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Sacred-meaning framework of Udmurt homespun fabric for traditional woman's outfit

A symbiosis of material world and a belief system constituted a fabric of life for a family line of pagan Udmurts. A traditional woman's outfit featured a rather singular pattern filled with knowledge and meaning to shape a magical protective cocoon around a woman. A combination of fabric, decorative components, supplements, and other elements brought to harmony in a particular manner created a unique sacred image of the Udmurt outfit. In view of the drastic systematic shift of material world of the ethnic group we can see nowadays, attributable to globalization and industrialization of the society, it is essential to study the cultural phenomena and outline some potential ways to adjust these ethnic traditions to today's material world in order to preserve cultural heritage of ancestors. Some aspects of making a traditional Udmurt homespun fabric are presented herein from the perspective of a sacred semantic aura around a woman's outfit.

Keywords: *material world of the Udmurts, traditional homespun fabric, pattern of semantic images.*

С. Н. Зыков. Сакрально-смысловая основа удмуртского домотканого полотна для традиционного женского костюма

Симбиоз материального и мировоззренческого начала в языческом мире удмуртов являлся основой жизни рода. Национальная женская одежда имела особую информационно-смысловую организацию, выстраивая магический обереговый «кокон» женщины. Гармонизированный ансамбль тканей, декора, аксессуаров и других элементов формировал самобытный сакрально значимый образ удмуртского костюма. В условиях происходящей в настоящее время кардинальной системной переориентации вещного мира этноса, связанного с процессами глобализации и индустриализации общества, в целях сохранения культурного наследия

предков необходимо изучить этот культурный феномен, наметить возможные пути адаптации этнических традиций к современному вещному миру. В статье представлены особенности декоративных обереговых мотивов и традиционного домотканого полотна удмуртов с позиций формирования сакрально-смысловой ауры женской одежды.

Ключевые слова: вещной мир удмуртов, традиционное домотканое полотно, ансамбль смысловых образов.

A traditional Udmurt woman's outfit had its own unique semantic language suggesting a bond of its owner with gods and the other world. In other words, it reflected a general framework of pagan culture of the Finno-Ugrians. Each and every fashion item, its exclusive shaping, and embroidery had hidden magical functions and meanings binding together such notions as "woman" and "life", "nature" and "beauty", "the female principle" and "godly magic". Woman's clothing always had a guarding and protection function, indication of status, and semantic message, as Prof. I. L. Sirotina [1, p. 238] noted. Basically, a traditional woman's outfit has for centuries been one of the most important tangible media and source of special semantic meaning for the Udmurts. It is appropriate at this point to recall a statement of V. V. Stasov [2, p. 16] that each dash had its own meaning in a woman's outfit, being a word, an expression of known concepts or ideas, and that rows of patterns on fabric formed a coherent speech, sequence of melodies, intended not only for eyes but for mind and senses as well. It is the unique ethnic semantic environment of the Udmurts, consisting of sacred objects, decorative components, and rituals, that has been defining their identity throughout the centuries, establishing an interconnected system of non-material and material parts of the cultural world. When one studies material world of the Udmurts, it is essential to call attention to the fact that closedness of the community specific to the Udmurts and, subsequently, minor impact of external modifiers allowed for their ethnic information realm to retain its unique consistent cultural specifics for a long while. This resulted in the possibility to dismiss a time-based diversity of the objects under research to a known degree. As a rule, semantic meaning intrinsic to the ethnic group was expressed with a certain sacredly adequate set of magical tangible objects, which by all means was directly embodied in a woman's outfit.

The challenge to adjust Finno-Ugric semantic images to today's material world is quite sensitive at the present day. This may be associated with unflinching natural but permanent vanishing of traditional ethnic objects (wooden dwelling units, household items, clothing, etc.) which represented not merely singular specimens of ethnic art but also tangible media of spirituality and a belief system. A symbiosis of material and spiritual worlds in ethnic culture of the Finno-Ugrians had been forming for centuries up until an era of intensive industrialization. This is the time period with respect to which the cultural phenomenon could be appraised as an established quasi-stable structure that, however, was already plagued by general globalization and danger of complete extinction. First and foremost, the phenomenon was described by the ability to unflinchingly reflect one or another aspect of worldview beliefs of the ethnic group almost in all specimens of traditional design, so that a distinctive well-balanced material world of the Udmurts, highly charged with unmatched mythological meanings, was formed and a unique sacred aura covered every bit of its existence. An Udmurt (Finno-Ugric) woman's outfit is the aspect that should be particularly distinguished out of all range of material objects of the ethnic group. It was always defined not so much by its utility but rather a rigorous composition-informative and semantic structure that surrounded a woman as a distinctive protective cocoon, her sacred place and protection. It was the Great Goddess (the Great Mother) that was believed to be a protectress of Udmurt women. It was her magic that protected them [3, p. 659].

