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Spiritual Values and Cognitive Harmony in Uzbek, Kazakh, and Turkish Riddles: A Comparative-Typological Analysis

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Abstract This study presents a comparative analysis of Uzbek, Kazakh, and Turkish folk riddles, focusing on the expression of linguistic cognition and cultural spirituality. Within the oral folklore of these Turkic nations, riddles serve as a mirror of collective reasoning, reflecting moral values and artistic worldviews. Drawing upon the theoretical frameworks of scholars such as Omonulla Madayev, Mukhtar Auezov, and Şükrü Elçin, the paper illuminates the linguistic-aesthetic dimension of the riddle genre. The findings demonstrate that folk riddles are a vital cultural repository, embodying the spiritual unity, cognitive alignment, and shared value systems of the Turkic peoples.

Key words: riddle, Turkic peoples, Uzbek, Kazakh, Turkish, linguistic thought, spirituality, oral folklore, comparative analysis.

Introduction. A riddle is an intellectual verbal game that challenges the listener or reader to identify an object or concept by indirectly describing its features without explicitly naming it. Riddles can take the form of short single-sentence structures, as well as couplets or poetic strophes, with many of them employing rhythmic and rhyming patterns¹. As one of the most ancient genres of folklore, folk riddles continue to retain their educational, cognitive, and pedagogical significance to this day².

In terms of size and structural form, riddles closely resemble proverbs, and at times, a thematic affinity between the two is also evident. However, their primary functional and generative purposes remain distinct. Considering the morphological structure of the Uzbek word for riddle—**topishmoq**—the root **top-** ("find") directly evokes cognitive actions such as "think," "search," "compare," and "seek." The addition of the suffix **-ish** specifies the task or collaborative action, while the infinitive suffix **-moq** embeds a pragmatic nuance of challenge, subtly conveying the sentiment of "if you can" or "if you are capable." Furthermore, Mahmud al-Kashgari noted that riddles were anciently referred to as **tabzug**³, citing the illustrative sentence "Tabzug‘uq tabuzdim" ("I asked him a riddle"). This linguistic

¹ <https://uz.wikipedia.org/wiki/Topishmoq>

² Z.Xusainova "O‘zbek topishmoqlari" T.: O‘zbekiston SSR "Fan" nashriyoti 1996 B. 2





evidence demonstrates that the historical origins of the Turkic riddle genre date back to antiquity³.

In her book *Uzbek Riddles (O‘zbek topishmoqlari)*, Z. Khusainova highlights that Uzbek folk riddles remained largely unstudied and uncompiled prior to the 19th century, noting that their systematic collection and scholarly examination only began during this period⁴.

In his textbook *Uzbek Oral Folklore (O‘zbek xalq og‘zaki ijodi)*, Omonulla Madayev states: "There is a lack of definitive empirical evidence in folkloristics concerning the exact emergence of the riddle. While several scholars highlight its ancient origins, *Dīwān Lughāt al-Turk*, which contains numerous proverbial examples, features the term *tabzug* without providing any actual riddle texts. Owing to structural and dimensional similarities between riddles and proverbs, it is hypothesized that both genres shared a concurrent historical origin—a perspective with which we concur"⁵.

In his seminal work *Turkish Riddles (Türk bilmeceleeri)*, Prof. Dr. Şükrü Elçin provides comprehensive insights into the terminological variations for riddles across cognate Turkic peoples:

"Eastern and Northern Turks, as well as the Azerbaijani realm, utilize the verb *tabmak* (bearing the same core meaning) and its derivative forms such as *tabzuğ* and *tabmaca*. Furthermore, the term *matal* among Turkmens; *cumbak* among Kyrgyzs, Kazakhs, and Karakalpaks; *tabışmak* alongside *cumbak* among Kazan Tatars; and *yumak* (derived from the same root) among Bashkirs are widely prevailing. In addition to the general designation *bilmece*, various villages and towns across Anatolia employ terms such as *masal*, *mesel*, *matal*, *hikâye*, *metel*, *bulmaca*, *söz*, *dele*, *gıcık*, and *gazelleme*..."⁶

Mukhtar Auezov, a prominent figure in Kazakh literary scholarship, provides key insights into Kazakh folk riddles:

"Mukhtar Auezov highlights that Kazakh folk riddles have retained their enduring relevance to the present day. He asserts that even following the October Revolution, riddles contributed significantly to the evolution of folklore by incorporating new thematic content and reflecting contemporary social realities.

