

Armenian Culture from the Semiotic Perspective

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Abstract

The present paper goes along the lines of Semiotics, a branch of linguistics. It studies the system of signs which takes the form of words, images, sounds, gestures and objects. Through the usage of signs we represent the linguocultural aspect of our knowledge, ethnic traditions and folklore.

The interest we take in the paper is the study of signs and symbols in Armenian culture. Culture, including miniature painting, singing, dancing, architecture and cuisine, may involve any sphere of Armenian identity. Signs and symbols that constitute language and culture are constructed through verbal and non-verbal interactions and are arbitrary.

The purpose of our analysis is to specify *what why, whom* questions in a specific context of situation, as well as in a large context of culture, such as social community, media and communication.

Key words: semiotics, culture, communication through signs, cultural identity, science of signs, cuisine, visual signs.

Introduction

Semiotics is the study of signs and sign using behavior. It was defined by Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure as the study of “the life of signs within society”. It is an academic field dedicated to the study of signs. A sign (for example, the word *ship*) may be recognized by the presence of its constituent parts, which in semiotic theories is based on the signifier (the container, or the sign's perceptible form: the letters *s-h-i-p*) and the signified (the meaning or content; the notion conveyed by the signifier: *a vessel of considerable size for deepwater navigation*). With these concepts, general semiotics allows us to describe any system of signs: texts, images, performances, multimedia productions, traffic signals, fashion, daily life, etc. There are specific semiotic systems (for text, images, multimedia) that take into account the specifics of each system of signs (Elements of Semiotics 2016).

It is important to note that Saussure treated a linguistic unit as a “double entity” meaning that is composed of two parts. He viewed the linguistic unit as a combination of:

- a concept or meaning
- a sound image

It is important to note that Saussure did not refer to spoken or written words, but to the mental impressions made on our senses by a certain “thing“. As Saussure states, the connection between two “signifiers” which are “sound images” or “linguistic signs” and what they are signifying – their signified object or concept – is arbitrary (Saussure 1959).

Although the term semiotics was first introduced in the 17th century by the English philosopher John Locke as an interdisciplinary mode for examining phenomena in different fields, semiotics emerged as a science only in the late 19th and early 20th centuries with works of American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (Locke 1997).

Ch. Peirce made a huge contribution in the study of semiotics by categorizing three main types of signs:

- an icon, which resembles its referent (such as a road sign for falling rocks)
- an index, which is associated with its referent (as smoke is a sign of fire)
- a symbol, which is related to its referent only by convention (as with words or traffic signals) (Pierce 1931).

In the present article we have focused particularly on the on the issues relevant to visual communication.

Visual communication has various types of codes that help determine *the meaning of the* message. For example, the visuals used in graphic design, photography, video and film contain discrete sign *elements* (shots, typography, drawings, etc.) which are variously called *semes or signemes*. The phenomenon of system of signs is manifold and embraces different approaches. For example, the American semiotician Charles Morris studied signs and meanings in human action and defined them in three ways:

- The perception stage – the person becomes aware of a sign
- The manipulation stage – the person interprets the sign and decides how to respond to it
- The consummation stage – the person responds (Morris 1970)

It should be added that the notion of sign and symbol are in close interaction as we consider that, depending on certain cultural environmental circumstances, they may

modify each other somehow. According to Langer theory, symbols are “vehicles for the conception of objects, instruments of thought, allowing a person to think about something apart from its immediate presence. Langer focuses on certain symbolic usages-discursive and non-discursive. Accordingly, he differentiates between language-based thought and meaning, and nonverbal-based emotion and meaning like art, music and dance. Meanings can be found in both non-discursive and discursive symbolism (Langer 1993). In our paper we follow Langer’s theory on the notion of symbol and sign and focus on visual signs that depict Armenian reality and culture.

Armenian National Identity through Signs

Since the scope of culture is wide, in our paper we have focused on some aspects of it, namely Armenian cuisine, music, dances and visual signs.

It is worth starting with the interpretation of the flower **forget-me-not** which has become a symbol of commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the Genocide. It has become an inseparable sign in Armenian reality. The symbolic use of this flower is not accidental. The concept of **forget-me-not** comprises a conscious wave of demand to the whole world and a voiced challenge to all the nations of the world to stop aggression, intolerance and hatred. It is a unique message to create true and undying love toward life itself, which is a sign of remembrance, memory and grief. Hence forget-me-not has become a recognized visual sign for the nation who witnessed the grief of the Genocide.

Another visual sign which reflects Armenian reality is **Khachkar**. It is a stone with engraved cross which has a long history and has been a part of Armenian cultural and historical heritage. Khachkars have always been silent witnesses of the pain and signs of commemoration that Armenian people have experienced. Another interesting example of visual sign is **Armenian apricot** which has a specific smell, flavor and color. It has always been a visiting card of Armenia grown on Ararat Valley. Armenian Apricot bears the flavour of the land and people living there. Probably the golden yellow of this charming fruit was a muse for the prominent Armenian painter Martiros Saryan whose paintings became recognizable through three primary colors - apricot yellow, red and blue. Thus the Armenian landscape appears to the world in its specific colors. These particular colors have become culturally loaded markers for the Armenian national flag. The latter has a special message - three equal horizontal lines of apricot yellow, red and blue. The color red recalls the blood shed for liberty. It is also associated with the well-known cochineal

which is a scale insect indigenous to the Ararat plain and Araks River valley in the Armenian Highlands. It was formerly used to produce an eponymous crimson carmine dyestuff known in Armenia as *vordan karmir*. The color is used to dye national carpets which have always been appreciated. Blue is associated with peaceful sky and hope. Apricot yellow (in Armenian it sounds like apricot color [tsiranaguyn]) symbolizes the land, courage and patience of the Armenian people.

