

Symbolic Forms within the Structure of National Culture

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Annotation

The article explores signs as fundamental elements of national culture that encode collective experience, transmit values and shape ethnocultural identity. Drawing on semiotic, cultural and ethnolinguistic approaches, the study analyses the nature of cultural signs, their structural and functional characteristics, and their operation in everyday practices, rituals and contemporary media discourse. Particular attention is paid to the role of signs as depositories of cultural memory, as markers of identity and as instruments of social regulation. The empirical basis of the article consists of illustrative examples from Slavic and Uzbek cultural traditions, including ornaments, ritual behaviour, forms of greeting, and national symbols used in public communication. The analysis shows that cultural signs form a multilayered symbolic system in which visual, verbal and behavioural codes are tightly interrelated. It is argued that signs not only reflect the worldview of an ethnic group but also actively participate in constructing it, mediating between individual consciousness and collective tradition. In the context of globalisation, signs of national culture become tools of cultural diplomacy and branding, while at the same time remaining key mechanisms for maintaining cultural continuity and resisting homogenising tendencies.

Keywords: sign, national culture, semiotics, symbol, cultural memory, ethnocultural identity, ritual, media discourse.

Introduction

Signs occupy a central place in the structure of national culture because it is through sign forms that collective experience is encoded, values are stabilised and shared representations of reality are transmitted. In cultural semiotics, the sign is not understood as a simple substitute for an object but as a modelling device that structures the world for its bearers and connects individual consciousness with the broader cultural tradition [1]. From this perspective, everyday objects, rituals, narratives, spatial forms and even historical personalities can function as signs within a complex system of cultural texts.

In contemporary humanities, the problem of cultural signs has been addressed from several complementary angles: semiotics of culture (Y. Lotman), ethnolinguistics and symbolic anthropology (N. Tolstoy, C. Geertz), theory of cultural memory (J. Assmann), and general semiotic theory (U.

Eco) [1–5]. These approaches converge in the recognition that culture is a semiotic space, in which every meaningful element is embedded into networks of associations, oppositions and narratives. However, the specific role of signs as elements of national culture that is, as markers of ethnocultural identity, social regulation and collective memory requires more detailed analysis, especially in relation to concrete cultural traditions.

The relevance of this study is determined by several factors. First, processes of globalisation and digitalisation intensify intercultural contacts, making cultural codes more visible, contested and reinterpreted. Second, in many societies there is a growing interest in symbolic resources of national identity, including traditional ornaments, folklore motifs, historical narratives and national symbols. Third, the spread of media and branding technologies leads to active re-semiotisation of cultural

signs, when they are transferred from ritual and everyday contexts into political, commercial and digital ones.

The aim of this article is to examine signs as key elements of national culture, focusing on their semiotic nature, functional diversity and role in constructing ethnocultural identity. The analysis is based on examples from Slavic and Uzbek cultural traditions and seeks to answer the following questions:

1. how do cultural signs encode collective memory and values;
2. in what ways do they function as markers of identity and tools of social regulation;
3. how are traditional signs reinterpreted in contemporary media discourse?

Materials and Methods

The study is theoretical and qualitative in nature and combines several methodological approaches. The primary framework is provided by cultural semiotics, particularly Y. Lotman's concept of culture as a "semiosphere", a unified semiotic space in which all cultural texts and sign systems interact [1]. This perspective makes it possible to consider signs not in isolation but as elements of larger symbolic structures, such as rituals, mythological narratives or institutional practices.

The second important component is ethnolinguistic and ethnocultural analysis as developed in the works of N. Tolstoy and his followers [2]. This approach focuses on the relationship between language, symbolic forms and traditional culture, paying attention to how meanings are embedded in names, formulas, proverbial expressions and ritual texts.

The third dimension is symbolic and interpretive anthropology (C. Geertz, J. Assmann), which conceptualises culture as a system of inherited symbols and sees collective memory as a key mechanism of cultural continuity [3; 4]. These perspectives

are particularly relevant for understanding the long-term functioning of cultural signs and their ability to preserve and actualise the past in the present.

