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CULTURAL HERITAGE OF CENTRAL ASIA

Creative Short Essays



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Cultural Production Series



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CONTENT

THE GREAT SILK ROAD – A CULTURAL HERITAGE	5
RURAL HISTORY. SOPU-KORGON.....	9
KAMCHYBEK'S <i>CHAPAN</i> AND THE TRADE WORK OF THE GREAT SILK ROAD	12
RURAL LIFE AND HERITAGE PROFESSIONS.....	15
MYSTERIOUS AND SACRED AT THE SAME TIME	18
GIRLS WEAR DIFFERENT HATS AT DIFFERENT AGES	23
CUSTOMS RELATED TO THE TRADITIONAL FEMALE HATS.....	23
<i>KALYAK</i> , A TRADITIONAL FEMALE HAT OF THE KYRGYZ PEOPLE.....	37
<i>TUSH KIYIZ</i> – THE AMULET OF GOODNESS	42

CULTURAL PRODUCTION SERIES

To revitalize the cultural and historical heritages of Central Asia and advance UCA's mission on cultural heritage preservation in the region, the Cultural Heritage and Humanities Unit (CHHU) initiated a new, *Cultural Production Series* which aims to explore creative ways of engaging with cultural heritage using multi-media tools and digital technology. The Series produces three types of cultural products: **short films** (5-10 minutes) focusing on cultural traditions and practitioners, **musical performances** combining music, theatre and fashion, and **creative short essays** about cultural traditions and lifeways of mountain communities of Central Asia. CHHU collaborates with young and creative Central Asians (writers, poets, journalists, musicians, artists, and film makers) to produce these cultural products and present them to wider audiences. This first issue of the **creative short essays** presents essays written by Ykybal Aidarova, a young and talented journalist from Kyrgyzstan.



THE GREAT SILK ROAD – A CULTURAL HERITAGE

The Great Silk Road – the road of international trade and economic and cultural relationships. Scholars, such as Radkevich V, A., Rtvelade E, V., Stavitskii B. Y., claim the formation of this road to be connected to the trip undertaken in second century BC by the Chinese Zhjan Zian to the ancient Fergana. Zhjan Zian had already had his men explore Hotan, Davan, Bactria and India. He determined that an intercontinental trade route through Central Asia would be useful for trade, according to historical sources.¹

¹ Tabyshaliev, S. “Kyrgyzstan on the Great Silk Road”, 1992.

Some of the most crucial points along the Great Silk Road were located in Kyrgyzstan. Specifically, the Fergana route started at Zamin, went through Isfara and Soh and arrived in Osh. In this region, the road split in two directions. First, the road went through Chirchik and Taldyk pass into Alai region, then towards Erkeshtam. Caravan travelers would go through Erkeshtam pass, then with the flow of K k-Suu river would reach East Turkestan, the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.



▲ Daroot-Korgon village, Chong-Alai district, Osh province.¹

The Alai Valley greatly contributed to the formation and building of the Great Silk Road. The Kyrgyz people of the Alai Valley actively participated in trade-work and had high interest in international trading. Trade goods were brought from east to west, with the main good being silk.² Silk became the most convenient good for long-distance trading because of its lightness, beauty and high demand. This is the reason that in the middle Ages, the Venetian Marco Polo called this road the Silk Road in honor of the silk trade. The term “The Great Silk Road” was officially coined in literary sources in 1877 by the German scholar Ferdinand von Richtgofen in his research articles titled “China”.³

1 Photo is taken from the website: www.foto.kg

2 The silk is obtained from the silkworm gland. The resulting natural fiber is easily dyed and durable.

3 Ferdinand von Richtgofendin. “China. Results of Personal Adventures.” 5 volumes. 1877-1911.

In addition, caravans carried the famous china dishes. According to scholars of the time, the Chinese were the only ones who were able to produce dishes described as “light as a whistle.” From India, traders brought spices, paints and diverse incense candles. From Iran, they brought silver and decorations. Central Asia, in turn, exported to China diverse items, including clothing and materials made from leather and wool, horse equipment, military equipment, gold, silver and precious stones. Even now, this road is still being actively used between countries for trading, diplomatic negotiations, tourism and, in particular, for exchange of experience for artisans.

In this part of the region, every artisan considers himself to be a part of the Great Silk Road. One might think that they consider themselves to be part of the Silk Road simply because they were born and raised in the region of interest. However, what makes them contributors and a valuable part of this trade route is that they created their livelihood from continuously uninterrupted trade of their handicrafts by implementing the existing trade route of the Silk Road. In this way, the people of Alai perceive this road as a cultural heritage inherited from their ancestors.

The Alai valley and the Kök-Suu river. ►

1. Photo by Kanat Sharipbekov.

2. Source: www.khaydarkan.su



Gülbarchyn Madraimova, a craftswoman in the Kerdegei village of the Josholu administrative unit of the Alai district, said the following:

“ When I think of cultural heritage, immediately the thought of the Great Silk road comes to mind. Cultural heritage, of course constitutes of historical places, figures, artisans, national instruments, antiques and utensils. The main purpose of the Silk Road is still to foster a relationship between countries through trade development, improving our handicrafts and introducing the people to other countries.

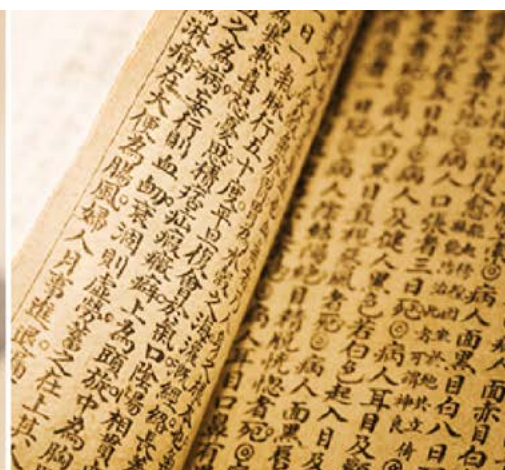
I am delighted that I turned to handicrafts and started this work. I know that at some level, I am contributing to the preservation of this cultural heritage. I feel that I have a direct connection to the Silk Road. ”

Altyn Moldokulova, the director of the Kurmanjan Datka Historical and Ethnographic Museum, said the following:

“ I consider the exhibits in this museum to be our cultural heritage. Every item that came from the Silk Road has been passed down from generation to generation, having been carefully used, now sits in our hands. I also feel that I am part of the Silk Road through the care and preservation of the items in the exhibits in our museum. We contribute to promoting our cultural heritage by sharing the knowledge we have in our museum to the many tourists who come by horseback because of the remote location of our museum. ”

Therefore, every citizen who is on the path of this Great Silk Road considers himself as a part of this historic trade route, preserves and continues the cultural heritage in the present day, contributes to the flourishing of the centuries old work along this road without compromising its value, being passed from hand to hand, it is clear that this heritage will continue.

▼ Photo is taken from the website: www.advantour.com





Sopu-Korgon village¹ ▲

RURAL HISTORY. SOPU-KORGON

The village of Sopu-Korgon is located in Alai region of Osh Oblast. “Sopu” in the name of the village comes from the word “Sufi” and “Korgon” could mean either an enclosure or a fortress.

The Sopu-Korgon fortress was built in the 19th century by the Khanate of Kokand in Alai valley of southern Kyrgyzstan. Some scholars show that Muhammad Ali Khan gave permission to the building of this fortress in 1827 under the supervision of an Andijan based man named Isa Datka.

¹ Photo is taken from the “Akademy Osh web” YouTube page.



During the times of the Kokand Khanate, three mighty fortresses were built along the Great Silk Road. These are Kyzy-Korgon, Sopu-Korgon and Daroot-Korgon. In the present day, only a fraction of these fortresses remains. According to historical sources, these fortresses were built by the Kokand Khanate in order to strengthen their military and remain strong against the Alai people, whom they feared. At the National Science Academy Signing Fund, conversation was held about the Sopu-Korgon fortress that was built in 1827 and from which very little information remains.

