

Turkic Language Speakers' Perception of Toponyms as Cultural Heritage in the National Epos "Edige"

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Abstract—The purpose of the present study is to examine the attitudes of modern native speakers of Turkic languages to the role of place names used in national folklore in preserving their nations' cultural heritage. This mixed-methods study is based on a specially developed questionnaire to provide quantitative and qualitative data on student youth's perceptions of toponyms as carriers of cultural heritage in a famous epic poem, which has many versions in different Turkic languages. The participants of the investigation are 214 undergraduate students majoring in Pedagogy and Philology at universities located in Kazakhstan, Tatarstan and Karakalpakstan. The results of the study show that, although toponyms from the epic poem "Edige" are not widely used either in official documents or in everyday situations, they still perform an essential function in preserving the historical and cultural heritage of the Turkic peoples. Through place names, students relate to locations that are historically and culturally important, and the knowledge of their origins and meanings is maintained by means of national folklore. Based on the responses of modern speakers of such Turkic languages as Kazakh, Tatar and Karakalpak, we conclude that the knowledge of place names in epic literature contributes to the collective memory about certain places and passing it down through generations.

Index Terms—toponym, folklore, epic poem, cultural heritage, Turkic

I. INTRODUCTION

Turkic epic poetry occupies a special place in world epic literature, combining characteristic features of epic poetry from various parts of the world. Turkic epic poems can be compared with the epic works of Homer as they are written in verse and describe long journeys made by the protagonists. At the same time, realism in depicting everyday life and mysticism in describing the world of spirits relate Turkic epos to Scandinavian sagas (Lethbridge, 2016). Another

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distinctive feature of Turkic epic poems consists in the exaggeration and idealization of the hero, and such a poetic hyperbole brings them close to Mongolian and Russian epos (Orlov, 1945). On top of all of this, Turkic epic poetry as part of national folklore is one of the most important components of Turkic culture (Tadjibaeva, 2020; Mamayev et al., 2021), expressing the nation's originality (Zhanibekova & Beisenova, 2021) and maintaining historical consciousness and knowledge of the Nomadic lifestyle (Zhumabayeva, 2022). Of particular importance in reflecting the Turkic national culture are names of places, or toponyms, related to the events described in epic poems.

Place names in epic poetry are considered essential due to their connection with nations' history and traditions. In the context of globalization, it is becoming crucial to preserve nations' cultural heritage. Being reflections of a nation's material and spiritual culture (Tektigul et al., 2021; Turdibekov, 2021), place names perform an essential role in maintaining the specific features of the traditional lifestyle and national identity, which are conditioned by a particular geographical position (Hadieva & Akish, 2015; Aleshinskaya, 2020). Toponyms are defined as carriers of national-cultural information (Lanovaya, 2021) or geocultural codes providing ethnocultural, geographic and spatial information that contributes to a better understanding of indigenous peoples' historical settlements, inter-ethnic contacts and societal values (Kurilova et al., 2023), as well as their economic activity and ancient migrations (Ganieva et al., 2020; Boribayeva et al., 2018). In epic poetry, toponyms can help to create an illusion of pseudo-documentary (Aleksenko et al., 2022) as they reveal significant information about specific locations at the time of their settlement (Seidl, 2019), historical events taking place in them (Hedquist et al., 2014) and various peoples inhabiting them (Lutfullina, 2021).

Among Turkic heroic epic poems, the most famous is "Edige", which is based on a well-known legend about Edige Batyr, a real historical figure of the second half of the 14th century. At that time, the Golden Horde, whose territory used to be the land of the Turks in the eastern part of Russia and the western part of Kazakhstan, weakened. Edige was an authoritative *biy* (translated as "people's adviser, mediator in disputes") who headed the ulus between the Volga (Yedil) and the Urals (Zhayyk). The epic poem depicts the events of the war in 1398, when the combined army of Lithuania, Poland and Western Russia tried to separate the territory of the Golden Horde. Edige showed great courage in this war and made efforts to strengthen the Golden Horde again.

