

Kırgız Tarihinin Sinemadaki Yansıması: Kurmancan Datka Filminde Tarihî ve Kültürel Arka Plan

Cinematic Representations of Kyrgyz History: Historical and Cultural Context in Kurmanjan Datka

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Öz

İnsanoğlu, doğduğu andan itibaren içinde bulunduğu toplumun kültürel öğeleriyle karşılaşmaktadır. Bu öğeler, bireyin çevresiyle kurduğu ilişkiler, gözlemleri ve deneyimleri yoluyla zamanla içselleştirilmektedir. Böylece kişi, bu süreç içerisinde ait olduğu toplumun toplumsal değerlerinin bir parçası hâline gelmektedir. Kültür, durağan ve değişmez bir yapıdan ziyade, sürekli olarak dönüşüm geçiren, canlı ve dinamik bir yapı sergilemektedir. Bu yönüyle kültür, her dönemde toplumsal, siyasal ve ekonomik değişimlere bağlı olarak yeniden şekillenebilmektedir. Kültürel değerlerin kuşaktan kuşağa aktarımı ise çoğunlukla semboller, anlatılar, ritüeller ve sanat aracılığıyla gerçekleşmektedir. Bu aktarım sürecinde özellikle sinema, güçlü bir anlatı ve ifade biçimi olarak önemli bir rol üstlenmektedir. Sinema, sahip olduğu görsel ve işitsel anlatım gücüyle toplumsal normları, değerleri ve kültürel öğeleri geniş kitlelere ulaştırarak kültürel aktarım sürecinde etkili bir işlev görmektedir. Aynı zamanda toplumların belleğini canlı tutmakta ve ulusal kimlik bilincini pekiştirmektedir. Kırgız sinemasında ise özellikle bağımsızlık sonrası dönemde, ulusal değerlerin, tarihsel anlatıların ve kültürel kimliğin sinema aracılığıyla yeniden inşa edilmesi dikkat çekmektedir. Bu çalışmada, 2014 yapımı Kurmanjan Datka filminin Kırgız kültürünü ve tarihini nasıl temsil ettiği ve bu temsiliyetin tarihsel gerçeklikle ilişkisi incelenmektedir. Film, Kırgız halkının kahramanlık öykülerini ve kültürel değerlerini işlerken, tarihi gerçekliğe de sadık kalarak ulusal kimliğin sinemasal bir yansımasını sunma açısından büyük bir öneme sahip bulunmaktadır. Araştırma, Kurmanjan Datka filminin tarihi ve kültürel gerçekliği nasıl yansıttığını ve Kırgız kimliği açısından hangi önemli anlatıları sunduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Filmdeki kültürel öğeler ve tarihsel temsiliyet de ayrıntılı bir şekilde incelenmektedir.

Anahtar Kelime: Kurmancan Datka, Kırgız Kimliği, Kırgız Sineması

Abstract

From the moment of birth, human beings are exposed to the cultural elements of the society they live in. These elements are gradually internalized through the individual's interactions, observations, and experiences with their environment. Thus, the individual becomes a part of the social values of the society throughout this process. Culture is not a static and unchanging structure; rather, it is a living and dynamic entity that continuously undergoes transformation. In this respect, culture can be reshaped in every period depending on social, political, and economic changes. The transmission of cultural values from generation to generation primarily takes place through symbols, narratives, rituals, and art. In this transmission process, cinema, as a powerful form of narrative and expression, plays a significant role. Cinema effectively functions in the cultural transmission process by conveying social norms, values, and cultural elements to wide audiences through its visual and auditory language. At the same time, it keeps the collective memory of societies alive and reinforces the awareness of national identity. In Kyrgyz cinema, especially in the post-independence period, the reconstruction of national values, historical narratives, and cultural identity through cinema has attracted attention. This study examines how the 2014 film Kurmanjan Datka represents Kyrgyz culture and history, and how this representation relates to historical reality. While portraying the heroic stories and cultural values of the Kyrgyz people, the film also holds great importance in providing a cinematic reflection of national identity by remaining faithful to historical facts. The research reveals how Kurmanjan Datka reflects historical and cultural realities and presents significant narratives in terms of Kyrgyz identity. The cultural elements and historical representation in the film are also examined in detail.

Keywords: Kurmanjan Datka, Kyrgyz Identity, Kyrgyz Cinema

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Introduction

When examining the history of humanity, it is evident that culture has been influenced by different stages of the life cycle in every era, and as a result, it has become a whole consisting of the material and spiritual values of society. As members of society, individuals encounter these values from birth and internalize them. However, just as individuals undergo changes over time, the material and spiritual elements of culture can also be transformed. This demonstrates that culture possesses a dynamic and ever-changing structure (Özbek, 2020). The social norms and technical structures specific to a society form the cultural whole of that society (Kafesoğlu, 1997, p. 16). Based on this, culture can be defined in its broadest sense as a continuously evolving and changing body of social values that is transmitted from generation to generation. This structure, which persists through various cultural elements within society, is shaped and sustained by values such as cuisine, music, traditional sports, clothing, and other elements embraced by the community.