The origin of the name Sopu-Korgon comes from a folk legend. According to the legend, this village was located in a wilderness and in this wilderness, there lived a simple man. He planted all the trees, plowed all the fields, and took the village under his care. The name of this simple man was Sufi. Later, as people began to settle the village, Sufi came to be known as “Sufi, the Guardian” by the people. The reason being that Sufi would guard and protect the village, offering his service of security guard to the village. Sufi the Guardian is said to have built a stone wall around the village. Because Sopu-Korgon was along the Great Silk Road, it is said that caravans on their journey along the road would always make sure to stop at Sufi the Guardian’s house to check in on his well-being and drink his *kymyz*, a traditional drink of fermented horse milk, before continuing on their way. For these reasons, it is thought that the name of Sopu-Korgon came from Sufi the Guardian.

In another legend, it is said that to spread the Islamic faith, Sopus-Korgon was located at the intersection of many trade routes of the Great Silk Road, thus making it the hearth of the caravan route. It is said that pious Sufis settled in this village from the travelling caravans that registered here because the teachings of Sufism were important and influential to the people in the caravans. The people who constantly traveled back and forth on the caravans would wait here for each other and in the meantime, would learn the teachings of Sufi. They carried out their learning of Sufi teachings in specially built stone fortresses. Perhaps that is why, as people would notify each other “We will meet at Sufi’s stone fortress,” that the name of Sopus-Korgon came about.

Despite being a tiny village that could fit in the palm of your hand, many legends about origins of Sopus-Korgon abound among the villagers. For example, besides the legends about the name of the village, it is said that Abu-Ibn-Sina fell hard for the beauty of a Botokoz maiden in the village and spent a long time living with the villagers. Another legend is that when our Queen Kurmanjan Datka fell ill, Sopus-Korgon’s Guardian was able to heal her with his mighty greatness. It is said that when the people on the caravans fell ill while travelling on the Great Silk Road, they would stop at Sopus-Korgon until they recovered from their illnesses. In this way, strong traditional and holistic healers, including shamans and midwives, were fostered in this place.

Perhaps it is the influence of the Sufi teachings on the village inhabitants that makes the Sopus-Korgon people strong-willed, educated, ambitious and stubborn in nature. Even now, great elders, hunters, knowledgeable wise men and scholars are said to come out of this region.

Until 1959, Sopus-Korgon village belonged to Alai region. In 1935, when the international Osh-Khorog paved road was built, Sopus-Korgon served as the main base for travelers along this road. Today, Sopus-Korgon is home to 371 families.

▼ Sopus-Korgon village. Photo is taken from the “Academy Osh web” YouTube page.





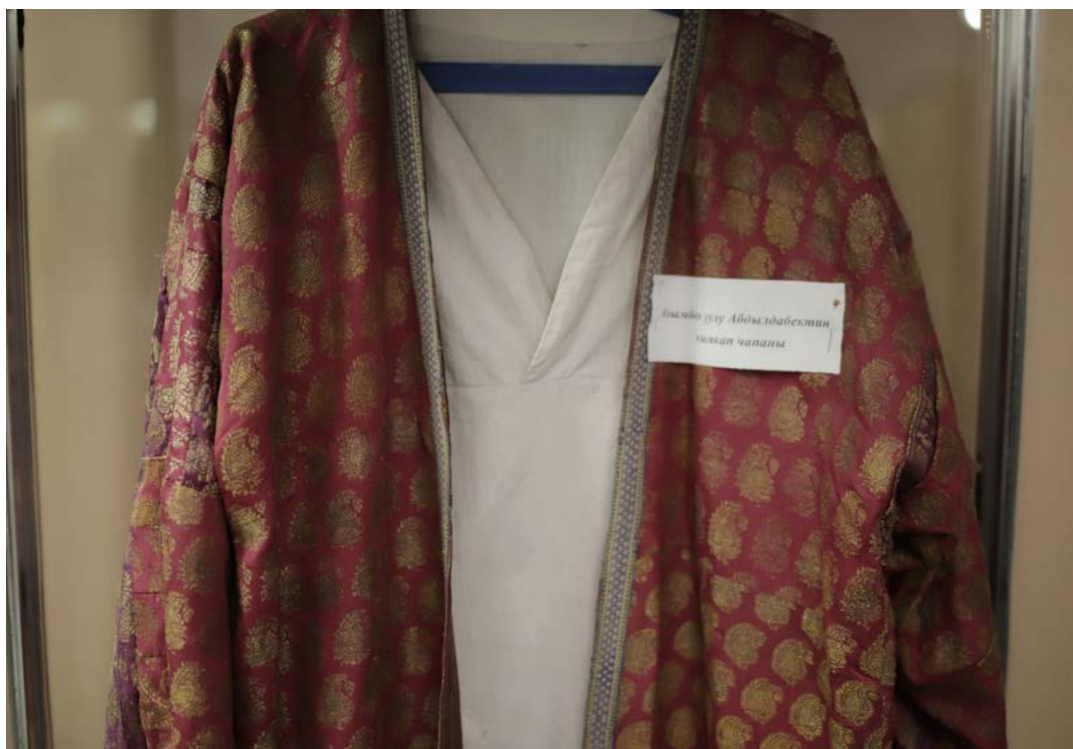
KAMCHYBEK'S *CHAPAN* AND THE TRADE WORK OF THE GREAT SILK ROAD

In the history of the Kyrgyz nation, there are several historical figures who have become the pride of their people, who have served their people, who did not write of their times with an impartial air, who have respectfully preserved the nation's customs, have valued and continued their people's traditions and who have earned the trust of their people's faith.

Among them are Alai born Alymbek Datka and his son Kamchybek. The father Alymbek Datka, the son of Asan-bii, was known to be a prominent statesman not only in Alai and nearby Fergana, but also in Khanate of Kokand, Emirate of Bukhara, China and the Russian Empire.

Because Alai is located on the Great Silk Road, Alymbek Datka was well abreast of international economic, political, and cultural affairs having been constantly supplied with new information, through his trade caravans, messengers, hunters. It was said that Alymbek Datka, being an influential person, envisioned a road to China via the Osh Korog road, during the Imperial Russia times, a road that was safe, short and customs free.

Besides his foster son, Jarkynbai, and his son Kamchybek, Alymbek Datka had four other sons: Abdyldabek (1837-1876), Baatyrbek (1939-1985), Maamytbek (1843-1913) and Asanbek (1849-1909). Kamchybek accompanied his father in his local trading business and in international travels, becoming acquainted with international politics. On March 2nd, 1895 on the grounds of sinning by “killing the border supervisor” Kamchybek was hanged. Like his father, Kamchybek was determined in character, not one to back down from his word and grounded in nature. In appearance, he was broad shouldered and tall, as we can tell by the height of his *chapan*¹, a traditional outer coat for men, found in the Kurmanjan Datka ethnographic museum in Alai. Compared to his father’s *chapan*, Kamchybek’s *chapan* was wider in shoulder and longer in length suggesting that he was taller and broader than his father.



According to the museum director **Altyn Moldokulova**:

“ These two chapans complement the series of exhibits with the most valuable items. If the museum only has six items belonging to the family of Queen Kurmanjan Datka, two of these items are the two chapans that had belonged to her sons. The other four items include her glove box, prayer rug, hairbrush and only the back of her sieve that was preserved by the people and donated to the museum at the time of the museum's opening. ”

As the trading along the Great Silk Road became very active, the handwork business of traders benefited greatly. Kamchybek's *chapan* was sown not out of wool, as is traditional in Kyrgyz people, but out of another material. It is immediately noticeable that the fabric was imported from another country. Therefore, one can see that the Great Silk Road trade network gave the opportunity for Kyrgyz craftsmen to bring in necessary materials as well as send out materials made from local people to other countries, showing that the trading has always been actively conducted. Even in the present times, materials made from Kyrgyz masters, such as carpets, felts and *terme*, are sent out to other countries via the Great Silk Road, in return importing paint, threads and any other necessary items. It is clear that trading relations have been continuously supported and carried out.