The epic poem "Edige" is treated as one of the pearls of the Turkic peoples' verbal creativity (Sagitov, 1986). It has the largest number of national versions, being widespread among many peoples such as Bashkirs, Karakalpaks, Kazakhs, Nogais, Tatars, Turkmens, Uzbeks and other Turkic peoples who inhabited Central Asia, Siberia, the Volga region, the Caucasus and Crimea. The poem has been subjected to numerous qualitative textual analyses focusing on its content and artistic features (Urmanche, 2015), poetic features characteristic of its different versions (Zhanpeissova & Kuzembayeva, 2019), the history of its creation (Assanov et al., 2016), religious and mythological aspects (Nurdauletova, 2012). A more recent study has looked at the functioning and cultural meaning of place names in the Kazakh and Tatar versions of the poem (Kenbayeva et al., 2022). It also showed that through toponyms in the national versions of the epic poem "Edige" a special microcosm was created displaying the reality that the Turkic peoples are familiar with and revealing valuable data on the life and interaction between the Turkic peoples for several hundred years.

Despite the acknowledged significance of toponyms in preserving the cultural heritage of a nation, little attention has been paid to examining native speakers' perception of the connection between toponyms in national folklore and cultural heritage. The analysis of toponyms can provide a description of the spiritual culture and worldview of the people who speak the given language (Vasil'eva & Dmitrieva, 2021). Given recent advances in qualitative investigations into the role of toponyms in national folklore and especially the epic poem "Edige", this study goes further to quantitatively explore attitudes of native speakers of the Turkic languages, to whom the poem and toponyms used there are sure to have a lot of meaning. The purpose of the current research is to examine, by means of a questionnaire developed specially for this study, Turkic young representatives' attitudes to the role of toponyms used in the epos "Edige" in preserving their nations' cultural heritage. We will show how modern speakers of such Turkic languages as Kazakh, Tatar and Karakalpak perceive the role of toponyms in national folklore and how the knowledge of place names in epic literature contributes to the collective memory about particular places and passing it down through generations.

II. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

The current investigation has an embedded mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011). In order to explore Turkic people's attitudes to toponyms used in the epic poem "Edige", a questionnaire was conducted among representatives of three Turkic nations – Kazakh, Tatar and Karakalpak. The questionnaire was aimed at undergraduate students, as they are generally considered a socially active group, being quite numerous and socially and demographically significant (Shunkeyeva et al., 2020). Student youths are also viewed by Groff et al. (2022) as "a pressure cooker of high-speed renewal", enabling a wider understanding of language change in society. The questionnaire allowed collecting and analyzing quantitative and qualitative research data on how Kazakh, Tatar and Karakalpak students understand the role of toponyms in preserving their national cultural heritage. The questionnaire

contained closed-ended and open-ended questions to enable quantitative and qualitative analyses of the respondents' attitudes.

B. Participants

The sample for the current investigation comprised 214 undergraduate students aged between 17 and 25 studying Pedagogy and Philology at three universities in Kazakhstan, Tatarstan and Karakalpakstan: M. Utemisov West Kazakhstan University (78 students), Naberezhnye Chelny State Pedagogical University (20 students) and Nukus State Pedagogical University (116 students). The language of instruction at each university is conditioned by its location: all subjects at M. Utemisov West Kazakhstan University are taught in the Kazakh language, while at Naberezhnye Chelny State Pedagogical University in Russian and/or Tatar, and Nukus State Pedagogical University in Karakalpak. In the introductory part of the questionnaire, the respondents were asked to provide information regarding their gender, age, nationality and native tongue, year of studies and major. The collected data demonstrating the distribution of the variables in the samples' profiles are presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1
SAMPLES' PROFILE

