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## SYMBOLISM OF JEWELRY IN TRADITIONAL KARAKALPAK COSTUME IN THE CONTEXT OF HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

**Abstract.** *The authors of this article analyze the relationship between the people's spiritual culture, reflected in the Karakalpak heroic poem "Kyrk-Kyz" (Forty Girls), and its reflection in objects of material culture, specifically women's jewelry from the traditional wedding attire of a Karakalpak bride. They note the profound connection between jewelry art and archaic notions of the universe and the human being's place within it. They illustrate the transformation of the semantic content of jewelry objects from magical, protective, and ritualistic components to military symbols. Based on an analysis of specific elements of the costume complex, they conclude that decorative and applied art is closely intertwined with both ideological symbolism and the cultural and historical context and aesthetic values shaped by this context.*

**Keywords:** *costume complex, decorative and applied art, epic poem, jewelry symbolism, Karakalpak bride.*

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## СИМВОЛІКА ПРИКРАС У ТРАДИЦІЙНОМУ КАРАКАЛПАЦЬКОМУ КОСТЮМІ В КОНТЕКСТІ ІСТОРИЧНОЇ Й КУЛЬТУРНОЇ ІДЕНТИЧНОСТІ

**Анотація.** *Автори статті аналізують стосунки між духовною культурою народу, відображеною в героїчному епосі каракалпаків «Кірк-Киз» («Сорок дівчат»), та її віддзеркаленням у предметах матеріальної культури, зокрема, жіночих прикрас з традиційного весільного вбрання каракалпацької нареченої. Завважено глибинний зв'язок між ювелірним мистецтвом та архаїчними уявленнями про Всесвіт та місце людини у ньому. Проілюстровано трансформацію семантики прикрас з магичних, захисних та ритуальних артефактів у військові символи. На підставі аналізу конкретних елементів костюму зроблено висновок про те, що декоративно-ужиткове мистецтво щільно переплітається як з ідеологічною символікою, так і з культурно-історичним контекстом та естетичними цінностями, сформованими цим контекстом.*

**Ключові слова:** *костюм, комплекс, декоративно-ужиткове мистецтво, епічна поема, символіка прикрас, каракалпацька наречена.*



**Figure 1.** A young Karakalpak woman in a traditional costume wearing an arebek, a nose ring

**Introduction.** The flip side of the globalization process characterized in general by an attempt to unify and stereotype all aspects of human activity unexpectedly sparked a renewed interest in questions of cultural identity. Cultural identity – that is, the sense of belonging to a particular community – typically requires a certain visualization, which is most clearly realized through clothing, and often through jewelry. Clothing, jewelry, and accessories easily and clearly demonstrate membership in a particular ethnic, religious, professional, status, or political group (Prokopovich, 2016).

Jewelry making is one of the oldest traditional forms of decorative and applied art serving as a kind of universal cultural language, a unique repository of spirituality, ethnic memory, archetypes, and a people's worldview. It also often serves as a symbolic model of their history and cultural and historical connections. Accordingly, the study of the origins, reproduction, and existence of jewelry in a cultural and historical context, as well as the



**Figure 2.** Jewelry – amulet holder haykel, bracelets with rings

examination of its symbolic nature and meaning, is crucial in the context of the research and revival of national, historical, and cultural traditions. This ranges from the applied and mundane to the magical and sacred. In this work, the authors attempt to trace the historical relationship between spiritual and material culture using jewelry as an integral part of the Karakalpak national bridal costume.

As researchers note (Bayalieva, 1972; Bekmuratova, 1969; Alieva, 2004), examining jewelry in the context of its symbolism leads to the following conclusions:

- 1) The origin of jewelry is often linked to amulets and talismans, which, when used in various rituals, were elements of a person's daily life.
- 2) The cultural and historical significance of jewelry lies in its role in the reproduction, preservation, and transmission of ethnic culture and the historical memory of peoples.
- 3) The symbolism of jewelry is often closely intertwined with the main aspects of the worldview of a person of traditional culture: his ideas about the surrounding world, the structure of the Universe and its connection with human life (solar, lunar symbols), the surrounding natural world (animalistic symbols).

**Previous Research in the Area.** When discussing research in the fields of ethnography, decorative and applied arts, and specifically jewelry in Karakalpakstan, it's important to note the outstanding role played by the artist, restorer, archaeologist, and collector I.V. Savitsky (1915-1984), a native of Kyiv. He formed a unique collection of artifacts that formed the core of the collection of the State Museum of Arts in Nukus (the capital of the Republic of Karakalpakstan), of which he was the founder and first director, and which now bears his name. Igor Vitalyevich Savitsky was one of the first to lay the foundations for a scientific approach to the study of the traditions of Karakalpakstan's folk applied arts during the Soviet period. Savitsky's student Marinika Maratovna Babanazarova succeeded Igor Vitalyevich as the museum's director and dedicated many years to preserving, expanding, and popularizing knowledge about the distinctive culture of Karakalpakstan. Among contemporary researchers, we would like to mention Zafara Jumabayevna Alieva, PhD in Art History and senior researcher at the Institute of Art Studies of the Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Uzbekistan (Tashkent), whose research on the sym-

bolism of Karakalpak jewelry served as the basis for this article.

