

Conservation of Cultural Heritage: Visual Interpretation of Yakut Riddles

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Abstract: This article presents the results of a project on the visualization of Yakut folklore texts aiming to explore figurative representations of Earth and space expressed through riddles. Folk riddles are regarded as a valuable source of material for research aimed at identifying traditional ideas about the world and its objects. A comprehensive analysis of riddles about natural phenomena, described in the forms of metaphors, reveals archaic mythological images and motifs about the structure and creation of the world. In order to construct a model of the Yakut Universe verbalized in folklore texts, the author initiated a school art project titled 'Postcards: Illustration of Yakut folklore texts'. The process of illustration was inspired by Yakut riddles collected by S.P. Oyuns kaya (1975) and involved students and a teacher of Art and Technology. Within the project children conducted semantic, semiotic and interpretational analyses of Yakut riddles about the earth, the sky and celestial bodies. The children's interpretation of key metaphors resulted in the construction of a visual model of the Yakut Universe and the generation of anthropomorphic, zoomorphic, and subject-related images of the earth and cosmic objects. The postcards with drawings were subsequently processed by InVision App and transformed into pictures with animated 3D graphics accompanied by recorded audio texts in the Yakut and Russian languages. The further promotion of the art project at various conferences as well as the publication of the animated pictures in the Sakha Republic's children's magazine contributes to the conservation of Yakut cultural heritage verbalized in riddles that metaphorically describe the world and reflect the traditional mythological worldview of the Yakut people.

Keywords: riddles, the Yakut language, key metaphors, cultural codes, representation, visualization

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INTRODUCTION

Riddles, being an archaic folklore genre, are considered reliable and interesting material for exploring semiotic elements and cultural symbols verbalized in the form of metaphors that figuratively characterize objects and represent traditional ideas of an ethnos about the world. Ana Stefanova underlines the close connection between a riddle and an archetype; she describes a riddle as “a short but wholesome and complete description of a part of the world” and “an attempt to capture the archetype and its transformations into words” (Stefanova 2007, 134). Researchers also note the existence of links between myths and riddles, since some riddles’ images are based on ancient mythological storylines and motifs that might be assimilated from other cultures and transferred into the traditional views of an ethnic group (Başgöz 1972; Harries 1976; Toporov 1980; Kaivola-Bregenhøj 1996; Gabysheva 2009; Köngäs-Maranda 2011; Filippova V. and Filippova S. 2021). Mythological and archaic representations are especially clearly reflected in cosmogonic riddles: images of the sky and celestial bodies may be encoded by metaphors denoting living beings and sacred objects. Some riddles substitute natural phenomena with ordinary objects such as dishes or linen, thus also containing information about the material culture of an ethnos.

In order to present and preserve the cultural heritage of the indigenous peoples of the Arctic which is verbalized in the riddles, one of the authors of this paper, Varvara Filippova, initiated a children’s art project titled *Postcards: Illustration of Yakut Folklore Texts*. The project focused on the interpretation and visualization of Yakut riddles that metaphorically describe the Earth and celestial bodies. The project was implemented at Berdigestyakh gymnasium, a village school in the Gorniy District of the Sakha Republic, where both Yakut and Russian are used as languages of instruction. Dual language teaching at the gymnasium greatly contributes to the conservation of cultural heritage and preservation of minority languages in the Sakha Republic. On the one hand, dual language teaching complies with the Russian Federal Law that designates Russian as an obligatory language in all country schools (Federal’nyĭ zakon ob obrazovanii v Rossiĭskoĭ Federatsii / Federal Law on Education in the Russian Federation), on the other, it makes it possible for students and teachers to maintain their ethnic language not only within the domestic sphere but also in the educational context. It is necessary to note that the current educational standard enables the use of native languages in the learning process;

moreover, they encourage the use of ethnic pedagogical technologies, which are considered a mechanism for implementing the latest generation of the Federal State Educational Standards based on ethnic-cultural education. In the Sakha Republic (Yakutia), ethnic pedagogy technologies are implemented in kindergartens: through a series of educational activities, teachers study the influence of the sacred concepts of Yakut epic poetry, *olonkho*, on the development of a child; they create a developing subject-spatial environment on the basis of *olonkho* and other folklore texts; the artistic language of *olonkho* is used as a resource for self-identification, self-understanding and self-presentation of a child; and so on. *Olonkho* has been proclaimed a UNESCO masterpiece of oral and intangible heritage of humanity, and Yakut riddles are often transformed texts of the *olonkho* heroic epic. In general, the use of ethnic pedagogical methods in the process of educating children allows us to transform the traditional motifs of the Yakut culture into modern forms, methods and techniques of education and to preserve the original culture of our people. Thus, during the art project implementation, the schoolchildren learned how to creatively interpret the texts of riddles, visualize their own traditional culture and reproduce Yakut worldview concepts in productive creative activities.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