Variables		Frequency (percent)		
		Kazakh sample	Tatar sample	Karakalpak sample
Gender	Female	68 (87.2%)	19 (95%)	89 (76.7%)
	Male	10 (12.8%)	1 (5%)	27 (23.3%)
Age	17	8 (10.25%)	1 (5%)	0 (0%)
	18	8 (10.25%)	11 (55%)	0 (0%)
	19	48 (61.5%)	0 (0%)	3 (3.6%)
	20	12 (15.4%)	4 (20%)	12 (10.3%)
	21	2 (2.6%)	0 (0%)	29 (25%)
	22	0 (0%)	4 (20%)	24 (20.7%)
	23	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	21 (18.1%)
	24	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	18 (15.5%)
Nationality	Karakalpak	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	93 (80.2%)
	Kazakh	76 (97.4%)	0 (0%)	5 (4.3%)
	Russian	1 (1.3%)	6 (30%)	0 (0%)
	Tatar	1 (1.3%)	14 (70%)	0 (0%)
	Turkmen	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	4 (3.4%)
	Uzbek	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	14 (12.1%)
Native tongue	Karakalpak	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	103 (88.8%)
	Kazakh	78 (100%)	0 (0%)	1 (0.9%)
	Russian	0 (0%)	8 (40%)	0 (0%)
	Tatar	0 (0%)	12 (60%)	0 (0%)
	Turkmen	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (1.7%)
	Uzbek	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	10 (8.6%)
Year of studies	First, Bachelor	13 (16.7%)	12 (60%)	0 (0%)
	Second, Bachelor	19 (24.3%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
	Third, Bachelor	36 (46.2%)	3 (15%)	49 (42.2%)
	Fourth, Bachelor	10 (12.8%)	5 (25%)	67 (57.8%)
Major	Pedagogy	43 (55.1%)	13 (65%)	71 (61.2%)
	Philology	35 (44.9%)	7 (35%)	45 (38.8%)

In our questionnaire, we aimed to involve students from two educational backgrounds related to examining and teaching national culture, and sought for more or less equal distribution in number, as well as on the age and gender basis. The participation in the questionnaire was voluntary, and we distributed the questions among undergraduate students at the three universities in three locations. Obviously, students from Nukus State Pedagogical University in Karakalpakstan participated in the questionnaire more willingly. This partially accounts for the uneven distribution of age variables, as undergraduate students who participated in the questionnaire appear to be of a larger average age. The research sample also demonstrates an uneven distribution of gender variables, which is consistent with the general observation that the majority of students choosing educational programs in Pedagogy and Philology are female, as opposed to technical universities where the majority of students are normally male (Aleshinskaya & Vasilieva, 2025). Moreover, this accords with the observation made by Lippa et al. (2014) that it is more typical of women to be employed in people-oriented occupations such as teachers. Regarding the nationality and native tongue, a greater diversity is demonstrated by students of Nukus State Pedagogical University in Karakalpakstan. The proportion of students studying Pedagogy is larger than that for Philology in all the three samples, which can be related to the universities' specializations.

C. Data Collection

The data for the current investigation were collected through the online questionnaire distributed among students of the three universities using Google forms. The questionnaire for this study was inspired by the survey conducted by Hakala et al. (2015). The statements in the abovementioned study addressed the relation between place names and name

branding, so we followed the authors' general idea but modified and added our own questions to avoid connection with name branding and build ties with national folklore. The aim of our questionnaire was to find out the students' perception of using place names from a famous epic poem in their everyday life and the role of these toponyms in their national culture. The questionnaire contained ten closed-ended items and an open-ended item in the form of statements divided into three main parts.

The first part of the questionnaire included five closed-ended questions devoted to the respondents' individual understanding of place names from the poem and relation to them and their native place: (1) Some of the toponyms in the poem "Edige" name the place(s) where I live/come from; (2) I understand the meanings of the place names used in the poem; (3) I know the history (etymology) of the place names in the poem; (4) The place names in the poem reflect the history and culture of the place where I live/come from; (5) I use the names of the places in the poem in everyday life. The second part of the questionnaire addresses the respondents' attitudes to the ties between toponyms in national folklore and their national culture: (6) The poem "Edige" is important for the culture of the place where I live/come from; (7) Most or all of the place names in the poem are official names (can be found on the maps, signs, etc.); (8) It is important to know the etymology and meaning of the place names in the poem; (9) If the place names in the poem were changed, part of the place's history and culture would be lost; (10) If the place names were removed from the poem, part of the place's history and culture would be lost.

