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El significado cultural y social de los rituales maternos en la formación de la identidad kirguís

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Resumen. La poesía kirguís dedicada a los niños, en particular las canciones de cuna, tiene un profundo significado cultural y espiritual. En estas canciones de cuna es fundamental la veneración por Umai Ene, la diosa maternal de la fertilidad y la protección en el folclore kirguís. Este artículo examina el papel de las canciones de cuna kirguises, o beshik ыры, en la formación de los lazos culturales y emocionales entre madre e hijo, y la protección espiritual invocada a través de figuras como Umai Ene. La investigación destaca el papel esencial de Umai Ene en la maternidad y el bienestar de los niños. Las canciones de cuna son parte integrante de las prácticas de crianza de los niños kirguises, con letras que a menudo invocan la protección divina, la naturaleza y los valores familiares. Estas canciones, cantadas durante ceremonias culturales como las beshik toi (celebraciones de la cuna), transmiten creencias espirituales y patrimonio cultural. El artículo también se basa en trabajos etnográficos y literarios que destacan el doble papel de las canciones de cuna como herramientas educativas y de crianza. Al relacionar las antiguas creencias espirituales con las prácticas contemporáneas, el artículo demuestra que las canciones de cuna sirven como herramientas para preservar la identidad cultural kirguís, al tiempo que garantizan la continuidad de tradiciones ancestrales.

Palabras clave: poesía kirguís, canciones de cuna, Umai Ene, identidad cultural, protección espiritual, diosa maternal, folclore, tradición kirguís, literatura infantil, creencias espirituales.

The cultural and social significance of maternal rituals in Kyrgyz identity formation

Abstract. Kyrgyz poetry dedicated to children, particularly lullabies, holds a deep cultural and spiritual significance. Central to these lullabies is the reverence for Umai Ene, the maternal goddess of fertility and protection in Kyrgyz folklore. This paper examines the role of Kyrgyz lullabies, or *beshtik ыры*, in shaping the cultural and emotional bonds between mother and child, and the spiritual protection invoked through figures like Umai Ene. The research highlights Umai Ene's essential role in childbearing and the well-being of children. Lullabies are integral to Kyrgyz child-rearing practices, with lyrics often invoking divine protection, nature, and familial values. These songs, sung during cultural ceremonies like *beshtik toi* (cradle celebrations, transmit spiritual beliefs and cultural heritage. The paper also draws on ethnographic and literary works that emphasize the dual role of lullabies as both nurturing and educational tools. By connecting ancient spiritual beliefs to contemporary practices, the paper demonstrates how lullabies serve as tools for preserving Kyrgyz cultural identity while ensuring the continuity of age-old traditions.

Key words: Kyrgyz poetry, lullabies, Umai Ene, cultural identity, spiritual protection, maternal goddess, folklore, Kyrgyz tradition, children's literature, spiritual beliefs.

INTRODUCTION

In Kyrgyz culture, children's literature plays an indispensable role in the spiritual and emotional upbringing of the younger generation. Among its many forms, lullabies stand out as profound expressions of love, protection, and cultural identity. These songs, passed down through generations, are not only meant to soothe infants but also to impart a sense of spiritual security, closely linked to the worship of *Umai Ene*, a maternal deity deeply embedded in Kyrgyz folklore. Revered as a protector of children and childbirth, *Umai Ene's* significance transcends the realm of mythology, influencing both ancient rituals and contemporary practices. Lullabies in Kyrgyzstan, known as *beshtik ыры*, reflect the intertwining of everyday maternal care and divine protection, highlighting a blend of emotional and spiritual nurture. Scholars, including Moldobaev (1999), have recognized the role of these songs in reinforcing familial bonds and connecting generations through shared cultural values. Furthermore, the influence of *Umai Ene* is not only symbolic but is an active part of the Kyrgyz collective consciousness, as reflected in rituals such as *ak bata* (blessings) and the language of lullabies. By examining the cultural, spiritual, and emotional aspects of Kyrgyz lullabies, this paper aims to explore how they serve as a crucial medium for transmitting both spiritual beliefs and cultural identity across generations. Through this lens, lullabies emerge as more than simple songs; they are powerful cultural artifacts that foster emotional growth while preserving the very essence of Kyrgyz heritage.

METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative research methodology that includes literary analysis, cultural studies, and folklore research to explore the dimensions of Kyrgyz lullabies. By reviewing both primary and secondary sources, this paper examines the historical, cultural, and emotional significance of

lullabies within Kyrgyz society. Key to this study is the investigation of the symbolic roles of figures such as *Umai Ene*, the protective goddess of children, whose mythological and spiritual influence is great on the cultural practices surrounding childbirth, blessings, and early childhood. The research emphasizes a multi-disciplinary approach analyzing the linguistic and cultural features embedded in lullabies, their textual content and translation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Kyrgyz literature dedicated to children encompasses a rich tapestry of storytelling and folklore, nurturing young minds while preserving cultural heritage. This literature review explores the role of Kyrgyz lullabies within the cultural and spiritual traditions of Kyrgyzstan, particularly in relation to the figure of *Umai Ene* (Mother Umai), a revered deity in Kyrgyz folklore. These lullabies, passed down through generations, reflect the emotional bonds between mother and child and the spiritual protection invoked through deities like *Umai Ene*. The importance of *Umai Ene* in Kyrgyz culture is researched with scholars such as Moldobaev (1999) highlighting the significance as the goddess of fertility and childbirth, believed to offer protection to mothers and children, Mahmud Kashkari left heritage writings about the wide influence of *Umai Ene*, whose blessings are sought in rituals like *ak bata*, especially during childbirth. Kyrgyz lullabies, or *beshik ырды*, are integral to the cultural identity of Kyrgyz families, with lyrics often invoking nature, animals, and divine protection, aligning with the deeply spiritual practices of child-rearing. These lullabies are traditionally sung during *beshik toi* (cradle ceremonies), where family members invoke *Umai Ene's* blessings for the child's health and well-being. Ethnographic studies underscore the emotional and spiritual significance of lullabies, which serve not only to soothe the child but also to transmit cultural values and beliefs, reinforcing the mother's role as a spiritual mediator and protector. Through these practices, lullabies in Kyrgyz culture continue to serve as a powerful medium for emotional, spiritual, and cultural transmission. In "History of Kyrgyz Children's Literature" by M. Tulagabylov (1991), the evolution of children's literature is chronicled, exploring development and societal significance. The anthology "Children's Folklore" created by S. Rysbaev, B. Abdukhamidova, and A. Batyrkulova (2012) presents a comprehensive collection of traditional tales and rhymes, reflecting the oral traditions deeply rooted in Kyrgyz culture. Similarly, "Anthology of Kyrgyz Children's Literature" edited by A. Akmataliev (2004) shows the diversity of contemporary works devoted for children, ranging from folk tales to modern stories. A.T. Sattarova's dissertation "Kyrgyz Children's Folklore: Genre Structure and Artistic Features" (2001) explores the structural and artistic elements of children's folklore, offering scholarly insights into its thematic richness and cultural significance.

Lullabies

Lullabies, as a form of folklore, hold a significant place in literature and culture, serving as vessels of tradition, identity, and heritage. Lullabies, a significant subset of folklore, are universally found across various cultures, serving as both soothing melodies for infants and as a means of bonding between caregivers and children. These songs, passed down orally through generations, reflect cultural values, societal expectations, and emotional expressions, marking an integral part of both the musical and literary heritage of a community (Brett, 1998; Clauson, 1972). According to the Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes (Opie & Opie, 1951), many lullabies are centuries old, reflecting the deep cultural roots they have in societies around the world.

