



# Patch in the ritual and daily practice of the Turkic people

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 <https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.105.32>

## Abstract

The article is devoted to the study of the patch as a stable tradition of the spiritual and material-artistic culture of the Turkic peoples. The patch is considered as a "participant" in ritual and ritual practice and manual artistic craft. The scientific novelty of the results lies in the fact that for the first-time sources on the ritual and everyday practice of the Turkic peoples with the participation of the patch have been systematized. The collected material is summarized and formed as a comprehensive study. The reconstruction of the functions and the role of the patch in the ritual and daily practice of the Turkic peoples was carried out on the basis of a comparative analysis. The general and distinctive features in the artistic and technological techniques of patchwork technique are established and systematized. Ethnographic materials were collected during field research in the period 2019-2021 and introduce a set of factual sources into the history of art of the peoples of Central Asia. The findings can be used in developments in the field of ethnoculturology of the Turkic world.

**Keywords:** patch art; fabric; ritual and everyday practices; ritual; amulet; Central Asia

## Introduction

The art of patchwork technique in the vast territory of Central Asia has received a special status of an artistic phenomenon in the history of the art of the Turkic peoples. A special attitude to the cloth patch is manifested in all the most important rituals of the life cycle, and in everyday practice, the patch is used in the household as a material for women's needlework (quilts, jewelry, clothing items, etc.). At the same time, the patch as an important element of Turkic culture attracts insufficient attention of modern ethnologists, anthropologists, cultural scientists and representatives of other humanities. In the scientific literature there is some information about the tradition of tying ritual ribbons made of white cloth among Tuvinians (Kongu, 2015), about sacrificial ribbons made of white cloth kyira among Altaians (Ekeeva & Belekova, 2018), about the role of patches in the ritual practice of Khakas (Burnakov, 2012) and patches on hitching posts among Buryats (Zaksheeva, 2009), about the tradition of distributing patches in the funeral and memorial rites of the Kazakhs (Oktyabrskaya & Suraganova, 2010; Bikenov et al., 2016), the significance of the patch – latta-band in the practice of veneration of funerary monuments-mazars among the peoples of Central Asia are presented in the work (Terletsky, 2007) and more.



The research topic on patches in the ritual and daily practices of the Turkic people holds great importance, emphasising the abundant cultural and spiritual legacy of these communities. The patch, also known as the "tumar," holds significance beyond its physical form as it represents a profound symbol that is deeply ingrained in the spiritual and material-artistic culture of the Turkic people. The role of rituals and daily practices has received significant scholarly attention, particularly in recent systematic studies. Patches are of utmost importance in Turkic rituals and cultural practices. They are utilised in life cycle ceremonies, domestic handicrafts, and as components of spiritual and cultural manifestation. The first documented reference to cloth patches in Turkic ceremonial culture can be traced back to the writings of M. Kashgari (2005), emphasising their enduring importance.

Patches hold significant importance for Turkic individuals due to their multifaceted nature. They function as talismans, representations of goodwill, and links to the supernatural realm (Nusipaliyzy et al., 2020). They are disseminated during significant communal occasions such as weddings, funerals, and memorials, and hold particular importance in the funeral rituals of the elderly. The practice of distributing patches during funerals is prevalent among various Turkic ethnic groups, such as the Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, and Uzbeks. These patches, typically crafted from luxurious materials such as silk, are regarded as containing a portion of the deceased's grace.

The scholarly investigation into patches as a cultural phenomenon, particularly from a semiotic standpoint, has only started to receive significant attention in recent years (Kadyraliyeva et al., 2019). This study entails a thorough examination of the ceremonial and daily customs of the Turkic populations, aiming to identify both shared and distinct characteristics. This research addresses a previously unexplored aspect of Turkic culture by examining the role and functions of the patch. It does so by employing historical-ethnographic and cultural perspectives. To elucidate, the examination of patches within Turkic culture holds great importance in comprehending the profound customs, convictions, and principles of these individuals. It provides a valuable understanding of their artistic manifestations, societal traditions, and the symbolic communication embedded in their material artefacts (Prychepii, 2022). The growing academic fascination with this subject signifies a significant advancement in understanding and safeguarding the abundant cultural legacy of the Turkic world.