The variants of responses to the closed-ended questions were based on the Likert scale from 5 (completely agree) to 1 (completely disagree). No optional responses were offered for the final open-ended question in the third part of the questionnaire, and the respondents were expected to provide their own detailed comments to the questions in the previous two parts. Informed consent was obtained from the students to take part in the questionnaire and to process their responses.

D. Data Analysis

To ensure the reliability and validity of the mixed-methods study, we tried to maintain both emic and epic perspectives in the analysis of the research data. The epic approach was based on the quantitative analysis of the responses to the closed-ended questions using the Google spreadsheets. This enabled us to calculate the frequencies and proportions of the responses to Questions 1–10 (the first and second parts of the questionnaire). Normalized frequencies of the participants' responses were calculated to enable identifying similarities and differences between the samples that are different numbers. The interpretations of the students' responses to the closed-ended questions were based on a 5-grade Likert scale.

The emic approach was based on the thematic analysis of the subjective data provided by the participants of the questionnaire in their responses to the final open-ended question. The thematic analysis of the students' comments was based on the deduction of the main meanings (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011). The qualitative analysis of the respondents' comments allowed identifying the following themes: the toponyms from the poem employed officially and on a daily basis; the existence of the real place names in the locations under discussion; the significance of place names in the local history and culture. The combination of quantitative and qualitative analyses was implemented to obtain reliable and trustworthy data about the students' attitudes to the role of toponyms used in the national epos "Edige" to the preservation of national cultural heritage.

III. FINDINGS

A. Quantitative Results

This section presents the results obtained through the analysis of quantitative data provided in the students' responses to the closed-ended questions of the questionnaire. Table 2 displays the normalized frequencies of the respondents' attitudes expressed in their answers to the first part of the questionnaire (Questions 1–5). In this part of the questionnaire, the participants provided responses to the statements regarding their personal understanding of toponyms from the epic poem "Edige", as well as relation to them and their native place. The normalized frequencies of the students' responses are given per 100.

TABLE 2
NORMALIZED FREQUENCIES OF STUDENTS' RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS 1–5 (PER 100)

Question	Variants of responses	Responses by sample		
		Kazakh	Tatar	Karakalpak
1. Some of the toponyms in the poem "Edige" name the place(s) where I live/come from.	I completely agree.	16.67	15	45.69
	I partly agree.	24.36	40	23.27
	I neither agree nor disagree.	41.03	45	11.21
	I partly disagree.	5.13	0	9.48
	I completely disagree.	12.82	0	10.34
2. I understand the meanings of the place names used in the poem.	I completely agree.	20.51	15	23.27
	I partly agree.	28.2	50	37.93
	I neither agree nor disagree.	37.18	35	13.79
	I partly disagree.	5.13	0	18.96
3. I know the history (etymology) of the place names in the poem.	I completely agree.	11.54	10	12.07
	I partly agree.	41.03	45	40.52
	I neither agree nor disagree.	28.2	40	23.27
	I partly disagree.	6.41	0	18.96
4. The place names in the poem reflect the history and culture of the place where I live/come from.	I completely agree.	12.82	5	5.17
	I completely agree.	26.92	20	39.65
	I partly agree.	41.03	35	22.41
	I neither agree nor disagree.	14.1	40	13.79
5. I use the names of the places in the poem in everyday life.	I partly disagree.	3.85	5	13.79
	I completely disagree.	14.1	0	10.34
	I completely agree.	7.69	0	13.79
	I partly agree.	33.34	45	37.07
	I neither agree nor disagree.	19.23	45	14.65
	I partly disagree.	15.38	5	27.59
	I completely disagree.	24.36	5	6.9

As seen from Table 2, the responses to the first part of the questionnaire reveal differences in attitudes between representatives of different locations. A vast majority of Karakalpak students agreed completely or partly with the first statement, "Some of the toponyms in the poem 'Edige' name the place(s) where I live/come from", while Kazakh and Tatar students expressed more uncertainty. In their responses to the second statement, a large number of students from different ethnic backgrounds acknowledged that they completely or partly understand the meanings of the place names used in the poem. Yet, a considerable number of respondents from Kazakhstan and Tatarstan neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement. In response to the third statement, most students from all the three locations agree, however partly, that they know the history (etymology) of the place names in the poem. At the same time, quite a lot of responses in the Tatar sample expressed the participants' uncertainty regarding their knowledge of the history and etymology of toponyms used in the epic poem.