Lullabies are not simply meaning of soothing children to sleep; they also carry vital cultural information. They often encode hopes and values that parents wish to impart to their children, such as strength, courage, and beauty. Notably, the content of lullabies may differ depending on the gender of the child, with lullabies for boys focusing on virtues like strength, while those for girls may emphasize tenderness (Adams, 1997). Lullabies are thus cultural texts, conveying significant moral, social, and emotional values (Green, 1968). S. Adams (1997) in “Poetic Designs” discusses the poetic structures found within lullabies, noting the aesthetic dimensions of these melodies. Bett (1968) examines the historical origins and evolution of lullabies in “Nursery Rhymes and Tales - their Origin and History,” providing insights into the cultural context in which these melodies emerged. G.T. Delamar (1987) examines the transition of lullabies from nursery rhymes to literature in “Mother Goose - From Nursery to Literature,” highlighting the transformation of these oral traditions into written texts. L. Eckensein (1906) offers a comparative analysis of lullabies from different cultures in “Comparative Studies in Nursery Rhymes,” illuminating the universal themes and motifs found within these melodies. Green (1968) provides a comprehensive history of lullabies in “A History of Nursery Rhymes,” tracing their development across time and space. Malof (1970) explores the metrical structures of English lullabies in “Manual of English Meters,” offering insights into the rhythmic patterns that characterize these melodies. “The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes,” presents a dictionary of lullabies documenting the rich diversity of lullaby traditions from around the world. Bolotina et al. (1998) discuss the pedagogical implications of lullabies in early childhood education, emphasizing their role in cognitive development and emotional bonding. Bolshakova (2004) explores the cognitive benefits of exposure to folklore, highlighting the importance of lullabies in shaping cognitive development. The literature review also includes works, such as “Folklore in Childhood Development” by M. Bolshakova (2004) which provide insights into the cultural significance and meanings of lullabies in Kyrgyz culture. These works offer valuable perspectives on the role of lullabies in nurturing emotional bonds, preserving cultural heritage, and transmitting communal wisdom from one generation to the next.

In Kyrgyz culture, lullabies, known as *beshtik yry*, play a critical role in familial life. They are part of a broader tradition that connects the family unit, particularly the mother and child. Lullabies in Kyrgyz culture are deeply interwoven with the nomadic lifestyle, often reflecting the natural world and the community’s rural way of life. The tradition of singing lullabies has recently seen a revival, with competitions and public performances encouraging the preservation and continuation of this oral tradition (Tulogabylov, 1991).

The role of lullabies extends beyond mere entertainment or comfort; they are viewed as essential for the emotional development of children. Studies have shown that children deprived of lullabies may face psychological challenges in their later lives (Bolotina et al., 1998; Huntington, 1907). Furthermore, Kyrgyz lullabies embody a space for women’s creativity, providing an outlet for emotional expression in a society with traditionally limited roles for women in artistic fields (Shaidullaeva, 2004; Solter, 2001).

In comparison, English lullabies tend to reflect historical, religious, and even political themes, using nursery rhymes to comment on societal events or figures, thus blending the personal with the societal. English lullabies, unlike the nature-focused Kyrgyz ones, often contain layers of political satire or reflect on historical events (Opie & Opie, 1951). Despite their differences, both Kyrgyz and English lullabies serve the same fundamental purpose—providing comfort, instilling values,

and strengthening the emotional connection between caregiver and child. As modernity shifts societal norms, both cultures continue to adapt their lullabies to reflect contemporary realities while preserving their cultural heritage.

Spiritual belief: Umai Ene

“Бата менен эр көгөрөт, Жамгыр менен жер көгөрөт.” / *A man will prosper with blessings; The earth will be fertile with rain. (Kyrgyz saying)*

One of the oldest and most revered spiritual beliefs among the Kyrgyz people is the cult of *Umai Ene* (Mother Umai). Identified by researchers as the most significant Central Asian goddess, *Umai Ene's* blessings are still sought today. Revered as a maternal deity, she is often considered the archetype of ideal femininity. The qualities of *Umai Ene* are rooted in Kyrgyz folklore and oral traditions, where she symbolizes the very essence of motherhood, protection, and care. The name “*Umai Ene*” is rooted in the Turkic language, where “*umai*” refers to the womb or a nurturing figure, and “*ene*” means mother. This concept is explored in the work of Mahmut Kashkari, a great philosopher, who described *Umai Ene* as “a supporter of a child, owner, womb” (Al-Kashghari, 2005: 167). In his *Dictionary of Turkic Languages*, he emphasizes the deep connection between *Umai Ene* and the protection of life from birth onward (Al-Kashghari, 2005: 167). The belief that “*Umai Ene's* hands are healing for the baby” (*Умайга табынса, уул табат or Умай эненин колу ымыркайга эмдом болот*) reflects the reverence for her as a protector of newborns. As the goddess who oversees fertility and childbirth, *Umai Ene's* image embodies maternal traits and the foundational qualities of femininity in Kyrgyz culture. *Umai Ene's* character is considered sacred, and she is revered as the ideal female figure, with all positive female traits attributed to her.

