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Kurai as Ethnocultural Symbol: Development from Artifact into Meaningful National Emblem of Bashkortostan

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Abstract. The present paper focuses on the peculiarities of symbolic meanings development drawing on the example of the Bashkir national symbol. The author turns to kurai, the traditional musical instrument of the Bashkir ethnos, with the aim to trace the national symbol development from an ethnic artifact into a meaningful emblem of a nation representing its culture and identity. The theoretical framework includes the scholarly considerations on culture code symbols representation, symbolic meanings and cultural connotations generation process. The methodological approach is critical and interdisciplinary benefiting from the contributions of Semiotics, Literature, Music and Art History, Cultural Anthropology and Linguistics. The paper is designed to highlight the types of cultural connotations the notion of kurai has developed. Thus, kurai manifestation is considered in the following aspects: auditory, visual and verbal. Drawing on the results of the multi-dimensional research undertaken, the author comes to the conclusion that kurai presents a pivotal cultural metaphor of the Bashkir nation conveying a distinct cultural message, giving insight into the cultural values and traditions of the nation under study and encapsulates the meanings fundamental to the Bashkir mindset and culture.

Keywords: kurai, cultural symbol, ethnocultural symbolic meaning, cultural connotation, cultural metaphor, visual metonymy.

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Курай: динамика становления национального символа от этнического артефакта до национальной эмблемы Республики Башкортостан

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Аннотация. В рамках данной публикации исследуется специфика возникновения и динамики развития этнокультурных символических значений на примере национального символа Республики Башкортостан. В фокусе исследования – курай, традиционный музыкальный инструмент башкир. Цель предпринятого изыскания – выявить особенности становления национального символа от этнического артефакта до национальной эмблемы, отражающей самобытную культуру и национальную картину мира. Теоретической основой послужили научные разработки отечественных и зарубежных исследователей в области семиотики, лингвокультурологии, языкознания, литературы, истории изобразительного и музыкального искусства. Специфика исследования потребовала обращения к междисциплинарной методике и аппарату семиотически ориентированных областей знания. Работа структурирована согласно динамике развития символизма курая и представляет акустическую, визуальную и языковую практики выражения национального атрибута. На основе полученных результатов автор приходит к выводу о том, что курай выступает как своеобразная культурная метафора башкирской культуры, отражающая мировоззрение и систему материальных и духовных ценностей башкирского народа.

Ключевые слова: курай, культурный символ, этнокультурное символическое значение, культурная коннотация, культурная метафора, визуальная метонимия.

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Introduction

The major emphasis of the present article is on an in-depth analysis of visual symbol development from an ethnic artifact into a meaningful emblem of a nation representing its culture and identity. With this aim I resort to one of the most significant national symbols of Bashkir people – **kurai** – which with the passing of time has undergone a successful transition from a

folk flute into the registered territorial brand of Bashkortostan and now embraces a set of diverse notions and visual forms.

The interest to and choice of that particular symbol is spurred by the following: firstly, the research will provide insight into the patterns and specifics of a national symbol development in general and kurai in particular. Secondly, kurai has become a unique and meaningful attribute

of Bashkortostan, giving clue to understanding some aspects of its culture. Thirdly, it would be instructive to see how via metaphorical and metonymical interpretation kurai has become a multilevel concept involving auditory, visual and verbal manifestations. And finally, it is one of the ways to profile Bashkir people identity and give tribute to my homeland multiethnic people united by the remarkable cultural heritage.

Motivated by these considerations, in the present study I discuss the following issues:

1. How did kurai come into being as a versatile national symbol of Bashkortostan?
2. Which kurai representations and practices are semiotically charged?
3. What symbolic meanings and cultural connotations does the symbol under study project?
4. Which aspects of cultural identity and nation memory it accumulates and conveys?
5. Has kurai developed semiotic potential conspicuous enough to be considered a symbol of Bashkir culture code?

In order to deal with these questions, the article will be organized according to the facets of kurai symbolic representations and dimensions via which its symbolic meanings are communicated.