1. A Kyrgyz family in traditional clothing, 1916. Source: www.foto.kg

2. A Kyrgyz man wearing a chapan, men's coat, 1930. Source: www.foto.kg

▼ 3. Kurmanjan Datka with her son Asanbek and servant. Source: www.foto.kg





RURAL LIFE AND HERITAGE PROFESSIONS

As many professions as there may be on this Earth, in each profession we seek to learn the existing knowledge and unearth new knowledge. In contrast to these modern professions, there are also professions that are passed down from mother to daughter, from father to son. In these professions, the children familiarize their eyes by watching their parents, train their hands by doing the work, and assimilate the knowledge through apprenticeship. Therefore, there's a Kyrgyz saying that goes "one who learns from their father pours bullets, one who learn from their mother sews ton¹".

¹ *Ton* – name for coat worn by men in Central Asia.

The Nishanova sisters Dilbar (48 years old), Maral (46) and Meergül (39) have grown up helping their mother weave the traditional Kyrgyz *terme*¹. They have carried this tradition through their mother and have seen the value that this heritage profession has brought into their lives. In the present day, these sisters work together in the field of heritage handicrafts. If their mother, who has reached seventy years of age, serves them as their advisor, the eldest Dilbar Nishanova builds the *terme*. The younger sisters Meergül and Maral then fold and process it into shape. These sisters are not the only ones in the family who are carrying on the heritage profession. Their daughters have also learned the art.

“ Even though they live in the city studying at universities, they make sure to build a *terme* when they visit us in the village and then take it home with them to finish. This not only allows them to continue carrying the heritage tradition, but it also allows them to earn extra for their living, ”

says **Dilbar eje**². The sisters add how this heritage work has provided them with the sustenance needed to raise their families.

“ This profession that I learned from my mother has never left me in need of anything in life. No matter what type of *terme* it may be, I know how to instead of how it build it and finish it. There are some types of *terme* that are very difficult to build due to the complexity and the skill required. A lot of women in this field do not know how to build these more complex types of *terme*. I have absorbed and learned how to build the most difficult types of *terme* from my mother. When I was little, I did not know how to do the finishing part, or perhaps I would get distracted with play, my mother would discipline me by letting a *terme* ruler slap across my hands with just enough strength that I would cry in anger.

1 *Terme* – a type of weaving using wool or felt for purposes of making clothing, household goods, or other items for living.

2 *Eje* – a title used to refer to women older than the narrator.





▲ Sisters Dilbar, Maral and Meergül Nishanovas

However, I am now very thankful for her gifting me with this valuable knowledge through discipline. Having become highly skilled in this heritage profession, I have found a place for myself in this life. I have taken my work to international exhibitions. In this way, I have been able to supplement my family's income. I understood that mothers never have ill intentions for their children after I became a mother myself. Looking at it now, I did not realize when I was little that the ruler that slapped across my hands became the sword with which I forged my future life. I now thank my mother daily for teaching me this heritage profession, ”

shared **Dilbar eje** while counting every thread with which she was building the *terme* while conversing.

Ms. Dilbar's sister **Maral Nishanova** completed her sister's words:

*“ Each work or profession has its own difficulties. The reward of a work that comes easy does not taste as good as something that requires hard work. This profession requires commitment of time and even physical health. If just preparing the threads for the *terme* work is very difficult, then the finishing stages, when we bring the *terme* into shape, can take a toll on your back and eyes. However, seeing the results of our work makes me joyful, warms my heart and makes me forget the worries I carried. ”*

It is clear to see that, despite the time and health investments this profession demands, their heritage profession has provided them with the income to raise their families and see the World. The Nishanova sisters continue the legacy of this profession by passing it to their children and have enjoyed a very fulfilling life.



MYSTERIOUS AND SACRED AT THE SAME TIME

A spindle spins inwards. Stay among us...



Adalat apa¹, 66, is holding a spindle. She is spinning a thread. As the spindle spins, my wandering mind starts merging my scattered thoughts into a single thread...

I keep asking Adalat different questions. I wait for her answers while my eyes are fixed on the spindle. Her manner of speaking is simple. She shares with me at what age she had learned to use a spindle, what type of wood is used for making a spindle, and that all handicrafts require a spindle for their manufacture. In the meantime, her steady way of handling the spindle kept me mesmerized. She recounted that the spindle in her hands was passed to her by her mother-in-law:

“ When I came to this family as a daughter-in-law, my mother-in-law entered the *koshogo*, the rooms dedicated to the bride/daughter-in-law, with some white cotton and the spindle in her hands. I stood up quickly and bowed to greet her. She kissed me on the cheek and gave me the spindle with the following words: “My child, may your feelings² to your parents (parents-in-law) be always pure as this cotton. You know that the spindle spins inwards. Similarly, may no word from our family go outside. If you spin the spindle outwards, the thread you made falls apart. Thus, if words spoken inside the family find their way outside, it means that the unity of the family is gone. Do not let this happen. A woman must know crafts. May you prosper; may you have sons and daughters. May this spindle serve you well when you are preparing dowry for your daughter’s marriage. May it be a lucky one that enhances your mastery. Spinning inwards like this spindle, may you be a flexible member of our family. She blessed me and gave me this spindle as a present. It turns out that this was a way for the mother-in-law to become acquainted with her daughter-in-law. And this was a tradition of welcoming a daughter-in-law into the family. That is how my wise and seasoned mother-in-law attracted me to herself with the spindle. Since then, I never let my spindle go. I have been spinning threads for making the dowry with this spindle. ”

Adalat apa steadily continued her work while telling me her story.

1 Translator’s note: in the original text, the interviewer refers to her as Adalat *apa*. *Apa* literally means mother and is often used in Kyrgyz language when referring to elderly women.

2 Translator’s note: the original text uses the word “*peyil*,” which can be roughly translated as inner feelings, inner world, intentions.





She looked like a loving mother reciting a fairytale for me. Only when she stopped talking, I came back to my senses and realized that this tradition of welcoming a daughter-in-law has disappeared nowadays. At the same time, the fact that the craft of spinning threads remains viable in the Chong-Alai region and that it is used in everyday life brought me joy.

At first glance, a spindle is a simple stick with a stone at one end. Although very small, the work done by the spindle is enormous. It is not only indispensable for handicrafts. I think very few people know that using a spindle has a positive effect on both the psychological and physical health of women. Looking at the spinning spindle allows women to focus their wandering minds, while the spinning motions make every part of the body move, thus allowing to keep them in shape. **Adalat apa** confirms my thoughts:

“ Since we are moving all the time, we do not worry about putting on weight. Spinning requires flexibility. While spinning the spindle, the entire body gets saturated with tenderness. This tenderness makes women look beautiful. ”

As our conversation went on, I began to imagine the spindle as a woman. If the spindle stops spinning, the work stops. Similarly, it seemed like the entire life would stop if the women's movement stops.



▲ Bunisa Termechikova, Chong-Alai district, Sary-Mogol village.

The spindle seemed to outline the contours of life. The more flexible you are in life, the easier it is. The spindle made me think about the parallels between spinning threads and life. Just like through constant effort, the wool becomes thread, and the thread is transformed into beautiful objects; only through action will we become strong like the weaved thread and succeed in life.





▲ Būzarbap Kalbaeva, Chong-Alai district, Kashka-Suu village.

The technique of spinning the spindle reminded me of how we achieve our goals in life. If you hold your hand high and move precisely and steadily while spinning the spindle, your thread comes out long and strong. Similarly, the higher you set your goals, and the more precise and determined your steps towards it are, the more spectacular and the more long-lasting your achievements become on the way to that goal...





GIRLS WEAR DIFFERENT HATS
AT DIFFERENT AGES

CUSTOMS RELATED TO THE
TRADITIONAL FEMALE HATS

“ I had not previously shared this information with anyone else as I had been gathering material for my own book. However, since you have come to me with a genuine interest to learn about Kyrgyz customs and traditions in general and the traditional Kyrgyz female hats in particular, I will share the information with you, ”

said **Bübüaisha Arstanbekova**, a poet and a civic activist.