Culture is transmitted from one generation to the next through symbols, thereby creating a link between different generations. Individuals from each culture interpret, analyze, and make sense of the symbols they encounter in the communication process in accordance with their own cultural contexts (Kartarı, 2023, p. 15). The ultimate goal of societies is to preserve the core elements of culture and pass them on to future generations despite the changes experienced over time. This transmission takes place through various means that convey culture, and cinema can be regarded as one of the most significant tools in this cultural transmission process. Like other branches of art, cinema is shaped by social dynamics. For this reason, cinema can incorporate many cultural elements such as language, clothing, music, food, and rituals.

The cultural indicators in films consist of the symbolic meanings encoded by a given culture. These indicators include the norms, values, beliefs, narratives, myths, and accepted moral judgments that shape the way of life of a society (Edgar-Hunt et al., 2012, p. 29). In Kyrgyz cinema, while films followed a specific line during the Soviet period, following the country's independence, there has been an increasing emphasis on conveying cultural identity and national values through cinema. Especially after the influence of Soviet propaganda that dominated productions up to the 1960s, Kyrgyz filmmakers began producing films that emphasized the nation's historical heritage, natural beauty, and heroic stories in order to strengthen national consciousness and a sense of belonging.

This study focuses on the question: What kind of narrative does the 2014 film *Kurmanjan Datka*, directed by Sadyk Sher-Niyaz and one of the most prominent examples of this cinematic transformation, present about Kyrgyz history, and what are the features of this narrative in terms of historical accuracy and cultural representation? In this context, the study aims to examine to what extent the film *Kurmanjan Datka* remains faithful to historical facts, how it reflects Kyrgyz culture, and how it contributes to the shared historical heritage of the Turkic world.

The reason this film has been selected is that it stands as one of the most successful productions of Kyrgyz cinema in recent years and serves as a valuable case study for analysis from various perspectives. In particular, its nomination for the Academy Awards in the Best Foreign Language Film category, its wide viewership on platforms such as YouTube, and the fact that it was state-funded by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the Kyrgyz Republic have increased the film's impact both nationally and internationally. Furthermore, the strong interest shown by Turkey and other parts of the Turkic world has helped the film generate broader cultural resonance. By portraying events from the era of the Russian Empire, the film recalls lived experiences and known events from the historical experiences of Turkic peoples, making it a topic worthy of academic discussion. Thus, analyzing the film from an academic perspective is of great importance.

This research seeks to answer the following questions: To what extent does the film reflect historical and cultural reality? What kind of narrative does it present in terms of Kyrgyz identity and historical consciousness? What is the significance of *Kurmanjan Datka* in the context of Kyrgyz and Turkic world cinema?

The study adopts a qualitative research method, using content analysis to examine the film's content.

When examining the existing literature, it becomes evident that the theme of strong female identity in Central

Asian cinema is frequently addressed, particularly through films such as *Kurmanjan Datka* and *Tomiris*. Narinova and Zhamankulova (2024) focused on the representation of female leaders in Central Asian cinema, analyzing the cultural and social impacts of these films. *Kurmanjan Datka* has been addressed from historical and ideological perspectives. Yetimova (2024), in her analysis of the film's historical accuracy and ideological subtexts, discusses how female leadership and public resistance are reflected in cinema. Meanwhile, Nergiz (2022) emphasizes the importance of the *Kurmanjan Datka* character in historical and cultural contexts, providing a detailed analysis of this legendary leader's female identity and leadership traits. Lastly, Koca and Koca (2024), analyzing the film through semiotic theory, examined how symbolism in the film influences the meaning-making processes of the audience.

In this study, however, the focus is on how the historical narrative of *Kurmanjan Datka* shapes Kyrgyz cultural identity and how the film balances historical accuracy with cultural representation.

1. Representation of Kyrgyz History and Culture in Cinema

Kyrgyz history and culture have been transmitted to both local and international audiences through cinema, playing an important role as a visual representation of Kyrgyz identity. Kyrgyz cinema began to take shape during the Soviet Union era, but produced works that more distinctly reflected its national identity after independence (Türk, 2024).

Kyrgyz culture, especially through its epic tales, traditions, and strong connection with nature, is represented in cinema. Epic tales are literary texts that reflect the cultural identity of the society they belong to and pass these values from one generation to the next (Altun, 1995, p. 22). These narratives, as the bearers of national identity, establish a connection with the past and carry cultural heritage into the future. Rooted epics like the *Manas* epic often appear, either directly or indirectly, in many films, highlighting values such as heroism and solidarity among the Kyrgyz people. The nomadic lifestyle, equestrian culture, and steppe life are also frequently featured themes in these cinematic narratives, visualizing the historical experiences of the Kyrgyz people and conveying them to the audience.