Theoretical framework and methods

Much of the contemporary research about national symbols centers on the specific questions limited to certain spheres (visual, verbal, artistic, etc.). Subsequently, when analyzing present-day research on 'kurai' phenomenon it soon becomes apparent that it has been examined by the scholars of various fields from the viewpoints of its musical qualities, visual characteristics and linguistic realization (Galina, 2017; Ilyasov, 2009; Kulsarina, 2010; Kuskarova, 2021; Sulejmanov, 2002; Yamanova, 2022; etc.). With that in mind, I suggest that semiotic dimension makes it possible to integrate and combine various approaches to provide a comprehensive idea of a culture symbol manifestation, its development and functions. "Culture is a slippery concept <...>, refers to signifying, symbolic, or meaning system" (Delaney, 2011: 12–13) therefore its profiling involves a manifold approach.

Following S.S. Avanesov, I strongly believe that visual, auditory and verbal aspects are intrinsic parts of any cultural phenomenon, each providing significant insights into its meaning and interpretation. I support the idea that "various cultural-communicative complexes are semiotically charged", "language by itself involves formalized visual practice" and "semiotic charge <...> is realized on multifarious communicative levels and, accordingly, conveys a versatile pragmatic effect" (Avanesov, 2014: 12–13).

Similar views are expressed by S.V. Ivanova and Z.Z. Chanysheva who investigate linguocultural codes and state that "linguistic unit usage formalizes cultural markedness due to occurrence of the junction point to culture values dimension in the language matter" (Ivanova, Chanysheva, 2014: 157). The scholars classify cultural connotations as universal, regional, ethnocultural, social and individual. Furthermore S.V. Ivanova and Z.Z. Chanysheva define cultural connotations as declarative, axiological, associational, cognitive, precedent and stereotypical (Ivanova, Chanysheva, 2014: 159–162).

Noteworthy is M.L. Kovshova's premise, who studies how cultural codes are manifested through symbols and quasi-symbols. The researcher states that symbol is "a sign invariable including closely interrelated objective image and implication" (Kovshova, 2009: 28) and believes that cultural realia can hardly be treated as culture symbols but can objectify cultural values in idioms and, consequently, function as quasi-symbols (Kovshova, 2009: 30–31]. G.V. Tokarev develops this viewpoint and presents his insightful research of quasi-symbols. He considers Russian cultural code quasi-symbols, in particular highly-productive fetish ones, and identifies a set of values they project. The scholar defines the following features of quasi-symbols: specific idea connotation, semantic imperativeness, precedence and allusive character, polysemantics and potential semantic inexhaustibility (Tokarev, 2021). In keeping with G.V. Tokarev's definition, "a quasi-symbol is an element of an intermediate, linguocultural system, generated as a result of close interaction between language and culture. While a symbol is a sign of culture that

expresses some idea in an imperative manner, a quasi-symbol is a type of symbol that has a verbal nature” (Tokarev, 2020: 5).

All the above mentioned reflects scholarly attempts to gain a strict understanding of how symbols mirror culture codes, to identify and formalize culture manifestation. This task is quite challenging and elusive since symbolism is an incredibly complex natural process of new perception acquisition: humans begin to attribute additional qualities and functions to surrounding objects and phenomena (Ivanov, 2002). With that in mind the following assumptions underly the present research:

1. Symbol is the result of sign notional development in culture (Lotman, 1999), object transfer from material to ideal dimension (Kubryakova, 2005);

2. Symbols are culturally embedded and culturally interpreted; their function is culture elements consolidation (Lotman, 1999);

3. Symbol verbalization provides its consistence and variability of representations (Kovshova, 2008).

4. A linguistic sign acquires a symbolic meaning when it concurs with a culture code so that “the signified in the first system turns into the signifier in the second”; as a rule culture code material objects tend to develop symbolic meanings (Alekseev, 2016: 108). Symbolic meanings correlate with cultural connotations, the latter being primary (basic object level reflecting the national cognition specifics) and secondary (generated by culture code on the basis of the primary ones) (Ivanova, Chanyshva, 2014: 159).

