

## Semiotic Status of the Folklore Image of the Stove in Traditional Culture of the Tatars

By

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### Abstract

The paper deals with one of the key elements of the internal space of a traditional Tatar house - the stove - as a significant cultural object. If we consider the house through the prism of tradition it appears as a plot-organized text that unfolds linearly from the moment it was laid to the point of its devastation. The “plot” of the house always has the goal of preventing denouement, i.e. maintaining its life becomes a necessary condition for household. The starting point of the study is the identification of the elements of the house, related verbal texts and situations where they start functioning as signs., since their semiotic status changes situationally. The paper aims to study the semiotics of the stove as though it is a cultural text, which must be interpreted from different angles. The author proceeds from the fact that in the traditional model of the world, rites and etiquette norms of the Tatars, the house appears as a spatial and mythological center. In this case, the mythological understanding of the house and its iconic elements is inextricably linked with such universal categories as the center / periphery / border / one's own / another's. In this regard, the study of the semiotic status of the designated locus is carried out through the prism of economic activity (laying the stove, practical function), human ritual life (ritual of the first cattle pasture, family, recruiting ritual, incantation tradition), mythological concepts (beliefs and customs related to the master spirit of the house / yard, ubyr), and folklore genres (riddles, proverbs, beliefs). Paradigmatic analysis allows us to conclude that the semiotic status of the stove in the tradition under study combines the symbolism of the border and center, which dictate the subsequent functional content of the studied locus.

**Key words:** semiotics, tradition, mythology, rite, house, stove, locus.

### Introduction

Spatio-temporal concepts are the most representative characteristics of a culture, reflecting its originality and forming the basis for steady images, cultural patterns, typological plots, behavioral forms, etc. with extreme clarity. Existential interest in the problem of the semiotics of space and time is expressed in several forms. Taking into account the large number of studies in the boundary fields of general philosophical, scientific, and cultural knowledge, consideration of concrete conceptual forms of space and time is of paramount importance. Significant changes in conceptual approaches to the study of traditional culture taking place in domestic ethnography and folklore in recent decades have determined a turn from “material science” to the study of the deep aspects of the functioning of objects in different periods of social history, depending on the context. Material and spiritual cultures are now considered

not separately but in indissoluble unity, in the context of a single systemic integrity of the worldview of the people. Researchers find the source of the modern study of the symbolic functions of objects in the works of P.G. Bogatyrev. He came to the conclusion that, basically, any object has more than one function, some of which are practice and others symbolic (Bogatyrev, 1971: 363).

The study of the traditional dwelling as a sphere of realization and reflection of the religious and mythological picture of the world of the people occupies one of the leading places in modern Russian historiography, in particular in the works of T.V. Tsiv'an (1978), N.L. Zhukovskaia (1987), I.N. Gemuev (1990), A.B. Permilovskaia (2005), T.A. Agapkina (2011), S.M. Tolstaya (2017), E.E. Dmitrieva (2019), O.A. Teush (2019), A.P. Konkka (2020), N.G. Fedotova (2020) and others.

A significant contribution to the study of the traditional Tatar home from an ethnographic point of view was made by The researchers of the second half of the twentieth century, R.G. Muhamedova (2008), Y.G. Muhametshin (1990), F.L. Sharifullina (2010), N.A. Halikov (2002), D.N. Suleimanova (2010), L.H. Muhametzianova (2018) etc. in their monographies concerning the traditional culture of the Tatars. The description of the semiotic status of the most important elements of the external and internal space of a traditional house, the symbols and interior items reveals, like a sign system, both universal and characteristic only for the Tatar ethnic group socio-psychological categories, hidden from of the representative of the ethnic group, but realized in the symbolic and practical being of culture.

## **Methods**

The main method of our work is the sociopragmatic analysis of traditional symbolism. The starting point of the study was the identification of the symbolic elements of the house: marked loci and moments of time, significant objects, details of the physical appearance, verbal texts, etc., the definition of their semantics, which varies depending on the situation, fixing situations where they acquire a symbolic meaning, since their semiotic status changes situationally. In the course of the preliminary study, we recorded verbal interpretations of the distinguished symbolic object of the house - comments of tradition bearers, given by them during ritual actions, available in folklore texts, or received by us in specially conducted interviews.