The representation of Kyrgyz history in cinema is generally shaped around national heroes and significant historical figures. For example, the film *Kurmanjan Datka: Queen of the Mountains* (2014) dramatizes the struggle for Kyrgyz independence and the critical role played by a female leader in this process. *Kökbörü: Game of the Tough* (2018), directed by Ruslan Akun, centers on the traditional Kyrgyz sport of *Kökbörü*, highlighting the theme of territorial struggle while drawing attention to societal issues. Similarly, the 2015 film *Sutak* (Сутак), directed by Mirlan Abdıkalıkov, although not a direct historical film, reflects the cultural identity, social norms, and family structure of Kyrgyz society. Historical realities, which were not sufficiently addressed during the Soviet era, are now being explored through cinema by the new generation of Kyrgyz directors, contributing not only to the field of cinema but also to the broader public's understanding of Kyrgyz history (Tölömüşova, 2015). These films have been instrumental in the construction of Kyrgyz identity and in promoting it internationally.

In Kyrgyz cinema, alongside local motifs, the works of Cengiz Aytmatov hold a significant place. Aytmatov's works brought the conflict between traditional Kyrgyz life and modernization to the forefront in cinema, inspiring many directors. His stories are considered important sources that reflect the historical memory of the Kyrgyz people (Türk, 2024).

Today, Kyrgyz cinema continues to convey its cultural heritage through both independent films and international co-productions. These films, which combine traditional elements with modern narrative techniques, play a vital role in promoting Kyrgyzstan's cultural richness and history on a global scale.

2. Kurmancan Datka

Kurmancan Datka was born in 1811 in the village of Orke, located in the Osh region of Kyrgyzstan. Historical sources highlight that she was raised in the Turkish-Islamic cultural tradition and possessed a courageous, determined, and combative personality. Three key turning points in her life shaped her historical role. First, she

made the independent decision to separate from her forced marriage to Kul Seyit. Then, she supported her husband, Âlim Bek, who worked in the administration of the Kokand Khanate. Finally, after the death of her husband, she was given the title of Datka and led a resistance against Tsarist Russia in the Alay Valley. Following peace negotiations, she was awarded the title of the “Queen of Alay” (Kalaycı, 2021, p. 160).

In 1832, Kurmancan married Alimbek, the bey of the Alay region, marking the beginning of a new phase in her life. Alimbek had joined the service of the Kokand Khanate at the age of 27 and was awarded the title of Datka by Madali Khan when he was 31 years old (Abitov, 2000, p. 156, 173). After being appointed as the bey of the Andijan region at the age of 32, he frequently had to leave the region for administrative duties, and during his absences, Kurmancan took on the region’s social and economic responsibilities (Alimbayev, 2021, p. 2).

In 1862, after the death of Alimbek Datka, Kurmancan took on both political and economic responsibilities. In the same year, when Kudayar Khan ascended to the throne for the second time, the Emir of Bukhara came to Osh and met with Kurmancan. Recognizing her influence over the people, he granted her the title of Datka (Yuvaçev, 1907, p. 965). Although this title went against traditional Muslim rules, it officially granted Kurmancan a leadership role (Yuvaçev, 1907, p. 905). The title Datka means “just ruler” and signifies an important status within the Khanate. There were two primary reasons for granting this title to Kurmancan: her authority and respect among the people, and her influence in political changes within the Kokand Khanate. With this title, Kurmancan began officially governing the Alay Kyrgyz and became more involved in the political processes within the Khanate (Alimbayev, 2021, p. 3).

Towards the end of the second half of the 19th century, the Russian Empire invaded southern Kyrgyzstan, eliminating the Kokand Khanate in 1876 and establishing the Fergana Oblast. The Alay Kyrgyz, however, resisted Russian rule and led uprisings under the leadership of Abdıldabek. The Russians made two attempts to gain control over the Alay region. In the first attempt, the Russian forces, commanded by General M.D. Skobelev, failed and retreated. In the second attempt, in July 1876, Kurmancan Datka refused to surrender and fled toward Pamir. However, on July 26, Skobelev and Konov’s Russian forces captured her and bestowed upon her the title “Queen of Alay.” After negotiations, Kurmancan promised peace, and she, along with her son Mahmudbek and other Kyrgyz, returned to Alay (Alimbayev, 2021, p. 4, 6).

Kurmancan Datka, as the leader of her people, her resistance against foreign domination, and her eventual contribution to peace, holds a significant place in Kyrgyz history.

3. The Importance of Kurmancan Datka for the Kyrgyz People and the Turkic World

Kurmanjan Datka is a significant figure for both the Kyrgyz people and the broader Turkic world due to her crucial role in the Kyrgyz struggle for independence during the 19th century. As a courageous and capable leader, she united her people, defended their rights, and demonstrated strong leadership during difficult times. Exhibiting both political and military leadership, Kurmanjan Datka made great sacrifices for her people and secured her place in history (Keserci, 2020, p. 53).

Kurmancan Datka is known as a symbol of women’s participation in state governance within Kyrgyz society, and her diplomatic skills earned her respect from the rulers of neighboring countries. Her political awareness was shaped by her husband, Alimbek Datka, who served as a senior official in the Hokand Khanate. Alimbek Datka, defying societal norms of the time, involved Kurmancan in political and social processes, mentored her, and supported the development of her leadership skills. This approach not only broke traditional beliefs about the role of women in society but also laid the foundation for Kurmancan to become an influential figure in state governance, not just within the family but also on the national stage (Ömürzakova, 2002, p. 42-44). After the death of her husband Alimbek Datka, Kurmancan Datka assumed leadership over the Kyrgyz people under the Hokand Khanate, becoming a respected leader not only in the Alay Mountains but also in regions like Kashgar, Fergana, and other Turkistan Khanates (Keserci, 2020, p. 47). The title “Datka,” a high-ranking administrative title of the period, signifies her position in Turkish history and the respect that was accorded to her (Kalaycı, 2021, p. 160).