It is my belief that multiform sources of evidence should be involved to provide in-depth understanding of kurai semiosis (verbal, audial, visual, etc.) and substantiate its analysis in terms of semiotic categories manifestation. The empirical data of this study includes literature and art, historical accounts, language corpus evidence, scholars’ published summaries of the folk flute impact and role in the Bashkir cultural heritage, my own observations (as native speaker and culture representative) of the traditions and practices intrinsic to the notion of kurai. Subsequently, the methodological approach is critical and interdisciplinary, benefiting from

the contributions of Semiotics, Literature, Art and Music History, Cultural Anthropology and Linguistics and involving such methods of research as descriptive and continuous sampling methods, conceptual, linguocultural and discourse analysis.

Discussion

1. Historical Background: Auditory Aspect

To begin with, **kurai** or **quray** (Bashkir ‘күрай’) is traditionally defined as “Bashkir musical wind instrument, type of end-blown flute. Kurai it made from the stem of umbelliferous namesake plant. Biological name – Urals *edgepistil* (*Pleurospermum uralense*). *The stem of the plant is measured 8–10 times the width of a palm and cut off. The holes are made beginning from the end <...>*. The kurai length is 510–810 mm. The scale is formed from the concatenation of two major pentatonic scales from the fundamental tone at a distance of a given interval. The range of a kurai consists of three octaves. The sound is poetically sublime, the tonal quality is soft, accompanied by a throaty, bourdon sound when played. Kurai is played as solo instrument and in a band. It is used to perform dance tunes and marches, program musical plays, onomatopoeic melodies and instrumental versions of chants” (BBE, 1996: 357–358) (Fig. 1).

From prehistoric times the end-blown flute type musical instrument was present in many nomadic cultures. So, it is natural that the Bashkir (and Tatar) kurai commonly correlates to the aerophones of diverse ethnicities around the globe. At the same time, unlike many ancient folk flutes worldwide which were confined to marginal role or faded into obscurity, it became the dominant musical instrument and epitome of the Bashkir nation voice: for centuries it served as a national history chronicler, folk wisdom and folklore keeper, essential element of nomadic people life. The following acoustic and articulatory properties are attributed to kurai:

- unique phonation and mellow timbre;
- specific sound imitating quality (crane cry, cuckooing, etc.);
- characteristic melancholic and harmonious sound (Iliasov, 2009; Kuskarova, 2021);



Fig. 1. Bashkir kurai. Public domain, Available at: <https://ru.wikipedia.org>

– similarity to human high-pitched male voice and the Bashkir language phonetics rich in onomatopoeic sound combinations, fricatives and soft hissing phonation (Bakhtyzina, Abzalilov, 2015).

Needless to say, the natural full-toned sound of kurai is repeatedly storied and mythologized as the aerophone parallels nomadic values passed down in Bashkir ethnos from generation to generation: mobility and endurance of yourt, South Ural air purity and transparency, dynamic life pace and meditative mindset (Bakhtyzina, Abzalilov, 2015: 104). In the Bashkir national narratives kurai is widely presented as a magic artifact: most existing legends stress its guardian and protective function, e.g., rescuing life and revealing dark secret of an evil khan or helping to find way out of a thick forest. As part of national heritage, it is mentioned in numerous folklore poems (kubairs) and eposes (Ural batyr, Akbuzat (winged horse), Kara Urga (black horse), Balakarga (fledgeling crow), Kungyr Buga (brown bull), Zayatulak and Hyuhylu, etc.).

The onomatopoeic quality of the musical instrument is noteworthy: kurai sound range is quite broad and it is compared to angry beehive humming, water stream roaring, quiet bumblebee buzzing and tender bird singing (Kulsarina, 2010: 931). That feature is reflected in the legend about cranes who scared away enemies and is skillfully developed in the ancient folk song Synrau Torna (clanging crane) imitating cranes cry and serving as appeal to nation (Bakhtyzina, Abzalilov, 2015; Kuskarova, 2021). Thus, kurai became the means of expressing nature connectedness and nature sacral worship, declaring them as part of the Bashkir national identity. Accordingly, kurai performing was part of Bashkirs existential competence and kurai sound would accompany every aspect of life, glorify-