## **Results and Discussion**

In a traditional Tatar house, the stove was the main structural part of the house and interior, the utilitarian and sacred functions of which are preserved to this day. It was located to the right of the door, sometimes to the left, with a hearth facing the front wall. When installing the stove, a small narrow space was left between it and the wall; it should not come into contact with the wall. The people called this space the "backside of the stove" [mich arty], it served as an exit to the kitchen; when a male stranger entered the house, a female could hide there from the stranger's eyes. A stove laid out in this way warmed the house much better.

The construction of the stove was the main stage in the development of the space of the new house. It was the element that made the house habitable. The Tatar proverb says: "A house without a stove is like a head without brains". Thus, the stove was the personification of home. Proof of this idea is also the widespread belief that after installing the stove the house should not be left unattended, i.e. someone should always stay at home; otherwise misfortune will happen.

The laying of the stove and the end of the process are ritually played out in the tradition of the Tatars through sacrifice or one of its variants - sprinkling with blood. At the time of preparing the place for the stove or after completing the laying, a chicken or rooster is sacrificed, the mouth of the stove is sprinkled with their blood and joint meal is prepared for the invited elderly villagers and family members (Muhamedova, 2008: 188). It is important and obligatory to bake some flour products during the first use of the stove in order to achieve further prosperity in the house.

The symbolic interpretation of the stove was largely predetermined by the fact that maintaining a home fire and cooking were specifically female pursuits. The part of the house where the stove was located was called the “black house” [kara iort], it served as a room for women. Another part of the house was called the “white house” [ak iort]; it was considered the male part. These two parts of the house were divided by a thin wall in the middle of which a door was made. But often the role of the wall was played by an ordinary canopy. The fact is that according to Muslim customs, if a stranger entered the house, a woman could not be shown to his eyes. The division of the house into two halves, thus, allowed women to go on with their activities without being disturbed.

The stove is featured in many genres of Tatar folklore and is interpreted as a living creature, correlated with the human body. Examples of this can be found in riddles in which the stove is associated with a woman: “A beauty dresses, the dress touches the earth”, “Although my aunt’s mouth is large, she can’t eat”. If the stove was the personification of a woman, then the fire symbolized the masculine nature: “Fat mother sits at home, long father walks on the street, beautiful daughter makes visits”. The coupling of fire and a stove at the moment of the lighting of the hearth is a union of male and female, so a lit hearth in traditional culture symbolizes the guarantee of procreation, and the stove itself is a connecting link with the spirits of ancestors. Imperceptible, even sometimes hidden from men, the daily activities of women proceeded in the presence and under the protection of their ancestors, the idea of whose presence was connected with the home. According to the beliefs of Muslim Tatars, the spirits of their ancestors flock to the stove on Thursdays in the hope of hearing the prayer, which is spiritual food for them. In the tradition of the ethno-confessional group of Tatars-Kriashens professing Christianity, this belief is played out with some differences, while preserving its essence: “The place of the deceased is next to the stove. They put a plate, spoon, egg, porridge on the table for him to feel full ”(Baiazitova, 2015: 38).

Around the stove, the situation of the recruit leaving for the army is also played out. Immediately before leaving the house for recruitment, the last symbolic meal is arranged, performed next to the stove or at the table, i.e. in the center of the house. This is a ubiquitous custom of eating bread and any other food received from the hands of the mother: “At the table, mom gives a loaf of bread. You try it and give it back to mom. She puts it on the stove. And it lies there until you return” (I.V. Ivanov, b. 1929, Republic of Tatarstan, Pestrechinsky district, village of Kryash-Serda).

We have recorded different variations of this custom among the Tatar population: bread can be stored on the oven, in the chest, above the door, hung on a ceiling beam, but in all cases its localization and deep meaning are preserved. The action is always performed in the center of the house at the table and is aimed at preserving a grain of food of the departing person, which is based on the widespread belief that food attracts a traveler home. In some places one

can see how the recruit is circled around the table in the direction of the sun, this action also fixes the connection of the departing with his home.

The symbolism of the stove as the center of the house is also being actualized in the rites associated with the first cattle pasture. On the day of the first pasture, a series of ceremonial actions is carried out aimed at fixing the connection of livestock with home space. The hostess puts bread and water for livestock in a separate bowl and carries it thrice around the stove; after that she gives water to the cow and bread to the sheep (G.R. Miftakhova, b. 1934, Republic of Tatarstan, Kukmorsky district, village Turkash). In some areas, feeding the animal with flour from the stove damper is practiced (M.Kh. Bakirova, b. 1926, Republic of Tatarstan, Vysokogorsky district, s. B. Bitaman). In all the ritual practices described above, the semiotic status of the stove is determined by the value of the mythological center of the developed space, a kind of core that supports the viability of a particular family or tribe.