A review of these and other works has shown that the study of the patch as a cultural phenomenon from the perspective of semiotics based on a comparative analysis of the ritual and everyday practices of the Turkic peoples, the identification of common and specific in it has not yet been carried out. In part, this article will be able to fill this gap. The purpose of the work is to study the role and functions of a cloth patch in the ritual and everyday practices of the Turkic people.

## **Methodology**

The research methodology is founded on the integration of contemporary semiotic approaches, encompassing historical-ethnographic, historical-philosophical, and cultural dimensions. This enables a comprehensive examination of the patch phenomenon from a unified semiotic perspective. The semiotic approach serves as the main methodological tool of this research, where two levels are important for us – semantics and pragmatics. From the point of view of semantics, the patch is considered as a sign of a symbolic language (mediation between worlds, metonymic sacrifice, votive gift and amulet), and from the standpoint of pragmatics, the relationship between the sign (patch) and the one who uses it is studied.

## **The Patch in the Ritual and Ceremonial Practice of the Turkic People**

The Turkic peoples, renowned for their opulent cultural customs such as the utilisation of ceremonial embellishments, constitute a heterogeneous ethnic collective dispersed across an extensive



geographic expanse. They are predominantly situated in Central Asia, encompassing countries such as Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and certain regions of Tajikistan. Moreover, their distribution encompasses areas including the Ural Mountains and Siberia in Russia, certain regions of China (particularly the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region), and extends into the Middle East where they have substantial populations in Turkey. The distribution of cultures, languages, and traditions in this region is diverse and intricate, characterised by their common Turkic origins but differentiated by their unique local manifestations and practices. The extensive distribution of the Turkic peoples throughout these regions highlights their substantial historical and cultural influence in Eurasia.

The ritual and ceremonial practices of the Turkic people in the main points have much in common, where the use of the patch is manifested in many of them: funeral and memorial and wedding-familial, including the practice of veneration of sacred places and initiation rites. The earliest written mention of the use of a cloth patch in the ceremonial culture of the Turks is found in M. Kashgari (2005). The author notes that the Turks at funerals divided valuable fabric (usually silk) into small pieces and divided it among those present, considering it a symbol of benevolence and connection with the other world, and the patch itself was called "byshysh".

Relics of this tradition still live among many Turkic peoples. For example, Kazakhs call this tradition "zhyrtys taratu". In this regard, researchers I. Oktyabrskaya and Z. Suraganova (2010) are deeply right, who note that the patch – "zhyrtys" comes from the word "zhyrtu" – to tear. Zhyrtys itself is a piece of cloth (from 30x30 cm to 50x50 cm) of a regular square or rectangular shape, which "was distributed at weddings, during funeral and memorial celebrations, on holidays associated with the birth of a child and the achievement of forty days and one-year-old, etc.". Zhyrtys was distributed exclusively to women and usually, it is a patch / piece of expensive fabric (silk, velvet, plush and more).

The tradition of distributing a patch during funerals is common among the Kyrgyz. According to Zh. Orozbekova (2012) on the anniversary of the funeral, cattle are slaughtered and zhyrtys is distributed. It is also "a small piece of silk or cotton fabric, about the size of a man's handkerchief. It was distributed to all the women present. In the future, they could sew some kind of thing for children from zhyrtys or use it when sewing different types of blankets". Moreover, in both cultures, these patches were distributed only at the funerals of people who had reached sixty or more years, and in cases of death of middle-aged and young people, zhyrtys was not distributed. And, the older the person, the more valuable this kind of gift was considered. The analyzed custom also existed among the Uzbeks, Karakalpaks and other peoples of Central Asia. On this occasion, researcher B.H. Karmysheva (1976) writes that among the Uzbeks in Akhshakh, immediately after the removal, simultaneously with the distribution of small scraps of cloth to women – yirtish, several closest relatives started preparing a ritual dish.