The most significant factor that made Kurmancan Datka a key figure not only for the Kyrgyz people but also for other communities in Central Asia was her courageous resistance to the imperialist policies of Tsarist Russia and her strategic actions. Not only did she defend her people's rights, but she also led the struggle against Russian occupation in Central Asia, alongside her sons. This resistance, lasting more than thirty years, led to her recognition as a heroic leader in Turkish and world history (Keserci, 2020, p. 52).

Throughout her life, Kurmancan Datka faced numerous challenges but emerged as a leading figure in the Kyrgyz people's fight against colonization. She not only exhibited military and political prowess but also demonstrated diplomacy and social organization. Her efforts to protect her people from the expansionist policies of Tsarist Russia made her renowned not only as a warrior but also as a strategist and mediator. Particularly during her resistance in the Alay region, she was able to unite the local population and played a pivotal role in maintaining social and economic order. Her leadership was decisive during negotiations with Russian authorities, contributing to the preservation of her region's cultural and political identity. Both during the Khanate and Tsarist Russia's rule, she fought for her people's rights, challenging Russian authorities with her family. However, as the reality of confronting the Russian Empire became apparent, she attempted to prevent unnecessary harm to her people. Her diplomatic efforts played a crucial role in bringing an end to the struggle and facilitating a peaceful resolution. The respect Tsarist authorities held for her, combined with her diplomatic efforts, played a significant role in the conclusion of the conflict (Alimbayev, 2021, p. 8). In this way, Kurmancan Datka remains an important figure not only in her time but also in the collective memory of the Kyrgyz people today.

4. Historical Significance as a Leadership and Female Figure

In history, women in Turkish society have not only been recognized for their role as mothers but also as crucial components in the organization and functioning of society. Turkish women have been accepted as individuals with equal rights to men, without encountering any restrictions in social and political spheres (Ceylan, 2021, p. 37). They have played significant roles in shaping societies and forming leadership structures. Having existed throughout a vast geography, Turkish women have fought alongside men in the nomadic lifestyle and have been featured in heroic tales (Bolat, Yılmaz and Sırer, 2023, p. 1347). These important stories highlight that Turkish women actively participated in society and had a profound impact on shaping social structures.

In historical literature, certain female figures have exhibited leadership according to the conditions of their time, guiding their communities and influencing historical processes. Kurmancan Datka, who stands out as an important female hero in Turkish history (Aytaç, 2024, p. 119), is also recognized as the first Turkish female general (Keserci, 2020, p. 44). In this context, the title "Datka" was awarded to her for the first time to a woman (Buyar, 2024, p. 125). The granting of the "Datka" title to Kurmancan Datka reflects her significant position and influence within historical and social structures (Aytaç, 2024, p. 119). Kurmancan Datka is one of the prominent figures in Turkistan history, having earned respect not only in Kyrgyz history but also across the entire Turkic world (Ömürzakova, 2002, p. 91). Even more notably, Kurmancan Datka, one of the prominent female figures in Kyrgyz history, became an important symbol in shaping Kyrgyz national identity after the establishment of the Kyrgyz Republic in 1991, during the process of building the new state structure (Buyar, 2024, p. 128).

Kurmancan Datka gained attention with her political influence and was respected by the leaders and notable figures of neighboring countries. Moreover, during the 19th century, when the Kyrgyz people faced the Russian Empire, Datka played a critical role in protecting her people and leading their struggle for independence. Kurmancan Datka was at the forefront of the resistance against the Russians, and during this struggle, she met Alimbek Datka, the leader of the Alay region, and married him. Alimbek Datka was an important figure in the Kyrgyz people's fight for independence and had guided resistance movements in East Turkestan. As the wife of such a strong leader, Kurmancan developed her political and strategic skills. Her husband Alimbek trusted her and consulted her on matters of state governance. Thanks to her intelligence and wisdom, she became a leader respected within the society. During times when her husband was away on military campaigns or at the Hokand palace, Kurmancan managed the leadership of the Alay Kyrgyz people and acted as their leader. Kurmancan's role was not limited to family life;

she was also her husband's closest advisor, confidant, and, when necessary, a military and political leader. After her husband's death, she took on the leadership of the Kyrgyz people, and with her courage and diplomatic skills, she quickly expanded her influence and gained recognition in Fergana, Kashgar, and other Turkistan khanates. Her leadership qualities were recognized in 1876 when she was honored with the title "Datka" by the Emir of Bukhara, Seyit Muzaffer ed-Din. Even before receiving the "Datka" title, Kurmancan Datka had led her army on horseback and played an active role in military leadership as a leader whom the people trusted and consulted on matters of strategy (Dağdeviren, 2021, p. 204). The trust she instilled in her people and her leadership abilities allowed her to have a significant impact, not only on the battlefield but also on the cultural and social dynamics of the society.