Another visual sign which requires a careful study is the famous monument **Grandmother and Grandfather** in Artsakh. High on the mountains the monument not only fascinates people with its stunning beauty, but also bears a special message. Throughout years and decades the monument has been a silent witness of all the misfortunes that people have survived in Artsakh. It is here to protect the nation from every coming evil.

It is common knowledge that music is also a form of communication. It fundamentally expresses the emotional state of the composer whose task is to impact on his listeners emotionally, by means of melodic notes. The famous musical composition named “**Artsakh**” by Ara Gevorgyan is a reflection of long-awaited silence which breaks through the eternal struggle against violence. The leading musical instruments of the composition are the Armenian *dhol and duduk*, which is a challenge for the Armenian people to live and create.

The elements of cuisine also have become visual signs which have always been associated with the land of Armenia. **Harissa**, a traditional meal made from wheat and lamb, is cooked over low heat and presupposes a long-lasting procedure. Etymologically the word harissa is formed from the Armenian word (harel - shake up, beat up). It is prepared in a big pot over which the whole family gets together. As the preparation of this dish is a time-taking procedure, it evokes sense of patience and strength in Armenian mothers. The meal is served with a spoonful of homemade butter, which symbolizes the hard work and care that Armenian women feel towards their families. That is *the mother* who can make every possible tasty meal for her family to smell and sound “homemade”.

Zhingyalov hats is one of the most tasted and recognized elements associated with Artsakh. Greens growing in this area make this dish desirable for anyone who has an opportunity to enjoy it. It characterizes the land where it is made, as these particular greens are typical of the territory of Artsakh. The pie enchants people with its taste and is a multi-layer element of tradition, culture and history.

Dolma is an eastern dish, which is highly appreciated in Armenia and is widely cooked and served here. This spicy dish is usually made by the senior of

the family, namely grandmother, on special occasions. Recently in Armenian reality the two words **dolma** and **mama** appeared in blending as **Dolmama**, for it presupposes a close connection between Armenian mother, family and hospitality.

Armenian folk dances have a long tradition of musical art dating back to prehistoric times. They have functioned as cultural elements and visual signs in Armenian reality. **Berd** (Fortress) is an Armenian dance the roots of which go back to Vaspurakan city. The dance is associated with an old Armenian game “Gmbetakhagh”. The dancers wear Armenian national costume “taraz”, which is a sign to show how devoted the Armenian people have been to their roots. The essence of the dance is to form a fortress by standing on each other's shoulders. This picture of dance style proves the unbending and stern character of the Armenian people (namely men) who are ready to unite and serve as a stronghold to each other – standing firm on the ground and confronting any possible hinder. **Yarkhushta** is another Armenian folk and martial dance associated with the highlands of the historical region of Sassoun in Western Armenia. The dance belongs to the category of Armenian “clap dances” performed by men, who face each other in pairs. The key element of the dance is a forward movement when participants rapidly approach one another and vigorously clap onto the palms of hands of dancers in the opposite row. This dance shows the tactical strength of the Armenian men, who have always been as firm as rocks of Western and Eastern Armenia. Similar symbolic picture comprises the “**Sabre Dance**” which is the final act of Aram Khachaturian’s ballet *Gayane* (1942), where the dancers display their skill with sabres thus showing great will and potential to struggle for freedom.

Conclusion

Armenian reality is loaded with visual signs many of which make up part of its culture. Every nation creates its portrait: traditions, customs, religion as well as visual signs in communication. They struggle to create and keep their identity to survive in this multi-national world. The diversity they present makes up the world itself. Being one of the oldest nations, Armenians have always been devoted to their roots, origin and national identity. They are part of Caucasian reality with their traditional cuisine, dances, music, in one word – culture and history, which presupposes the Armenian stereotype.

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Հայկական մշակույթը նշանագիտության դիտանկյունից

Սույն հոդվածում նշանաբանության տեսանկյունից դիտարկվում են հայկական մշակույթի անբաժանելի մասեր կազմող խորհրդանիշներ, քննարկվում է դրանց դերն ու նշանակությունը հայի ինքնության ձևավորման գործում: Որպես փաստական նյութ ընտրված են հայկական խոհանոցին բնորոշ ուտեստներ, հայ իրականության մեջ կարևորություն ներկայացնող խորհրդանիշներ, հայկական պարի ն բնորոշ առանձնահատկություններ: Հոդվածում փորձ է արվում մեկնաբանել վերը նշվածը՝ շեշտադրելով նրանց արժեքայնությունն ու կապը արտաքին աշխարհի հետ: