

The Role Of The Color Black In Turkish Mourning Ceremonies

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Abstract: This article explores mourning ceremonies and the cultural symbolism of color, especially black, among Turkic peoples and other world cultures. It examines how customs and rituals function as a cultural heritage transmitted across generations and highlights the religious, social, and emotional dimensions of mourning practices. The study also analyzes linguistic expressions, regional variations, and symbolic behaviors such as clothing traditions, gestures, and condolence formulas. Special attention is given to the role of black as a symbol of death, grief, and power in different cultural contexts.

Keywords: Mourning ceremonies, Turkic culture, traditions, customs, symbolism of color, black color, cultural heritage, rituals, condolence expressions, ethnolinguistics.

Introduction: Customs and traditions are cultural elements that ensure social cohesion and maintain connections with the past. Culture encompasses a society's way of life, language, religion, origin, and values. Even when a community is forced to migrate from its homeland, its values continue to accompany it wherever it goes. From this perspective, customs and values are considered a heritage passed down from generation to generation. Customs consist of various ceremonies. In Turkish culture, ceremonies are generally classified into three main categories:

1. Birth ceremonies
2. Wedding ceremonies
3. Mourning ceremonies

Mourning ceremonies have become one of the common rituals found in all cultures around the world. Throughout centuries, people who lost their loved ones due to disasters, defeats in wars, or death have sought to express their inner feelings and emotions. Over time, these practices gradually became embedded in culture as rules and traditions that are expected to be observed. Mourning refers to the grief experienced by

individuals after losing their loved ones, the pain of separation caused by not being able to see them again, and the behaviors expressed through crying, lamentation, and sorrow. Mourning also signifies the period of bereavement following the death of a respected person or a close relative, along with the related gatherings and commemorative ceremonies (Hojiyev A., Nurmonov A, Zaynabiddinov S, Kokren K, Saidxonov M, Sobirov A, Quronov D, 2001:138). Among Turks, mourning (yas tutmak) signifies being immersed in sorrow, entering a state of bereavement, and observing mourning. It also refers to expressing the pain, grief, and suffering felt after a loss through certain ritualized behaviors and actions (Farabi., No:1.0).

Mourning ceremonies are not unique to Turks; rather, they have been preserved as inherited customs passed down from generation to generation in cultures across the world. Since the beginning of human existence, people have continuously sought meaning in the events occurring around them and attributed symbolic significance to these occurrences. They adopted certain beliefs and integrated them into their daily lives. Likewise, there has been a strong belief that colors

carry symbolic meanings and influence human psychology. Black, blue, and white have become symbolic colors of mourning in many cultures.

According to I. Yoldashev, in Uzbek mourning ceremonies, clothing was primarily designed for women. Although men did not have a specific mourning outfit, they traditionally wore a belt around the waist and a skullcap on the head. If a close relative passed away, women would sew dresses from blue or black fabrics within three days. On the fourth day of mourning, a ceremony of wearing these mourning clothes was held, during which liquid food was distributed. This day was referred to as “ko’k kiydi” (“wore blue”). According to custom, the sleeves and hems of mourning garments were left unstitched. After one year, the blue dresses were taken off, and a ceremony of changing into white dresses was organized. In Tashkent and the Fergana Valley, women wore *mursak* garments and tied belts during condolence days. Today, the *mursak* is placed over the coffin of a deceased woman. In the regions of Samarkand and Bukhara, it was customary for women to wear white dresses and white headscarves during mourning ceremonies.

Similarly, in Kazakh culture, a black flag was hung at the house of a bereaved family as a symbol of mourning, while a white flag was displayed for those who had died as martyrs (Yuldashev I., 2002:4). In this culture, the tradition of offering food such as pilaf and bread to guests and travelers at a household observing mourning has long been practiced. The following proverb also demonstrates both this custom and the symbolic association of black with mourning: “A hungry person runs to the house in black” (Inan A., 1986:189).

Why is black considered a symbol of mourning? In Azerbaijan as well, a black flag is hung at the house where a condolence ceremony has taken place (Kalafat Y., 2000:63). In Iraq and Iran as well, black is regarded as the symbol of mourning. Moreover, this color also represents mourning in Europe. This is because, during plague outbreaks, human bodies turned dark in color. When a person dies, the body darkens and takes on a blackish tone. Black is considered “the color of death,” as it reflects pain, mourning, and suffering (Sağır A., 2017:161).

In particular, idiomatic expressions help reveal the

history of the culture in which they emerge. The following Turkish expressions related to mourning reflect the symbolic use of the color black: *yüreği kararmak* (to be overwhelmed by grief), *karalar giymek* (to wear black clothes), *kara yas tutmak* (to observe black mourning), and *kara çullara girmek*, etc.