According to the scholar, the poetic and verse-bound structure of Kazakh riddles is a distinctive phenomenon that underscores their inherent poetic nature and aesthetic

³ Omonulla Madayev "O‘zbek xalq og‘zaki ijodi" "Mumtoz so‘z" nashriyoti T – 2010 B. 77

⁴ Z. Xusainova "O‘zbek topishmoqlari" O‘zbekiston SSR "Fan" nashriyoti T – 1996 B. 6

⁵ Omonulla Madayev "O‘zbek xalq og‘zaki ijodi" "Mumtoz so‘z" nashriyoti T – 2010 B. 80

⁶ Elçin Şükrü. *Türk bilmeceleeri*. Kültür bakanlığı yayınları. Ankara, 1989. S. 1.





potency. Consequently, this phenomenon must be evaluated as a crucial factor in examining the artistic cognition and linguistic worldview of the Kazakh people"⁷

Mukhtar Auezov emphasizes that Kazakh folk riddles have retained their enduring significance up to the present day. He further notes that even following the October Revolution, these riddles were enriched with contemporary themes, reflecting new social realities and contributing substantially to the evolution of folklore. According to the scholar, the poetic verse structure of Kazakh riddles represents a unique phenomenon that showcases their intrinsic poetic essence and aesthetic force. Consequently, this phenomenon must be regarded as a vital factor in investigating the artistic cognitive system and linguistic worldview of the Kazakh people.

The creative heritage produced by any nation vividly reflects its lifestyle, culture, religious beliefs, moral values, and traditions. This phenomenon is equally evident in folk riddles:

Zarga topilmas, zo'rg'a topilmas. (Answer: Vaqt / Time)

("Cannot be bought with gold, nor obtained by force.")

This Uzbek riddle encapsulates the supreme value of time, emphasizing that neither material wealth—such as gold or jewels—nor physical power and force can acquire or retrieve it. Reflecting the ethnocultural mindset nurtured within the region, this riddle underscores the profound reverence and importance attributed to time in traditional Uzbek thought.

Similarly, a Turkish folk riddle addresses the concept of time through vivid metaphorical imagery:

Ne su, ne rüzgar,

Akar gider durmadan,

Ne görülür, ne tutulur.

Cevap: Zaman

"Neither water nor wind,

It flows away continuously,

Neither seen nor grasped."

Answer: Time

In this Turkish folk riddle, time is depicted through figurative and metaphorical means. The lines "Neither water nor wind" express the invisible yet perceptible essence of time. "It flows away continuously" signifies the perpetual motion of time, whereas "neither seen nor grasped" denotes its irreversibility.

Through this riddle, the Turkish cultural worldview portrays time as an entity hidden from direct human perception, yet serving as the fundamental measure of life. The

⁷ М. Әуезов. Қазақ халық әдебиеті. Жұмбақтар туралы





relentless flow of time serves as a poignant reminder of the transience of human existence, underscoring the imperative to realize the value and true purpose of life.

Ushbu bo‘limni ilmiy-akademik va kognitiv tilshunoslik uslubida ingliz tiliga quyidagicha tarjima qildim:

Similarly, in the folklore of the cognate Kazakh people, the concept of time is articulated through the following riddle:

**Күні бойы ағады, қолмен ұстай алмайсың,
Өтіп кеткенінен аңғармайсың, қайта келмейді.**

Javob: Уақыт

("It flows throughout the day, you cannot grasp it with your hand,
You do not notice its passing, and it never returns."

Answer: Time)

In this Kazakh folk riddle, the concept of "time" is depicted through expressive figurative means. Lexical units conveying "flowing," "passing," and "irreversibility" provide linguistic expression to the continuous motion of time, emphasizing that while it can be perceived, it cannot be physically grasped. Here, "time" is interpreted as the most invaluable yet intangible and transient phenomenon in human life. In Kazakh folk cognition, time is viewed as one of the fundamental forces of nature—a crucial determinant of human life, labor, and fate. In this riddle as well, time is allegorized as a "flowing river"; it is cognized through human perception, yet remains devoid of a tangible physical form.

Ushbu bo‘limni ilmiy-akademik va semantik-stilistik tahlil talablariga mos ravishda ingliz tiliga tarjima qildim:

Another core theme in Turkic folk riddles pertains to enlightenment, knowledge, and books. An Uzbek folk riddle illustrates this concept as follows:

**Sandiq to‘la pista-bodom,
Ochib ko‘r, bo‘lsang odam.
Xosiyati ko‘p, olam-olam,
Terib ol uni har dam.**

(Kitob)

("A chest full of pistachios and almonds,
Open it and see, if you are human.

It possesses endless virtues, vast as the universe,
Gather them at every moment."

Answer: Book)

This Uzbek folk riddle emphasizes that books are far more valuable to humanity than material wealth, underscoring that moral and intellectual worth ought to be prioritized over physical possessions. Concurrently, the riddle contains an explicit





call to reading, urging the listener to glean xosiyat (virtue) from books. A semantic examination of the word xosiyat reveals that it denotes "a positive trait, good quality, or noble attribute." Thus, the riddle carries an underlying moral exhortation: individuals seeking to cultivate commendable qualities within themselves must seek them through books.