ing the beautiful steppe nature, its freedom and vastitude, air and atmosphere. Today kurai as a musical instrument retains its mainstream role, it is defined as the Bashkir “national musical culture canon” (Skurko, 2002: 4) and is widely used in classical pieces, drawling folk songs (uzunkui) and the anthem of Bashkortostan. Needless to say, that from the point of view of semiotics, all the above-mentioned sonic features validate kurai as an *iconic* sign of Bashkir culture code since sound imitation is traditionally treated as “icon” manifestation (Brazgovskaya, 2023). Moreover the significance and symbolic character of kurai for the Bashkir ethnos is highlighted in numerous literary works by L.N. Tolstoy, D.N. Mamin-Sibiriyak, S.T. Aksakov, D. Lebedev, N. Krasheninnikov, S.P. Zlobin, V.I. Gerasimov, etc. Most of the Bashkir people presented in fiction are positive characters who play kurai thus expressing their emotions, remembering motherland and singing its beautiful nature (Kulsarina, 2010).

In other words, kurai as a musical instrument has over time developed distinct cultural connotations as ‘voice’ of the Bashkir ethnos and “musical language” complimenting and intensifying the native one.

2. Kurai Visual Representation

Another viable semiotically charged facet of kurai is its visual representation which happily conveys the symbolic meanings associated with its audial manifestation and contributes new connotations.

Strictly speaking, the shape of the folk flute, so advantageous for its transportation and performance, is apparently too simple to function as a distinguishable national image symbol. Therefore, the solution to the challenging task of kurai visualizing proved to be effective and ingenious: the Bashkir artists resorted to



Fig. 2. Kurai flower in nature and as emblem. Public domain, Available at: <https://bogatyр.club/53471-cvetok-kuraja.html>

the origin of the musical instrument – the umbelliferous plant, and created a stylized depiction of kurai flower: the plant corolla consists of seven blossom trusses, symbolizing seven Bashkir tribes’ unity and friendship (Fig. 2). That insightful image became the emblem and icon of Bashkortostan, part of cultural visual code appealing to the significant Bashkir culture artifact and core ethnic values.

Alongside with the latter, the stylized image turned into the source of artistic inspiration and basis for creative reinterpretation in the ornamental art, i.e., kurai flower was introduced as ethnic element in the Bashkir decorative art. In 1970s at the Bashkir art crafts enterprise “Agidel” the talented artisans developed the Bashkir decorative painting style drawing on the traditions of the famous Russian khokhloma style, the Bashkir traditional folk motifs and introducing the kurai flower element (Fig. 3).

Today the kurai flower is a mandatory element of the Bashkir symbolics in all types

of design. Present on the official emblems (the coat of arms and the flag of Bashkortostan), it is freely stylized and transformed in various events identica (sports activities, regional festival occasions and international meetings and ceremonies). The meaningful icon undergoes novel variations and is used in graphic design: brand logos, adverts and textiles (Yamanova, 2022; Munkhatova, Beketova, 2021). Moreover, kurai is monumentalized in different parts of the republic (Fig. 4).

To conclude the account on visual kurai representation, its high symbolic potential and representative image, I should mention an example of the decorative element application in modern architecture – the glamping recreation area designed in shape of the kurai flower and constructed in the picturesque area of the Ural Mountains (Karaidel district).

Apparently, kurai flower ornament is now effectively incorporated in diverse types of visual art implying regional affiliation and pride for



Fig. 3. Kurai flower element in decorative art. Public domain, Available at: http://kuglib.ru/_ld/21/68818781.jpg