Researcher H. Esbergenov (1963) notes the presence of this rite among the Karakalpaks, where during the funeral of an old man or an old woman, there was a distribution of scraps of cloth called zhartysh (from the word "tear"). By analogy with the Kazakhs, Kyrgyz and other Turkic-speaking peoples, the Karakalpaks believed that with this piece of cloth, a particle of the grace of the deceased passes to them. At the same time, "the commemorations for the old man and the old woman, especially the annual ones, were festive in nature and were called toi – feast". It is not difficult to notice that the names of the patches in the analyzed material also have a purely phonetic similarity: zhyrtys (Kazakh) – zhyrtys (Kyrgyz) – yirtish (Uzbeks) – zhartysh (Karakalpaks), which are due to the common linguistic and cultural basis of these people.

In this rite, the symbolism of the number 60 (the age of the deceased, at whose funeral it is customary in traditional Turkic culture to distribute patches of cloth) attracts attention, and the cycle of rituals (annual commemorations) was festive in nature. Yu.A. Rapoport (1971), who, based on the analysis of a number of ethnographic sources on the people of Central Asia and researchers of primitive society (in particular K.V. Trever), indicates 60 years of age as the "limit" age, the age of



transition to the "ancestral group". Consequently, receiving a patch from a person who has passed the age limit is considered by the people to be the highest good and worthy of "communion" with him. It is most likely that the ideas about the "ultimate" age among the Central Asian people, dating back to the primitive society according to the reconstruction of Yu.A. Rapoport (1971), were later strengthened with the advent of Islam, where 63 years is considered a sacred age, correlated with the age of death of the prophet Muhammad.

Hence, receiving a patch as a gift (and participating in the entire cycle of funeral and memorial rites) of people over the age of 60 – prosperous, with many children and respected in society was one of the coveted, interpreted by science in the context of the practice of "communion" according to J. Fraser (1995), which is reflected in his work. In addition to the distribution of zhyrtys (scraps of new fabric) in the Kazakh culture, there was also a custom of donating scraps directly from the clothes of the deceased person, which was torn and given, and subsequently a variety of textiles were made from them. On this occasion, D.H. Karmysheva (1986) writes: "According to Kazakhs, with the help of a torn piece of clothing, the grace-giving power (kasiyet) of the deceased is transmitted to the survivors. Kazakhs sewed clothes for children from scraps (especially hats) so that the kids lived as long as their grandfather or grandmother and earned the same respect from others", which we also understand as one of the ways of sacred "communion".

In what, undoubtedly, there is a connection with contagious (partial) magic, which is based on the understanding of things that once came into contact with each other, continue to interact at a distance after the termination of direct contact. The same understanding is found among other Turkic peoples. For example, the Bashkirs had patches in the gift exchange system during the wedding ceremony, for the Tuvans for any ritual actions – the birth of a child, wedding, funeral, etc. it is customary to submit a kadak, which is a strip of fabric, most often silk. Thus, the tradition of distributing patches to all those present at important events in the community – a wedding, the birth of a baby, the funeral of very old people is common among many Turkic people. It was believed that the multiplicity of patches affects abundance: the increase of offspring, the multiplication of property, the offspring of livestock, etc. At the same time, Kazakh women believe that getting scraps from any celebration implies a speedy and successful holding of such a celebration already in their family (Argynbaev, 1974).

Another manifestation of partial magic is the connection of the patch with the ancient ritual "Khan-kuturmak", which is described in sufficient detail by the Kazakh historian A.A. Galiev (2015). The author, based on the analysis of a huge factual material, reconstructs the rite of ascension of the ruler, which was performed as follows: the person proclaimed khan was put on a white felt carpet, personifying the purity of his intentions, and the most respected people of society raised it three times by the ends, proclaiming: "Khan! Khan! Khan!". As soon as the felt carpet touched the ground, it was picked up again by the people running up, and then it was torn into shreds, and everyone took them in memory of having participated in a kind of coronation ceremony. Consequently, the patch in the Turkic culture once played an important role in the rite of initiation of the ruler.

