

## The Food Code in the Yakut Culture: Semantics and Functions

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### ABSTRACT

The relevance of researching the issue of a specific cultural meaning for a word in a folklore text is based on its being insufficiently studied and due to the importance for solving the problem of the folklore language semantic features. Yakut nominations for dairy products, which are the key words in the language of the Sakha people's folklore, have not been an object of a special study yet. In this regard, this study aims to analyze the symbolic meanings and the semiotic functions of the Yakut food nominations and motivation for their metaphorization in the context of the mythopoetic worldview. The lexical analysis of a word is accompanied in this work with cultural and semiotic excursions into the field of material culture, ritual practices, customs, and so on; in other words, a linguistic sign is regarded in the context of other, non-linguistic, signs. The language semantics, in turn, allows interpreting and presenting seemingly disparate information and bizarre culture components in a single dynamic system. The advantage of the suggested approach is that the analysis of the vocabulary in the background of all the native speakers' cultural presupposition actualizes the cultural meaning of a word and its referent, potential senses and various connotations, providing a more accurate interpretation of both the word and the text as a whole.

### KEYWORDS

vocabulary, semantics, connotations, color symbolism, folklore, the Turko-Mongolian languages

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received :21 August 2016

Revised:15 September 2016

Accepted:31 October 2016

### Introduction

The specific cultural significance of Yakut nominations for dairy products in folklore texts has not yet been the object of a special study; desultory remarks

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about the milk symbolism in the folklore of the Turks of southern Siberia are found in a series of monographs (Lvova et al., 1989; Sagalayev, 1990). There is a work by a German linguist dedicated to the etymology of the koumiss names in the Turkic and Mongolian languages (Erdal, 2009).

The author of this article for the first time addressed the issue of cultural connotations of the Yakut nominations for dairy products in 1986 (Gabysheva, 1986), and this study is its continuation.

### Methods

The purpose of the research is to reveal, involving comparative historical material, the specific cultural significance and the symbolic functions of the Yakut nominations for dairy products in folklore texts, to give semantic motivation to the color naming for dairy and meat food.

The works of both domestic and foreign scientists (Lotman, 2000; Toporov, 1995; Apresyan, 1995; Teliya, 1996; Arutyunova, 1990; Eco, 1968; Lakoff, 1980; Wierzbicka, 1997; Grice, 1971; Linsky, 1971; Leech, 1981 and other scholars) have served as the methodological basis for this work.

There is a problem of 'live' understanding of the folklore metaphorical language; and the study methodology of the word semantics in a folklore text, which still retains its syncretic structure and strong non-textual communications, should be based not only on the text, but also on the 'extra-textual' information: myths, rituals, superstitious beliefs, customs, etc. - all that forms the so-called background information.

Accessing such a complex object as language and national culture has required combining the linguistic analysis as such with the cultural one and at the same time with hermeneutics.

### Hypothesis

It is known that in the Turkic and Mongolian languages names with the adjective meaning 'white' are used for lexical nominations of dairy products; the word \*qara 'black' is a component of the meat food names. In the Turkmen, Karachay-Balkar, Bashkir, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Uzbek languages the word \*a:q 'white' undergoes substantivization and is used to refer to dairy food (Clouston, 1972). The Altai epic describes: '*...актың-сүттің аражанын келип, кожо ичкилейт ...of white milk (viand) aradyan, sitting down, drank together*'; *ак чөл* 'white food' is the way dairy products are called in the Khakass language (Baskakov and Inkizhekova-Grekul, 1953). In the Yakut language dairy products are designated with the lexical unit *үрүҥ* 'white': *үрүҥү аһаа* means 'to eat dairy food': the olonkho epic says that a girl grew up, 'gaining strength from the froths of white *үрүҥтэн үрүмэтин өллөнөн*' (Pekarsky, 1907-1911). In the Suntarsky region, instead of literary *үттээ* 'to pour milk (in tea)' they say *үрүҥнээ* (literally 'to make white'); in the taboo speech of the ancient Yakuts the nominalized adjective *үрүҥ* 'white' served as a dummy name for butter.