Bübüaisha Arstanbekova discusses traditional Kyrgyz hats, which were made for her by her mother. Ms. Arstanbekova or Bübüaisha *apa* wore these hats between the age of 2 and 18.

Ms. Arstanbekova has been researching the traditional knowledge of the Kyrgyz people. She also offers workshops for various audiences where she shares her knowledge and skills. Bübüaisha was born and raised in a traditional Kyrgyz family. Ever since she was young, she wore traditional female hats and experienced firsthand the traditions associated with them. She cited her parents as the main and indispensable source of information for her. She showed us various traditional Kyrgyz female hats and unveiled the deeper meanings and secrets behind each of them. Bübüaisha explained to us that through the tradition of wearing female hats, Kyrgyz people preserved girls' purity, spiritual capacities¹, and femininity. The rituals associated with the traditional headwear shaped the girls' character, habits, and feminine qualities and served as an upbringing and a teaching tool.

¹ Translator's note: the original text uses the term “*kasiyet*,” which denotes capacities and qualities of a person or a non-human being. Those capacities and qualities are often, although not always, implied to be spiritual.



“I STARTED LEARNING ABOUT THE DEEPER MEANING OF CLOTHING FROM AN EARLY AGE...”

“ Both of my parents came from traditional families. That is why our family followed the traditions passed down from generation to generation, both on my father’s and mother’s sides. There was a certain charm and aura in my parents’ behavior: when they spoke, their words were eloquent, and each of their movements was graceful. That is why I say that I was raised in a traditional Kyrgyz way. All aspects of my life, ranging from clothing to my values and worldview, were shaped by our traditions. My father, Arstanbekov Kulu, was born in 1912, while my mother, Salima Sali kyzy¹, was born in 1913. My late father was the Chairman of the Village Council in Zerger village of the Özgön district², whereas my mother dedicated her entire life to the family. There were four children in the family: three boys and myself. Starting from the age of five, I started wearing traditional clothes and headwear. My mom used to sew clothes for me and decorate them with embroidery.

At that age, I would wear traditional clothes at times and wear “normal” clothes at other times. Up until the third grade, I kept questioning why my mom made me wear all this [i.e., traditional clothes]. Sometimes, I just wanted to dress “like other girls.” Then, when my mother started explaining to me the meaning and symbolism of each element of the traditional cloth, I became increasingly interested and started wearing the traditional clothes all the time without objections. That is how I got introduced to the world of traditional clothing from an early age. ”



Bübüaisha Arstanbekova ▲

1 Translator’s note: *kyzy* means “daughter of.” That is Salima, the daughter of Sali.
2 Translator’s note: this is in the Osh province of the Kyrgyz Republic.



THE MEANING OF WORDS “NARISTE” AND “PERISHTE”

All of these hats that you see in *Kök Asaba*¹ magazine belong to me. I wore them in my childhood and youth. Some of them were made for me by my mother, while some of them were passed down through generations as our family heirloom. Some of these hats are more than 100 years old.

In autumn 2020, I went to my home village of Zerger and brought all my hats for cleaning and repairs. While repairing them, I tried to preserve the hats' authentic look. I had to replace some gems and silver decorations, which were lost, and change the worn-out elements made of leather and fabric.

Before I explain traditional female headwear to you, let me explain the meaning of the words “*nariste*”² [infant] and *perishte*³ [angel]. When a baby is born, Kyrgyz people call them “angels” regardless of their gender. Forty days after birth⁴, a baby boy is referred to as an “infant,” while a baby girl is referred to as an “angel” throughout her childhood. The sacred qualities of an angel accompany a woman throughout her life because every time a woman gives birth she dies and is resurrected. When giving life to another human being, she purifies herself and gradually turns into an angel.

¹ Translator's note: it means the Blue Flag.

² Translator's note: literally, an infant, a child, a baby.

³ Translator's note: literally, an angel.

⁴ Translator's note: according to Kyrgyz tradition, the first forty days of an infant's life are considered auspicious. For this reason, there is a tradition of celebrating the 40th day after the birth of the baby. There are a number of rituals conducted on the 40th day after the birth of a baby.

Why is a baby-boy called “*nariste*? [infant]” It stems from two words, i.e., “*nary*”¹ and “*izde*”² that means to “look further” or “search further.” In other words, as he grows, he will search further, and his responsibilities will increase as he grows. He will have to look after his family and protect his family and land, and he will therefore need to constantly be looking further all of his life. As for the women, the Kyrgyz people treated and respected them as angels, and that is why it was taboo to hit a girl.

My mother’s lullaby songs expressing her words of endearment towards her sons:

*You are my brave one who will secure our food
And protect our honor.
You will take care of your kinsmen
Following your ancestral tradition.*

*My son, my lion who
Will win prizes from horseback games
And who will return home
With saddle bag filled with gold.*

*My lion, my baby,
He will wear a white kalpak³.
He will prove that
He is the falcon of Ala-Too mountains and
The descendant of Great Manas.*

*My lion, my son,
Who will continue the lineage.
When an enemy attacks the Kyrgyz,
You will be the one who will protect
them fiercely.*

*He will load food onto a gray camel.
He will ride gracefully.
When he grows up,
He will build his own future.*

*He will load food onto a black camel.
He will ride gracefully.
When he grows up having strong arms,
He will fill possess great wealth.*

As for raising girls, the Kyrgyz never raised a finger on them. Kyrgyz girls were treated like angels and nurtured with great compassion and care.

A GIRL BETWEEN THE AGE OF 2 TO 5 IS CALLED
“*PERISHTE*” [AN ANGEL] HER HEADWEAR IS “*TOPU*”⁴

“ I wore this hat when I was two years old. My mother made it for me in 1962. It is made out of pure cotton. The embroidery on it, which dates back to 1915, was done by my grandmother. In 2020, I gifted this hat to my own granddaughter. ”



1 Translator’s note: literally, further.

2 Translator’s note: literally, search, look for, seek.

3 *Kalpak* is a men’s traditional hat made of white felt.

4 Translator’s note: *topu* is a particular type of hat. Since there is no equivalent of this type of hat in English, it is translated as “a hat.” Thus, every time there is a reference to a hat in this paragraph, it should be understood as a *topu* hat.

A GIRL BETWEEN THE AGE
OF 5 AND 10 IS CALLED “*BESH KÖKÜL*”¹.
HER HEADWEAR IS “*KYZ TAKYIA*”²



“ This hat is made from felt³ and called *kyz takyia*, which I wore during summers and autumns from age five until I was ten⁴. It was made in 1966. My mom sewed the hat's edges herself using the stitching method referred to as “*jugurtmo*” or as “*running stitch*” The top of the hat is decorated with red pearls. The silver decorations belonged to my grandmother. ”

Back in the day, when a girl turned five, her hair would be braided into five strands. The first time a girl's hair was braided was accompanied by ceremonies. The relatives would gather together, and the oldest female elder would braid the girl's hair and perform other accompanying rituals. Then, they would put on her a *kyz takyia* hat. After that, a girl is referred to as “*bash kökül*” or “*five braids*”. Girls at this age are admired for having those scattered braids and playing like angels.



“ This type of hat is also worn during winter.⁵ The edges in winter hats are made out of marten or sheepskin. This feature makes them very warm. When I was repairing this hat, I replaced the marten skin on the hat's edges. There is also a single owl feather attached to the right side of the hat. Usually, the owl feather is placed on the very top of the hats. ”

¹ Translator's note: literally, five hair locks, braids, bangs.

² Translator's note: “*Kyz*” means “a girl”. *Takyia* is a particular type of hat. Since there is no equivalent of this type of hat in English, it is translated as “a hat”. Thus, every time there is a reference to a hat in this section, it should be understood as a *takyia* hat.

³ Translator's note: felt is a traditional material made out of sheep wool.

⁴ Translator's note: in the original text she says: when I was the *bash-kökül* age.