A slight contrast can be observed in the responses to the fourth statement regarding the reflection of the local history and culture by means of the place names in the poem. The largest number of Karakalpak students strongly agreed with this statement, whereas the largest number of Kazakh and Tatar students agreed only to some extent. At the same time, a large number of Tatar students did not know how to respond to the fourth statement. The fifth statement, "I use the names of the places in the poem in everyday life", caused some contradiction in students' responses. Thus, the majority of participants from all the three universities partly agreed with this statement. Meanwhile, a quite large number of Karakalpak students partly disagreed, and a large proportion of Kazakh students completely disagreed with the statement. None of Tatar students agreed completely, however a significant number of them did not know what to answer again. It is noteworthy that the frequency of the response "I neither agree nor disagree" among students from the university in Tatarstan is considerably higher than of those from Kazakhstan and Karakalpakstan. Probably, Tatar respondents were rather undecided on these statements. This issue requires further investigation on a larger sample of participants from Tatarstan.

Table 3 displays the normalized frequencies of the respondents' attitudes expressed in their answers to the second part of the questionnaire (Questions 6–10). The second part of the questionnaire focuses on the participants' perception of the ties between toponyms in national folklore and their national culture. The normalized frequencies of the students' responses are provided per 100.

TABLE 3
NORMALIZED FREQUENCIES OF STUDENTS' RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS 6–10 (PER 100)

Question	Variants of responses	Responses by sample		
		Kazakh	Tatar	Karakalpak
6. The poem "Edige" is important for the culture of the place where I live/come from.	I completely agree.	15.38	30	67.24
	I partly agree.	35.9	25	14.65
	I neither agree nor disagree.	8.97	45	4.31
	I partly disagree.	24.36	0	7.76
	I completely disagree.	15.38	0	6.03
7. Most or all of the place names in the poem are official names (can be found on the maps, signs, etc.).	I completely agree.	12.82	10	31.03
	I partly agree.	29.49	35	25
	I neither agree nor disagree.	33.34	50	24.14
	I partly disagree.	7.69	0	12.93
8. It is important to know the etymology and meaning of the place names in the poem.	I completely agree.	12.82	5	6.9
	I partly agree.	21.79	25	76.24
	I neither agree nor disagree.	25.64	35	13.79
	I partly disagree.	28.2	35	3.45
9. If the place names in the poem were changed, part of the place's history and culture would be lost.	I completely disagree.	12.82	5	4.31
	I completely agree.	11.54	0	11.21
	I partly agree.	21.79	40	57.76
	I partly disagree.	23.08	35	14.65
10. If the place names were removed from the poem, part of the place's history and culture would be lost.	I neither agree nor disagree.	25.64	25	6.9
	I partly disagree.	14.1	0	6.9
	I completely disagree.	15.38	0	13.79
	I completely agree.	28.2	30	57.76
	I partly agree.	20.51	45	10.34
	I neither agree nor disagree.	28.2	25	10.34
	I partly disagree.	5.13	0	6.03
	I completely disagree.	17.95	0	15.52

As shown in Table 3, the absolute majority of Karakalpak respondents completely agreed with the sixth statement that the poem "Edige" is important for the local culture. On the other hand, opposite views were expressed by Kazakh respondents, almost half of whom agreed completely or partly with the statement, while almost the other half expressed complete and partial disagreement. Slightly over a half of Tatar respondents agreed completely and partly with the sixth statement, whereas a little less than a half did not know whether they agreed or disagreed. The seventh statement, "Most or all of the place names in the poem are official names" was the only one in the questionnaire where the a third of Kazakh respondents and half of Tatar respondents chose the option "I neither agree nor disagree". Moreover, a large number of Karakalpak respondents chose the same option, meaning that this question was the most complicated to answer to all the participants of the questionnaire.