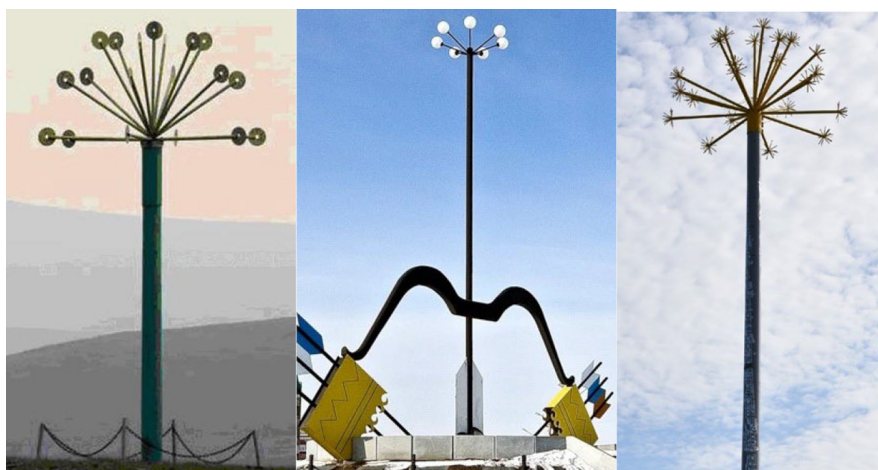


Fig. 4. Monuments to kurai. Public domain, Available at: <https://www.bashinform.ru/>



Fig. 5. Glamping site “Kurai Riverside” Public domain, Available at: <https://ufa.rbc.ru/ufo/05/05/2023/6454c34b9a79472baaa9f6ee>

the nation. As a result, it has taken the rightful place of a compelling Bashkortostan label and discernible element of the visual culture code.

This list of facts suggests that the visual representation of kurai is *symbolic* manifestation of visual metonymy which is not surprising since “from the perspective of Peircean semiotics, metonymic relations are seen as derived from the semiotic principle of *indexicality*, including relations such as cause and effect, part and whole, container and contained, and so on” (Feng, 2017: 442). Moreover, “the fact that in both metonymy and symbolism we say that one thing ‘stands for’ something else already suggests that symbols are metonymically

motivated” (Forceville, 2009: 22). It is my belief that the visual metonymy of kurai serves as a potent means of conveying a distinct cultural message through visual domains of artistic endeavor and furnishes a visual form of the Bashkir cultural knowledge. Apart from that, the visual representation of kurai can be regarded *iconic*, due to its obvious physical connections between the signifier and its meaning, and, at the same time, *symbolic* since the meanings attributed to the image are conventional.

3. Kurai Manifestation in Verbal Dimension

In what follows, I will focus on verbal dimension of symbolic communication and fur-

nish a number of examples to demonstrate how kurai as symbol is formalized in natural language as “language is efficient means of symbolic meanings expression” (Kovshova, 2008: 20). In an attempt to gain an understanding of how symbol is verbalized many researchers resort to a symbolic component study in the figurative language, e.g., phraseological units, considering an idiom as a secondary semiotization unit and a language sign making use of other linguistic units symbolization (Kovshova, 2008). Another credible source of symbol verbalization is onomastics since proper names carry a distinct symbolic charge (Kuzyemina, 2022). With that in mind, using the continuous sampling method, the following results have been revealed:

Firstly, ‘kurai’ as a lexical unit turned out to be idiomatically non-productive: the only idiom comprising ‘kurai’ is “курайына бейеу” (to dance to one’s kurai) meaning “to obey sb, lack willpower” (Uraksin, 1996: 227). The set expression though underlines the above discussed “magic power” of the musical instrument, nevertheless presents a loan-translation of the Russian idiom one (to dance to one’s pipe).

Secondly, various proper names with ‘kurai’ lexical component turned out to be quite numerous. That fact displays its high word building productivity and the list of such units includes names and titles in the following spheres:

- ergonymy, i.e., names of companies and organizations. There are numerous restaurants, cafes, stores, recreation companies, residential estates and mass media companies named simply ‘Kurai’ or by means of some compounds with ‘kurai’ element (residential estates Golden Kurai and Kurai Flower, television channel Kurai TV, car dealer Kurai Motors, restaurant Kurai Hall, etc.);

- gluttonyms, i.e., food nominations (bread Kurai, Kurai rolls, liqueur Kurai Bitter, vodka Kurai on Kumis, etc.);

- events, e.g., the national cultures festival Kurai Flower;

- technology, e.g., the regional geolocation system Kurai.