In Turkish folklore, a riddle addressing the concept of a book utilizes structural parallelisms and paradoxes:

**Yaprağı var, ağaç değil,
Dikilidir, ruba değil,
Konuşur, insan değil.**

(Kitap)

("It has leaves [pages], yet it is not a tree,
It is stitched, yet it is not a garment,
It speaks, yet it is not a human.")

Answer: Book)

In this Turkish riddle, the phrase "It has leaves [pages], yet it is not a tree" alludes to the book's capacity to spread enlightenment—much like spring leaves that cloak the world in greenery and bring joy to humanity—thereby underscoring the book as an enduring fountainhead of knowledge. Furthermore, the line "It is stitched, yet it is not a garment" emphasizes another distinct attribute of the book: its ability to consolidate strands of wisdom and enlightenment into a unified whole. Finally, the expression "It speaks, yet it is not a human" illustrates how the book guides individuals toward moral and intellectual perfection through its inherent wisdom.

In the folklore of the cognate Kazakh people, a riddle regarding the book is expressed as follows:

**Тісі жоқ, тілі жоқ,
Бірақ адамға сөйлейді.**

Javob: Кітап

("It has no teeth, it has no tongue,
Yet it speaks to human beings.")

Answer: Book)

In this Kazakh folk riddle, the book is portrayed as a symbol of human intellect, as well as a primary source of knowledge and spirituality. Through the figurative expression "It has no teeth, it has no tongue, yet it speaks to human beings," the riddle artfully contrasts the book's inanimate nature with its profound capacity to influence the human spirit through words, knowledge, and enlightenment. In Kazakh folk cognition, the book is revered as a source of enlightenment—a transformative force guiding individuals toward moral and intellectual perfection. Although a book cannot literally speak, its pages embody cumulative human experience, history,





morality, and wisdom. In this regard, the riddle encapsulates the paramount role of the book as both spiritual wealth and a supreme product of human cognition.

Another fundamental dimension in Turkic folk riddles concerns language, speech etiquette, and the tongue (til / dil). An Uzbek folk riddle illustrates the dual nature of speech depending on its alignment with reason:

Aqlga do'st tutsang, a'lo so'zlar,

Yo'qsa u suyaksiz balo so'zlar.

(Til)

("If befriended by reason, it speaks excellently,
Otherwise, this boneless thing speaks calamity.")

Answer: Language / Tongue)

As conveyed in this riddle, when an individual's speech is guided by intellect and reason, it yields meaningful and prudent discourse. Conversely, if speech lacks rational grounding, reckless words inevitably bring misfortune upon the speaker. This metaphorically emphasizes the profound responsibility associated with verbal expression in Uzbek culture.

In Turkish folklore, the tongue (dil) and speech are conceptualized through vivid aesthetic metaphors:

Altı mermer, üstü mermer,

İçinde bir bülbül öter.

(Dil)

(English translation:

"Marble below, marble above,
Inside, a nightingale sings.")

Answer: Language / Tongue)

In this Turkish riddle, the upper and lower rows of teeth are metaphorically equated to fine marble, while the tongue enclosed within them is likened to a singing nightingale. Just as a nightingale's melody brings delight to its listeners, the riddle implies that human speech ought to be harmonious, pleasant, and intellectually uplifting.

A Kazakh folk riddle employs a remarkably similar aesthetic imagery:

Астында ақ маржан,

Ішінде бүлбүл сайрайды.

Javob: Тіл

(English translation:

"White pearls beneath,
A nightingale sings inside.")

Answer: Language / Tongue)





In this Kazakh riddle, language and speech are depicted through evocative figurative devices. The phrase "white pearls beneath" metaphorically symbolizes the teeth, whereas "a nightingale sings inside" represents the human capacity for eloquent articulation. The nightingale's song embodies the aesthetic beauty, rhythmic cadence, and spiritual resonance of spoken language. Here, language is interpreted as humanity's most delicate yet potent instrument—a mirror of intellect, cognition, and morality that distinguishes human beings from other living creatures. Thus, within Kazakh folk cognition, this riddle serves as a symbolic reminder to exercise restraint, truthfulness, and propriety in speech.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that while the riddle genre is designated through various synonymous terms across Turkic traditions—such as *topishmoq*, *jumboq*, *bulmaca*, and *boshqotirma*—it maintains a fundamental functional and thematic unity. A comparative analysis of Uzbek, Kazakh, and Turkish folk riddles reveals that beyond stimulating intellectual quick-wittedness and cognitive agility, riddles serve as a vital medium for moral, cultural, and educational enlightenment. Furthermore, the profound conceptual, semantic, and stylistic parallels observed across these three folklore traditions highlight their shared linguistic foundation and worldview. Ultimately, these findings reaffirm the deep historical, cultural, and spiritual proximity among cognate Turkic peoples, underscoring folk riddles as an enduring repository of common Turkic heritage.

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