

# Historical-Genetic Foundations of Colour Symbolism

Ro'ziyeva Mohichehra Yoqubovna

Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Philological Sciences, Professor, Uzbekistan

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**Abstract:** This article explains the organic connection between the concept of colour, human thinking, archetypal systems, and cultural layers. The symbolic meanings of colours are revealed through colour psychology, philosophical understanding methods, and comparative analyses in historical development. This topic is extensively analysed based on examples related to various folk concepts, religious beliefs, and mythological images.

**Keywords:** Colour, mythology, symbolism, totemic views, religious attitudes, white colour, black colour, red colour, symbolism.

**Introduction:** Colour symbolism is an integral part of human thought and culture, with its roots extending back to ancient mythological concepts, religious beliefs, folk oral traditions, and customs. In the culture of Turkic peoples, the symbolic meaning of colours has deep roots, through which people expressed their perceptions of nature, society, and the world. For example, white colour signified purity and sanctity, while black colour represented sorrow, suffering, and sometimes negative forces. These colours were not merely external appearances, but possessed inner meaning and aesthetic significance. Similarly, great thinker-scholars such as Al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, Mahmud Kashgari, Najmiddin Kubra, and Alisher Navoi specifically emphasised the role of colours in language and culture.

In modern research, colour symbolism is studied in relation to poetic thought, folklore, and religious-spiritual heritage. The concept of colour emerged from the earliest stages of human thought, and its semantics are organically connected to the most ancient symbolic systems. Colours in mythological consciousness were associated with spatial, temporal, and energetic concepts, occupying a central place in the worldview of archaic societies. Through anthropological and mythological analysis, the fundamental meanings of colours, their role in ancient worldviews, their functions, and their archetypal content are revealed. Since ancient times, humanity has drawn inspiration

from natural phenomena. Similarly, various colours, flowers, and ornaments have captured human attention. People began to see in colours not only aesthetic beauty but also spiritual delight. Over time, colours began to acquire spiritual and symbolic meaning in human consciousness. Thus, like many other peoples, Turkic peoples have since ancient times attributed symbolic and national-spiritual value to colours.

## METHODOLOGY

Colour is one of the fundamental, permanent, and essential elements of folk culture, playing an important role in the process of forming, assimilating, and preserving in memory a system of concepts with archetypal and national characteristics. Over time, colours acquire complex layers of meaning. For this reason, contemporary research on colour is based on the analysis of concepts such as semantics, symbolism, informational value, imagery, myth, and signs. Colour is no longer merely a physical phenomenon, but has become a symbolic idea with profound content.

The symbolic meaning of colours in Turkish history first attracted the attention of Western Turkologist scholars. For example, Hungarian scholar Professor A. Alföldi, German Turkologist Annemarie von Gabain, and another German Turkologist I. Lude-Cirtautas, as well as the famous writer Goethe, have extensively covered this topic.

Among the Turkic and Mongol peoples, dividing the world into four directions and marking them with specific colours was an integral part of ancient cosmological views. According to Gabain's writings, from the Turkic perspective:

- **East — green or blue (sky),**
- **West — white,**
- **South — red (al-qizil),**
- **North — black,**
- **Centre — yellow.**

This concept existed in China, Turkestan and Mongol culture, as well as in ancient Mayan, Roman, Greek and Egyptian civilisations, but each people expressed it in their own distinctive interpretation.

Among the Mongols and other nomadic peoples, there were morning ceremonies where they would prostrate themselves to the elements of nature (fire, water, air, earth) according to the four main directions. Some tribes believed that there were 'good and bad sides of the sky' towards the north pole. Five-coloured banner ribbons (green, white, red, black and yellow) stood as symbols of these beliefs. Among the Mongols and Chinese, the 'five-coloured banner' was customary as a symbol of the sky god. Also, the historically famous Motun Khan:

- **To the west — with white horses,**
- **To the east — with blue horses,**
- **To the north — with black horses,**
- **To the south — their campaigns with red horses have come down to us through historical sources.**

Ancient Turks saw an organic connection between colours and directions. Colours were also reflected in geographical place names. For example, the Black Sea (in the north) and the White Sea (in the west) were so named.

