KIYMESHEK AND SAUKELE: THE ORNAMENTAL LANGUAGE OF KARAKALPAK WOMEN'S HEADDRESSES AS A SOURCE FOR CONTEMPORARY FASHION DESIGN

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In the traditional culture of Central Asia, the headdress was the most "talkative" part of a woman's costume. It was seen first, it framed the face, and it changed at the turning points of life – at marriage, after the birth of children, in old age. For the Karakalpaks, whose very name means "black hat", this connection between headwear and identity is especially strong. Two women's headdresses – the kiymeshek and the saukele – concentrate the main symbolic ideas of the costume and are therefore a rich source for fashion designers who wish to work with national heritage [6].

The kiymeshek is a hood with an opening for the face and a long breast part. It existed in two versions: the red qızıl kiymeshek was worn by young married women and the white aq kiymeshek by elderly women [1]. The cut was the same; what changed was colour and the direction of the ornament. On the red kiymeshek the embroidery ran horizontally and included cosmogonic signs, images of a woman, water motifs, zoomorphic and plant elements; the central strip, orta qara, resembled the Karakalpak cradle, besik. On the white kiymeshek the patterns were vertical and executed in cross-stitch [2]. The whole piece, viewed at large scale, has a rhombic outline, which ethnographers connect with the ancient symbol of motherhood and fertility [1]. Thus a single garment told the community who the woman was and what stage of life she had reached.

The kiymeshek was also an object of lifelong value. I. Bogoslovskaya notes that it was part of the dowry set and was kept for the whole of a woman's life; each piece was an individual work in which the bride's skill was displayed [3]. This means that for a designer the kiymeshek is not only a set of motifs but a story of personal authorship – an idea close to today's interest in hand-made and slow fashion.

The saukele is a helmet-shaped bridal headdress worn over the kiymeshek and topped with the metal cap tóbelik. It was covered with red cloth and decorated with metal plates, coral, coloured stones and beads, and a long embroidered strip hung down the back [4]. The metal plates were called qıran – a word associated with a dexterous, quick and sharp-sighted hunting bird [4]. Researchers compare the saukele with the helmets of the ancient warrior women whose memory survives in the epic "Qırq qız" [5]. The saukele therefore combines three meanings: bridal status, protection of the wearer and the heroic image of the maiden-warrior.

How can these meanings be used in a contemporary collection? Our analysis suggests three principles. First, *meaning before motif*: the designer should decide which idea – motherhood, protection, life stage – the garment is to express, and only then select the ornament. Second, *graded quotation*: elements with everyday significance (the vertical cross-stitch stripes of the aq kiymeshek, the horizontal bands of the qızıl kiymeshek) can be reproduced fairly closely, whereas the saukele, a sacred wedding object, is better transformed – for example, into a structured high collar or a sculptural shoulder line that keeps the idea of a protective helmet without copying the headdress itself. Third, *preservation of colour oppositions*: red and white in the kiymeshek mark the beginning and the end of a woman's adult life, so a collection built on this pair can tell a story of generations, for instance through a mother-and-daughter capsule.

In practice these principles give clear design solutions. A hooded cape with a detachable hood and an embroidered rhombic front panel reinterprets the qızıl kiymeshek; a long white linen tunic with vertical embroidered stripes refers to the aq kiymeshek; an evening dress with a rigid collar decorated with metal plates echoes the saukele and its qıran ornaments. Such

garments can be produced with the participation of embroiderers from Nukus and the districts of Karakalpakstan, supporting local crafts.

In conclusion, the kiymeshek and the saukele are not merely decorative headdresses but compact carriers of the Karakalpak picture of the world. Their ornament, colour and form encode ideas of motherhood, life stages and protection. When designers respect this semantic core and choose the degree of quotation carefully, national heritage becomes a living resource for modern fashion rather than a set of borrowed patterns.

References

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