The basis of the Mongol's food color classification is formed by 'a centuries-old experience of the people, consecrated with shamanic beliefs'. In the Mongolian language '*цаган идээ* (white food) - milk and dairy products (*өрөл, аруул, бяслэг, хурт, арха*) - is considered to be clean food, that's what it is called - *ариун идээ* (clean food)... *Хар идээ* (black food) - tea without milk, meat

broth, clear water - is considered bad food, guests cannot be treated to it, it is thought to be offensive' (Viktorova, 1980).

As aforesaid, the names of food, a kind of its color classification in the language, were correlated with the color names of animals, shamans, various parts of dwelling (for more details, see Gabysheva, 2003). Traditionally Yakut people divided food into a white-and-black dichotomy, *ryng* – *khara* (= milk and meat), and this lexical taxonomy of food in a certain way correlated with their mythological classification. For example, 'white gods' are splattered with 'white food' and the dark forces of the Low World were given *khara* (=bloody sacrificial offerings). V.F. Troshchansky writes about the Yakuts' Supreme Deity *Үрүҥ эр*, the first milk yield of mares was devoted to (Troshchansky, 1902). When referring to gods, Yakut people would traditionally exclaim, 'Let your gold chariot arrive here, crossing over the sky and ground, with their powerful horses, leaving after themselves wake of sacrificial butter!' In the southern Altai 'mare's milk was considered the most honorable for sacrificial purposes, the fresh morning milk was used to sprinkle the image of *Жайык*' (Anokhin, 1994). In the Altai myths, lord of the Kingdom of the Dead and underworld *Erlik Khan* feeds on red blood food and drinks the inner pulmonary blood; the word *erlik* in the Buryat language is used in the sense of 'blood-thirsty'. In the traditional Buryat culture, the autumn sacrifice to the spirits was 'bloody' - horses, sheep, goats, cattle were slaughtered; in the spring, to mark the onset of the warm season, first milk was sacrificed, and the ritual of sprinkling dairy foods was performed (Khangalov, 1958).

In some of the Turkic and Mongolian languages the colour term *\*qara* (=black) means 'tea without milk' and 'without fat (in reference to meat)' (Tenishev et al., 1997). Such tea without milk was used by the Tuvinians, for example, to sprinkle for the spirits of the Underworld. The Telengits did not just hang a black ribbon (*қара жалама*) for *Erlik*' son, *Karash*, but also offered *қара су* 'spring water'. According to the opinion of A.N. Kononov (1978), the word *\*qara* 'black' has the meaning 'ground'; so, *kara su* is a type of a river, which draws water from the ground, its sources. (Compare with the other version of the phrase etymology by Stachowski, 2010). As for the meaning of the word *\*qara* 'lean, with no fat (about meat)', there is a passage citing A.V. Anokhin saying that *Erlik* 'was often given a scraggy even a sick animal as a sacrifice' (Anokhin, 1994); and both the Turkic and the Mongols used to call lean (with no fat) meat 'black': Turkic *kara et*, Yakut *хара бороң эт*, Altai *кара эт*, Buryats *хара мяхан*, etc.

As it was mentioned above, bloody sacrifices were not performed for good deities *Ajyu*, and this is emphasized in the *olonkho* – the hostess told to pour into the fire '*хаана суох сыа* lard without blood', as well as butter (Pekarsky, Khudyakov, 1913, 1918).

Differentiation of sacrifices on the grounds of being milky/bloody is probably accounted for the conventional wisdom about the special sacred purity of dairy products and blood impurity. It is significant that the shamans who performed blood sacrifices to the spirits of diseases were not allowed to the ritual celebration of the Yakut holyday *Yhyakh*. Such conventional wisdom is partly reflected in the *olonkho*; thus, in a long list of advantages of an epic beauty there is one like this: '*симэһиннээх аһы аһаабатах* has never eaten anything undercooked, with sanies', which should, according to the authors, be indicative of the purity and sinlessness of the girl.

The universal opposition 'raw'/cooked', Claude Lévi-Strauss wrote about (Lévi-Strauss, 1969), is also relevant to the Yakut culture: 'had the side closest to the fire barely started to boil, he (*абааһы* a Low World bogatyr - *L.G.*) already started to eat'; at the same time, olonkho accentuates the irregularity or inferiority of his world: the hearth of the inferior bogatyr is 'with the mouth back to front', a patched pot, a chippy bowl, a broken spoon (Popov, 1936).

