



A peer-reviewed student publication
of the University at Buffalo
Department of Library and Information Studies

The Dede Korkut digital library: a student project faces the real world

Ozlem Bayram
Ankara University
Faculty of Letters
Information and Records Management
Sihhiye, Ankara, Turkey

Astrid Emel
Circulation Librarian
St Johns University
Rittenberg Law Library
Queens, NY, USA

Library Student Journal,
February 2007

Abstract

This essay details the fate of a student project for a digital libraries course from its initial development, through a grant application to make the project a reality, to its end. The Dede Korkut stories, Turkish folktales, were chosen for digitization and potential inclusion in a digital collection which was intended to benefit scholars worldwide.

Introduction

Five students gathered together to present a hypothetical website of Dede Korkut stories for a class titled Digital Libraries in Queens, New York. After a few short weeks it developed into our dream project: an

ambitious plan to create a digital library that would bring together a wide range of research materials on the subject of this famous Turkish epic. The materials would include an image collection from the original manuscripts of Dede Korkut, links to further information, and selected scanned print versions of theses and research studies. Our *Dede Korkut Collection Homepage*, we imagined, would be hosted on a library's server, providing access to relevant texts, images, and related materials on the Web.

Once upon a time

The Turkish epic tradition begins with the Book of Dede Korkut (the Dede Korkut Stories), which was transcribed from the oral tradition of Oghuz Turks to written scripts. According to Paksoy (1995), the exact date of transcription is unknown, but it originated as an oral tradition in the 9th or 10th centuries. Turkish scholars have commented on the Book of Dede Korkut in numerous articles for scholarly journals. Meeker (1992) explains the endurance of Dede Korkut: "Modern translations in prose and in verse have been undertaken, the most successful of which have run into numerous printings. Some of these translations, accompanied with illustrations, have become a staple of children's literature" (p.395).

The character Dede Korkut, a soothsayer and bard in the oral tradition, tells folktales in 12 epic stories about the cultural and historic lives of the Oghuz Turks. Traditional motives—religion, miracles, battles, dwellings, norms and traditional facts, economic and social life, love, food and musical instruments—survive in these stories. The origin of the story is still debated. The story of a monster named Tepegöz ("google-eyed") bears a striking resemblance to the story of Polyphemus in book 9 of the *Odyssey* and is believed to have been influenced by the Greek epic (Meeker, 1992, p. 396) And another familiar story, Wild Dumrul, evokes the Greek myth of Alcestis (Binyazar, 1996, pp. 79-81).

Much debate has surrounded the exact age of the stories. There are references to the Turkish god Tanri rather than Allah of the Muslim religion, and the characters of these stories claim the modern Azerbaijan as their homeland. The ozans and poetry performance tradition that exist in the 12 stories of Dede Korkut, which have been accepted to have emerged in the 11th to 12th centuries, hold the secret to the daily lives of the nomadic tribes of Eastern Europe and the Middle East. The Dede Korkut epic gives us an inside look at the daily life in the years between the 7th and 11th centuries. The history recorded in these tales contains the history, culture, and lifestyle of the nomadic tribes of the middle ages. The stories tell us about religion and marriage, music and dance, politics, law, war, food, dwellings, family life, love, and death. The stories take on different forms ranging from fairytales and philosophical poems to the classic tragedy and realistic novel. Historians, scholars, and students have studied these tales for their value in history and literature.

The tales are common knowledge in the Middle East and Eastern Europe because the people have kept the oral tradition alive. If the best way to preserve the oral stories for future generations is to write them down,

our purpose is to take it one step further and put them on the World Wide Web.

A grand idea

Our research found that a collection of seven Dede Korkut translations—German, English, Persian, French, Russian as well as a modern Turkish and Azerbaijani—are now available in print to complement the original Azerbaijan manuscripts. The original manuscripts are located both in the Vatican Library and Dresden Royal library now known as Saxon State Library.

The titles in the various languages we aimed to digitize were:

- Sumer, F. & Uysal, A. E. & Walker, W. S. *The Book of Dede Korkut: a Turkish epic* (in English).
- Kemal, Y. & Bazin, L. & Gokalp, A. *Le livre de Dede Korkut dans la langue de la gent oghuz: récit de la Geste oghuz de Kazan Bey et autres* (in French.).
- Hein, J. *Das Buch des Dede Korkut: ein Nomadenepos aus türkischer Frühzeit* (in German.)
- Darabi, I. *Didah Qurqud* (in Persian).
- Bartol'd V V & Arasly H & Tahmasib M H. *Dede Korkut* (in Russian).
- Gokyay, O.S. *Bugünkü dille Dede Korkut masallari* (in Turkish) .
- Zeinalov F R & Alizada S. *Kitabi-Dada Gorgud Kitab-i Dede Korkut* (in Azerbaijani).