⁵ Translator's note: the original text mentions that the winter version of the *kyz takyia* hat is also referred to as “*ükü tebeti*”, which means “owl hat”. *Tebeti* is a particular type of traditional Kyrgyz winter hats.

When I asked my mother why mine had a single feather and why it was attached to the side as opposed to the top, she explained to me that it signifies that I am the only daughter among three male siblings in the house. As for the jewelry on the hat, it represents “the mother sign”¹.

My mother explained to me that if a girl was the only child in the family, then a single owl feather was attached to the top of the hat. If she was the only daughter with male siblings, a single owl feather was attached to the right side of the hat. If there were several daughters in the family, a hat would have as many owl feathers as there are daughters. If the number of feathers indicated the number of girls in the house, their arrangement as a ladder with some being higher than others indicated if the girl was oldest or youngest in the family.

A unique feature of this hat is the two rows of pearls on each side of the hat. There are four pearls on each side, which makes it eight in total. The number eight is a symbol of eternity and of limitlessness. My mother encoded her wishes for me in this way. She wished me to have limitless and eternal happiness. That’s how the idea of eternity was literally “mounted” on girls’ heads.

A GIRL BETWEEN THE AGE OF 10 AND 15 IS CALLED “SEKELEK”². HER HEADWEAR IS “KEP TAKYIA”³

“ My grandmother made this *kep takyia* hat in the 1920s for my mother. My mom repaired it in 1976 and gifted it to me. It is made out of cotton chintz, while the broad edges and the ear covers are made from felt. Two strains of beads are made out of red-colored walnut pellets. ”



Various beads, buttons, and other elements were put on the hat with special intention, not just for decorative purposes. They were sewn on the hat during a special ritual. After a girl’s hair was braided into forty plaits, her grandmothers, her village’s female elders, and her neighbors would each bring something as a decoration. When giving decorative pieces, they would also give her their blessings, good wishes, and wise pieces of advice. My mother used to say: “Your

1 Translator’s note: in the original text, the interviewee uses the expression “*ene belgi – en belgi*”. The first part of this expression, i.e. “*ene belgi*” means “mother sign.” The second half “*en belgi*” means “brand or branding sign.” Historically, each tribe or family had its own, with which they would brand their livestock and other belongings. It should be noted that two parts of the expression rhyme and have only one letter difference.

2 Translator’s note: “*sekelek*” can be roughly translated as a “young girl.” However, as a reader will see from the text, “*sekelek*” refers to young girls between 10 and 15 years of age.

3 Translator’s note: one of the meanings of “*kep*” is “speech,” “story,” “words”. *Takyia* is a particular type of hat. Since there is no equivalent of this type of hat in English, it is translated as “a hat.” Thus, every time there is a reference to a hat in this section, it should be understood as a *kep takyia* hat.



hat contains the blessings and best wishes of your kin in seven generations.”

According to a well-known Kyrgyz proverb, “a girl is monitored from forty houses”¹. Unfortunately, this proverb is often misinterpreted as if it justifies that the entire community, i.e., 40 families, should impose restrictions on a girl, and there are some cases when young girls live under pressure. But in fact, the proverb implies good advice, genuine blessings, and good wishes coming from the community (e.g., 40 houses).

By wearing the *kep takyia* hat during the “*sekelek*” stage of her life a girl’s character and poise are developed in the right way and she is able to become a gracious young woman. Thus, the philosophy that underlies the wearing of the *kep takyia* hat in this transitional period is to encourage girls to learn about themselves, listen to their inner voices and to follow their dreams. Special attention given to girls at this age helped them to disregard negative words and opinions, keep their minds clear, and choose the path required in order to achieve their goals.

Another Kyrgyz proverb says that “a young girl’s feelings mature faster than a young boy’s mind.” Between the age of ten and 15,² girls’ mindsets form, and they start acting in accordance with their judgment. Although a girl at this age can still be capricious as a little girl, she often begins to perceive herself as an adult and to critically reflect on her own capricious behavior.

During this transitional period, I would plait my hair into 40 braids and always wear my *kep takyia* hat. I kept myself busy with embroidering. I embroidered various flowers, mountains, eagles, and the *Umai Ene*³ symbol. During this period, girls’ dreams take shape and develop. It is important that during this time, girls distance themselves from gossip and negative words coming from outside and focus on their own bright future and pure thoughts. The traditional wisdom of the Kyrgyz people can be seen in the symbolism of the hat’s elements. *Kep takyia* hat has long ear folds. Moreover, the ceremony of presenting *kep*

¹ Translator’s note: the literal translation of this proverb reads as “a girl is controlled/monitored/limited/restricted from forty houses”.

² Translator’s note: in the original text the author uses the term “the *sekelek* age”.

³ Translator’s note: *Umai* is a goddess/spirit of fertility and a protector of women and children in the traditional belief system. The word “*Ene*” literally means “mother.”

takyia is accompanied by rituals to protect the girls' pure worlds symbolically and energetically. Female elders would tell that *kep takyia* protects and discourages girls from engaging in and spreading gossip. My mom used to say that if a girl brought gossip from the outside into a house, her mom would sew an additional layer of fabric inside her hat's ear folds. This was a way for a mother to tell her daughter that the latter needs to leave the bad words where she heard them. During this transitional period, a mother would closely monitor her daughter. Nowadays, this kind of caring yet strict supervision and monitoring, upbringing, and understanding are lacking, which leads to cases of depression, stress, and suicide among young girls.

“ The moon-shaped motif on the back of the hat was embroidered by my mother. My mother used to say that these 11 moon-shaped patterns symbolize the formation of my *kasiyet*.¹ As for the braided felt tassel in the lower part of the hat, she used a button from her own jacket to attach the braided felt tassel to my hat. I will never forget how she was asking God to give me a lot of happiness, longevity, and many other good things while decorating my hat. May her soul rest in the Heavens! ”

A GIRL BETWEEN THE AGE OF 16 AND 18 IS CALLED “BYIKECH” OR “MAIDEN” HER HAT IS “BYIKECH SHÖKÜLÖ”²

“ Girls between the age of 16 and 18 plait their hair into 40 braids and are called “by-ikech.” During this age, young women wear a hat, which is not decorated with many gems or beads. Instead, several vertical decorative patterns are embroidered on the hat. The embroidery patterns are chosen by each girl according to her taste. I wore this felt hat during the cold seasons, and I wore another thinner hat during the warm seasons. ”



¹ Translator's note: the term “*kasiyet*” denotes capacities and qualities of a person or a non-human being. Those capacities and qualities are often, although not always, implied to be spiritual.

² Translator's note: *shökülö* is type of a traditional Kyrgyz female hat. The distinctive characteristic of this type is that the hats are cone-shaped. Thus, the term “*byikech shökülö*” can be roughly translated as “maiden hat.” Since there is no equivalent of this type of hat in English, it is translated as “a hat”. Thus, every time there is a reference to a hat in this section, it should be understood as a *shökülö* hat.



When I used to wear this hat, the owl feather was attached to its right side. Both the feather and the fur on the edges used to be natural. This hat was made about 45 years ago; hence some of its parts got worn out. While repairing the hat, we substituted the natural feather and fur with artificial ones. We also placed the feather on the top of the hat.

During this period, a girl's character settles down, and she begins preparing for marriage. During this time, girls experience their "maiden era," during which they invest themselves fully into things they do, such as dancing or other fun activities. During this time, girls' traits manifest themselves in their actions and behavior. Girls begin openly expressing their opinion. This maiden period is a very difficult one. Girls mature during this period. Every girl begins choosing the colors and outfits that suit her. If parents do not have sincere conversations with their daughter during this time or show support and understanding, this may negatively affect the girl's psychological wellbeing.