The Yakut names of deities of the Upper and Lower worlds have constant epithets opposite in meaning *үүт таас олбохтоох* 'with milky stone seat/*хаан олбохтоохс* 'with bloody seat' (in modern language has a figurative meaning of 'stained with the blood of many victims, bloody'). These epithets are used in a variety of folklore genres and, in particular, in shamanic legends. For example, in the story of a Yakut shaman about his vocation, where the blood image is the keynote (blood river, a piece of dried blood of the pillow size, a piece of plate with blood, and other), at the end of the ceremony spirits are proclaiming: '*Хаан дьаралың олбохтоох атыыр ойуун буоллуң!* You have become a famous shaman, having a bloody foot!' (Popov, 2006).

Blood and dairy products exercise a distinctive function in the shamanistic rites of initiating a neophyte. The Turkmens-Tcheklen offer a neophyte three bowls: with the blood of slaughtered sheep, with sour milk, and with water. If the future shaman chooses the bowl of blood, a blood sacrifice will be required while treating patients (Basilov, 1986). After the Yakut ritual *эттэни* (dissection of a body), 'putting the young shaman on his feet, they seat him and serve him blood. If the new shaman becomes a 'big eater' (*сиэмэх ойун*), i.e. an evil shaman, he drinks this blood. If he is destined not to be a "big eater", he falls on his back roaring' (Khudyakov, 1969).

The idea of different sacrifice patterns has transformed in olonkho into the images of udagankas (*female shamans*) of the Upper and the Lower Worlds. 'Do not turn away from us, mistaking us for dark shamans with blood clots in their hands...', the celestial udagankas refer to the deity during the initiation, when sacred bowls of mare's milk are passed around them. 'They have brought eight sacred bowls filled with koumiss and butter. Holding these bowls (interestingly, the cross-cutting keynote of the ritual vessel associated with initiation, and serving in a number of cultures, according to G. Dumézil, as a symbol of the priestly functions (Dumézil, 1941); in comparison, there is a Buryat term to denote a minister of religion '*аягабаряаша* (*lit.* 'The one who has taken the cup of sacrifices'); the expression *аягабариха* (*lit.* 'To take the cup') has a figurative meaning 'to continue the shamanic line of ancestors' (Galdanova, 1998), they walked around us on the sunny side and ordained us as udagankas', olonkho says (Okladnikov, 1955).

The mythology of many Turkic peoples of Siberia preserved the beliefs of rivers of blood and human tears that flow in the lower world; the image of a milk lake (option: a river) is no less characteristic of the semantic space of the pastoralist cultures, its image being often present on shaman's drums of the Altai and Shor peoples. 'You seem to have shed milk, extending under the whitening (sky) white silk (i.e., the Milky Way)!', - the Khakases' statement to the celestial says. In case of an abundant harvest and livestock multiplication, the Kirghiz expressed as follows: '*Умай эненин эмчегинен сют агат.* From the mother Umai's breast milk is leaking'. The image of a cosmic river is presented in the Yakut culture: according to shamanic myths, on the 'river of life' one can observe 'two streams flowing towards opposite directions... One is the streambed

of flowing milk, and the other one is tears and blood'. The first stream comes from the good spirits *айыы*, and the second one - from the evil spirits *абааһы*.

In the Yakut mythological texts milk foods are not only respectfully referred to as *айыы аймаҕын аһа* 'human food', but also serve as kind of a marker of affiliation with the human race. The metamorphosis of a demihuman-demipuck (*илиэхэй аһардаах кили*) in olonkho is depicted as 'he gradually began to look like a human, began to look at the sun, began to speak the way humans speak, began to eat human (dairy) food' (Mas Batyya, 1945). Dairy foods have as high semiotic status in the characteristics of the solar tribe *күн улууһа* as human speech and a mythical connection between 'people with solar reins' and the sun. The reminiscence of similar mythological motifs sounds in shamanistic texts: 'A Yakut human appeared, first eating white dairy food ...' (Khudyakov, 1969).

The Yakut compound adjectives *үүт үрүһ, үүт кэрэ, үүт маңан* 'milky-white' serve as idealized epithets for names of sacral objects in the folklore. A Shor kaychi, describing the way an epic bogatyr lives in a golden palace, pictures that 'to a gold tethering-post whiter than milk a white and gray horse is tied' (Korogly, 1998).