As we conjured up our digital library we became conscious that access from all parts of the world to the rich history included in these stories would benefit all types of readers. It would be important to make these epic stories available to all people in all lands in all languages. For researchers and students of literature and history, we felt it important to make these stories available for study in order to better understand the culture and history of these tribes. It is important for those who study and research

the Dede Korkut to compare variations in the translations of individual words or phrases. These stories have a global audience, but for now only selected manuscripts are available online.

A Dede Korkut Collection Homepage would give readers an opportunity to view the tales in their entirety no matter their location globally. This would be quite a task for students in various stages of their education and experience, but we dared to dream.

Many successful digitization projects on the Web concentrate on retrospective materials, such as the project, "Sunday School Books in 19th Century America" (<http://digital.lib.msu.edu/projects/ssb/>), at the Michigan State University Libraries. The manager of that project, Ruth Ann Jones (2001), indicates that library digitization projects are one response to the increasing commercialization of knowledge:

Digitized collections of primary sources on the World Wide Web are providing new and exciting research alternatives for students and teachers of history. Many rare and fragile works, once accessible only through microfilm reproductions or travel to the library that owned them, are becoming freely available in their digitized formats to anyone with Internet access. (p. 1)

Show me the money

An email arrived and the tone was exciting; "Would the group who collaborated on the final project for the Digital Libraries class like to apply for a grant to realize our dream project?" One student had found a grant offered to international collaborators to support research projects. We met the criteria, we had citizens of the right countries, an ambitious project that had not been attempted before and a useable idea—it was too good to be true. Collaborating online, as we did for our class

project, emails flew through cyberspace so fast we were almost in real-time. As the grant proposal took shape over the course of the next weeks, we were exhilarated by the idea that this project might actually happen. We met in the computer lab on campus to put the final touches on the proposal and printed the required five copies. After the envelopes were signed, sealed, and delivered, we held our breath and waited for the response.

Despite our enthusiasm, the road ahead would be difficult. First, we lost two partners—family, work, and school got in the way—our original group of five was now three. Second, we had not yet located a library to host our digital material. And, third, we did not have a scanner and the grant would not provide one.

Where oh where?

Our envisioned digital library would be a one-stop site for research of the culture and history available through the epic stories of the Dede Korkut, with music, maps, and pictures, and a links to further resources. We knew we had a good idea—a much-needed digital library for a much-loved epic—and were confident we could find a library that would share our dream. And we did!

We found a library willing to host our pages and launch our project on their website—contingent, of course, on the funding. We met with them and they were very excited about the project. The library had a multicultural area with patrons of all types of nationalities that spoke many languages. And they even had scanners we could use. Although our grant proposal had budgeted only for a staff of three at less than minimum wage, for the remaining members—three students on a budget—it would be a labor of love.

Happily ever after?

Then the letter came. We did not get chosen for the grant award. Still optimistic, we continued on trying to get copies of the original documents on micro fiche. We could find other sources of funding!

But miles between the members and the original documents began to grow longer. Graduations came and went and international students returned to their homes.

This story does not have a happy ending. We ran out of time. The only thing left of our dream project is a great idea, a not so great story, and a flicker of excitement at the thought of the digital library that was never born.

References

The Book of Dede Korkut. (1974). Lewis Geoffrey (ed.). Harmondsworth: Penguin

Binyazar, A. Dede Korkut. (1996). Istanbul: Yapı Kredi Kültür Merkezi.

Dedem Korkudun Kitabı. (1973). Gokyay, O. S. (ed.). Istanbul: Milli Eği.

Jones, R. (2001). Behind the scenes in a digitization project. *Feminist Collections*, 22(2). Retrieved January 17, 2007 from http://www.library.wisc.edu/libraries/womens_studies/fc/fcjones222.htm

Meeker, M. (1992). The Dede Korkut ethic. *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 24: 395-417.

Paksoy, H. B. (1995). Destan genre in Central Asia. In *Modern Encyclopedia of Religions in Russia and the Soviet Union*. Academic International Pres. (Vol. V.).

Sümer, F. & A. Uysal & W. Walker. (1972). *The Book of Dede Korkut*. Austin and London: University of Texas Press.

Author's Bio

Ozlem Bayram completed her Masters Degree in special libraries and PhD degree in info metrics at Ankara University, Turkey in 1997. She also received a second master's degree in Library Science from St. John's University, New York, USA, in 2003. She is currently an assistant professor at the Department of Information and Records Management in Ankara University. Her research interests include digital libraries and metadata (including traditional cataloging as well as digital schemes), open access and institutional repositories, and info metrics.

Author's Bio

Astrid Emel completed her Masters of Library Science in 2005 at St. John's University with concentrations in Preservation and Law Librarianship. She is currently the Circulation Librarian at St. Johns University Rittenberg Law Library.