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Woman's headdress and its semiotic status in ancient Eurasian
cultures

The techniques of other disciplines (linguistics, cultural studies, sociology and anthropology) used in archaeology provide a new approach to quite conventional archaeological material. The funeral rite, like any cultural phenomenon, can be considered a sign system. The role of signs in this case is connected to objects such as funeral stock, sacred tones, etc. and certain materialized actions (tomb, enclosure, funeral chamber etc.). As a rule, the oral language of the rite in cultures of the preliterate period is unknown. The combination of signs, symbols and forms is the "text" of the rite with its own language, which provides information about the buried person's sex, age, social position and cause of death. These sign-objects signify various characteristic features of the buried person. In this context it may prove interesting to interpret female headdresses originating from Alakul graves, dating from the midsecond century BC and belonging to the Andronovskaya culture of the Bronze Age (one of the branches of the Indo-Aryan tribes mentioned in Avesta). It became possible, using fragments and the set of decoration details, to restore 17 examples of female headdresses from the Lisakovsky, Takanay, Bozengen and Satan necropoleis in north and central Kazakhstan.* On the basis of this we have attempted to define two types of plaited women's headdresses (ill. 1). The first type is a plaited headband in the form of two strings of beads, whose inferior parts are ornamented with leaf-shaped pendants. The second type is a stitched leather cap. The plait decoration is a combination of bronze sheets of geometric forms and beads. The inferior part is also trimmed with leaf-shaped pendants. Golden rings, bronze plates, as well as pendants made of animal bones and shells are also parts of the plait decoration. Comparing the age of the buried women and types of hairdresses we can see the following. Headdresses of the first type are in graves of girls aged 10-15 (7 examples), those of the second type

* I would like to thank my colleagues (V. Logvin and V. Evdokimov) who kindly allowed me to use their materials in my report.

in graves of girls aged 16-25 (10 examples). (Parenthetically, one should take into account the large number of looted graves of the Andronovo period, thus informative possibilities are considerably reduced.) Therefore, the plaited headdress in Andronov society indicated the age of the dead woman. According to ethnographic data it is quite certain that the headdress is one of the main elements of a woman's attire. Its change marks the main steps in a woman's life connected with changes in her social status. The headdress is the necessary attribute of the rites of passage which embrace the person's whole life cycle. These are birth, baptism, initiation into adulthood, weddings and funerals.¹ In this ritual context the change in headdress can be considered an important behavioural archetype in the cultures of many peoples of the world. Being a part of her attire the headdress marks a woman's family and social position and indicates her marital status. In addition, it is also a part of a magical realm, in that it aids in protecting a woman's reproductive abilities.² It can also be said that the plaited headdress is the symbol of the change in marital status mainly in rituals of Eurasian nations speaking Finno-Ugric and Turkic languages, such as the Marys, Tatars, Kazakhs, Mordvas, Turkmens etc. (ill. 2-8). Scholars associate the appearance of plait decoration completely covering the woman's hair with the magic of hair and the desire to protect her woman hood.³ The plaited headdress is worn by girls who are brides of marriageable age. The custom required hair to be partly covered. Some time after childbirth hair is fully covered, as a rule.⁴

We think that interpretation of archaeological data is possible with data from extant cultures. In this case the functional-typological similarity between ritual objects is more important than territorial or chronological unity and outward resemblance. Thus the plait decoration together with the headdress of the first type was worn by girls aged 10-14, i.e. girls not yet of marriageable age who had already passed initiation. The little girls who were younger than 8-10 years old had no plait decoration. Plait decoration of the second type ornamented the bride's headdress and belonged to girls older than 15-16. In the Novie Yabalickli necropolis in Bashkortostan, the grave of

¹ Gennep von A. *The rites of passage*. / Cambridge Chicago Press. 1963.

² Tchvir, L.A. *Tadzhikskie juvelimije ukrasheniya*. / Moskva, 1977.

³ Klueva, K., Mikhailov, I.A. *Nakosnije ukrasheniya u sibirskich narodov*. / Sb. MA 3-L., 1988, 1, XIII, 105.