According to the responses to Question 8, most respondents agreed that it is important to know the etymology and meaning of the place names in the poem "Edige". Besides, quite a lot of them were sure that if the toponyms in the poem were changed, part of the local history and culture would be lost, and in case toponyms were removed from the poem, part of the local history and culture would be lost. It should be added here, however, that quite a few Karakalpak and Kazakh respondents, surprisingly, expressed complete disagreement with the final two statements. Yet, despite some disagreement, the responses showing agreement, both complete and partial, are significantly dominant in all the three samples.

B. Qualitative Results

The qualitative analysis of the respondents' answers to the open-ended question allowed arranging them into thematic groups. As a result of the thematic analysis, the following thematic groups of responses were identified: (1) whether real place names used in the epic poem exist in the locations under discussion; (2) what toponyms from the poem are utilized on an official or daily basis; (3) how the respondents see the significance of place names in the local history and culture.

Among the toponyms that exist in the localities under consideration, many respondents mentioned the toponyms *Oyil* and *Kyil*, which are located on the territory of modern Kazakhstan. These toponyms were mentioned more than a hundred times. The toponyms *Qubakol* and *Qumykent* were mentioned in the students' responses 25 times. Most respondents believe that the toponyms *Qubakol* and *Qumykent* (translated as "a city of sand") are a desert, although in the Kazakh and Tatar national versions these toponyms are found in the form of a city where the main hero of the epic, Edige, was born. The hydronyms *Kargaly* and *Elek* were mentioned 18 times in the respondents' answers. Some respondents also mentioned *Altyn Orda*, a khanate that appeared in the Nogai period; the main hero of the epic, Edige, lived and ruled the Golden Horde. In the respondents' answers, the Golden Horde (*Altyn Orda*) was mentioned 9 times. The respondents who mentioned the Golden Horde believe that all toponyms, despite the fact that they are not used in everyday life or do not exist on the map of modern Karakalpakstan, are a source of historical information related not only to culture but also to nature. Moreover, in the respondents' answers, it is stated that the toponyms reflect ancient migrations and interethnic contacts of the Turkic peoples.

Regarding the second theme, most respondents agreed that many toponyms are not found on the geographical map of modern Karakalpakstan, Kazakhstan or Tatarstan, but they are sure that the Turks, who led a nomadic lifestyle, once inhabited the banks of the rivers *Edil* and *Zhaiyk*. Therefore, it is no surprise that the respondents mentioned the toponyms *Edil* and *Zhaiyk* in their comments about 150 times. Moreover, according to some respondents, if the toponyms *Edil* and *Zhaiyk* are removed from the epic, the work will lose its importance, because they are a significant part of the lexicon of the poem “Edige”. All the toponyms that are found in the epic poem “Edige” determine the place and historical background of the action of the work. By naming the place of the characters’ movement, the narrator carries out a geographical concretization of the event described. All the toponyms found in the poem are real, and all of them are connected with the history of the Turkic peoples.

It is also important to note that respondents wrote that the above-mentioned toponyms are found not only in the epic poem “Edige”, but also in Karakalpak classical works. Many Karakalpak respondents indicated that the toponyms *Zhaiyk* and *Edil* are found, for example, in Karakalpak folk songs, which they often hear or sing themselves at traditional events. For example, the song “Zhailauym” (translated as “summer, stay on summer pastures”) describes the difficult life of the Karakalpaks after migrating from the land of Turkestan.