**Results and Discussion.** Turning directly to traditional Karakalpak costume, it should be noted that its symbolism is closely intertwined not only with numerous folk beliefs and legends, but also with historical events and stages in the formation and existence of the ethnic group. Traditional costume holds a special place in the spiritual life of the people, and various customs, rituals, symbolic and mythopoetic ideas associated with clothing and jewelry persisted in traditional Karakalpak culture until the first third of the 20th century. These symbolic ideas were most clearly manifested in jewelry, an integral part of the traditional costume. In addition to their aesthetic value, Karakalpak jewelry invariably carried magical properties: protective, healing, and productive (Allamuratov, 2019).

Some of these, especially earrings, pectorals, and bracelets, were traditionally worn until the 1930s. Jewelry, as elements of a woman's attire, has always accompanied her from early childhood to old age. Initially, these were simple protective adornments. As a girl matured, they became more complex, increasing in number, with the greatest number of adornments worn, of course, during the wedding ceremony and the first years of marriage. This is the period when, according to popular belief, a woman is most vulnerable to external influences, and the entire meaning of the jewelry she wears is associated with a protective power designed to protect her and her future offspring (Aliyeva, 2022).

We will briefly examine here some of the most significant elements of traditional Karakalpak women's jewelry. The making of earring and nose studs is considered a special category of traditional jewelry art. Moreover, the nose stud, or *arebek*, which was pierced, usually on the right nostril (Fig. 1), was imbued with magical properties capable of protecting a woman's sense of smell and breath from the influence of evil spirits.

Another popular form of jewelry making was wrist jewelry. Luxurious bracelets connected to rings by thin chains (Fig. 2) stood out for their distinctive shape. The massive shape of these bracelets clearly resembles a piece of armor used to protect the hands (Fig. 3).

Metals such as silver, and less commonly copper and bronze alloy were used for jewelry making. Gilding was also used. Colored minerals such as carnelian and turquoise, as well as exotic ma-



**Figure 3.** Art historian Z. Aliyeva demonstrates Turkmen jewelry – a Tekin bracelet resembling a combat bracer, and a pectoral brooch (converted into a ring), shaped like a combat shield or shoulder guard. These Turkmen jewelry pieces are similar in shape and decoration to Karakalpak ones

rine fossils such as coral, mother-of-pearl, and cowrie shells, were traditionally used for inlays (Aliyeva, 2021).

The history of headdresses, such as the *saukele* and *tobelik*, dates back to ancient times. The *saukele* is a traditional bridal headdress, a soft, helmet-like cap made of felt, covered with red cloth, and richly decorated with patterned metal plaques and pendants (Fig. 4). This is, of course, a mixed technique – a combination of jewelry, embroidery, and sewing. Coral beads are arranged in tight rows on the earflaps and forehead, and between the coral beads are metal plates, also inlaid with coral or turquoise.

The pectoral jewelry *haykel* is a flat rectangle with horn-like branches at the top and pendants at the bottom (Fig. 5). Its front side was decorated with large carnelian inlays (according to popular belief, carnelian was a talisman), which were popularly called *haykel kas* – the “eyebrows” of the



**Figure 4.** Saukele is a traditional bridal headdress. From the private collection of American researcher Adam Albion. (WOSCU, 2024)

ornament. Interestingly, the word “haykel” translates as “idol, monument.” Scholars suggest that the hollow central part of the jewelry may have originally been used as a case for amulets (needles, pieces of coal, salt, fragrant and bitter-tasting



**Figure 5.** A jewelry amulet haykel from the collection of the Savitsky State Museum of Arts, Nukus

plants) or figurines of idols. Later, with the advent of Islam, it began to be used to store Quranic texts with prayers (Alieva, 2022).

The ornamentation covering the surface of the jewelry also had a specific meaning. Jewelry featured plant patterns – leaves, shoots, and grains – symbolizing fertility. Karakalpak beliefs ascribed special magical properties to the horns, fangs, and claws of animals or birds. This is why stylized horns and claws are so common in jewelry designs. For example, almost all Karakalpak haykels have a horn-like top. Images of horned rams’ heads symbolizing prosperity and fertility are also located on the temple of the saukele, among the corals. They also serve as guardians against hostile forces (Allamuratov, 2019).