In Kyrgyz mythology, *Umai Ene* is considered a key deity, second only to Tengri, the sky god. She is particularly revered as the protector of children and expectant mothers. Her presence is not only significant in ancient traditions but continues to be acknowledged in contemporary Kyrgyz life. Evidence of her divine role can be traced back to the Orkhon–Yenisei inscriptions from the 7th and 8th centuries, which mention her alongside other central deities such as Zher-Suu (Earth-Water) and Tenir (Sky). Interestingly, the word “*umai*” itself in ancient Turkic referred to the placenta and afterbirth, highlighting *Umai Ene's* role as a guardian of both birth and the life force of all children. In Mongolian, “*umai*” translates to “womb,” reinforcing the belief in her association with motherhood and fertility. In Tibetan, “*umai*” means “mother,” further establishing *Umai Ene's* sacred role as the maternal protector across cultures.

The mythological tales surrounding *Umai Ene* also illustrate her role in the birth of the hero *Manas*. A song recounts her assisting in the birth of *Manas*, guiding the child through the labor process:

*Умай Эне — периште,
Кирип келди эшиктен,
«Айтканымды ук деди,
Кана, сыртка чык» деди.
Куйругуна домдоду,
Кудай ишин оңдоду.
«Чыккын!» деди чакырып,
Энесинин ичинен,
Бала түштү бакырып...*

Umai Ene — Angel*Entering the door,**“Listen to me,” she said,**“Come, go outside,” she called,**Her tail swept,**God’s will she made.**“Come out now,” she called,**From the womb of his mother,**Crying baby came out.*

In this epic, *Umai Ene* is depicted as an angelic figure who aids in the birth, guiding the child from the womb with divine intervention. The Kyrgyz term “*perishte*” refers to a mythical angelic creature, highlighting *Umai Ene’s* elevated spiritual status. As the protector of mothers and children, her role is seen as integral to the family and community’s well-being.

Blessings, or *bata*, are an essential part of Kyrgyz spiritual life. These blessings are often invoked during significant life events, such as births, weddings, and journeys. The blessing of children, especially by respected elders, holds a special place in Kyrgyz traditions. One common blessing for children goes:

“Бул менин колум эмес, умай эненин колу, умай эне колдосун!”

“This is not my hand, it is Umai Ene’s hand. May Umai Ene support you!”

This invocation expresses the community’s deep connection to *Umai Ene’s* protective and nurturing qualities. The blessing invokes her divine assistance and reflects the enduring belief in her spiritual influence. In addition to verbal blessings, Kyrgyz people celebrate the birth of a child with the *beshtik toi* or cradle celebration. The child’s cradle is ceremonially prepared, often with traditional rituals. Grandmothers prepare the cradle by placing small sheep bones—*alchiks*—at the bottom, saying, “*On bol!*” (be lucky). Then, the mother is given the cradle, symbolically carrying the child in the hands of *Umai Ene*.

The cultural significance of lullabies across generations

Across all cultures, folk lullabies encapsulate profound wisdom and aesthetic beauty. These melodies serve as a gateway for infants to explore life and their immediate environment. Indeed, the nurturing of a baby often commences with the tender recital of a lullaby. As a mother sings, she pours her heart into her song, infusing it with profound emotions for her child. The formative development of a child, both physically and mentally, significantly hinges upon whether the mother serenades lullabies to her offspring. Scholars has established a correlation between exposure to lullabies during childhood and an individual’s cognitive prowess in adulthood (Bolshakova, 2004). She asserts that “lullabies, through nurturing speech development, contribute to the maturation of the brain” (Bolshakova, 2004: 46). This assertion underscores the contemporary significance of lullabies, where every child yearns for a sense of affection.

