

An Ethnographic Analysis of the Religious and Mystical Healing Functions of Traditional Clothing of Khorezm

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Abstract: This article examines healing practices embedded in the traditional clothing of the Khorezm population, an inseparable part of the Uzbek nation. These practices are reflected in garment cuts, as well as in geometric forms containing various prayers and Qur'anic verses. The study highlights the religious-mystical meanings encoded in clothing elements and their role in traditional healing practices.

Keywords: prayer and Qur'anic verse, square, color, cut.



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Introduction. Along with astonishing monuments and archaeological remains, our ancestors have bequeathed to us their intellect, wisdom, insight, capacity for thought, and rich spiritual world. After the 1990s, opportunities emerged to revive ancient national traditions and values that were on the verge of being forgotten. Uzbek national clothing, including the traditional garments of Khorezm, is closely connected with the history of our people and, among material and spiritual heritage, reflects the distinctiveness of ethnic groups, standing out through its specific ethnic features.

National clothing embodies traditions rooted in the history of a particular people, as well as elements of social relations and educational, religious, and aesthetic forms. It clearly reveals the people's taste, ideals of beauty, distinctive aspects of economic life, and certain facets of family and domestic practices.

Clothing reflects not only an individual's social status, but also the place and time in which they lived, as well as joyful and sorrowful events in their life. At the same time, it is necessary to reveal the healing function inherent in clothing and to clarify that this function is connected not only with the natural properties of the materials used, but also with the religious perceptions and beliefs of the people. Studying the history of this issue contributes to restoring the diversity of many invaluable cultural monuments that have been lost or are in the process of disappearing, and serves to introduce the unique heritage of our people to the wider world.

Literature Review. In almost all ethnographic studies devoted to traditional clothing, jewelry, and household items, primary attention is given to the classification of their types, the periodization of their development, manufacturing techniques, material composition, quality,

color, dimensions, and cuts. The works of O. A. Sukhareva, K. L. Zadykhina, and M. V. Sazonova [1] are representative examples of this approach. The chronological scope of their studies mainly covers the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In these works, clothing is analyzed according to gender (women's and men's garments), age (adults, children, bridegrooms' and brides' attire), seasons (summer, autumn, winter, and spring clothing), social function (festive, wedding, and mourning garments), and functional position on the human body (headwear, body garments, and footwear).

In the studies of N. A. Lobacheva [2], the history of ancient clothing traditions of the peoples of Central Asia is examined through mural paintings preserved in early and medieval architectural monuments. The research of G. A. Pugachenkova [3] is based on the analysis of miniature paintings. Later studies, particularly those by T. A. Abdullaev, S. A. Khasanova, M. A. Bikzhanova, and N. Sodikova [4], also follow this established tradition in the study of clothing.

Methodology. In addressing issues related to this topic, the above-mentioned researchers employed historical-descriptive and historical-comparative methods of scientific research, as well as comparative-structural approaches. In the present study, however, textual analysis, semiotic analysis, and interdisciplinary research methods were applied.

Discussion. In many traditional Khorezm garments, it is possible to observe square-shaped patches on the back and sleeves, triangular inserts under the arms, and similar patchwork elements inside the clothing. Likewise, patchwork trousers and quilts composed of triangular and square shapes are widely encountered. In popular understanding today, such items are often said to be sewn simply so that they may "come together" or "hold together." In fact, the notion of quralib ketish (coming together) is symbolically associated with childbirth and the mutual affection between husband and wife.

According to Sufi healing traditions, the above-mentioned patchwork shapes were believed to contain a specific Qur'anic verse, which was to be carried close to the body in order to ensure a wife's humility toward her husband and affection for her children. This text consists of the following Qur'anic passage:

"Bismillāh al-Raḥmān al-Raḥīm. Wa alqaytu 'alayka maḥabbatan minnī wa lituṣna 'a 'alā 'aynī. Iḍ tamshī ukhtuka fa-taqūlu hal adullukum 'alā man yakfuluhu fa-raja'nāka ilā ummika kay taqarra 'aynuhā wa lā taḥzan wa qatalta nafsān fa-najjaynāka mina al-ghammi wa fatannāka futūnā."

This belief and its application are documented within the framework of Sufi healing practices [5, p. 37].

E. A. Rezvan [6] also emphasizes in his studies that various practices in Central Asian and Islamic culture were closely connected with Qur'anic verses. In particular, certain verses served as a basis for symbolic inscriptions and special rituals aimed at regulating marriage and personal relationships. For example, verses 87–89 of Sūrat al-Nisā' (Qur'an 4:87–89) were written on the clothing of a young, unmarried woman or inscribed on paper and carried on her person. The main purpose of this practice was to assist in choosing a suitable spouse. Through this ritual, it was believed possible to determine which person among those surrounding the woman was most appropriate for her.