Words denoting milk products encode abundant life and prosperity in the folklore texts. Thus, the bride's words, before leaving for a strange land, for the trees and grass of her home ground to ooze cream, butter, and fat should be interpreted as a wish of a happy abundant life: '*Хахыйах ойуур салбырҕаса араҕас илгэнэн айгысыннын, үрдүк маса сөн сүөгэйинэн сүдүүрүннэнэ турдун!* May the beauty of springwood, the beauty of a young birch forest ooze the divine yellow liquid, and from its high trees may heavy cream be dripping!' (Pekarsky, 1907-1911). In folklore texts, the expression *от арыыта* (literally 'herb butter') is commonly used, by which 'the Yakuts mean cow butter, as its original source is grass and hay' (Pekarsky, 1958-1959). Olonkho researchers emphasize that *илгэ* 'divine drink' is not just butter; it is rather the sap of grass, which turned into butter. The same meaning is specified by E.K. Pekarsky in the word *сөлөгөй/сүлэгэй/сүлүгэй* and, comparing it with the Teleut *жулу, жулык* 'tree sap', he cites from olonkho the expression '*Аар дуун мас сүлүгэйэ* the sap of the sacred oak tree, the divine sap of this tree'. The said connection between grass and dairy products motivates the epithets of pasture meadows in the folklore texts: '*алаас баһа арыы чалларыын, сыһыы баһа сыа сырҕал* the best meadow, exuding butter, the foremost *алаас*, greasing with fat'; or '*арыы-сыа таммалыы турар алаастардаах эбит* pastures, dripping with butter and fat'. Compare with the passage from the Buryat invocation of the earth host spirit Bayan Khangai and his wife: '...those turning the grass and the green into fat...' (Tushemilov, 1995). On the basis of the common fertility semantics, the two images - dairy foods and vegetation - are intertwined, merging into an integrated symbol of the sacred tree producing the milk lake, drinking wherefrom the old one becomes young, the weak one becomes full of energy.

According to numerous plots of olonkho, to slop, to spill koumiss on the ground is the greatest sin, entailing the death of newborn children, calves, and foals; in other words, the category of milk, as the denotation itself, is associated with the symbols of fertility and happiness. Hence the epithet for happiness in Yakut algyses '*мохтубат дьол* non-spillable happiness', significant in meaning. The said symbolism of milk dates back to the most ancient customs of the Altai peoples; thus, the Chagatai people, if during a feast anyone of the guests spilled even a drop from the cup of koumiss, made them drink 9 cups; if a guest spilled

all of the bowl, they should drink off 30 bowls; this should help to overcome the adverse consequences of the offense. The Mongols, fearing the wrath of gods, forbade to spill koumiss or mare milk on the ground, to tread underfoot the god given drink (Tenishev, et al., 1997).

The cultural significance of the nominations for dairy products associated with the designation of good happy living is embodied in the system of metaphors and the phraseological corpus of the Yakut language. The set expression *‘Сыңаабың сыаланнын, айабың арыланнын! May your chin become greasy, and your mouth buttery!’* has a figurative meaning and means a wish of happy prosperous life. Until the present, the Yakuts jokingly say about a good business: *‘Быс даа – сыа, бас даа – арыы!’* You cut up to find only fat, you scoop to find only butter!’ A shaman asking the kut spirits for cattle, wealth, and abundance, uses the distinctive metaphor *‘Тобонохпун дьолуота диэн, үрүң күүгэн үктэлгэ, араҕас арыы тэллэххэ, сөң сүөгэй дьолго уруй-төлкө буоллун!* Speaking, for our elbows’ success (to be) at the foot of white froth, on the bed of yellow butter, on the happiness of rich cream, let there be good fortune!’ (Alekseyev et al., 2003). If the well-known formula, marking the end of the Russian fairy tale, mentions honey that ran down the ‘moustache’, the happy ending of the olonkho plot contains an untranslatable expression with the word *үүт* ‘milk’: *‘үүт тураан үчүгэйдик олордунар* they lived well and absolutely quietly, peacefully’ (Pekarsky, 1907-1918).