A slightly different context of the patch can be traced in the practice of venerating the graves of saints (pilgrimage) and sacred places in the Turkic culture. The essence of this tradition is already in the offering of small pieces of white cloth – aktyk and tying up patches on trees, fences and other various places near the holy place. At the same time, in modern reality, a piece of white cloth (aktyk) pilgrims not only bring, but also take with them the pieces previously left by other pilgrims, considering them as if "charged" from the holy place. According to our field materials, they are used for headaches (tied on the head) and stored at home as a valuable relic. Another meaning is put into the tradition of tying patches on trees, shrubs or other holy places (according to the pilgrims). So, very often today Kazakhs can find attributes of "nodular magic" (Figures 1-3).



Figure 1. Pine tree tied with patches at Okzhetpes mountain (Akmola region, Kazakhstan); photo by Zh. Shaigozova



Figure 2. Birch tied with patches at the sacred spring Gauhar ana (Karaganda region, Ulytau village, Kazakhstan); photo by Zh. Shaigozova



Figure 3. An ancient well at the sacred place of Terekty-Aulie (Karaganda region, Kazakhstan); photo by Zh. Shaigozova

According to N.S. Terletsky (2007), the tradition of tying knots among the peoples of Central Asia is today the prerogative of women's pilgrimage. In general, the essence of this phenomenon is expressed in the following: "most pilgrims leave various votive objects on mazars (burial sites) as symbols of appeal – requests to the "saint", as well as as a sign of the vows given to him" the researcher states. The main idea, according to the pilgrims themselves, is a variety of pleas: for the sending of health, offspring, most often a son-heir, well-being in the house, a good harvest, a rich offspring of cattle and others. Another meaning was invested in tying ribbons on dangerous sections of the road: an impassable pass or a river. On such occasions, when facing a hazardous part of the journey, the traveller fastened a torn patch from his clothing to a tree, as a means of seeking good fortune (Kislyakov, 1960).

The tradition of tying sacrificial ribbons to certain trees (more often to birch or larch) of exclusively white color (kyira / jalama), practiced by the Altaians and other Turkic-speaking people of Siberia, researchers E.V. Ekeeva and E.A. Belekova (2018) associate with the ideas of the spirits-owners of individual objects – mountains, rivers, lakes and healing springs. In order to avoid the wrath of these spirits and gain their favor, the Altaians make offerings in the form of "patchwork" gifts. The Tuvan rite of tying up the ritual ribbon "chalama", perceived as an offering to the host spirits of nature, is also close in meaning, which is noted in the work (Kongu, 2015), which is actively practiced in modern times. In all these cases, in the popular understanding, a patch tied in a knot served as a talisman "for good" and, they could be held, tied happiness, fertility and good luck.

### **A Patch in the Daily Practice of the Turkic People**

The patch acquired in various rituals of the life cycle is actively used in everyday practice, which is expressed in the manufacture of decorative and applied art products. Among them, the most common is the manufacture of patchwork quilts, called in Kazakh culture "kurak korppe" (quilt of patches). This type of decorative and applied art is widespread among many peoples of the world, which in traditional culture demonstrates the practice of waste-free production. At the same time, "Kazakhs still consider it a great sin to throw out scraps" notes ethnographer Sh.Zh. Tokhtabayeva (2019), especially if this concerns patches received at funerals (zhyrtys). More free handling is observed with the patches obtained during sewing, which are called pushak or kikim. The patchwork quilt "kurak korppe" (or several of its units) is an important component of the dowry of the Kazakh bride, which in the traditional period was mainly made from ceremonial patches collected for many

years in special chests and passed down from generation to generation, from the older woman to the younger (Figure 4).