The stove, according to A.K. Baiburin is also a “channel of communication between one’s own and another world, people and ancestors, between which there is an ongoing intense exchange. By the fire of a furnace, people heat and light the other world. Steam from cooked food is the favorite food of ancestral spirits. Through the chimney, the souls of the dead go to the other world. In turn, people receive their share of blessings from their ancestors; through the chimney, the souls of newborns enter the world of people, etc.” (Baiburin, 1983: 215).

In the traditional culture of the Tatars, the symbolism of the stove as the border between the two worlds is realized in folk medicine, magic, funeral and memorial rites, etc. The Tatars, like many other peoples, know the rite of baking the child. In the tradition of the Tatars of the Ulyanovsk region, this rite is called *nyzhy kuyru*<sup>1</sup> and is performed in case of difficulty urinating in a newborn. The child is dressed in clean, ironed clothes, laid on a wooden shovel and bandaged with a large towel. The stove also becomes a necessary attribute in the name change ceremony, which is performed in case of the appearance of a birthmark, prolonged illness, or tearfulness of a child. During the performance of the ceremony, the child is sat by the stove. An adult rises to the roof of the house and through the chimney three times shouts the new name of the child .

The chimney is a specific exit from the house, intended mainly for contacts with the other world, devilry; precisely through it the harmful mythological characters can enter the house. This belief is actualized in the traditions of the Tatars’ diverse customs and ritual practices associated with the idea of preventing evil spirits in the house (Davletshina, 2020: 128). One of such spirits is *ubyr*<sup>2</sup>, which, after entering a living person, flies out of the chimney at night or flies into other people's homes with the desire to do harm. In view of this, in the Tatars' tradition, the custom of finding out if *ubyr* is present in a house is widespread. They rise to the roof and blow into the chimney. If the *ubyr* flew into the house, then pieces of brick

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<sup>1</sup> *Nyzhy kuyru* – lit. “To bake *nyzhy*” that is, the rite of expelling a disease associated with difficulty urinating in infants.

<sup>2</sup> *Ubyr* is a mythological character that exists in two forms: the demonic soul as an independent unit and the same soul, but penetrated into a living person, turning the latter into a double-human. The functional characteristic of this character reveals it as a bunch of motives (send spoilage, steal the fetus from the womb of the mother, as well as the calf from the pregnant cow, take away male strength, turn the person into “loss”), united by a single harmful function.

or sand poured from the chimney. After that, salt was thrown into the stove, which was due to the belief that potholes appeared on the face of the ubyr from the salt.

The magical meaning of the stove is also manifested in the ceremonies of going on the road, as well as the funeral and memorial tradition associated with the symbolism of the road. The house appears to be in a symbolic exclusion zone: they don't give anything to anyone from it on the day of departure and they try not to take anything out, not to clean the table or even sweep the rubbish from the floor. In Pestrechinsky district of the Republic of Tatarstan, the custom of bringing several logs into the house after seeing a person off is widespread so that the life path of the departed is not interrupted. In the funeral rite, after a person's death, they open the stove shutter so that the soul can fly out; after the funeral, they touch the stove and light several splinters, thus informing the other world about the death, or bring several splinters into the house so that the deceased does not return.

## Summary

Thus, in the traditional culture of the Tatars, the stove was used for heating the home, for cooking, and also has played a significant role in folk magic, beliefs, and rituals. The content of the semantics of the stove in the culture of the Tatars is largely determined by its ability to turn "alien" into "one's own," which dictates not only the rules of settling in a house, but also provides a way to accept strangers into an already existing community. Undoubtedly, such sign-like function of the stove is connected with the fact that it was a reservoir of fire, the successor of the ancient hearth, around which a vital force was concentrated, possessing healing and unifying energy.

## Conclusions

Paradigmatic analysis revealed the invariant value of spatial loci and objects associated with them, the temporal characteristics of ritual and everyday life. To study the semiotics of the symbolic element of the internal space of the Tatar house, the non-verbal (social, cultural, psychological) context of the utterance was taken into account. The folklore text is inscribed in a non-verbal model synchronously coexisting with it; it is inseparable from its elements of the model, forming strong syncretic complexes. Bearing in mind the analysis of representations and symbols as means of social regulation, we restore not only the "cultural" text of the symbolic element of the Tatar house — the stove — but also its understanding and results — the social reality (behavior, relationships, relationships) which it programs.

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