The empirical material used in the article is illustrative rather than statistically representative. It consists of:

- 1) examples of traditional visual signs (ornaments, colours, clothing elements) from Slavic and Uzbek cultures;
- 2) ritual and behavioural signs (forms of greeting, hospitality practices, age hierarchies);
- 3) national symbols and lieux de mémoire (flags, coats of arms, monuments, epic narratives);
- 4) instances of the use of national symbols and motifs in contemporary media discourse (state celebrations, media campaigns, cultural branding).

These examples are interpreted through close reading and contextual analysis, with attention to their semiotic structure (signifier-signified relations, symbolic associations), cultural functions (cognitive, communicative, regulatory, identity-related) and transformations in different historical and communicative contexts. The objective is not to provide an exhaustive description of specific cultural traditions, but to reveal the functional potential of signs as elements of national culture.

Results

The analysis shows that signs of national culture form a multilayered semiotic system in which different modalities visual, verbal and behavioural are tightly interconnected. At the most general level, cultural signs act as condensed forms of collective experience, embodying historically developed interpretations of the world. They translate complex social and spiritual meanings into recognisable symbolic patterns that can be easily perceived and reproduced.

One of the key findings concerns the role of signs as depositories of cultural memory. Traditional ornaments, motifs and narrative figures often preserve archaic mythological representations that are no longer explicitly articulated but continue to structure cultural perception. For instance, solar motifs, images of the tree of life or birds in Slavic embroidery carry ideas of cosmic order, continuity of generations and protection, even when their original mythological context is forgotten in everyday consciousness. Similarly, geometric and floral elements in Uzbek decorative art encode notions of fertility, prosperity and divine protection. These signs function as silent carriers of memory, linking the present with the cultural past.

Another important result relates to the identity-forming function of cultural signs. Visual markers such as traditional clothing elements, headwear, colour combinations or patterns on ceramics, as well as emblematic objects in the interior, allow individuals and communities to demonstrate their belonging to a specific cultural space. In many cases, these signs also differentiate social roles, age groups or ritual statuses. For example, the choice of colours and patterns in traditional dress may indicate marital status, regional origin or social rank. In this way, cultural signs operate as a visible grammar of identity, enabling recognition, inclusion and distinction within the community.

The regulatory dimension of cultural signs is manifested in ritual practices and everyday norms of behaviour. Gestures of greeting, hospitality rituals, rules of spatial arrangement at the table or in the house are not merely practical conventions, but sign systems encoding values such as respect, hierarchy, reciprocity and solidarity. The Slavic custom of greeting guests with bread and salt symbolically expresses the ideas of hospitality, blessing and peaceful intention. In Uzbek culture, particular attention to the

position of elders, the way of addressing them and the spatial organisation of gatherings serves as a visual and behavioural sign of respect and social order. These practices can be seen as performative signs that simultaneously describe and reproduce the normative structure of the community.

The study also reveals the growing importance of cultural signs in contemporary media discourse. National symbols — flags, coats of arms, historical heroes, key dates and holidays are actively used in state communication, advertising, tourism branding and digital media. In these contexts, traditional signs are resemiotised: they are detached from their original ritual or local settings and embedded in new narrative frameworks, such as national branding or international promotion. Media texts often combine historical and modern visual codes, creating hybrid symbolic images designed to evoke pride, unity and positive emotional identification with the country. At the same time, such processes may lead to simplification or commodification of cultural meanings, when complex historical symbols are reduced to easily consumable stereotypes.

Finally, the material demonstrates that cultural signs are especially sensitive to situations of intercultural contact. In communication between representatives of different cultures, familiar signs can become sources of misunderstanding if their symbolic meanings are not shared. For example, certain colours, gestures or forms of address may be interpreted differently depending on cultural background. This highlights the importance of explicit reflection on cultural signs in educational and intercultural communication contexts, as well as the need for conscious preservation and reinterpretation of national sign systems in the globalised world.