When discussing Karakalpak jewelry and women’s wedding attire in general, one cannot help but note their obvious resemblance to military equipment. Many Karakalpak jewelry pieces, especially headpieces, chestpieces, and wristpieces, are distinguished by their impressive size and weight, giving them a monumental appearance, reminiscent of armor. Furthermore, complex jewelry consists of numerous interconnected elements. This complex, multi-layered construction resembles chainmail or so-called lamellar armor (armor made of plates woven together with cord).

Particularly notable in this regard are traditional types of jewelry such as the haykel (a chest ornament that was the main part of a girl’s dowry) – a massive ornament that resembles a piece of protective armor. Also notable is the bride’s headdress, which consists of two parts, the saukele and the tobelik, resembling a combat helmet (Fig. 6), and is considered one of the most distinctive Karakalpak jewelry items.

Researchers interpret the name saukele in various ways, for example, as “royal cap” or “whole, healthy head”. In general, the wedding attire of saukele and tobelik retained features of royal crowns, which is associated with the likening of the wedding couple to a prince and princess, and the bride to a fertility goddess (Alieva, 2018). The term saukele appears in the Karakalpak epic “Kyrk-kyz” (“Forty Girls”), which tells the story of a squad of warrior girls. One of the leaders of the Amazon girls, Sarbinaz, dons such a headdress before battles.

The heroic poem “Kyrk-kyz”, recorded in 1940 from the words of the famous folk storyteller Kur-

banbai Tazhibaev (1876-1958) in the Turtkul district of the Karakalpak ASSR, gained widespread popularity. During the Soviet era, it was translated into Uzbek, Kazakh, Turkmen, Kyrgyz, Russian (Arseny Tarkovsky, 1951), and Lithuanian. Like other similar works, the epic is multilayered; it appears to have been composed in various historical eras, reflecting both ancient and more recent events, particularly military clashes that took place in the Khorezm oasis in the 18th century.

The epic poem “Kyrk-kyz”, which tells the story of a detachment of girls led by the king’s daughter, Gulaiym, is considered a unique work in Central Asia, with ancient roots presumably linked to the Saka-Massaget tribes and matriarchal traditions. The main plot of “Kyrk-kyz”, as noted by experts (Meletinsky, 1985), largely echoes Herodotus’s account of the Massagetan queen Tomyris and her war with the Persian king Cyrus the Great, as well as Diodorus Siculus’s account of the Saka queen Zarina, who liberated her people from foreign dependence. The main character, Gulaiym, warrior and military leader, leads a detachment of forty girls called upon to defend her people from invaders. This sharply distinguishes “Kyrk-kyz” from most heroic epics of other Turkic peoples, where the protagonists are typically male.

In the epic “Kyrk-kyz”, Gulayim and her forty friends, as well as her beloved Arslan, fight against the troops of the Kalmyk Khan Surtaishi and the Iranian ruler Nadir Shah, and in it, as researchers note (Maksetov, 1958), the most ancient and archaic customs, characteristic of the social order of the ancestors of the Karakalpaks, are reflected.

**Conclusions.** Thus, when discussing the symbolism of Karakalpak national jewelry, it is necessary to note, on the one hand, their inextricable connection with archaic beliefs and ritual-magical functions. On the other hand, the features of the national worldview embodied in their forms, which finds a place for women – not only the guardians of the hearth, but also freedom-loving warriors, capable of taking up arms to defend their people, home, and hearth. This is undoubtedly confirmed by the outstanding literary monument “Kyrk-kyz”, which celebrates not only feminine beauty but also strength, courage, and devotion to one’s land. It is, in its own way, a unique cultural and historical phenomenon. It is a phenomenon of spiritual culture that has influenced, or at least reflected, the characteristics of material culture, in which the viv-



**Figure 6.** Karakalpak bridal attire: blue dress, red breast scarf (kyzyl kiymishek), tobelik and sauकेle on the head, and a haykel on the chest

id image of the warrior girl is captured not only in epic lines but also preserved to this day in elements of the bride’s costume. It’s also worth noting that various rituals and beliefs associated with clothing and jewelry continue to occupy a significant place in traditional Karakalpak life. Concepts regarding the protective and magical role of certain types

of clothing, jewelry, and stones have persisted for centuries. Although some of their sacred meanings have now been lost, they generally continue to be imbued with archetypal protective significance.

In conclusion, it can also be noted that various forms of traditional folk applied art provide exceptionally important and interesting material for studying the ideological, social, tribal, and aesthetic values of any ethnic group. And jewelry craftsmanship, learned by an apprentice from the hands of a master, remains a lasting legacy, passed down from generation to generation.

### Конфлікт інтересів

Автор не має потенційного конфлікту інтересів, який би міг вплинути на рішення про опублікування цієї статті.

### Використання штучного інтелекту

Штучний інтелект у дослідженні не застосовано.

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