery and preservation of this voluminous collection of proverbs which otherwise could have been either destroyed or lost. Fortunately, thanks to his undercover activity, the Archives of Traditional Music Library at Indiana University now has this collection, and it can be studied and shared worldwide. I personally benefitted from the availability of this treasure and hope that the research on this collection will shed some light on the social and cultural history of the Azerbaijani people living in Iran and the throughout the word. Finally, even though all the individuals who were active in the preservation of this collection are not physically present with us today, they would be happy to know that social media has

made the study and collecting of endangered collective sources of human societies easier to preserve. They would be happy to know that if they had access to the unlimited opportunities that internet and social media provide to us today, they could have easily shared the fruits of their labors with the entire world without the fear of being harassed by anyone anywhere. This remind us of a fine Turkish tune telling us in repeated refrains in the song, assuring the listeners ‘Folksongs will never be silent (die), Folksongs smile, Folksongs run freer than the running water and the fly freer than the flying birds. The same can be said about this proverb collection in that no one can silence the voices of the proverbs (“*Atalar Sözü*”) i.e. its collectors *and those who strive to keep them alive.*

***Türküler susmaz, türküler güler,
Akan sularдан daha özgür, türküler.
Türküler susmaz, türküler güler,
Uçan kuşlardan, daha özgürler.***

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Notes

- 1 Professor İlhan Başgöz is the author of some 17 books and numerous articles published in various folklore and literary journals and magazines.
- 2 Başgöz, I. (1971). *Turkish Folklore Reader*. Uralic and Altaic Series. v.120. Bloomington, Indiana University.
- 3 Samad Behrangi was a schoolteacher who moved from one village to another “schools” to schools to teach the children of peasants in small villages. He studied at the Teacher-training College in Tabriz, capital of the Iranian Azerbaijan in 1940 and wrote several books. “The Little Black Fish” is one of his most famous one, which has been translated into many languages.
- 4 See page 25 of the dissertation for the quotation.
- 5 Başgöz, İlhan. 1984. Proverbs, Folklore and Ethnic Identity in Iranian Azerbaijan. Introduction to *Azerbaijani Proverbs* by Ali Asghar Mujtehed. Middle East Series, no.5. Piedmont (California): Jahan Book Co.
- 6 Professor Başgöz himself related this anecdote to me in 1985 and repeated the same story in 1989.
- 7 The collection in its entirety were voice-recorded on cassette tapes first in 1972. Later, between 20002-2005, the cassette tapes were transferred onto CD and became part of the Archive of the Traditional Music’s deposition at Indiana University.
- 8 When working with the Turkic materials written in Perso-Arabic script, the inclusion of the diacritic marks become important in better comprehending the materials. The reason is that the Turkic languages are rich in vowels (Azerbaijani has 9 vowels). The Perso-Arabic script is use only 6 characters to show the short and long vowels. Hence the Person-Arabic script proves to be insufficient to represent some of the short and rounded vowels like Ö, Ü, I, unless extra special diacritic marks would be added to the words. Uyghur Turks have incorporated extra signs to show the true representations of their vowels in their language.
- 9 Simmons, C. Donald. 1961. Analysis of Cultural Reflections in Efik Folktales. *Journal of American Folklore* (74: 126-141).
- 10 Daneshgar, Shahyar. *Azerbaijani proverbs: Collection and Analysis (Formal and Thematic)*. 1995. Indiana University. PhD dissertation. The numbers refer to the index numbers in the dissertation. The dissertation is available at Indiana University H. B. Wells Library and at the University of Michigan online Library.