Image of the Great Mother is one of the most ancient and esteemed images in the pagan Udmurt mythology of the Finno-Ugrians. N. I. Shutova, the researcher, noted that this image embodied cohesion of the world we know, an idea of fertility and of everlasting renewal expressed in alternation of day and night, summer and winter, birth, development, death, and birth again [4, p. 222]. The image is sacredly based on worshipping the divine gift of giving a new life. Everything around that was capable of bringing life into the world was unexceptionally connected to the great feminine being of the Great Mother. In this respect, according to beliefs of the Udmurts, a woman, as a creature with a gift of child-bearing, represented human's affiliation to mysteries of nature and affinity with magical celestial forces. The sacred awe the pagans had of woman's capability to pro-

create offsprings developed into the belief that women had an immediate spiritual bond with the Great Mother, meaning that they could magically influence offspring of animals and harvest and ensure prosperity of the family line. That is the reason the Udmurts perceived a woman as a semantic image of the Great Mother, the guardian of nature and wildlife, which was decisively reflected in a woman's outfit.

Special sacred status in society was highlighted with unique embroidery in clothing and accessories directly related to the Great Mother (the Tribal Goddess) and the Great Feminine Principle. The examples include a diamond symbol (a pattern "mumy-pus" [5, p. 32] or a "maternity symbol") to stand for fertility, reproduction, and retention of the family line; a diamond symbol with tails in the form of angles or triangles (a pattern "kusko" or a symbol of a woman in labour, with the hands up and legs bent) [6, p. 80]; triangles and angles (a symbol of a woman's womb giving birth) [6, p. 80]; repetitive angles or decorative "herringbone" and "zig-zags", squares (symbols of woman's natural forces, fertile bottom as a footing, roots of the family tree, the goddess standing at the origin of the family line [7, p. 104]).

The symbols of the Great Mother and the feminine principle followed an Udmurt woman from the birth and altered subject to her age. Herewith, the clothing and accessories were not the only items that were given a sacred meaning, so were the items of household and labour (such as distaff). It shall be noted that forming and decoration of the Udmurt woman's articles are not particularly exquisite or complex. No doubt, this is due to certain process restrictions the ancient craftsmen had. So, in the old days, the technology of domestic weaving permitted decorative patterns only in the form of the simplest figures made of straight lines. That's exactly the way such well-known Udmurt decorative patterns as "mumy-pus", "kusko", etc. look like.

Magical abilities were given to clothing and homespun fabric not only by special protective decorative patterns indicative of worshiping and protection on the part of the Great Mother. The fibers of the plants used for weaving also contributed to sacred status of the fabric intended for traditional clothing and other loomwork.

Being pagan, the Udmurts identified themselves as a part of nature and worshipped its supernatural powers and gods. An extensive deploy-

ment of knowledge concerning health benefits and magical abilities of plants was a common practice. All natural objects were assigned a magical meaning which was implemented in folk medicine and various rites, weaving included. Traditionally, woven fabric was made of the plants that could be found or were cultivated on Udmurt lands, such as *flax*, *hemp*, *nettle*, etc. Let us consider magical abilities of these plants (as stand-alone folk medicine objects), which were naturally extended to a sacred aura of the woven fabric made of the plant fibers.