A GIRL OLDER THAN 18 IS CALLED "*SELKI*".
HER HEADWEAR IS "*SELKI SHÖKÜLÖ*"

“ A selki is a cone-shaped hat coated with red plush fabric. It is slightly shorter than the white wedding shökülö hat. As I mentioned before, the number of feathers at the top of the hat corresponded to the number of daughters in the family. Since this hat belonged to me, there is only one feather on its right side. ”



During this age, girls also plait their hair into 40 braids. Those girls who managed to preserve the purity at this age were respected and valued in society. The *selki* hat symbolized the importance placed on the girl's purity. The height of the hat also represented purity, which was difficult to maintain.

After transitioning from her maiden age to *selki* age, a girl becomes impulsive and intolerant to some words. For example, if her mother says, "my dear, matchmakers have arrived," the girl often retorts by saying, "I will not get married, who told you I would? It's too early. Just let me be. I do not want to hear it." During this period, girls can grow very irritable. Despite all of this, this is the period when girls become ready for marriage. At this stage of her life, girls begin to pay close attention to their looks, appearance, and behavior and start monitoring their posture, words, and laughter. This is how girls begin attempting to show their good qualities to others. At this age, girls can attract many admirers. The number of those willing to have a particular girl as a daughter-in-law grows, and the matchmakers begin coming ever so often.

"MOTHER *SHÖKÜLÖ*"¹ OR "WISDOM² NEST" *SHÖKÜLÖ*

“ When a girl is ready to become a mother and start a family, she begins to wear a “mother hat.” She wears this hat until she departs for her groom’s family home. It was mandatory that a girl’s mother made this hat with her own hands. There is also a reason why this hat is not heavily decorated. ”

¹ Translator’s note: *shökülö* is a type of a traditional Kyrgyz female hat. The distinctive characteristic of this type is that the hats are cone-shaped. Since there is no equivalent of this type of hat in English, it is translated as “a hat.” Thus, every time there is a reference to a hat in this section, it should be understood as a *shökülö* hat.

² Translator’s note: the original text uses the word “*akyl*”, which means intellect, reason, smartness. Here the word “wisdom” is used as it seems to better convey the intended meaning of the original expression.



This hat of mine was given to my mother by my grandmother in 1931. In 1979, my mom repaired it and gave it to me. Only the front side of this hat is slightly decorated with gems, silver jewelry, and a “mother sign”. This hat is slightly taller than the selki hat. It is usually green because the green color symbolizes youthfulness. This hat was never brought back to the girl’s family. After marriage, it was kept in the girl’s own chest as an heirloom.

The back of the mother hat was not decorated by either embroidery, beads, or silver. The top of this hat was round like a lid and symbolized the four sides of the world. When I was wearing this hat, my mother sewed some valuable gems, beads, and jewelry on the inner side of the “lid”.

“ A selki is a cone-shaped hat coated with red plush fabric. It is slightly shorter than the white wedding shökülö hat. As I mentioned before, the number of feathers at the top of the hat corresponded to the number of daughters in the family. Since this hat belonged to me, there is only one feather on its right side. ”



According to my mother, this particular hat was known as a “wisdom nest”. During the traditional festivals, which featured such traditional games as *yr-kese*, *sarmerden*, *girls*, *aitysh*, *ak-chölmök* and others, my mother won competitions in tongue twisters, riddles, and *akyinek*,¹ which made her famous in the village. The female elders approached my grandmother and told her, “your daughter grew up both beautiful and smart, you should give her a “wisdom nest” hat. Following this, my grandmother fashioned this hat from her own hats and gave it to my mother. My mother attached the “mother sign” to it and passed it on to me as a “mother hat.” If a woman did not have daughters, she would pass this hat down to her daughter-in-law.

¹ Translator’s note: this is a traditional Kyrgyz game played by girls and women. It features two teams of girls singing short funny songs about one another.



The mother hat was also used for another ritual. When prospective in-laws would come to ask for a girl's hand and present engagement earrings, a girl would appear before them wearing this type of hat. After the engagement earrings were presented to a girl, her future mother-in-law would put a white scarf on the girl's head. While tying up the white scarf, they would give her their blessings. The white color symbolized that the girl should preserve her *ak niyet*, *qut*, and *kasiet*.¹ Then, both families would set a date for the wedding feast. The future in-laws would take the girl's "mother *shökülö* hat" with them. The girl's mother would also gift her daughter's future mother-in-law one sack² of butter and a ball of honey. The groom's mother would invite her relatives and let them try the honey and butter. She would tell her relatives that the bride is from a good family³ and that the engagement was confirmed.⁴ The right to mix the butter and honey was usually given to a respected elderly woman who already had a daughter-in-law.

1 Translator's note: these are the local concepts, which do not have full equivalents in English. "*Ak niyet*" can be roughly translated as "pure intentions," "*qut*" as "abundance, delight, God's grace," and "*kasiet*" as [spiritual] capacity.

2 Translator's note: the original text mentions one "*karyn*" of butter. "*Karyn*" is dried sheep stomach, which was used as a vessel to store and conserve butter.

3 Translator's note: the literal translation of the original expression would be "a girl who saw the upbringing of her mother," which means that she is a girl from a good family with good manners.

4 Translator's note: the literal translation of the original expression would be "we put a headscarf on her head" or "we tied her head with a headscarf."

WHITE *SHÖKÜLÖ*¹ HAT IS A FEMALE HEADWEAR FOR WEDDING

This hat is obviously white, and the edges are covered with a marten of sheepskin. It is much taller than the two previously described *shökülö* hats, i.e., *selki shökülö* and *mother shökülö*. The height of the hat symbolized that being a mother was something exalted and elevated. It also meant that the girl was making steps towards becoming a mother and reaching those heights. The difference between the white hat was that it featured a veil. In the beginning, only a half-veil was attached to the hat from the left side. The bride's hair was arranged into two braids. During the "seeing a girl" ceremony, the girl would reveal her face to the groom only. The half-veil conveyed a message to the groom that he was her other half and that he needed to add the other half of the veil. After the ceremony, the other daughters-in-law added the second half to the bride's veil. To be more precise, they removed the half-veil and attached the full veil instead. Thus, the bride's face would be covered completely, and it meant that the bride and groom were two halves, which became one."

After the full veil was attached, everyone would make the following wish:

<i>May two halves become one,</i>	<i>May the in-laws be respectful to each other,</i>
<i>May all of us be happy,</i>	<i>Our traditions are precious,</i>
<i>May us be in-laws for thousand years,</i>	<i>Let us spread our palms the blessing!</i>
<i>May there be mutual respect,</i>	

With the full veil, the bride would leave with the groom to his family. The bride's mother decorated this hat as much as possible with gems and jewels. This hat was decorated with white pearls with a wish that the bride's *ak niyet*, or intentions, would always remain pure. It was decorated with red pearls with a wish that the bride would protect her purity and *kasiet*. In order to protect the bride from an evil eye or tongue, eye-shaped amulets were attached to the inner side of the hat so that it was invisible to others. In addition to that, special silver bells were also attached to the hat. The reason for this was as follows. The groom's relatives would come to see the bride, and the bride was supposed to bow to them. Every time she bowed, the bells rang. The observant guests could deduce from the bell sound whether the bride was bowing to them with pure intentions or not. When the bride's family invited their new in-laws to their house, the bride took her white hat back to her house and gave it to her sisters. If the bride was the only girl in the family, she would gift this hat to her sister-in-law. If she had no sisters-in-law, she gave it to one of her cousins.

¹ Translator's note: *shökülö* is a type of a traditional Kyrgyz female hat. The distinctive characteristic of this type is that the hats are cone-shaped. Thus, while the term "white *shökülö*" can be translated as "white hat," it denotes "a bride's hat." Since there is no equivalent of this type of hat in English, it is translated as "a white hat." Thus, every time there is a reference to a white hat in this section, it should be understood as a bride's *shökülö* hat.