**Figure 4.** The photo of “kurak korppe”

The analysis of the traditional Kazakh name "kurak", made in the article by I.V. Oktyabrskaya and Z.K. Suraganova (2010), derived from the word "kuru" revealed two meanings of this word. One – "death", "die", "disappear", "vanish", "be destroyed", and the other – "creation", "create", "compose", "build", "connect" demonstrates two mutually exclusive semantic meanings: "from destruction to creation", which in principle is embedded in the very semantic content of patchwork things: from death to birth, from chaos to harmony, from funeral to wedding, etc., which is interpreted by us as a symbolic expression of the duality of the world, and the blanket itself patchwork is, according to I.V. Oktyabrskaya and Z.K. Suraganova, a material expression of the "symbol of the balance of opposites".

The fundamental element used to create patterns for Kazakh patchwork quilts was a module, which could be either a square or a rectangle. The composition may comprise diminutive fragments of fabric with varying dimensions, such as squares, rectangles, and triangles - all of which are geometric shapes. The simplest combinations of scraps with different colors of fabric could give many variants of ornaments, which in traditional culture have their own names and contain different meanings (Prychepii, 2023). For example, a square (sharshy) in Kazakh culture is a symbol of stability, durability and order; the triangle is a symbol of the World Mountain, the elevation of the spirit and a powerful talisman sign (tumar), etc. Each ornament or integral ornamental motif, according to the author's field research conducted within the framework of this study among Kazakh craftswomen is "read" in a clearly defined way. For example, the ornamental composition consisting of alternations of light and dark stripes of fabric was "read" by the craftswoman M. Nurlanova (born in 1951) as an instruction to her daughter getting married: "my daughter, life consists of successes and failures, remember there will always be a bright streak of life behind the dark, learn to treat it equally calmly and steadfastly", and the patchwork quilt itself is interpreted by the craftswoman as a diverse world full of different moments.

Another craftswoman, A. Suleimenova (born in 1968) interprets an ornament with a dark small square inside against a background of light fabric as an image of a well, which, according to her already deceased mother, reflects one of the wishes for her daughter. The essence of this wish is as follows: "you (daughter) should become like a well with fresh water for your husband and his family, from which the whole family will drink" The well in the Turkic culture is interpreted as a source of life and spiritual strength. Another ornament, in the form of a cross, which the Kazakhs call



bestanba, according to almost all the masters, is interpreted as a sign – the center of an ordered space, the presence of the head of the family. In general, there are about more than 40 variants of the ornament of Kazakh patchwork quilts, which reflect the most significant cultural universals: protection of the sky (zhuldyz – star, ai – moon, etc.), ideas of fertility (irek – zigzag, kempir kosak – rainbow, etc.), protection and prosperity (kos muyiz – motif of paired horns, koshar muyiz – motif of ram's horn, etc.) and many others.

The ornamental composition of the patchwork product, its elegance depends on the level of skill, but all its technical nuances have preserved the understanding of the patchwork quilt as a reflection of the Universe, a family amulet, and its presence in the dowry is interpreted as a kind of talisman for a young, newly created family. In addition, blankets in the Turkic culture, wedding attributes were also made from patches. For example, Kazakhs, Uzbeks and other people sewed various patches to the bride's wedding veil in order not to "jinx" the bride. It should be noted that the tradition of making patchwork products in the Turkic-speaking countries of Central Asia is now experiencing its rebirth mainly in the form of a variety of products prepared for sale, as well as as modern designer things for the interior.

Things for children were sewn from patches. For example, I.V. Oktyabrskaya and Z.K. Suraganova (2010) write about this: The Kazakhs of Altai still have the practice of making patchwork clothes for children exposed to the "evil eye". The jacket, sewn from zhyrtys and decorated with cowry shells, acts as a reliable talisman and remains forever in the family. Similar things were worn by Kazakh children literally 50-60 years ago everywhere. A similar tradition still exists among the Kyrgyz. According to oral information of Kyrgyz craftswoman (Karymshakova Zhuldyz), on the 40th day after birth the baby was put on a shirt sewn from 40 patches donated by relatives. Each piece carried the good wishes of loved ones, and the whole shirt was supposed to protect the child from the evil eye and bad influence. Such clothes, according to the Kyrgyz, seemed to absorb all the power of the clan, a large family and "protected" the baby in such a peculiar way.