The belief in the four directions of the sky, their colours, and the elements associated with each direction existed not only in China but also among the nomadic Turkic peoples. In the pre-Islamic period, there was a daily morning ritual of paying homage to the directions of fire, water, air, and the spirits of the deceased. On the flags of nomadic Turks, five colours—green, white, red, black, and yellow—always held special symbolic meaning. These colours represented meanings corresponding to the directions of the world. In Turkic mythology, colours were not merely aesthetic tools but were understood as political, religious, and multi-layered symbolic instruments. In images such as 'White Father', 'Blue Sky', 'Black Earth', 'Black Grandmother', and 'Red Mother', colours exist not just as external

appearance but as cosmogonic ideas. The 'Diwan Lughat al-Turk' provides a classification similar to the above information but with significant variations: white represents East, red represents South, blue represents North, black represents West, and the centre is marked with a yellowish colour (this earth—the human centre, meaning the axis of life). The connection of colours with the four sacred directions is part of the mechanism for creating a world model in the ancient Turkic worldview. This model is based on shamanistic and religious foundations. However, because belief theories shaped the colour-related views of both Turkic and European peoples, diverse approaches emerged. This created differences related to each nation's culture. Colours acquired deep meaning in religious-philosophical thought, serving in each religion and belief system as symbols for understanding divine truth, spiritual purification, and connection with cosmic forces. In Islam, shamanism, Buddhism, Christianity, and other beliefs, the mystical and archetypal content of colours has deep roots.

In Islam, colours have acquired symbolic meaning through Quranic verses, hadiths, and Sufi interpretations. Green is mentioned in the Quran as the colour of paradise garments: "They will wear green silk and brocade garments in paradise..." (al-Insan, 76:21). This colour is widely used in Sufism as a symbol of sanctity, life, renewal, and blessing.

White, on the other hand, is mentioned in hadiths as a symbol of purity and lawfulness. Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said: "Wear white clothing, for it is most fitting for cleanliness, and shroud your dead in white cloth." For this reason, in Islamic ceremonies—particularly in pilgrimage attire (ihram), funeral rites, and during prayer—white clothing is considered preferable.

Black has dual meanings in Islamic beliefs: on one hand, it is the colour of the Kaaba's covering and represents respect, protection, and humility; on the other hand, in Quranic and hadith interpretations, it is sometimes interpreted as a symbol of darkness, sin, and hell.

In Sufism, spiritual stations are expressed through colours. For example, Sufi masters such as Ahmad Yassavi, Jalaluddin Rumi, and Bahauddin Naqshband connect colours in their works with the stages of heart purification: black represents ignorance, white represents enlightenment, and green represents truth and a sign of spiritual ascension. In Sufism, there exists the concept of 'Anvari sab'a', which refers to seven different colours. These colours are blue, yellow, red, black, green, and white, which reflect the purification of the soul, the ascension from one spiritual rank to another, and appear in the mystic's spiritual journey.

The end of Anvari sab'a is colourlessness, that is, transparent light.

According to Najmuddin Kubra, the blue colour signifies that the mystic has entered the path of repentance and fully observes the laws and regulations of Sharia. Yellow colour represents the awakening of love in the heart, a sign of closeness to Allah. Red colour symbolises the ascension of the spirit and the opening of the passion for enlightenment. White colour represents the purification of the heart. Green colour signifies the heart's immersion in the beauties of the unseen world. The symbol of the state of returning from the Divine to creation is the black colour. Furthermore, according to Kubra's classification, white colour reflects Islam, yellow colour reflects faith (iman), blue colour reflects excellence (ihsan), green colour reflects trust, sky-blue colour reflects complete certainty (yaqin), red colour reflects gnosis (irfan), and black colour reflects the state of wonder.

The spirit also takes various forms - sometimes red, sometimes yellow, sometimes black, occasionally turning white - appearing in different colours to represent materiality. Therefore, the concept of the seven attributes (atvori sab'a) reflects the practice of contemplation in Navoi's poetry, as with all great Sufi and mystical poets.