These findings imply that the set of kurai symbolic meanings and cultural connotations

accumulated thus far provide a potent and solid basis for its efficient functioning in the modern language and the local cultural context. It is my understanding that kurai notion multidimensional evolution secured its viability and consistence in the present time whereas in the past (when most idioms were generated) it was associated mainly with a musical instrument. Moreover, these findings reflect the trend of growing sense of national identity, the intent to highlight communal spirit and unique indigenous linguistic environment. Increasingly emerging hybrid compounds (containing etymologically diverse components) update and refresh the native culture phenomenon, mirror the trend of integration of national and global cultures (Vildanova, 2021). In sum, today kurai verbal representation displays quite high derivational and semiotic potential, it consolidates and expands the national symbol cultural connotations. By and large all the kurai symbolic meanings communicated via auditory and visual modes are consolidated and enhanced by their *verbal* signification. Moreover, these meanings can be treated as metaphoric since “metaphor is understood as sign production, representing a system of visual/audial signs, interpreted by a recipient in the certain semiotic medium. A person develops this conceptual system when interacting with a certain sign” (Zubkova, 2010: 328). Semiotically, the given meanings evolving correlates with the metaphor transfer development within the icon/index/symbol triad and the kurai metaphor, in terms of A.P. Chudinov’s classification, is a vivid example of artifact metaphor (Chudinov, 2001).

It is my understanding that following M.J. Gannon and R. Pillai approach to ethnic group profiling, ‘kurai’ can justly be called a Bashkir cultural metaphor, i.e., a key notion and set of features of one critical phenomenon giving insight into the cultural values and traditions of a society under study (Gannon, Pillai, 2013). Metaphorically, kurai encapsulates the meanings fundamental to the Bashkir mindset and culture. The aerophone is a cultural reality and culture-specific element that can truly be considered an important symbol objectifying key cultural values via different media.

Conclusion

The results of the multi-dimensional analysis of 'kurai' manifestations appear to support the following propositions:

1. The origin of kurai symbolism dates back to the historical background of the Bashkir ethnos. The musical instrument became a quintessential symbol due to the traditions and lifestyle of the Bashkir people, embedded in the value system, reflecting love to nature and promoting national heritage.

2. From the point of view of semiotics, kurai as a distinct sign of Bashkir culture code, can be analysed in terms of the symbol/index/icon triad. The study undertaken confirms that the national artifact has acquired the following semiotic categories characteristics:

– kurai sonic and visual representations can be treated as “icon” manifestations due to the obvious physical connections between the signifier and its meaning;

– conventionality of meanings acquired by the image of kurai build up its “symbolic” potential and present an apt illustration of visual metonymy.

3. Unquestionably kurai symbolic meanings communicated by auditory and visual media are consolidated and enhanced by their verbal signification which can be treated as metaphoric. In fact, verbalized metaphoric meanings draw upon the established connotations, formalize and reinforce them thus turning kurai into a multifold national cultural concept.

4. The musical instrument can be defined as powerful cultural metaphor for Bashkir national identity since it encompasses fundamental aspects of the Bashkir culture.

5. ‘Kurai’ phenomenon has developed diverse symbolic meanings in times gone by and the most conspicuous are:

– “national voice” and “medium of communication” correlating with the natural language and musical traditions;

– “unity of the ethnos” and “ethnic diversity but unity and friendship of nations”;

– “motherland” and “close communion with nature”.

To sum up, to date the kurai notion is popularly recognized as the ubiquitous expression of the Bashkir national spirit. Kurai maintains its pivotal role due to its historical background and bonds to the traditional cultural framework, active and varied modern representation, ability to synthesize traditional and new values, emphasis on the unique culture and, primarily, the Bashkir people dedication to national heritage.

The key tenet of the paper was to bring out the peculiarities of ethnocultural symbolic meanings development on the example of the traditional Bashkir artifact. I dare hope that the present study contributes to cultural symbolism understanding and provides visibility into how national symbols profile ethnic identities, correlate to cultural values and express cultural themes in new and exciting ways.

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