To create postcards representing the model of the Universe, participants of the project selected folk riddles about the sky, the sun, the moon, and the earth from a collection of Yakut riddles (Oyunskaya 1975). The main tasks of the students were to research the semantics of folklore texts and identify key metaphors representing the objects of the world and the Universe. In the final stage of text analyses, it was necessary to analyze and interpret metaphors as semiotic elements, i.e., cultural codes and symbols that uncover archaic and traditional ideas about the world. Then, participants of the project exchanged ideas to decide on the images that would illustrate the phenomena described in the texts of selected riddles. Finally, one student, Grigory Rummyantsev, under the guidance of artist and teacher of Arts and Technology Ivan Rekhlyasov created the drawings depicting metaphorical images representing the objects encoded in the riddles. It must be noted that each postcard is based on one or several texts about particular key image(s) and demonstrates certain object(s), for example the Sun or stars. Thus, at different stages of the project children conducted the methods of semantic, semiotic and interpretational analyses.

The essence of the art project, within which the unique drawings with deeply symbolic images were created, predetermined the scope of the activities and events aimed at disseminating the project experience in visual interpretation of folklore texts. The postcards were exhibited at Ysyakhs (national Yakut holidays), at forums for teachers in the Sakha Republic, and at the Interregional Space Forum ‘Earth – a view from space’ in Moscow and Korolev. The results of the projects were also presented at seminars and academic conferences on folklore and cultural studies in Buryatia, Tatarstan and other regions of Russia. In 2021, the project was transformed into a digital format: materials were processed through the InVision app and widely distributed in print across Yakutia with the assistance of the Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) and Keskil, the Sakha Republic’s Publishing House (Chuoraanchyk 2021a; Chuoraanchyk 2021b; Kolokolchik 2021). Thus, postcards were converted into moving pictures with 3D graphics and the texts of the riddles were voiced by children in both Yakut and Russian.

It was previously mentioned that the art project was aimed at preserving the cultural heritage of the Arctic’s indigenous peoples. We believe that conservation of the traditional worldview and culture of the Yakuts and other indigenous peoples of the Arctic region requires collaborations of academics and media professionals with members of local communities. The active engagement of participants along with the further promotion of the project in Yakut press and at different types of events match the concept of participatory conservation of cultural heritage defined by P. Spiridon and I. Sandu (2015) that presupposes the active involvement of society members in the process of cultural and historical research. The authors state that at the level of interactive participation “the community members are involved in professional teams’ work (finding materials, ... identifying the role and significance of some cultural heritage assets in and for local community, etc.)”, within passive and passive-interactive participation community members are informed through “local communications, media tools” (Spiridon and Sandu 2015, 48). Thus, the art project involving Yakut schoolchildren, a professional linguist and an art teacher as well as widespread presentations of the project’s results are considered interactive, passive and passive-interactive types of community participation in the conservation process.

METAPHORICAL NATURE OF RIDDLES AND THEIR VISUAL INTERPRETATION

The study and interpretation of a figurative description of an object in a riddle reveals a mental image, which is associated with personal impressions, ideas, knowledge and a linguistic worldview. It is known that each language reflects a certain way of perceiving and organizing the world. The linguistic worldview is a reflection of the structure of extralinguistic reality in the forms of the language (Gak 2000). Folklore texts can serve as a reliable source of information about the linguistic worldview of an ethnic group and, moreover, about its mythopoetic worldview. According to N.I. Tolstoy (1995, 48), folklore should be understood as a certain system of worldview and folk ideas, a system of genres and visual means, a system of ritual functions and texts that have a certain content established by tradition.