In Alisher Navoi's work 'Nasoim-ul muhabbat', the views of Sheikh Saididdin Farghani are cited: 'The khirqa (Sufi robe) has two types of attribution: one is the khirqa of spiritual will, which cannot be rightfully obtained from anyone other than a sheikh, and the other is the khirqa of blessing. The latter may rightfully be obtained from many masters for blessing.' The colour of the khirqa is black, blue, and white. Those newly initiated into the tariqa wore black robes, those who had reached a certain level wore blue, and those who had completed the spiritual journey wore white robes - though this had become customary, blue held greater prestige among robe-wearers. Hujwiri explains the meaning of his statement 'Sufis' clothing is often blue' as follows: 1. The path taken by Sufis is based on travel and journeying. White clothing gets dirty quickly during travel. 2. The second meaning of wearing blue refers to the misfortunes and sorrows that befall those (whom fortune has favoured), as 'the world is a land of disasters, a ruin of calamities, a desert of grief, a place of torment for those burning in separation, and a fortress of affliction. Disciples and those with spiritual resolve wear blue because they have seen and known that their heart's desires cannot be fulfilled in this world...' 3. There was another group of Sufis who could not protect their conduct and actions from faults, from corruptions of the heart, from wasting time in vain. For this reason, they never removed the blue robe from

themselves.

In shamanism, colours serve as signs of communication with spirits, ritual powers, and multi-layered worlds (upper, middle, and lower). Among Siberian, Turkic, and Mongolian peoples, white is associated with the upper celestial realm, blue with the sky god, red with fire and sacrifice, and black with the underworld.

In shamanic clothing, buttons, ribbons, and belts of various colours serve special semantic functions. For example, black ribbons open the path to the spirits of the dead, while white is used to summon sacred spirits. These colours are chosen according to the type of ritual, its purpose, and spiritual status.

M. Eliade emphasises that in shamanism, colours are "codes that connect with transcendent worlds", and writes that through colours, the shaman travels upwards or downwards.<sup>7</sup>

Colours are widely used in Uzbek folk epics, wedding ceremonies, folk songs, and proverbs. For example, white represents purity, honesty, and innocence; black represents sorrow, difficult trials, and strength; red represents love and life; blue represents the sky and permanence. Popular expressions among the people such as "white intention", "black day", and "red flowers" confirm this.

Similarly, Sh. Turdimov has proven in his research that colours in folk oral literature constitute the core of the "fundamental poetic symbols" system. According to his classification, white, black, and red colours are considered the permanent symbolic centre, while other colours are interpreted depending on the situation.

In Bashkir traditional clothing and patterns, colours indicate social status. Red represents power, struggle, and joy; blue represents the sky and spirituality; white is associated with purity and the spirits of ancestors.

Bashkir researcher R. Ishmuratova writes: "Colours in Bashkir folk oral literature are encoded with specific values: for example, blue represents not only the sky, but also freedom and love of liberty."

### Colours in Uyghur culture

Among the Uyghurs, colours are associated with mystical and traditional Islamic contexts. Green is the colour of prophets, white represents moral purity, and black signifies historical trials and sacred soil. In Uyghur literature, these colours are often used in harmony with imagery.

According to researcher Y. Abdurehim, in Uyghur folk epics, red represents devotion and love, white symbolises patience and salvation, and black is the central symbol of life's difficult trials.<sup>7</sup>

## DISCUSSION

Through colours:

- Cosmic structure (world directions),
- National identity (flags, clothing, customs),
- Religious concepts (shamanism, Islam),
- Social hierarchy (military ranks, symbols of rulership),
- National pride (symbols, slogans, festivals and emblems) are expressed. Colours in the history of Turkic peoples are considered a significant means of communication that has preserved cultural unity and continuity. Therefore, even today, Turkic peoples understand their historical roots and ancient culture through colours.

For example, the colour green has long been considered a symbol of life, growth, spring, nature's awakening, and blessing. In folk songs, the colour green is used in various contexts:

- Green garden, green meadow, green land (forest) — these places often serve as the environment where events begin, appearing as the scene against which the characters' actions unfold.
- Green leaf, green vine — symbols of love, youth and hopes and dreams.
- Green belt — in the male image, a symbol of strength and power, new life, and virility.

This colour is associated with vitality and harmonises with values that represent natural energy.