Likewise, the expressions *kara gece* and *kara tün* reveal the place and significance of the color black in the Turkish language. The fact that night, as a law of nature, brings silence to humans and prepares them for death indicates that darkness, and black as its symbol, are associated with death and mourning (Toker I., 2009:12). In Turkish culture, the color black has generally carried more negative meanings than positive ones. In terms of positive connotations, however, black has not only symbolized mourning but also greatness, power, and glory. The fact that the prayer rug and carpet used during the enthronement ceremonies of Turkish rulers were specifically black demonstrates the significance of this color in such contexts. In addition to representing sovereignty, black was also widely used during the 11th–13th centuries (Küçük S., 2010:200).

The names *Kara Koyunlu*, the *Karakhanids*, and the nomadic tribe *Kara Keçili* can be cited as examples of this usage. In addition, the second name of Oghuz Khan is considered to be *Kara Khan* (Hacıgökmen M. A., 399).

The departure of a deceased person from the mortal world and their burial in black soil contributed to black becoming a symbol of mourning. In Turkish culture, this is reflected in the expression *kara toprak* (black soil). Since ancient times, this color has been represented in clothing as the color of mourning in various societies. Likewise, in Turkish phraseology, this symbolism is clearly seen in expressions such as *karalar bağlamak* (to tie a black scarf) and *karalar giymek* (to wear black clothes). The tradition of *karalı-göklü giymek*, which has continued from *Dede Korkut* to the present day, signifies mourning through the wearing of black and other dark-colored garments. Furthermore, in the stories of *Dede Korkut*, the expression *kara donlu, eğri dinli* was used to describe infidels (Teyek S., 2017:35).

Siyah sarık sarınma refers to tying a black turban. During mourning, this does not mean that all clothing is completely changed to black; rather, it is limited only to wearing a black turban.

Siyah başörtüsü bağlamak means that women wear

black headscarves during mourning.

Although black is generally considered the color of mourning among Turks, in some regions white also symbolizes bereavement. For example, in Inevi village, located in the Sarıkaya district of Yozgat, mourning garments are white in color (Özalp I., 1951:335). Unlike the symbolic use of black, there is also a tradition of wearing clothes inside out as a sign of mourning. In Yemençayır village of Kars Province, Türkiye, women wear their clothes inside out and tie black headscarves until the 52nd day of mourning. Likewise, in Doğan village of Erzurum, the relatives of the deceased do not wash their clothes as a sign of bereavement. In Karahan village of Van, women wear their clothes inside out for one month during the mourning period (Tan N.K., 1965:3812).

Another way of expressing mourning is related to hair practices. In Şanlıurfa, the closest relative of the deceased cuts one side of their hair. In the Erzurum region, a woman whose husband has passed away recites the following verses:

Bir saçımı ağ ördüm

Bir saçımı kara ördüm

Senin uğruna dağıttım.(Örnek S.V., 1977:223)

Unlike women, men generally do not undergo significant changes in clothing during mourning. However, they avoid flashy or attention-grabbing attire and refrain from cutting their hair and beard for a certain period. During condolence ceremonies, men and women participate in two different spheres. While women take on the role of crying and reciting elegies, men are expected to remain composed and demonstrate endurance.

Condolence ceremonies usually last for three days. However, depending on the status of the deceased, the mourning period may also continue for forty days. Guests who visit the bereaved family offer condolences and express wishes for patience and well-being by saying:

Başınız sağ olsun – May your head remain safe / condolences

Canınız sağ olsun – May your life remain safe

Allah rahmet eylesin – May Allah have mercy on him/her

Mekanı Cennet olsun – May his/her place be in

Paradise

Nur içinde yatsın – May he/she rest in light

Allah sabır versin – May Allah grant patience

Allah taksiratını affetsin – May Allah forgive his/her sins

Metin olun – Be strong / Stay strong

Allah verdi, Allah aldı – Allah gave, and Allah has taken away.

Such expressions of condolence are also shaped by whether the deceased was considered a good or bad person, as well as by their religious affiliation. For non-Muslims, the words Tanrı or Yaradan are often used instead of Allah in condolence expressions (Aripov M.P., 2022:81).

Mourning ceremonies represent a universal cultural phenomenon deeply rooted in Turkic and other world traditions. They function not only as religious and social practices but also as important cultural expressions transmitted from generation to generation. The study highlights the symbolic significance of colors, especially black, in expressing death, grief, power, and cultural identity. It also shows how linguistic expressions, clothing customs, and regional practices reflect different dimensions of mourning. Overall, these traditions demonstrate the close relationship between language, culture, and collective memory in shaping human attitudes toward death and loss.

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