While we often associate these melodies with innocence and simplicity, their significance transcends their apparent simplicity. Exploring the rich tapestry of lullabies and nursery rhymes within Kyrgyz literature and culture, examining their cultural significance, historical roots, and contemporary relevance, we believe that lullabies represent one of the most ancient genres of oral folk art, serving as the very essence of human existence. Today, as in antiquity, mothers cradle their infants, singing simple yet profound melodies, as shown in folk songs (Sputnik Kyrgyzstan, 2021) and in the poem by Guljamila Shakirova (Roza Otunbaevanın Demilgesi, 2018):

Бешик ыры (элдик ыр)
 Алдей, алдей ак балам,
 Арка жөлөөр жан балам.
 Кунан койдун куйругу,
 Бышты жегин жан балам.
 Атаң барса айылга,
 Куржун толо эт келет.
 Энең барса айылга,
 Эмчек толо сүт келет.
 Кунан койдун сой балам,
 Куйругуна той балам.
 Алдей, алдей ак балам,
 Тердик токуур жан балам.
 LULLABY (FOLK SONG)
 Lullaby, my precious child,
 My comfort, my beloved.
 Feast upon the tender lamb's fatty tail,
 Nourish yourself, my cherished one.
 When your father attends to guests,
 A bounty of meat shall grace our home.
 And if your mother ventures out,
 She returns with overflowing milk.
 Slaughter a sheep, my son,
 Indulge in its richness, my little one.
 Lullaby, my darling child, lullaby,
 Wrap a sweatshirt on the horse, my son.

The folk song “*Beshik yry*” provides insight into the cultural practices and traditions of the Kyrgyz people, particularly regarding childcare and nourishment. Through tender words, the caregiver expresses deep affection for the child, referring to them as “my supporter, my dear,” emphasizing the nurturing bond between parent and infant. The song incorporates elements of traditional Kyrgyz cuisine, such as the mention of young sheep’s fatty tail, symbolizing the importance of nourishing the child with wholesome foods from an early age. Additionally, references to parental roles in providing sustenance highlight the communal and familial nature of childcare in Kyrgyz culture. The act of slaughtering a sheep to ensure the baby’s satiation reflects the cultural significance placed on hospitality and generosity, where no effort is spared to ensure the well-being of loved ones.

Moreover, the mention of putting a sweatshirt on the horse signifies the practicality and resourcefulness of Kyrgyz parenting, teaching children to become helpers from a young age and prioritizing warmth and comfort for both the infant and the future supporter of the family. Folk song “Lullaby” serves as not only a soothing melody but also a cultural artifact preserving and transmitting age-old traditions and values from one generation to the next.

Literary analysis of a poem “Lullaby” by Guljamila Shakirova

“Lullaby” by Guljamila Shakirova is a “*beshik yry*”, as an example that includes the hopes, dreams, and cultural heritage of the Kyrgyz people. Through tender words and gentle imagery, the

poem explores themes of parental love, guidance, and the transmission of cultural values from one generation to the next. We provide an analysis of the poem, focusing on its tone, speaker, national peculiarities, and impact on the listener.

“Lullaby” by Guljamila Shakirova

You came into this world, my sweet child,
Blessed by the grace of our ancestors of old,
You slumber peacefully, cradled
By the ancient melodies of your mother’s song.

Lullaby, my child, lullaby, sweet baby, lullaby,
Gently unfurl your wings.
Lullaby, my child, lullaby, pure and innocent, lullaby,
Rest in your pristine cradle.

Will you grow to be a prosperous soul,
Who tends to the needs of your kin?
Or will you inherit the generosity
Of your heroic Manas forebears?

My child, never stray into darkness,
Follow the path of goodness and light.
Sleep in your white cradle,
Bathed in the glow of celestial beams.

May you become a hero with a courageous heart,
Who cherishes and serves their people.
May you amass not just wealth, but also joy,
Through service to your country and kin.

Lullaby, my child, lullaby, sweet baby, lullaby,
Slowly spread your wings.
Lullaby, my child, lullaby, pure and innocent, lullaby,
Rest in your pristine cradle.

Sleep now, my darling, don’t shed a tear,
Umai Ene will cradle you in her arms.
May your pure world hear,
The earnest wishes of your mother’s heart.

My child, always choose the path of right,
And follow the footsteps of the virtuous.
Sleep in your white cradle,
Wrapped in the gentle glow of dawn.