5. Methodology

This study examines the narrative presented in the 2014 film *Kurmanjan Datka*, directed by Sadyk Sher-Niyaz, focusing on its portrayal of Kyrgyz history. By analyzing the features of historical accuracy and cultural representation in the film, the study evaluates how the work reflects Kyrgyz culture and contributes to the shared historical heritage of the Turkic world. The film's nomination for the Academy Awards, its wide audience on social media platforms, and its state-sponsored production have increased its national and international influence. Moreover, the strong interest it has received from Turkey and the broader Turkic world has amplified its cultural resonance. By focusing on the period of the Russian Empire, the film sheds light on historical events and serves as a valuable example for academic analysis.

This research seeks to answer the following questions: To what extent does the film reflect historical and cultural reality? What kind of narrative does it offer in terms of Kyrgyz identity and historical consciousness? What is its position within the context of Turkic world cinema?

This study adopts a qualitative research method. Qualitative research aims to reveal individuals' perceptions and events comprehensively and authentically within their natural environments and collects data through methods such as observation, interviews, and document analysis (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2016, p. 19). The data analysis method used in this study is qualitative content analysis. Carl Roberts (1997, p. 14) defines content analysis as any methodological measurement process applied to a text or other symbolic materials for a specific purpose within the context of social sciences. This method aims to systematically collect and evaluate written texts to derive meaningful conclusions (Neuman, 2014, p. 466).

The main features of qualitative content analysis are as follows: The formation of a category system during the analysis process is a fundamental component, and the data is examined within contextual integrity. The method seeks to uncover implicit and indirect meanings in texts, conducted within a structured and systematic framework. Emphasis is placed on reliability and validity, and texts are viewed not as static, but as dynamic processes. When necessary, extra-textual elements may also be included in the analysis to enrich interpretation (Gökçe, 2019, p. 49-50).

6. Kurmancan Datka Movie

Film Details

Director: Sadık Şer-Niyaz

Release Year: 2014

Release Date: 2014

Duration: 130 minutes

Genre: Historical Epic Drama / Biography

Screenplay: Sadık Şer-Niyaz, Bakıtbek Turdubayev

Producer: Kyrgyz Film, Aytış Film

Cast: (Main Roles) Nazira Mambetova, Aziz Muradilov, Elina Abaykızı, Mirlan Abdulayev, and others.

6.1. Short Summary of the Film

The film *Kurmançan Datka* (2014) is a historical drama set in the early 19th century in Central Asia, portraying the story of how the Kyrgyz people's fate was shaped. The film focuses on Kurmançan's life journey, starting as a young girl, and emphasizes the personal and societal responsibilities she faces in the face of historical and cultural challenges. At the beginning of the film, it is foretold that Kurmançan, through a prophetic vision, will play a crucial role in saving her country from destruction, changing the fate of her people. This prophecy is contrasted with the lack of value placed on women during that era and the critiques surrounding Kurmançan's societal position.

Kurmançan's story begins when she is forced into marriage with a man she does not love or desire. At a young age, she meets Alimbek Datka during a scene depicting a punishment for adultery by the river. Alimbek, an important local leader known for his justice, influences Kurmançan. Over time, Kurmançan leaves her forced marriage with the help of Alimbek and marries him. However, shortly after, Alimbek is killed, and Kurmançan is left a widow with children, taking on a huge responsibility for her people's safety and independence.

After her husband's death, Kurmançan Datka decides to fight for her people's freedom. Facing the colonial policies of the Russian Empire and its strong military presence in Central Asia, she is forced to make peace with the Russians. However, the peace does not last long, and the Russians arrest her son and execute him. Kurmançan must make a choice between her son's life and the fate of her people. The film tells the dramatic story of Kurmançan Datka's personal traumas, her strong leadership qualities, and her struggle to secure the well-being of her people.

6.2. Historical and Cultural Analysis of the Film *Kurmançan Datka*

In Kyrgyz family structure, although patriarchal elements are prominent, the sharing of domestic authority between men and women is notable. In this context, the integrity of the Kyrgyz family is shaped by an egalitarian understanding of structure (Ünal, 2017, p. 126).



Photo 1: The Singer of Elegy Laments



Photo 2: Koshukcu Sees the Future of Kurmançan

As in Turkish culture, having children holds great significance in Kyrgyz society. In the film, the *koshukchi* (a traditional Kyrgyz poet and singer), who mourns the history of the Kyrgyz people, is approached by Kurmançan's parents, who express their wish to have a male child. In response, the *koshukchi* calls Kurmançan over and tells her family that she will be a figure equivalent to having ten male children. This scene reflects how highly fertility is regarded in Kyrgyz culture from a societal perspective. Indeed, in Kyrgyz society, women who cannot have children are considered to face a significant shortcoming and can be ostracized by the community. It is even known that such women are often not allowed to participate in important social rituals such as the "beşik toyu" (baby cradle ceremony) or weddings (Çeltikçi and Kayhan, 2016, p. 64).