Discussion

The findings of the study confirm the productivity of a semiotic approach to national culture. Viewing culture as a system of interacting sign structures, as proposed by Y. Lotman, makes it possible to understand how everyday objects, gestures and narratives become meaningful elements of a larger symbolic whole [1]. Cultural signs function not simply as labels attached to pre-existing realities, but as tools that shape perception and interpretation of those realities. They select, stabilise and transmit certain worldviews, while marginalising or silencing others.

The role of signs as depositories of cultural memory corresponds to J. Assmann's concept of cultural memory as a special form of preserving and actualising the past in symbolic forms [4]. Ornaments, rituals, epic plots and monuments can be described as "memory supports" that secure continuity between generations and offer models for interpreting the present. At the same time, cultural memory is not static: each act of using a sign involves its reinterpretation in a new context. This dynamic aspect becomes particularly evident in contemporary media, where traditional symbols are frequently reframed to fit the needs of political communication, marketing or identity campaigns.

The identity-forming function of cultural signs resonates with the interpretive anthropology of C. Geertz, who defined culture as a web of meanings spun by people themselves [3]. Membership in a community implies the ability to "read" its signs and to participate in their reproduction. Visual markers, ritual behaviours and narrative clichés serve as signals of inclusion: they tell both the group and outsiders who "we" are and how "we" differ from "others". In this sense, national culture is not only expressed through signs but is constituted by them.

The regulatory dimension of cultural signs can be interpreted through the notion of performativity. Ritual gestures, forms of greeting or etiquette practices are not only representations but actions that establish and maintain social relations. They make power structures, hierarchies and value systems visible and tangible. Understanding these signs is crucial for successful participation in the social life of the community and for respectful intercultural interaction.

At the same time, the analysis reveals several tensions characteristic of contemporary cultural sign systems. On the one hand, globalisation increases the visibility and mobility of signs: ornaments, rituals and national symbols circulate across borders, appear in new contexts and are reinterpreted by different audiences. On the other hand, this mobility can lead to the loss of depth and historical density of meanings, turning complex cultural signs into superficial markers used for decorative or commercial purposes. The challenge for national cultures is to find a balance between openness and protection of their symbolic resources, ensuring that signs remain carriers of living tradition rather than museum exhibits or marketing clichés.

Another important issue is the asymmetry of interpretative power. Different groups within the same society may assign divergent meanings to the same signs, depending on their historical experience, political views or generational position. Conflicts over symbols — monuments, flags, historical names — show that cultural signs are not neutral but embedded in struggles for recognition and memory. This underscores the need for inclusive dialogue about the meanings of national symbols and for critical reflection on their historical origins and contemporary uses.

Conclusion

The study has shown that signs as elements of national culture constitute a complex and dynamic system that performs multiple functions: cognitive, communicative, regulatory and identity-related. Cultural signs encode and preserve collective experience, mediate the transmission of values, organise social interaction and provide individuals with symbolic tools for self-identification.

Examples from Slavic and Uzbek traditions illustrate how visual, verbal and behavioural signs form coherent symbolic configurations, linking everyday practices with deep cultural meanings. Traditional ornaments, rituals of hospitality, forms of address and national symbols demonstrate that national culture lives in signs and through signs, and that mastery of these codes is a prerequisite for full participation in the life of the community.

In the contemporary world, marked by intensive intercultural contacts and mediatisation, the role of cultural signs becomes even more significant. They act as instruments of cultural diplomacy and national branding, but also as fragile carriers of historical memory and identity. Preserving and critically rethinking the sign systems of national cultures is therefore an important task for educators, cultural institutions and researchers.

Further research could focus on comparative analysis of cultural signs in different regions, empirical studies of how various social groups interpret national symbols, and exploration of digital transformations of cultural semiotics in social media and virtual environments.

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