May your dreams be filled with melodies,
As I wish above all for your health.

Lullaby, my child, lullaby, sweet baby, lullaby,
Gently spread your wings.
Lullaby, my child, lullaby, pure and innocent, lullaby,
Sleep in your pristine cradle.

In Kyrgyz culture, the act of placing a baby in a crib carries cultural significance, drawing from rich traditions and beliefs ingrained in the community. The white cradle, symbolizing purity and protection, serves as a sacred space where the newborn is cradled in the loving embrace of both earthly and spiritual guardians. References to cultural icons such as *Umai ene*, the maternal deity known for her nurturing care, and the legendary hero Manas, evoke a sense of ancestral connection and divine protection, reinforcing the belief in the interplay between the physical and metaphysical realms in safeguarding the infant’s well-being. Through the ritualistic act of placing the baby in the crib, parents not only provide a peaceful environment for rest but also impart moral values, instilling virtues of prosperity, generosity, and courage, as depicted in Guljamila Shakirova’s poem “Lullaby”. As such, the cradle becomes more than just a piece of furniture; it becomes a vessel through which cultural heritage, familial love, and spiritual blessings converge, nurturing the newborn and fostering a deep sense of belonging within the community.

In Kyrgyz culture, placing a baby in a crib involves customs and beliefs that emphasize respect, tradition, and care. The baby cradle is considered a sacred object and should not be sold once the child outgrows it, though it may be lent with the expectation of return. It is important to avoid rocking an empty cradle, as it is believed to symbolize negativity and childlessness. The crib must always be covered, and rituals are performed to safeguard it when the baby is not using it. The baby should be placed in the crib from the right side, and when purchasing a cradle, haggling over the price is discouraged. Certain actions, such as rocking the cradle with feet or lifting it with two people, are considered disrespectful or inappropriate. Additionally, the crib should not be used as a plaything, as it is solely for the child’s rest and safety.

These customs and beliefs surrounding baby cribs in Kyrgyz culture reflect the community’s deep respect for tradition, symbolism, and the well-being of their children.

TABLE 1. Literary and cultural aspects of the poem “Lullaby” by Guljamila Shakirova

Aspect	Description
Tone	Tender, loving, and protective. The tone conveys deep care and concern for the child’s well-being, offering warmth and reassurance to both speaker and listener.
Speaker	Presumably a parent, offering words of affection, guidance, and wisdom. Expresses profound love and hopes for the child’s future, serving as a nurturing presence.
Cultural Heritage and National Identity	Reflects Kyrgyz cultural heritage through references to ancestral lineage, traditional values, and iconic figures like “Manas ancestor” and “Umai ene.”
Cultural Specificities	Includes culturally specific words and references such as “Manas ancestor” and “Umai ene,” grounding the poem in Kyrgyz traditions and mythology.
Impact on the Listener	Evokes feelings of warmth, security, and reassurance, fostering a deep emotional connection between parent and child. Instills hope and optimism for the future.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the literature review highlights the multifaceted nature of lullabies in Kyrgyz culture, encompassing aesthetic, historical, pedagogical, and cultural dimensions. By synthesizing insights from diverse scholarly works, this review contributes to a deeper understanding of the role of lullabies in shaping identity, fostering connections, and preserving heritage within Kyrgyz society. Placing a baby in a crib in Kyrgyz culture involves adhering to specific customs and beliefs rooted in tradition, emphasizing respect for the cradle as a sacred object and ensuring the well-being of the child. "Lullaby" by Guljamila Shakirova is a beautiful expression of parental love, cultural heritage, and aspirations for the future. Through its tender tone, nurturing speaker, national peculiarities, and impact on the listener, the poem offers a timeless reminder of the enduring bond between parent and child, and the power of cultural identity to shape our hopes and dreams. In conclusion, lullabies occupy a central place in Kyrgyz culture, serving as vessels of tradition, identity, and heritage. Through their tender melodies and heartfelt lyrics, lullabies nurture emotional bonds between mothers and children while transmitting cultural values from one generation to the next. As repositories of communal wisdom and expressions of maternal love, lullabies continue to play a vital role in shaping the cultural landscape of Kyrgyzstan, preserving traditions, and fostering connections between past, present, and future.

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