Photo 3: Kissing Hands in Turkish Culture

In Islam, the act of kissing is associated with various rituals. It can involve actions such as kissing the hand, feet, forehead, eyes, the holy book, or the Kaaba, among other things (Soylu, 2017, p. 60-271). In Turkish culture, “kissing the hand” is a traditional gesture performed by younger individuals to show respect and affection to their elders. The act involves kissing the elder’s hand and then bringing the hand to one’s forehead (Selçuk, 2005, p. 6). The hand-kissing scene in the film *Kurmancan Datka* carries a dual significance, reflecting both societal respect and religious elements. In the film, the act of kissing *koshukchi*’s hand can be interpreted as a reflection of deep respect for elders in Kyrgyz culture. Furthermore, in Islam, the act of kissing holds significant meaning as both a recognition of respect and religious authority. Since the *koshukchi* is portrayed as a prominent figure of authority in the religious and cultural life of the people, kissing their hand symbolizes both adherence to social norms and devotion to religious authority.

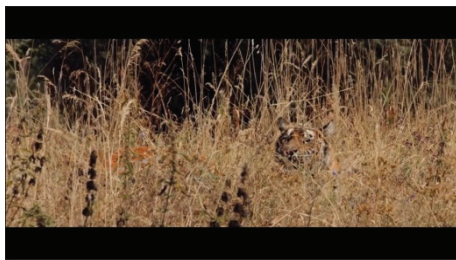


Photo 4: Tiger Figure



Photo 5: Tiger Gets Stronger

The tiger has been used as a symbol of power and bravery in Central and Inner Asia (Çoruhlu, 2002, p. 137-138). In the film *Kurmancan Datka*, the tiger figure holds significant symbolic meaning. The tiger not only represents physical strength and courage but also embodies values such as leadership and heroism. *Kurmancan*’s combative and resilient identity is linked to the tiger figure, emphasizing her strength and determination on the path of heroism. This cinematic representation of the tiger serves as a tool in the film to symbolize the inner strength of the characters and their societal struggles.



Photo 6: Punishment of a Woman Accused of Adultery



Photo 7: Russian Soldier Cuts Woman's Hair

Hair, particularly long hair, has been considered one of the most important indicators of femininity within the framework of patriarchal societal norms. The cutting of a woman's hair without her consent is seen as a sign of depriving her of her right to subjectivity, reducing her to an object under conditions typically granted only to men (Kayalı, 2013, p. 21).

In the film, the cutting of the woman's hair, accused of adultery, is presented as a punishment in accordance with Sharia law. In Central Asian societies and within Islamic culture, adultery is considered a serious crime, and the methods of punishment vary according to the society and the era. Here, the cutting of the hair functions as a ritual of humiliation and social exclusion; the notion of the woman's honor being damaged is physically symbolized by the cutting of her hair. Society views this punishment as an appropriate application based on the traditional and religious rules of the time.

On the other hand, when the Russian soldier cuts the woman's hair, it is done as both a physical and psychological insult. This act presents the cutting of the hair as an act of degradation, a display of power, and an attack on the woman's will. However, this is not accepted by society and is seen as an offense. To protect the woman's honor, a decision is made to kill the soldier. In this scene, the hair-cutting act is viewed by society as a grave offense, and it is decided that the perpetrator will be punished.



Photo 8: Punishment of Women by Stoning

According to Sharia law, the punishment of stoning (recm) refers to the execution by stoning imposed on married men and women who commit adultery. While this punishment is not explicitly stated in the Qur'an, it is legitimized based on certain hadiths and the practices of the four caliphs (Esen, 2013, p. 443). In the film *Kurmançan Datka*, the cutting of the hair of the woman accused of adultery, followed by her being sentenced to stoning, illustrates how societal moral norms are linked with bodily politics. This scene not only refers to the application of stoning in Islamic law but also includes the hair-cutting ritual, which symbolizes the woman's loss of dignity. The community's participation in the punishment process reveals that such practices are not just legal mechanisms but also serve as collective moral regulatory systems.



Photo 9: Invalidation of a Woman's Testimony

In Islamic law, there is a distinction between the testimony of men and women; in certain cases, the testimony of women is not considered valid, and in other situations, the testimony of two women is considered equal to that of one man (Dalgı, 2005, p. 8). This distinction can be linked to the different roles that men and women are assigned in Islamic societies. The limitation of a woman's testimony can be seen as a factor that reduces her representation in the public sphere and her influence in legal processes. In the film *Kurmancan Datka*, some scenes portray the perception that women's testimony holds less value than men's. Specifically, it emphasizes that for Kurmancan to have a say in a male-dominated society, she needs not only personal courage but also the ability to transform societal perceptions. The events in the film reveal how a woman's testimony is limited not only in legal terms but also in social and cultural dimensions.