The riddle is a genre metaphorically actualizing everyday ideas of ethnic groups about objects of the surrounding world and images of linguistic consciousness that determine their worldview's approach to the phenomena of reality (Kovshova 2015; Orlova 2017; Filippova V. and Filippova S. 2021). According to S.P. Oyunskaia (1975, 93), the logic of assimilation or the use of metaphor has a causal relationship with the people's way of living. Thus, riddles represent a specific world of things and phenomena that are present in the life of a society. On the other hand, the metaphor in riddles is embodied in artistic images with the help of figurative words, fabulous and mythological names, and literary devices such as onomatopoeia, simile, paraphrase, personification, hyperbole, and litotes. In this regard, the visualization of metaphors seems to be an extremely difficult and ambitious task which requires the use of a range of linguistic methods in addition to the methods of artistic and semiotic analyses.

Philosopher John Locke (2022) notes that the task of semiotics is to study the nature of signs used to understand things and phenomena or to transfer their knowledge to others. The semiotic sphere of riddles about the structure of the world can be said to consist of signs which are the elements of complex archaic semantics. The images verbalized in riddles can reflect the metric-standard sphere responsible for structuring and evaluating the surrounding world.

When creating artistic symbols, it is necessary to consider their complex semantics, since the meaning laid down by the artist will collide with the inner world of the viewer and the peculiarities of their perception. Moreover, when visualizing any text, it is difficult to claim

the accuracy of its image, since the depicted symbols and images are not only a reflection of the artist's personal perception but can also generate new content that each viewer will create in their imagination. In this regard, when working on the content of the illustrations, we tried to take into account the collective opinion of the project participants in order to minimize the personal perception of folklore texts. When depicting the key images of the Yakut riddles, other ethnic cultural codes (phenomena of the traditional life of the people; ornaments) served as a background. Some images were supplemented with scenes from the folk epic *olonkho*, which presents a detailed large-scale picture of the Universe with a description of the sky, celestial bodies, natural phenomena, and Earth landscapes. Thus, Figure 1 presents a generalized image of the Universe based on several riddles about Earth, the world and seasons reflecting the three worlds of the Yakut Universe (Upper, Middle, and Lower).



Figure 1 The image of the Universe in Yakut riddles

The riddle about the spatial model of the cosmos - *Aan dođdu ortotugar kômüs serge turar uđu* / *They say that in the middle of the Universe there is a golden serge* (horse tethering post) – describes the combination of vertical and horizontal structures in the world model, with the Aal Luuk Mas mythological world tree of life in the center linking all the elements of the Yakut Universe (three worlds). According to Yakut mythology, the roots of the tree descend to the

very Lower World inhabited by *abaasy* demons, while the top reaches the heavens and, having passed the tier of the sky where the *Aar Aiyy Toyon* supreme deity lives, it becomes a sacred horse tethering post (Alekseev, Emelyanov, and Petrov 1995). It is interesting that related folklore texts, for instance, fairy tales, describe the Middle World shaped as a frying pan (or bowl), whereas the Lower World is presented in the shape of a cone or *urasa* tent. Thus, the geometric model of the Universe resembles the *choron*, a traditional vessel for drinking koumiss (fermented mare's milk).



Figure 2. The image of the Sun

In the riddle about the Sun (Figure 2), the reindeer's movement "from east to west" is the clue indicating the spatial direction: *Ilin diekiten biir chuoghur taba kiiren arghaa dieki baran sippüt / A single spotted reindeer, setting off in the east, disappeared in the west*. When visualizing the image of a reindeer as the sun, the depiction of the sun in its antlers serves as a cultural background and clue. The reindeer metaphor in the Yakut riddle is not accidental, since in the traditional culture of the peoples of Siberia, the reindeer was considered an animal of heavenly origin; reindeer antlers depicted the Sun's rays and were also a symbol of longevity and rebirth. The drawing also depicts a fairy-tale motif of the northern peoples of the Arctic about the reindeer, a savior of the people who carried the sun in its antlers (Barmina 2019).



Figure 3. The image of the sky

Figure 3 presents the visual embodiment of riddles about celestial space (the sky, the night sky dotted with stars). In the riddle *Küökh son bitün aan doïdunu büriübüt ühü* / *They say that a blue double-sided fur coat has covered the entire world*, the sky is presented in the image of the traditional Yakut blue piece of winter clothing. The metaphor of clothing in the representation of the sky is also observed in riddles about the stars: *Aana emeekhsin sonun abyraghyn kyaïan abyrakhtammat ühü* / *They say that the old woman Anna cannot cover the patches on her fur coat*. In this folklore text, fabric is again used as an image of the sky, characterizing it as a canvas with patches; the image of the woman is associated with sewing, a traditional female occupation. In the riddle *Uraghas töbötüger oïuu tikpittere ühü* (*oïuu-bichik baar ühü*) / *They say that ornaments are sewn onto the cone of the pole*, the stars are represented by traditional ornamental embroidery associated with Yakut arts and crafts. The stars and constellations appear sewn in, characterizing a static locus of objects in the sky. In addition, a riddle about the Milky Way is used as a secondary plot in the illustration: *Khallaan uolun khaïyharyn suola khaalbyt ühü* / *They say that the ski trail of the sky boy still remains*. The celestial ornaments are presented as patterns sewn by the craftswoman, placed on the ski tracks of the heavenly lad who chased the heavenly reindeer and thus formed the Milky Way in the sky. It should be noted that the