### 2.2. Red Color

The red color is interpreted in folklore thinking at two main poles:

Positive: beauty, love, celebration (for example: red girl, red sun, red flower dress); Negative: danger, blood, war, fierce struggle, intense emotional experiences (for example: red tears, red grave stone). "Red" — in ancient times meant "beautiful." For this reason, in folk creativity, the word red is used as a synonym for beauty and goodness.

In songs: A red flower bloomed in the stony place, Your memory has also crushed my heart."

Here, "red flower" is a symbol of love. This color holds a deep place in folklore as an external expression of human experiences and psychological states.

### 2.3. White Color in folklore:

A symbol of purity, innocence, loyalty, divinity; Images of marriage and innocence, white dress, white scarf; Sometimes related to emptiness, loneliness, death: "white cemetery," "white dust" and so on. In folklore texts, the white color often comes with valuable images

such as "pure heart," "white soul," "white mother's milk."

2.4. Black Color in folklore thinking has more negative connotation:

A sign of mourning, sorrow, evil, death; "Black night," "black hair," "black soil," "black sorrow" — expresses deep emotional anguish. However, in some cases:

"Black hero" — a strong, brave, warrior image, "Black horse" — a symbol of military valor, movement, danger.

"Black horse" — a symbol of military courage, action, and danger. This situation in folklore shows the ambivalence of the color black: it expresses both negativity and strength and willpower.

2.5. Blue (light blue) color in folk oral creativity:

A symbol of sky, eternity, spiritual peace, calmness; "Blue sky," "blue river," "blue terrace" — a source of happiness, dreams, and desires. Additionally, the blue color also comes with the semantics of longing and separation. This indicates that it is a unique symbol between goodness and sorrow.

2.6. Golden and silver colors in folklore often:

Represent noble, divine lights, patterns on the robes of sultans or princes in folk epics; "Golden hair," "silver belt," "golden heart" — symbols of beauty and high virtue. Through these colors, the people express their ideal — perfection, prestige, and purity.

## RESULTS

According to linguist A. Kononov, the use of colors in "Dīwān Lughāt al-Turk" and "The Book of Dede Korkut" reflects not only the language of that era but also serves as an example of semantic stability: "In the medieval Turkic language, the semantic scope of each color term was clearly defined, and it has remained almost unchanged in today's Turkic languages."

Indeed, the research reveals that in the folklore of Turkic-speaking peoples such as Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Turks, Bashkirs, Tatars, and Karakalpaks, the color-related expressions and symbolic poetic images are semantically similar, often repeating and enriching one another.

Colors have also played a significant role in the rituals of all Turkic peoples. These colors are deeply embedded in the customs, traditions, and ceremonies of these nations. When compared, the following commonalities can be observed:

- **Weddings:** white and red — representing the harmony of purity and passion;
- **Funerals:** black and white — symbolizing seriousness and sanctity;
- **Spring rituals:** green — symbolizing renewal;

- **Harvest festivals:** yellow and red – representing abundance and strength.

Moreover, in the worldview of Turkic peoples, colors are imbued not only with physical attributes but also with profound national, spiritual, and symbolic meanings. Through colors, they express:

- worldview (cosmogony),
- beliefs (shamanism and Islam),
- historical heritage (flags, clothing, traditions),
- social structure (rank, status),
- cultural continuity (spiritual values passed down through generations).

For Turkic peoples, colors have served as:

1. indicators of existence,
2. reflections of social consciousness,
3. symbolic means of connection with the world.

## CONCLUSION

In Turkic peoples, the symbolism associated with colors is a rich expression of national consciousness, culture, and ancient beliefs. Colors serve not only as visual and poetic tools, but also fulfill cognitive, axiological (evaluative), and ethnolinguistic functions in conveying cultural values.

Overall, the symbolic meanings assigned to colors by different peoples remain an integral part of their culture, language, and collective mindset.

In folk oral traditions, colors are not only artistic and aesthetic devices but also form an important system of symbols reflecting the people's historical memory, spiritual world, and social consciousness. In folkloric texts (such as fairy tales, epics, songs, and proverbs), colors function as unique poetic codes, deepening the meaning of events and the characteristics of the images portrayed.

Thus, colors are an inseparable component of oral folk creativity, through which the worldview, value system, and historical experience of the people are reflected via artistic imagery. This highlights the significance of philological and folkloric analysis of color symbolism as a distinct and important direction in modern scholarly research.

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