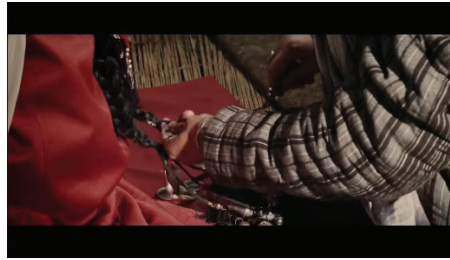


Photo 10: Hair in Kyrgyz Culture

In Kyrgyz folk culture, hair holds both aesthetic and symbolic meanings. Influenced by Shamanism and ancient Turkic beliefs, hair is considered sacred during important life transitions such as birth, marriage, and death. Women's and children's hair is associated with beauty and fertility, while the length and braiding of hair are seen as symbols of abundance and prosperity. Additionally, there are folk beliefs that hair protects against evil spirits, and cutting hair is believed to lead to negative outcomes. These cultural elements elevate hair as a protective symbol in Kyrgyz society (Bayrak İşcanoğlu, 2022, p. 296). The braiding of a woman's hair in Kyrgyz folk culture is not only an aesthetic expression but also carries social and symbolic meaning. Hair symbolizes a woman's beauty, fertility, and societal role, and its braiding highlights her marital status and commitment to her family. Braided hair also signifies protection, as it is believed to ward off evil spirits. This symbolic meaning is reinforced by the custom of attaching the key to the dowry chest to the hair. The key symbolizes a woman's personal space and her role within the family, and when combined with her hair, it represents both her physical and spiritual protection. The connection between the dowry chest key and hair signifies a woman's deep connection to the values and traditions of her community. In this context, the relationship between hair and the dowry chest symbolizes a woman's social identity, her status within the family, and the traditional responsibilities assigned to her.

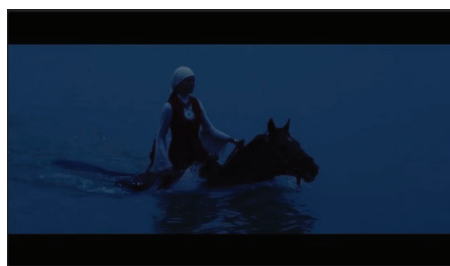


Photo 11: Kurmanjan's Escape from Kul Seyit

Kurmancan's escape from Kul Seyit symbolizes her quest for personal freedom and resistance against societal norms. Under the pressure of Kul Seyit, Kurmancan represents the independence and autonomy of women, and her flight is not just a physical escape but also a cultural and societal struggle for freedom. This act reflects her inner strength and her effort to reclaim her identity. Moreover, it can be seen as an expression of women's efforts to reshape their place in society and their demands for equality. This act can be regarded as a powerful symbol of the fight for women's independence and freedom.



Photo 12: Archery in Kyrgyz Culture

Archery has played a crucial role throughout history as a survival and combat tool for nomadic societies and warrior cultures. Over time, it evolved into a form of entertainment and sport, and the Turks adopted archery as a way of life. The bow and arrow became symbols of masculinity, bravery, and justice, acquiring a religious meaning as virtues in both pre-Islamic and Islamic cultures. Archery was further reinforced through religious rituals such as prayers, blessings, and the recitation of Bismillah in mosques, and today it remains a sport (Küçük, 2018, p. 189). In *Kurmancan Datka*, Kurmancan stands out as a strong, brave, and independent female character within traditional Kyrgyz society. From the very beginning of the film, her strength and leadership qualities emphasize her place in society and her independence. Kurmancan is not only a warrior but also a figure who challenges societal values. Despite being a woman, she fights alongside men and makes decisions as a leader, transcending gender roles. This symbolizes the strength of women in Kyrgyz culture while also questioning cultural traditions and social norms. Kurmancan becomes an important figure for both her family and society, representing the defense of social justice and freedom, as well as the power of women.



Photo 13: Use of Horses in Kyrgyz Culture

The economic, social, and political strength of the Kyrgyz people is historically rooted in their nomadic culture. Like other pastoral nomadic communities, the Kyrgyz have traditionally sustained their livelihoods through livestock and have maintained a horseback nomadic lifestyle. Although they transitioned to settled life by the early 20th century, their love and respect for horses have endured (Aytbayev, 1962, p. 27). This shows that horses still play an important role among the Kyrgyz, even for those who have adopted a settled lifestyle. In Kyrgyz culture, the horse is not only seen as a means of transportation or a weapon of war but is also considered a highly valuable and respected entity. The important place of the horse in Kyrgyz culture is evident in their oral history, such as the epic tales of *Manas*, *Semetey*, *Seytek*, as well as the stories of heroes like *Kurmanbek*, *Er Töştük*, and *Şırdakbek*. For the Kyrgyz people, the horse has become perhaps one of the most fundamental elements of their socio-cultural structure (Belek, 2015, p. 120). In *Kurmancan Datka*, Kurmancan's relationship with the horse creates both a cultural and social bond. The horse, more than just a means of transportation, becomes a symbol that provides Kurmancan with strength and freedom on her heroic journey. In Kyrgyz culture, the respect and value placed on the horse is strengthened by Kurmancan's deep connection with her horse, further solidifying her identity and heroic stance.



Photo 14: Alimbek Datka's Prayer Before Death

The assassination of Alimbek Datka is carried out in a cold-blooded manner, with the anonymous assassins wearing simple clothing and concealing their faces. The death sentence issued by the Khan of Khoqand symbolizes Datka's execution as both a political figure and a societal symbol. Approaching death with submission during prayer, Datka embodies a spiritual maturity, while being treacherously killed by the assassins. This form of execution represents not just a physical killing, but also a spiritual death. Datka's demise reflects how the ideological conflicts and power struggles of the era played out on a personal level and demonstrates their impact on social structures.