KALYAK, A TRADITIONAL FEMALE HAT OF THE KYRGYZ PEOPLE

*Uz-Datkalar*¹ is a civic organization based in the Sary-Mogol village of the Chong-Alai district in southern Kyrgyzstan, who have been exploring the history of *kalyak*. For several years, members of the *Uz-Datkalar* have been researching a traditional female hat, which is locally known as “*kalyak*”². Over the course of the research, they visited eight major tribes living in southern Kyrgyzstan. They found and documented local varieties of the *kalyak* hat and learned how local women wrap the *kalyak* hats. As a result of the research, the *Uz-Datkalar* team created a collection of *kalyak* hats named “Muras” [lit. heritage]. Here I want to share what I learned while interviewing the members of the *Uz Datkalar* civic organization.

¹ Translator's note: The word “*uz*” (also *uz*) means craftswoman in Kyrgyz, whereas “*datkalar*” is a plural form of the word “*datka*,” which was an honorable administrative title in a traditional Kyrgyz society.

² Translator's note: *kalyak* hat is a type of turban. The *kalyak* hat is made by wrapping a long piece of cloth around one's head. After the *kalyak* hat is wrapped, it is decorated with various jewels and beads.

The *kalyak* tradition flourished from the XVIII to the middle of the XX century. During that period, *kalyak* hats played an important role in everyday life. Every mother would make a *kalyak* hat with her own hands to give it as a present to her daughter before her daughter's marriage. The *kalyak* hat contains deep meaning and symbolism.

A *kalyak* hat was made by a mother for her daughter and embodied the mother's blessings and wishes for her daughter. The *kalyak* hat served as a beacon in a woman's lifelong journey

Sharipa Tashkulova, the head of the "*Uz-Datkalar*" public association, defined the meaning of the word:

“ The word “*kalyak*” is made up of two words. The first word is “*kalla*,” which means the “head,” while the second word is “*ak*,” which means “fabric.” The *kalyak* hat resembles a mountain, and the symbolism associated with it is elevated and high. Indeed, a *kalyak* hat is wrapped in a way that resembles rocky mountains, which are a characteristic feature of Kyrgyzstan's landscape. Moreover, the fact that a woman puts on a *kalyak* hat before getting married signifies that a woman assumes responsibility as big as a mountain by getting married.

Kalyak hats were not worn just for beauty but also for many practical reasons. For example, a *sagak*¹ protects one's ears from the heat and cold, while the top tip of the *kalyak* hat shields the face from the sun in summer and from cold winds in winter. The silver-plated decorations on the *kalyak*

¹ Translator's note: *sagak* is a part of the *kalyak* hat, that covers one's ears, chin, and partially the chest. As noted above, *kalyak* hat is a type of turban, which consists of a long piece of cloth that is wrapped around one's head in a particular way.





hat ensured the strait posture, thus preventing back pain. The beads and jewels used for decorating the sagak had antibacterial properties. For example, silver decorations protected women from infectious diseases, as well as chest and stomach ailments. ”

I interviewed **Tumarbu apa**, an elderly woman in her sixties. When I saw her for the first time, I noticed how she gently stroked the beads and other decorative items on her *kalyak* hat. From her behavior, I deduced that she treated her hat and jewelry with special care. When I asked her about her *kalyak* hat and jewelry, she told me that it was a gift from her mother. She gently touched some of the decorative pieces on her *kalyak* hat and shared with me the following:

“ *The kalyak [hat] on my head is a precious item left to me by my mother. When I was getting married, my mother made and decorated this beautiful hat for me. This was her gift. Although almost half a century has passed since then, I am still taking good care of it. That is why it looks as if it was made just now. The items that were made by my mother are of special significance for me. They are sacred to me. That’s why I treat them with respect and care. ”*



She shared with me the important traditions related to the “*kalyak*” hat. For example, a bride’s family usually invites an elderly woman, who is greatly respected in the community, to wrap a *kalyak* hat on the bride’s head before the latter leaves to her groom’s house. The idea behind this ritual is that the elderly woman must become a role model for a young bride. That is why not just everyone gets the honor of wrapping the *kalyak* hat on the bride’s head. The elderly woman who gets to do the job is usually an elderly woman who is respected in the community, has lived with her husband for many years, and has given birth to and raised many children. Thus, by having a respected elderly woman wrap the *kalyak* hat, the bride’s family wishes her to live a long, healthy, and happy life with her husband and have many children.

My next interlocutor, **Tursun apa**, highlighted some other interesting aspects of the *kalyak* hat tradition. She said:

“ When a young woman got married, her husband’s community could deduce a lot of information about the bride based on the *kalyak* hat she wore. Judging by the *kalyak* hat’s quality and decorations, one could tell how well-off the bride’s family was, how wealthy her father was, and whether her mother was a skilled craftswoman. That is why every family that had a girl

tried to prepare a beautiful kalyak hat while girls were growing up. When a bride was about to leave her home with her groom, the bride's family took care of every part of the kalyak hat to make it impeccable. ”

Nowadays, we are witnessing the revival of interest in and growing popularity of *kalyak*. We are confident that such interest will continue to grow and that *kalyak* hats have a place in the future.

It is clear that *kalyak* hat is not just a mother's wedding gift to her daughter. It is also an embodiment of parents' blessing to their daughter, who is starting her own family. Such deep philosophical ideas embodied in the *kalyak* hat demonstrate that it is a cultural heritage passed from mothers to daughters.

A Kyrgyz proverb says that "If you lose your hat, you lose your head". This proverb contains a deep symbolic meaning. It can be interpreted as saying that we cannot truly value anything else in life unless we know and appreciate the value and symbolic significance of headwear. A bride is joining another family to extend their family lineage. A *kalyak* hat was made by a mother for her daughter and embodied the mother's blessings and wishes for her daughter. That is why the *kalyak* hat served as a beacon in a woman's lifelong journey.





TUSH KIYIZ – THE AMULET OF GOODNESS

As I was sorting through my mother's chest, I noticed a piece of wrapped cloth at the bottom. "Mom, what is this?" I asked. She answered: "It is *tush kiyiz*,¹ my daughter. When I was young, *tush kiyiz* was a part of every bride's dowry. This is my *tush kiyiz*. I embroidered it myself. Since it is not used nowadays, I put it in my chest."