⁴ Zelenin, D. "Zhenskije golovnije ubori vostochnich (russkich) slavjan" *Slovenia* 1927/5:93.

a woman was found whose hair had been ornamented in the same manner as the Andronov plait decorations of the second type.⁵ An analysis of the metal in the headdress indicated that it had come from the Andronov region on the Kazakhstan steppe. The woman was buried together with a child. Her plaited headdress was not put on her head but lay near her. Perhaps after childbirth, and her change in status the headdress was not put on, and was placed in the grave as a sign of her original homeland. Besides, in Andronov graves of women more than 30 years old there were no plait decorations at all. Probably women had another style of headdress at this age. Perhaps they wore a headdress which hid their hair completely, but as it was made of cloth it was not preserved. Considering the headdress of the second type as a mark of a virginbride's attire one may turn to the ancient metaphor of the "death-wedding".⁶ Burial and marriage rituals are both rites of passage, and therefore they suggest semantic community. This connection between death and marriage is expressed in the funeral. A virgin of marriageable age who has died is buried as a bride because she has been unable to fulfil her life's function.⁷ Thus, the performance of the rite emphasized eternal change of cycles and the continuity of human life. Therefore, in the Andronov funeral rite the headdress serves a dual function. It was both the object and the sign at the same time, combining a number of functions: aesthetic, person's sex, age, territorial group, social status, and magic.⁸ The last function was stressed rather expressively in the Andronov headdresses of both types. The actual plait of the decorations and the headdresses was painted red, the beloved colour of bridal attire symbolizing life and fertility.⁹ In addition, the headdress was decorated with amulets and pendants made from shells, animals, fangs, teeth and heel bones. The Mary, Chuvash, Yakut, Tadzhik, Turkmen and other peoples used kauri shells as amulets in their plait decorations. Andronov people use sea shells (from the *codaria tigerina*) from warm seas including the Black Sea, and river shells (from the *divaricella copiru*) wide-spread in

⁵ Kuzminich, S.V. "Andronovskije importi Priuralja" / *Kultura bronzovogo veka vostochnoj Evrope*. Kujbishev, 1983:136.

⁶ Baiburin, A.K. – Levinton, G.A. "Pokhoroni i svadbi" / *Balto-slavjanske etnokulturnie i archeologicheskie drevnosti. Pogrebalnij obrjad*. Moskva, 1985:6.

⁷ Sokolova, V.K. "Ob istoriko-etnograficheskom znachenii narodno-poeticheskogo obrjadnosti" / *Folklor i etnografija*. Leningrad 1967:192.

⁸ Sumtsov, N.F. *Kulturnie peredzivanja*. Kiev, 1980.

⁹ Tchvir, L.A. *Tadzhikskije juvelirne ukrashenija*. / Moskva, 1977:101.

Eurasian rivers. Their unusual form and symbolic connection with water elements make them an amulet, protected from the Evil Eye. Fangs, teeth and heel bones mainly of wild animals from the *canis lupus* family also entered the magical realm of the amulets whose function was to preserve the mother's and child's health.¹⁰ This function is preserved in the traditional costume even now. The leaf-like pendants, which form the bottom of the plait decoration can be related as plant motifs in the Andronov costume. They are in the form of a tree leaf. This motif is wide-spread in female headdresses (e.g. the Bride's Wreath, the diadema from Novochoerkassk and the headdress of the Summer Queen). It is based primarily on the comparison of time and plants, connected with Fertility Magic.