Photo 15: Giving Datka Title to Kurmancan

The title "Datka" given to Kurmancan represents the highest level of leadership during the periods of the Khokand and Bukhara Khanates. This title refers to the sole authority figure in charge of a province, serving as the religious and political leader, the problem solver in society, the judicial officer, and the military commander (İğde, 2020, p. 49). The "Datka" title given to Kurmancan highlights that she is not only a political leader but also a figure who guides and protects her community. In the film, Kurmancan Datka's leadership qualities stand out through her ability to solve both military and societal issues. Particularly in the scenes of the film, it is evident how Datka occupies a central place in the eyes of the people, both as a ruler and as a symbol of justice and peace. Her character presents itself as an authority figure who unites the community, while scenes also emphasize her struggle to ensure the safety of her people, leaving a strong impact on the audience.



Photo 16: Kurmancan Datka Signs Agreement with Russians

Kurmancan Datka's decision to negotiate with the Russians reflects the harsh conditions brought by war and her desire to protect the future of her people. The film emphasizes how a leader is forced to make difficult decisions to ensure the survival of her people. In a situation where her community faces the threat of annihilation, Kurmancan realizes that continuing the resistance would increase the risk of genocide and result in the deaths of more innocent people. This highlights that, in addition to being a soldier and warrior, she is also a leader who must consider the broader consequences of her actions.

Kurmancan's agreement with the Russians does not mean she compromises her beliefs or the values of her people. On the contrary, it is a strategic move made to protect the lives of her people. The terms of the agreement reflect her aim to preserve her people's religious, cultural, and social rights. In this way, the film portrays Kurmancan's struggle not just as a physical fight but as an effort to protect her people's cultural identity, freedom, and dignity. The film can be interpreted as showing that a hero's leadership is not limited to warfare but extends to making difficult decisions for a peaceful resolution. Kurmancan's choice reflects the complex nature of leadership, where sometimes making concessions and taking difficult paths is necessary to safeguard the future and well-being of the community.



Photo 17: Photographing Kurmanji



Photo 18: Regiment Queen Kurmancan Datka

Kurmancan's title as the "queen of the regiment" symbolizes both her status within society and how she is perceived externally. This title represents a form of both honor and objectification; while Kurmancan shapes her power and identity through her own will, she is also confined to a role defined by the system. The scene where her photographs are taken in the final moments of the film signifies the immortalization of her image and her recording as a public figure in history. The photograph functions not only as a memory object but also as an instrument of authority; while it documents Kurmancan's existence, it simultaneously reinforces the control over her image and legacy. This duality reflects the tension between personal autonomy and the larger societal or political forces that seek to define and control individual identities. Kurmancan, in this case, becomes both the subject of her own story and an object of historical representation, showing how personal agency can be constrained by public perception and institutionalized power. The photographs, then, serve as a powerful metaphor for both the preservation of her legacy and the limitations imposed upon her by the broader societal structures.

Conclusion

In the film Kurmancan Datka, it is emphasized that the social status of women in Kyrgyz society is shaped through fertility. The portrayal of Kurmancan as a figure with the equivalent of ten male children suggests that, in a patriarchal society, women could gain value through their individual capabilities. However, this also highlights that stepping outside traditional roles was an exceptional situation. The scene of kissing hands in the film reflects the practice of respect, reverence, and recognition of authority in Kyrgyz culture, symbolizing the internalization of one's cultural identity and religious values. The tiger figure represents Kurmancan's leadership and heroic values, reinforcing her fighting spirit and importance in the social context.

The hair-cutting scenes in the film carry different meanings within the context of social norms and power relations. The cutting of the woman's hair, accused of adultery, is depicted as a form of punishment within the traditional and religious rules of the time, while the same act performed by a Russian soldier is perceived by society as an insult. This shows that hair functions as a symbol of social honor and female identity. Moreover, the scene of punishment for adultery highlights disciplinary practices on women's bodies as part of social control mechanisms. The limitation of women's ability to testify is addressed as a reflection of gender roles in society, while Kurmancan's struggle underscores the potential for women to have a voice within patriarchal structures.

Hair, carrying deep symbolic meanings in Kyrgyz culture, also represents freedom and heroism, as exemplified by Kurmancan's connection with her horse. The horse is seen as a reflection of the historical nomadic culture of Kyrgyz society.

Kurmancan's title of "Datka" emphasizes her importance as a political leader who guides and protects her people. Her decision to accept an agreement with the Russians showcases her strategic leadership, symbolizing a difficult decision to ensure the safety of her people. This decision highlights that leadership requires not only courage in warfare but also foresight and bravery in peaceful resolution processes.

Finally, Kurmancan's title of "Queen of Alay" symbolizes her social status and power, but it also reflects her confinement to a specific role defined by the system. The photographic scenes in the film solidify her position as a public figure, while also symbolizing the external observation and control of her personal strength and identity. This situation emphasizes the tension between being remembered and being shaped by external forces.

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