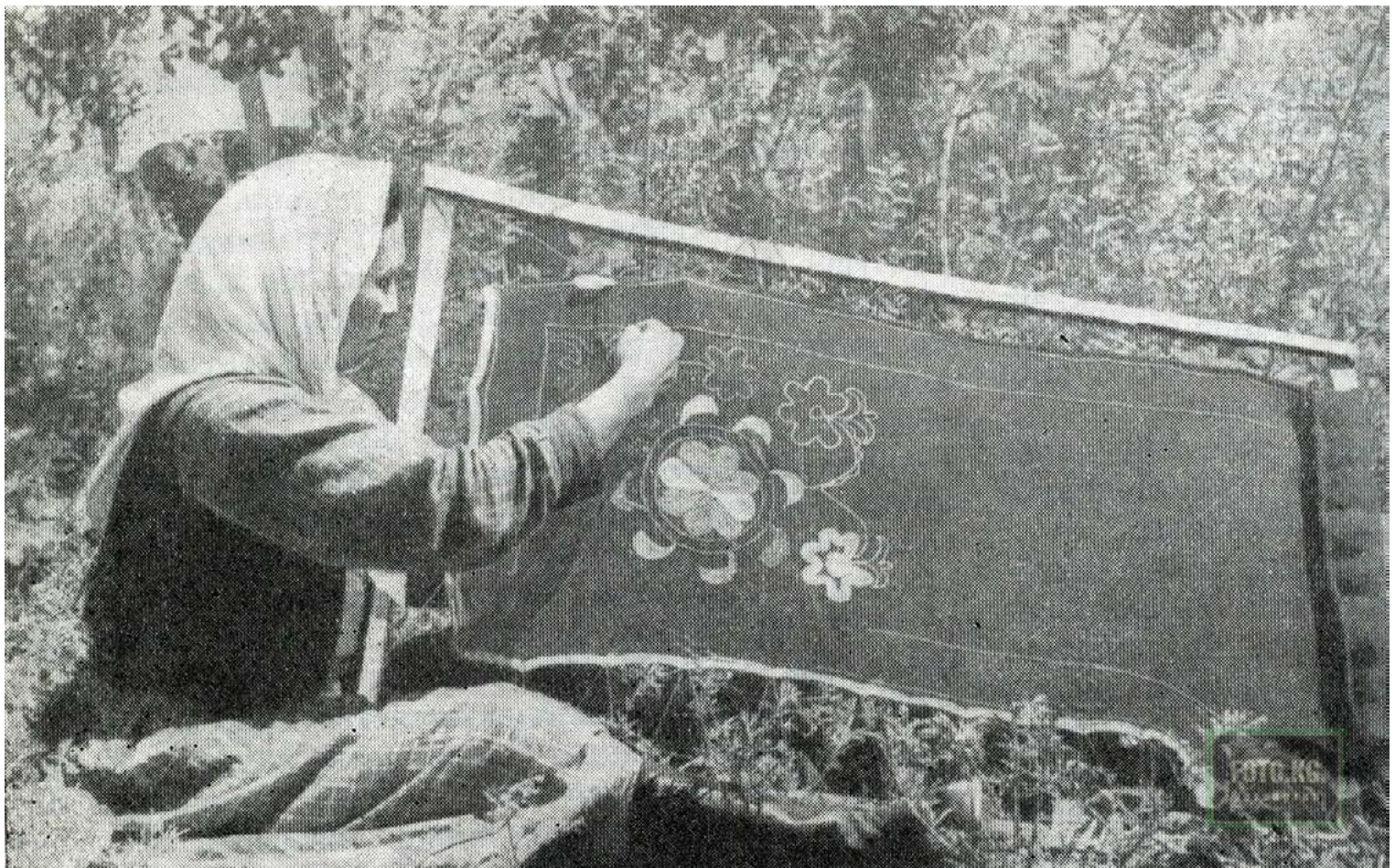
¹ *Tush kiyiz* is a decorated wall carpet, which is hung on the "*tör*" wall of a yurt or house. "Kyrgyz History. Encyclopedia" Bishkek 2003. Translator's note: *tör* is the part of the living space, which is farthest from the entrance. It is considered to be the most honorable place in the yurt or room.

Tush kiyiz is a decorated wall hanging, which is hung on the “*tör*”, the most honorable place in the yurt or room, wall of a yurt or house. Having examined the *tush kiyiz*’s embroidery with great admiration, I put it back at the bottom of the chest. My mother seemed upset that *tush kiyiz* fell out of use and said to me the following: “*Tush kiyiz* is not being used. Sometimes I think of making a cushion out of it, but I dare not.” I noticed in her eyes her wish for *tush kiyiz* to become popular once again. After this conversation, we did not talk about the *tush kiyiz* ever again.

Much time has passed since then. While living in the city, I met **Tolsun apa**¹ and learned that she embroiders *tush kiyiz* wall hangings. I decided to come to visit her to see the process of embroidering and to learn more about the significant value of this cultural heritage. While embroidering the *tush kiyiz*, Tolsun apa shared exciting stories:

“ I wish there were more people around me while I am embroidering. Even if they did not embroider, the power of embroidery would have awakened their thoughts, touch their souls, and spark interest in the handicrafts. This would have given me more strength as well. When people come to see how I do embroidery, I tell them many captivating stories about handicrafts to spark their interest in crafts. Many people get interested and drawn in and want to learn embroidery. ”

▼ The process of embroidering on *tush kiyiz*. Source: www.foto.kg





▲ Tolsun *apa*

Tolsun *apa*'s every move was smooth and steady. As I watched her movements, I realized that learning these skills required a lot of work, patience, and time despite looking easy.

Tolsun *apa* spent a lot of time on her embroidery. She pondered on every element of the embroidery, seeking the right colors for each pattern, coming up with combinations of patterns that best conveyed the ideas in the mother's hearts and the wishes and blessings they encode in the embroidery.

¹ Translator's note: *apa* is an honorable way of addressing elderly women.

Tolsun apa said that each step of this creative process brings joy and nourishment to her soul. She went on to say:

“ Unless you try doing this work with your own hands and live through these moments of creativity, you won't be able to feel the pleasure that comes after the hard work. While embroidering, I feel like I'm in another world, and my daily problems are forgotten. With the threads in my hands, I feel like I am one with the universe. When I perceive and embroider the beauty of the world into my patterns, my spirit gets lifted, and my soul rejoices. It feels like I am resting while doing this work. Surely, each craftswoman has her own style of work depending on her worldview, way of thinking, and imagination. Our ways of creating eye-catching beauty demonstrate the old tradition, value, and uniqueness of our art. Craftswomen invent various types of embroidery based on their artistic vision and creative potential. They create beauty from beauty. Once one gets immersed in the world of embroidery, one's soul gets filled with spiritual pleasure. One feels like she is constantly communicating with other craftswomen through art. Maybe you will understand better what I mean if I say that embroidery clears your mind and purifies your soul. ”

I asked:

“ The craftswomen seem to be in harmony with their work. They treat the embroidery as living beings. Maybe that is why the patterns embroidered by our foremothers have preserved their beauty until now, is it not so? ”

▼ Photo from the “Kiyiz Düynö” foundation.





▲ Photo from the “Kiyiz Düynö” foundation.

Tolsun *apa* replied and shared the culturally significant value of *tush kiyiz*:

“ The uniqueness of Kyrgyz embroidery is its durability. The secret of durable embroidery is its tightness. The patterns embroidered by grandmothers shine as if they were made just today. Even if the fabric got worn out, the embroidery remained intact and beautiful. This embroidery was left as a heritage for generations to come. This shows how skilled and prudent our grandmothers were. *Tush kiyiz* is a treasure containing joy and warm energy. This treasure came from the hearts of our mothers. *Tush kiyiz* embodies a mother’s love, blessings, and good wishes for her children. Such a thing must last long, is not right, my daughter?¹ ”

Tolsun *apa*’s words reminded me of the *tush kiyiz* wall hanging, which hung on the wall in our house when I was growing up. I seemed to have understood why my mom carefully stored it in her chest after we stopped using it.

¹ Translator’s note: it is common for elderly women to use the term “my daughter” when addressing any young women and girls.

▼ Photo from the “Kiyiz Düynö” foundation.



Since I do not know how to embroider, I wondered what people like myself could get from the embroidery done by our mothers. **Tolsun apa** pointed to the thread, which laid next to me, and showed me with a gesture to pass it over to her. Then she said:

“ Looking at the beautiful patterns and admiring them gives a sense of relaxation. One can feel the energy of the craftswomen who did the embroidery. One can feel the good wishes the craftswoman encoded in the embroidery patterns. And when you start embroidering yourself, you are surrounded by good thoughts, noble aspirations, and lofty goals. That is why the *tush kiyiz* draws people’s attention to itself with its pure energy and beauty. Those who pay attention to art and crafts can hear the silent voices of our mothers. They can interact with the embroiled patterns in their inner worlds. They can feel with their hearts pure wishes encoded in those patterns. They can feel the craftswomen’s rhythm of compassion. ”

Tolsun apa did not take her eyes off the needle while talking to me. While listening to her, I realized that *tush kiyiz* has a great place in our lives. Seemingly silent, the embroidered patterns encode profound philosophical ideas, speak loudly to those who understand them, and convey information enciphered within them.

Tush kiyiz is respected and hung on the *tör*¹ wall across the doorstep. The fact that the appreciation for *tush kiyiz* is being revived nowadays touches our hearts and fills them with joy. It teaches us to safeguard our heritage and traditional crafts since that’s what makes up the core of our nation. It is not enough to simply hang the *tush kiyiz* on our walls again. We should try to live with it and make it live as well. That way, we would contribute to the longevity of our cultural heritage. *Tush kiyiz* is an amulet that does not lose its value and status. *Tush kiyiz* wards off evil and attracts good.



¹ Translator’s note: In the original text, the author used the term “*tör*”. It is the part of the living space, which is farthest from the entrance. It is considered to be the most honorable place in the yurt or room.