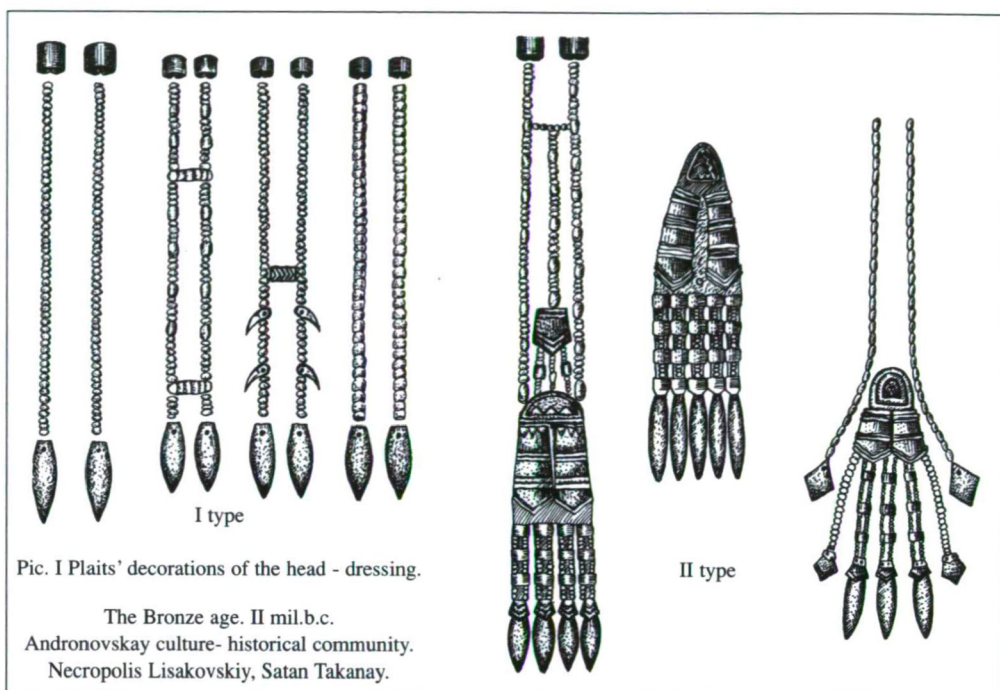
In conclusion, the universal archetype of the change in headdress in the rites of passage began to form in the ritual life of Andronov tribes in a steppe region between the Urals and Siberia in the second century BC. In wedding rituals alone the headdress becomes the main symbol of female attire and its symbolism is defined by a thousand years of a people's culture. When discussing integration among different peoples we return to the priority of language parallels. Archaeology reveals many ancient levels of human culture, which is included in the world of subjects. In this case we may speak of the Indo-Iranian subject heritage in the modern cultures of Turkic and Finno-Ugric peoples.

Illustrations from text books

1. Folk costumes of the peoples of Russia in graphic arts of the 18th-20th centuries. St Petersburg, 1993. - Ill. 2 (A, B); Ill. 3 (A).
2. Suslova, S.V. Zhenskie ukrasheniya Kazanskich tatar. Moskva, 1980 - Ill. 3 (B).
3. Agapov, P., Kadirbaev, M. Sokrovishcha drevnego Kazakhstana. Almaty, 1979 - Ill. 4 (A).
4. Svanberg, I. Turkish ethnobotany SLA, 1986-1987. - Ill. 4 (B).
5. Kostyum narodov Sredney Azii. Moskva, 1979 - Ill. 5 (A, B); Ill. 7 (A).

¹⁰ Potapov, L. "Volk v starinnich narodnich poverjakh i primetach uzbekov" KCU 3 Moskva, 1958, XXX:136.

6. Traditsionnaya odezhda narodov Sredney Azii i Kazakhstana. Moskva, 1989 - Ill. 6 (A, B).
7. Traditional jewellery from Soviet Central Asia and Kazakhstan. Moskva, 1984 - Ill. 7 (A, B).
8. Drevnyaya odezhda narodov Vostochnoy Evrope. Moskva, 1992 - Ill. 7 (A).
9. Vainshtein, I. Mir kochevnikov Centra Azii. Moskva, 1991 - Ill. 7 (B).