Flax was the basic agricultural crop cultivated within the territory of central and northern regions of Russia and traditionally used for home-spun fabric. It is appropriate to mention here that only a flax fabric was called “fabric” or “linen” in the days of old. Without elaborating on its health-giving powers used in folk medicine, it shall be highlighted that flax was always clearly associated with a woman (a girl) according to legends and beliefs. There even existed an instruction for young girls: “If you wish to be happy, you should get to see a field of blooming flax” [8]. Therefore, flax flowers were thought to bestow happiness to a woman. In the hope to be happy, a young Udmurt girl wore a flax-linen clothing to image a white pure birch from the sacred Udmurt grove called “lud”.

Nettle. Nettle is long since among the plants used by various ethnic groups for folk medicine and white magic. It is believed that nettle counteracts jinxes in addition to obvious health benefits. It is worth reminding here that materialized tangible and invisible sacred worlds universally co-exist and intertwine in pagan culture, which can be clearly seen in nettle.

In its natural environment, nettle protects its existence through stings. It was seemingly believed that these protection features remained intact after it was dried, but were transformed and transferred from matter into an invisible protective astral shell. Accordingly, nettle handling was subject to sacred operations as early as it was harvested. So, it was torn up with bare hands in spite of stings to preserve its magical abilities. It was never rooted out to maintain a sacred connection of the plant with its place of habitat as it bestowed its magical forces.

The way magical abilities of nettle were put to use by Udmurt women was traditional as well. They suspended nettle bundles above an entrance door, fumed their dwelling and family with nettle besom, put nettle leaves in kid’s boots or straw shoes, or made a pendant of a sack with

untreated salt mixed with dried nettle to hang around their husband's or betrothed's chest. Nettle was also used for making homespun fabric for a woman's outfit, contributing to the singular protective aura that surrounded the Udmurt women. Not only the plant fibers were interwoven with linen thread of homespun fabric but sometimes they even were its solid-woven warp.

Hemp (or "pysh" in Udmurt) was traditionally under cultivation on the Udmurt lands. Let us try to uncover its pagan semantic meaning, typical for both Slavic and Finno-Ugrians.

Hemp was referred to as "a grass that breaks" for a good reason. It was believed to be able to "break" familiar worldly ties and transfer consciousness into a specific altered state when a person could contact other worlds among the great cosmic tree (both underworld of ancestors and overworld of gods).

A capability to make an invisible contact with the other world and gods was the order of the day for an Udmurt woman traditionally perceived as having a special magical status in social ranking. Therefore, it was absolutely natural and even essential for Udmurt women to use hemp in all forms, such as hemp itself, its seeds, oil, etc. The Udmurts fumed rooms and objects with a hemp besom to appeal to gods for protection. The family of newly-weds threw hemp seeds over them during the wedding ceremony or put them inside the couple's shoes to protect against jinx.

Clearly, hemp fibers were used for making a homespun fabric to give it magical abilities of "a grass that breaks" to contact other worlds. It is notable that even the weaving itself was inevitably associated by pagans with magic of contacting gods. It stands to reason that a woman weaving a fabric was believed to be possessed by Mu-Kylchin, the Great Goddess.

As can be seen from the above, one can arrive at the idea that almost each kind of the fiber used for homespun fabric initially had one or another pagan semantic meaning unflinchingly imposed upon the clothing made thereof and forming a part of its magical aura.

It should be pointed out here that as trade and factory manufacturing (*Favrik* in Udmurt) were being developed, traditional feedstock for fabric, such as nettle, flax, hemp, was gradually substituted with brought-in materials (cotton or "paper" as the Udmurts called it, thin wool or worsted, etc.). The more cotton and wool having no any mythologized meaning for

the Udmurts were used for homespun fabric, the more its sacred meaning diminished by degrees. As a consequence, the unique input the traditional fabric contributed to generation of magical aura for a woman's outfit was being altered as well.

The traditions intrinsic to material world of the Udmurt (Finno-Ugric) culture embodied in classical national woman's clothing have substantially lost their power they had of being generators of unique semantic and informational space of the ethnic group.

A cohesive system to make traditional outfits sacred, from magic of the plant fibers used for homespun fabric to a comprehensive composition structure of protective patterns, has been continuously collapsing with the advent of factory manufacturing. Now, it is implemented in a modern Udmurt-themed woman's outfit all too often only in some decorative components that play merely artistic or aesthetic role. In light of the above, it appears to be beneficent and essential to protect the ethnic domain of traditional methods to make a woman's outfit sacred.

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