Milky Way is translated into Yakut by the word combination *khallaan siige*, which literally means ‘a heavenly seam’.

The image of the Moon appears in riddles as a broken chipped ladle lying over the *balagan* winter dwelling (Figure 4): *Balaghan irduiger keltegei khamyiakh sytar uhu* / *They say that a chipped ladle lies on the balagan*. The word *keltegei* characterizes an object that has a curvature or something incomplete that gets curved and becomes asymmetric (Pekarsky 1959, col. 1022), that is, the text of the riddle contains a clue in the description of the changing shape of the Moon and its asymmetry. In addition, the description of the object refers to shamanism, since the word combination *keltegei yi* has an additional meaning: an iron semicircle or an iron circle bent in half as an attribute on the back of a shaman's costume. The drawing also depicts the myth of an orphan girl who the Moon felt sorry for and adopted.



Figure 4. The image of the Moon in Yakut riddles

Figure 5 presents the Earth as Mother Nature, personified in the image of a lady and mother, hardworking and caring: *Üöskeebitin öriüi öidöoböt, syttym dien synn'ammāt, utuidum dien uuta khammat, Sing khaantan törütteekh tung baraan Iie khotun baar uhu* / *They say there is a Mother lady, who does not remember her origin, lies down, but does not rest, sleeps, but does not get enough sleep, the deity Sung Khan's descendant*. Similar mother metaphors exist in many cultures of the world, since the Earth feeds, waters, nurtures and thereby

realizes its maternal function and becomes a respected matron. The image of Mother Earth echoes the image of the *Aiyy* deity, who protects the Middle World inhabited by human beings. In addition to the image of earth, the artists depicted the multifaceted world of the Yakut people, including the traditional Ysyakh Festival, which is associated with the awakening of earth, the summer solstice and the beginning of the cattle-breeding New Year. The illustration also shows the *serge* tethering post, representing the motif of the vertical character of the cosmos.



Figure 5. The image of the Mother Earth

A semiotic analysis of the riddles allows us to conclude that this genre of oral folk art records Yakut observations of the Universe, the sky, and celestial bodies. The texts originally interpret the orderliness and integrity of the cosmos and the human's place in it. The project, implemented by children and teachers, made it possible not only to visualize the texts of the riddles, but also to visualize the traditional worldview of the people represented through folklore.

CONCLUSION

Thus, within the project participants analyzed the Yakut mythological worldview, identified the key images of the sky, Earth and celestial bodies and then translated them into artistic illustrations for postcards.

The art project showed that Yakut riddles contain metaphorical images consisting of myths and archaic ideas about connections between the human space and the Universe. The images come to life especially vividly when they are visualized through the method of illustrating the folklore content based on a complex analysis. The methods of semantic and semiotic analyses, and artistic interpretation of metaphorical similes revealed the key cultural codes underlining the drawings: zoomorphic, anthropomorphic, and spatial codes, as well as codes represented by colors and everyday objects. The cultural codes embedded in the Yakut riddles represent a world of sacred and meaningful objects; these cultural codes reflect the mythologemes of the sky, stars, the world tree, and the reindeer. A complex analysis of the text allows one to penetrate the deep structure of the linguistic worldview of the people and visualize the content of the folklore text by identifying the key cultural codes. In general, the project demonstrated that the Yakut riddles can be used as unique data that reflects the mythological and poetic worldview of the Yakut people.

We believe that the relevance and significance of such art projects lie in their contribution to the preservation and documentation of the ethnic culture, with the artistic visualization of the images functioning in this capacity for future generations. With people living in the information society, the method of image visualization is a modern informative way of presenting significant linguistic, cultural, and ethnographic information that has been formed over the centuries in one meaningful image.

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