The respondents gave numerous comments on the significance of toponyms in the local history and culture. Below are selected comments to provide a general overview of the respondents’ opinions, regardless of their local belonging: “Toponyms are our memory of language, history and geography”; “We need toponyms to know where we live”; “It is important to know the history of our geography. It is important to know the places where our heroes fought for the sake of the country”; “The study of geographical names is of great scientific value, illuminating unknown facts from the distant depths of the history of a people, revealing obscure aspects of the directions of its migration, military alliances, etc.”; “Toponyms are a reflection of the history of a nation, they record various periods of development and prosperity of the language and culture of a society”; “Important place names for history and culture depend on the context and interests. For example, ancient cities such as Rome or Athens are of great importance for the history of civilization. In everyday situations, language depends on the place of residence, and the use of place names can be related to geography, history or culture”. Several responses mention the connection of place names with future: “The toponyms used in this poem will undoubtedly remain in history, serving as a good lesson for future generations”; “A world where history and culture are intertwined for our future”. Thus, Kazakh, Tatar and Karakalpak students are united in their belief that toponyms used in the national epos “Edige” are a valuable cultural heritage that reflects elements of the material and spiritual culture of the Turkic peoples.

IV. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

The current study was devoted to examining Turkic young representatives’ attitudes to the role of toponyms used in the well-known national epos “Edige” in preserving their nations’ cultural heritage. To the best of our knowledge, such an empirical analysis has not been performed so far. The results of our questionnaire are in fairly good agreement with those of the survey conducted by Hakala et al. (2015) in their investigation into the residents’ views on the role of toponyms as the carriers of identity and heritage being further transferred to the place brand. According to the researchers, place names have a significant historical and cultural value, and in carrying memories of the place’s past, they represent its collective memory. Furthermore, place names are closely related to place branding from the heritage perspective. The heritage perspective is what the researchers’ and our studies have in common. However, unlike the study on heritage as a tool for place branding, our research attempted to empirically establish relation between place names and national culture through national folklore.

As a result of the empirical investigation, toponyms in national folklore are shown to essentially contribute to the collective memory about a particular place and transferring it from one generation to another. In accordance with the participants’ responses to ten closed-ended and one open-ended questions, a significant number of Kazakh, Tatar and Karakalpak students believe that, although toponyms from the epic poem “Edige” are not widely used either in official documents or in everyday situations, they still perform an essential function in preserving the historical and cultural heritage of the Turkic peoples. Through toponyms, the respondents relate to places that are historically and culturally important, and the knowledge of their origins and meanings should be passed on from one generation to another thus preserving the cultural heritage. Based on the responses of modern speakers of such Turkic languages as Kazakh, Tatar and Karakalpak, we conclude that the knowledge of place names in epic literature contributes to the collective memory about certain places and passing it down through generations. Moreover, considering the relatively large number of “I neither agree nor disagree” responses, a serious step in the preservation of cultural heritage through place names in national folklore would be to integrate culturally meaningful narratives into education, as suggested by Toibazar et al. (2025). Probably, the frequent use of the option “I neither agree nor disagree” in the students’ responses to the statements in the questionnaire is indicative of the lack of culturally rich content comprising Turkic epic literature in the curriculum.

The current research has several limitations. Based on the results of the present investigation, it has been shown that place names employed in national versions of the famous Turkic epic poem reveal the common cultural code inherent in the Turkic peoples, as they are characterized by a common Nomadic lifestyle and culture (Kenbayeva et al., 2022). The respondents’ detailed comments confirm the idea of being united with the common cultural code (Pangereyev et al.,

2023). At the same time, the responses seem to lack comments showing any significant differences in perceiving individual cultures through place names. A further direction of the research could be to address the cultural originality of the Turkic peoples by focusing on aspects that seemed essential to those who named culturally important places (Lim Tyan Gin & Perono Cacciafoco, 2021) that would point at the specificity of the worldview and culture of a particular Turkic people. Moreover, the present study is limited by a relatively small research sample, especially the Tatar sample. A larger sample involving participants representing a wider geography of the Turkic peoples and a higher number of universities would permit more discrepancies between the various samples to be observed in the students' responses to the closed-ended questions. This would enable a better understanding of actual differences between the Turkic peoples allowing us to draw conclusions regarding their individuality.

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