Uzbeks also sewed children's clothes from patches. For its manufacture, patches were used from old light textiles, preferably left over from the elderly, as well as from fabrics that were distributed at the wake of a person who reached old age and from fabrics used as a path (poendoz) for newlyweds entering their home (Zununova, 2020). Thus, the patch acts as a significant cultural phenomenon in the daily practice of the Turkic people. In the beliefs of many Turkic people associated with the protective functions of a cloth patch, in our opinion, the syncretic character of the apotropee is reflected, containing echoes of ancient magical ideas. But, in general, the role and functions of the patch in Kazakh culture has received a clear formulation in the traditional view of the seven troubles (zhety zhat). It includes: an unclaimed word, a depopulated land, a lake without birds, a people without a leader, a brave warrior without a homeland, an elder left without peers and unstitched patches, where the latter are perceived as the destruction of ties – kindred, social, natural (Gul, 2019).

The patch, or "tumar" in Turkic cultures, is a significant element in both ancient and modern rituals, although its meaning and function have changed over time. In ancient times, tumar played a key role in the shamanistic practices of Turkic peoples. This amulet was considered a powerful protector against evil spirits and misfortunes. It was usually made of metal, leather or cloth and decorated with symbolic designs and signs, such as the Tree of Life or images of the sun and moon, reflecting the connection with nature and the cosmos. Tumars were worn by both adults and children for protection and well-being. The modern meaning of the tumar has been transformed, although elements of ancient beliefs have been preserved. Nowadays, the tumar may be used as an element of a national costume or as a piece of jewellery, but its protective function remains important. It still symbolises the connection with ancestors and cultural heritage, reminding us of spiritual roots and traditions. Comparing ancient and modern practices, it can be seen that the original shamanistic and ritualistic role of the tumar has given way to a more symbolic and cultural meaning. While in the past it was an integral part of rituals and beliefs, providing spiritual protection and a link to the beyond, in the modern world the tumar acts more as a symbol of national identity and respect for tradition, although





its protective functions are still valued. This reflects the general trend of preserving cultural heritage in a changing world, where ancient customs are being adapted to modern conditions.

Combining semiotic analysis with material culture perspectives enhances our comprehension of Turkic ritual patches, like the Tumar. The selection of fibres and textiles, such as wool, silk, or cotton, is influenced by the accessibility of materials and their cultural importance, while colours carry symbolic connotations—blue representing spiritual safeguarding and red symbolising vitality. Textures, regardless of their roughness or smoothness, contribute tactile dimensions that amplify the perceived potency of the patch. From a semiotic perspective, every element, such as material, colour, and texture, functions as a signifier, communicating culturally distinctive meanings, such as animal motifs representing specific mythological attributes. This approach unveils the profound nature of these artefacts, not only as tangible items but also as profound conveyors of cultural identity and tradition, showcasing the artistic, craft traditions, and belief systems of the Turkic people within their social and cultural environments.

## Conclusions

In connection with the semiotic approach to the patch phenomenon, the following positions are important. The semantics and pragmatics of the patch – all the content, information transmitted through it, in the most general form is interpreted by us as the relationship between the sign carrier (patch) and the participants of various rituals, where the cloth patch (as a necessary participant in the ceremony) is allocated the role and functions of a certain "harmonizer" of relations designed to protect people, as well as to promote social affirmation, "legitimization" of the changes that it fixes (wedding, birth, funeral, initiation, etc.).

Thus, stable expressions of a mental nature and the issues considered demonstrate the presence in the Kazakh traditional consciousness of beliefs dating back to ancient magic, where a piece of cloth acts as a significant cultural phenomenon. So, until today, in the traditional consciousness of the Turkic people and Kazakhs in particular, the conviction remained that with the help of a cloth patch – the most important ceremonial element, it is possible to achieve the desired goals and have a beneficial effect on the course of events in a person's life.

## Acknowledgments

The article was prepared within the project of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan AR09259862 "Research of traditional crafts of modern Kazakhstan: state and search for ways to preserve".

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