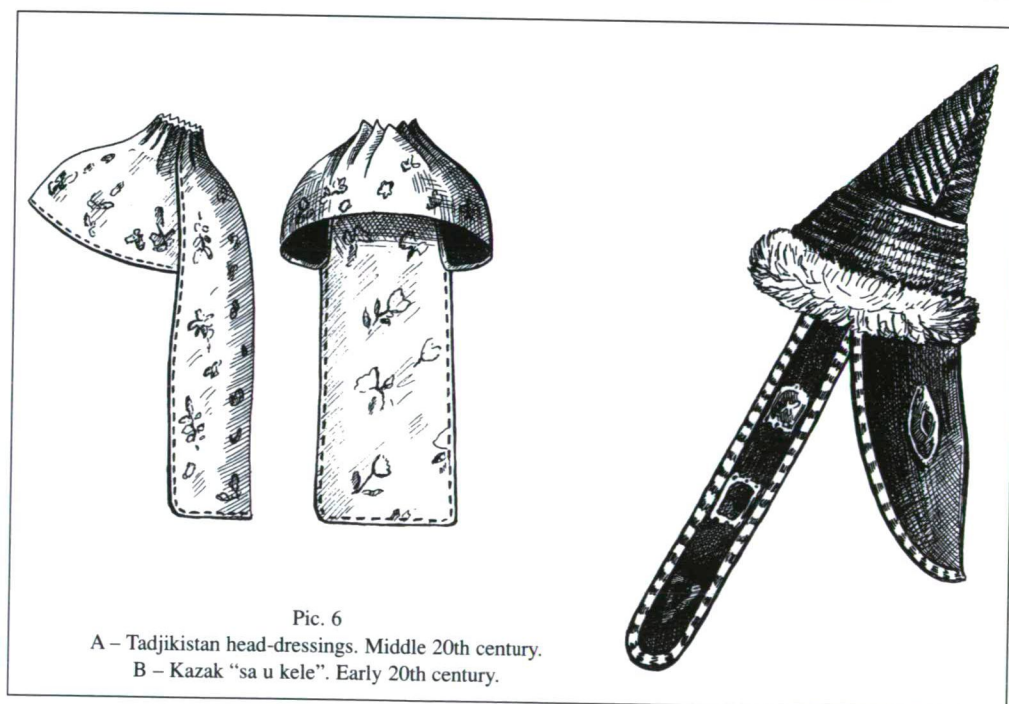
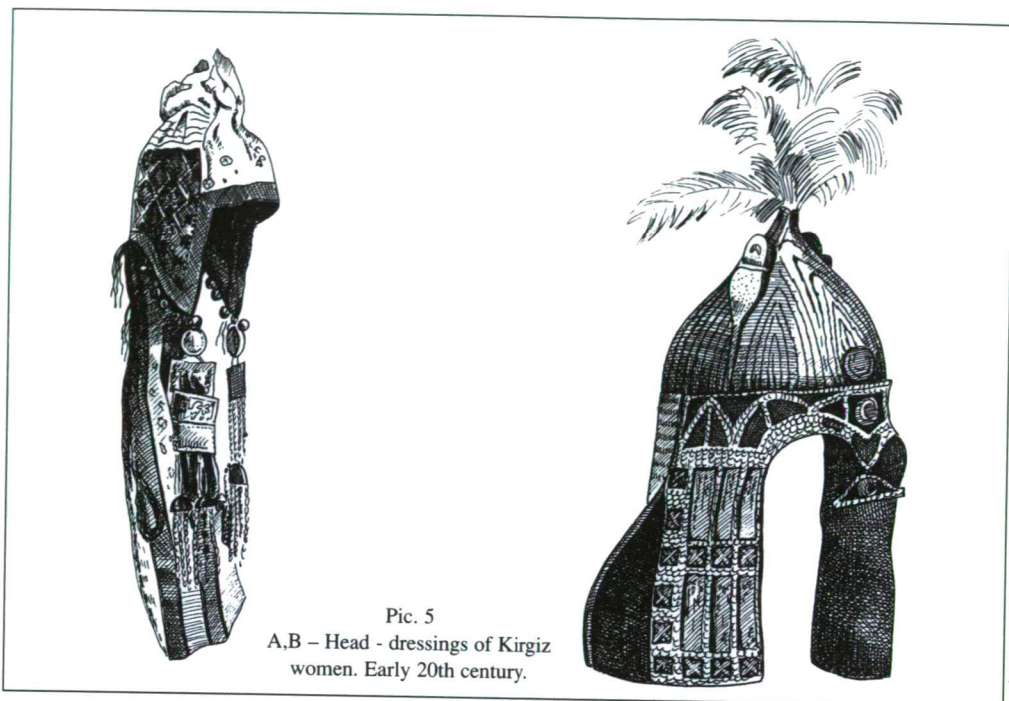




Pic. 3
A,B – Tatar woman. Kazan.
Early 20th century.



Pic. 4
A,B – Kazak woman.
Early 20th century.





Pic. 7

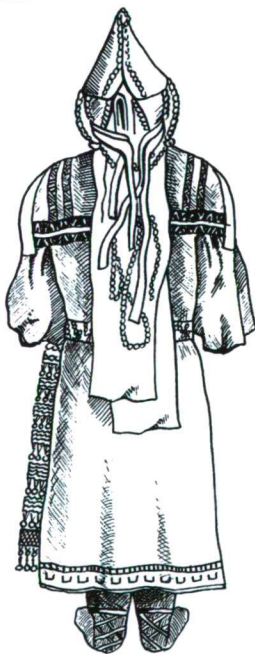
A – Turkmenian girl. 19th century.
Early 20th century.



B – Hair ornament. Northern
Tadjikistan.



C – “Asuk” hair ornament.
Turkmenia. Early 20th century.



Pic. 8
A – Ugric (vod) woman. Early
20th century.



B – Tuvian woman. Early 20th
century.