The semantic language of the ethnocultural tradition constantly brings the images of dairy products and fat together; thus, the words *арыы* ‘butter’ and *сыа* ‘fat’ can act as a complex compound word *арыы-сыа*; they often replace each other in sayings. Fat, as well as dairy products, is a symbol of prosperity and happiness: *‘With no meat, solely with fat was dining, with no milk, solely with cream was wining’*. An epic formula - a bogatyr lives, ‘tossing the thick abdominal fat with coins, laying the thick neck fat with the vertebrae... *халын хабанан хаччы кэбиһэн, суон саалынан тоноохос ууран...*’ serves as a rich metaphor for a good happy living. The expression is also used as a proverb. The dreary feeling of loneliness, isolation from the family is expressed by a Yakut in songs by means of a typical metaphor: *‘Холтоң хоңнуотун хоңнорон ылбыт курдук...* As if the scapular fat was torn off the front leg...’.

The specific cultural significance of the fat denotation and concept reflects in the system of tropes and phraseologisms of many languages. Exploring symbols in the Slavic folk poetry, A.A. Potebnya pointed out that *‘zhir* ‘fat’ develops into the meaning of prosperity, happiness, as in the Arkhangelskiy and Vologodskiy dialects, *zhira*, in the Olonetskiy dialect *zhirova* good living, abundance, in the Orenburgskiy dialect *zhiritsya* to spend time in idleness..., in Kamchatskiy dialect *zhirovat* to eat in plenty and live in prosperity...’ (Potebnya, 1914). *‘Zhirovat* means to live in abundance, eat in plenty, *zhirovoy* means happy, *zhirovik* acts as the guardian of domestic happiness and household’, - these are the facts A.N. Afanasyev mentions (Afanasyev, 1983).

## Results

For the first time a semantic motivation was given to the color names of dairy and meat food, which the author has analyzed in the context of the myth-ritual system of the Turkic-Mongolian peoples’ culture. In addition, it has been found that the Yakut category of dairy products in the folklore texts encodes abundant life and affluence in the folklore texts, and is associated with the symbols of

fertility and happiness. The said symbolism of milk dates back to the myths and the most ancient traditions of the Turkic-Mongol peoples.

### Discussion

Unfortunately, these symbolic meanings of nominations for dairy products still go under the radar of folklorists, who, commenting on, for example, the epithets of the earth hostess spirit who is a generous giver (*Аан дайду иччитэ, күүгэннээх хоннохтоох, көлөһүннээх сүүстээх, арыылаах ытыс, абыныахтаах дьилбэк...*). The earth hostess spirit, with a foamy bosom, with sweaty forehead, with a buttery hand, with a greased knee...), give the following explanation: 'the epithets of the earth hostess spirit portray her as a hard-working rich worker, who works so hard that sweat foams in her bosom, her hands are buttery because she cooks food, and her knees are somewhat greased because she twists thread on them' (Alekseyev et al., 2003). In this case, the authors do not take into account the symbolic meaning of the epithets *күүгэннээх* foamy, *арыы* buttery, *абыныах/обонух* greased, well-known to the culture of many Turkic peoples from the earliest times; in comparison, the authors provide the epithet 'butter-face tengeri-sky' from a prayer of the Buryats (for more detail see Gabysheva, 2003).

### Conclusion

The words *үүт*, *арыы*, *сүөгэй*, *сыа*, *хаан* are not just the names of food products. They have an important cultural significance, depending on the semantic environment, a place in the folklore text, its genre - a mobile and at the same time a unified significance. The nominations for dairy products are closely correlated with the ritual space of the culture, with the myth and are the semantic and emotional centers of cultural texts. The actualization of their meanings in the folklore text gives great opportunities for all kinds of associations and semantic increments, a profound meaning of the text being formed on the basis thereof.

The study has for the first time defined the cultural connotations and the symbolic functions of words denoting food; the nominations for dairy products turn out to be semantically and semiotically loaded; their role is not limited to only the nominative function. An interpretation of the color metaphor involving comparative historical data has been provided. On the basis of the revealed semantics, separate uncompiled facts of the Yakut and other Turkic peoples' culture receive motivation, drawing up a system. Whereby, a close relationship of a lexical meaning and cultural connotations of words, a custom and a folklore plot, the interaction of the ritual structure and language taxonomies are found. These results contribute to a more fundamental and more accurate understanding and interpretation of the symbolic language of the ethnic and cultural tradition and are of practical value for the compilation of mythological dictionaries, textbooks, reference books on the Yakut folklore; they can be used in specialized courses on the traditional culture of the Turkic-Mongolian peoples.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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