Similarly, verse 10 of Sūrat al-Mā'idah (Qur'an 5:10) was written on a young woman's garment together with the names of a young man and his mother. The aim of this practice was to facilitate the realization of the girl's marriage to the designated individual. By means of this method, efforts were made to actualize the relationship between the woman and the young man and to direct the ritual toward its intended outcome.

Verses 59–63 of Sūrat al-An‘ām (Qur’an 6:59–63) were written and placed into garments woven from cotton, which were then positioned under a pillow. Through this practice, it was believed that a person could gain insight into how to conduct their activities correctly and effectively.

In addition to the dervish tunic in the Khalili Collection of the British Museum, specific ritual items such as belts worn around the waists of men and women contained small papers inscribed with the letters: “Bi, Sin, Mim, Alif, Lam, Khe, Alif, Lam, Ra, Ha, Ya, Mim.” In the Khiva Ichan-Qal’a museum fund, one such belt contains 72 coins, with some missing coin slots. Considering that most of the coins are inscribed with the names of Allah, this would amount to 99 names.

Foreign scholars [6] note that by the mid-15th century, Qur’anic verses were widely incorporated across almost all regions of the “Dar al-Islam” into various types of weaponry. Craftsmen inscribed verses on war axes, shields, gauntlets, swords and sabers, drums, daggers, horse armor, and other components, demonstrating a broad ritual and protective use. Turkish historians [9] also note that by the late 15th century, special talismanic garments appeared in Turkey, Iran, and India, worn beneath armor and understood as “taqwa clothing” (libās al-taqwā) [7:26]. These garments were entirely covered with inscriptions, including full or partial Qur’anic texts, prayer formulas, magic squares, and other sacred symbols. Magic squares typically consisted of four letters or even numbers (4–2–8–6) and were sometimes inscribed on sword hilts along with the craftsman’s name. At the Arda Khiva Museum, four such ritual weapons have been preserved [10].

The Qur’anic texts inscribed on weapons often included verses such as 61:13 (“Help from Allah and a swift victory”), Ayat al-Kursi, the last short surahs (105, 109, 110, 112–114), and 68:51 — employed as protection against the evil eye.

In the context of religious-mystical healing practices, material objects function as mediators influencing the human body and psyche. Within traditional Khorezm healing, such objects include water, soil, textiles, metals, and minerals, with the chapān (coat) occupying a central role. The chapān was not considered an ordinary garment but a sacred object carrying baraka, protection, and healing properties. Этнографик маълумотларга кўра, чопон инсон танасини тўлиқ ёпувчи буюм сифатида “муқаддас парда” вазифасини бажарган. Диний-мистик қарашларда у: салбий таъсирларни (кўз тегиши, кўркув, ёвуз руҳлар) қайтарувчи, инсонни илохий барака билан ўраб олувчи, маросим жараёнида беморни “муқаддас ҳолат”га киритувчи восита сифатида ишлатилган.

These beliefs, rooted in Islamic tradition, are symbolically linked to the Prophet Muhammad’s chapān (burda) and have merged with local spiritual practices in the Khorezm region. The use of the chapān in healing rituals can be observed in several contexts: *Firstly*, in cases of nervous disorders, fear, insomnia, or “heart tightness,” the patient’s shoulders or entire body were covered with a chapān recognized as belonging to a saint, a sheikh, or a respected person. This practice aimed to eliminate the source of illness by enveloping the patient in baraka (blessing). *Secondly*, in rest or ritual ceremonies, the chapān functioned as a material repository for prayers and Qur’anic verses. A chapān inscribed or imbued with Qur’anic texts was either worn by the patient or draped over their shoulders, reinforcing the belief in its healing power. *Thirdly*, in the treatment of children, the chapān was particularly significant. When a child became frightened or cried excessively—interpreted as a form of spiritual disturbance—the child would be wrapped in or passed through a chapān worn by an elder, restoring the child’s spirit to its proper state.

Within the religious-mystical healing system, the chapān operates as a transformational instrument, moving a person from an ordinary state to a ritualized state, marking the boundary between illness and health, and delivering spiritual healing through a material object. This demonstrates the inseparable connection between the material form of the chapān and its spiritual meaning.

Conclusion. Ethnographic analysis shows that traditional clothing in the Khorezm region was not merely a utilitarian means to meet everyday needs, but developed as a cultural object with spiritual-healing and protective functions within the system of folk medicine and religious-mystical beliefs. Traditional garments such as the chapān, headwear, and fabric wraps marked a symbolic boundary between the human body and the external world, serving to repel negative influences.

In this regard, the religious-mystical healing function of Khorezm traditional clothing can be considered an essential component of folk medical practices. These garments convey spiritual meaning through their material form and play a decisive role in restoring human health, demonstrating the importance of psychological and spiritual influence in the healing process. By enveloping the body, clothing acted as a protective shell, directly separating the individual from sources of illness.

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