The magical symbolism of the comb in the primitive and medieval culture of Azerbaijanis

The comb, as a symbol of religious and magical ideas, has been present in the culture and art of the Turkic peoples since the Neolithic era. Archaeological materials testify that the symbolic function of the comb was formed and used long before the appearance of the household comb itself. A petroglyph depicting a motif resembling a comb was found in a complex of primitive rock paintings near the settlement of Qobustan (Azerbaijan) and dates back to the Middle Stone Age (Mesolithic).

The comb symbol, which originally arose in the agricultural and pastoral environment, was associated with the idea of fertility and was a sign of the emanation of the sun's rays from the luminary, rain streams falling from the sky, the growth of sprouts from the earth, etc. Later, this symbol also acquires the function of a talisman, again interconnected with the symbolism of fertility and vitality (1).

Neolithic bone combs already combine both magical and utilitarian functions. A household item that visualizes an invisible magical emanation of life force also acquires a magical context. The approval of the image of the comb as a symbol with magical power is linked to the most important idea for the Neolithic farmers of the magic of growing crops. The growth of the crop, on which life depended, was the most important and desired event of the farmers, and therefore, the vast majority of the magical rituals and symbols of the farmers were associated with the idea of the germination of the sown grain.

The magical perception of the symbolism of the comb is extrapolated to the bone comb itself, which was a simple utilitarian household item. In the everyday life of a Neolithic man, the comb turned into a utilitarian item with magical powers. It was noticed that with regular combing of hair, this item had a beneficial effect on the growth of human hair, pets. It can be assumed that the growth of hair observed by Neolithic man was the simplest and most obvious confirmation of the effect of comb magic. Hair grew very quickly and this growth was correlated in the mind of a person with the idea of growth, strengthening life force exactly as it happened with a growing crop.

In the context of this idea, hair began to be perceived as mediators of vitality. The comb, which turned into a magical mediator of vital energy, symbolically reunited with the personal mediator of vital energy (hair). In magical terms, the contact of the comb with the hair symbolized the sacred act of transferring vital energy from the comb to the hair and further to the whole person or pet.
The symbolic "reunion" and "interaction" of the two magical mediators of the life force, sooner or later had to go beyond the sacred rituals. The practice of the ritual in which the ritual magical contact of the comb and hair took place was also transferred to the profane part of life, in which the magical comb turned into a simple, utilitarian hair comb (4).

At the beginning of my speech, I already said that the visualization of the comb symbol in the form of outgoing direct rays from a common source corresponded to the requirements of imitative magic, according to which - "likeness - creates likeness". But in order for the idea embodied in the image of the comb to be perceived as a source of real sacredness, the prototype of the sign, that is, the comb itself, had to have magical powers. And that magic power was the comb's electromagnetism effect.

It is well known that prolonged use of the comb when combing hair leads to the accumulation of static electricity on the teeth of the comb. The resulting static electricity has the property of magnetism and the comb turns into a magnet that attracts hair, fluff, wool, and so on. Now we already know the nature of this magnetism, but for ancient people it was a demonstration of the magical power of the comb. Thus, in the view of primitive man, both the object itself and its symbol had the same magical properties.

In this context, it is of interest to search for possible prototypes of the crest in nature:
1. It must be admitted that the human hand with splayed fingers was the very first, natural comb that a person who wanted to comb his hair began to use. The obvious functionality of the comb hand could serve as the basis for creating a magical copy of the hand in the form of a comb.
2. The sun with rays rising from it and the image of rain streams pouring from the sky can undoubtedly be the primary visual prototypes for the comb symbol and its subsequent material embodiment in a utilitarian object. It must be admitted that the visualization of the idea of the emanation of the rays of the sun and falling streams of rain into a magical sign and the subsequent materialization of this sign in the form of a comb is a rather complicated process of transforming the idea into a symbol and a utilitarian object. Nevertheless, if we take into account that it was in the Neolithic era that symbolic and ornamental signs of abstract ideas on ceramics first spread, then there is no reason to unambiguously deny this opinion.
3. A person's awareness of his inextricable connection with the surrounding nature, flora and fauna, could predetermine the emergence of the comb symbol and household items by simply imitating natural objects (jagged mountain peaks) or plant and animal forms. In this sense, both birds and animals, as well as mollusk shells and plants, could serve as prototypes. Among birds, rooster and hoopoe have combs on their heads.
In the folklore of the Azerbaijani Turks there is an old legend about the miraculous transformation of a young daughter-in-law combing her hair into a hoopoe. According to legend, a young daughter-in-law, who recently came to her husband's family, somehow decided to swim while no one was at home. At this time, unexpectedly, ahead of time, the father-in-law of the daughter-in-law returned home. To avoid shame for her naked appearance, the daughter-in-law, who was combing her hair at that time, prayed to God to turn her into a bird. God heard her prayer and at the same hour turned her into a hoopoe. The comb with which the bride combed her hair turned into a luxurious comb of feathers on the hoopoe's head.

The rooster has always been perceived as a harbinger and messenger of the sun. Red comb on his head was taken as a sign of his fiery and solar nature, associated with the idea of the fertility of heat and light.

And finally, the tips of the wings of the eagle, which in ancient cultures has always symbolized the sun, are very similar to the comb. Symbolizing the power of the sun, the eagle has always been a cult bird of the Turkic peoples. The comb, similar to the ends of the wings of an eagle, in ancient times could magically symbolize the vital force characteristic of the sun and its messenger - the eagle.

4. Among animals, the deer has comb-shaped antlers. Even among the ancient Turks, the deer was considered a zoomorphic embodiment of the sun. The famous "deer stones" (grave steles) and "golden deer" of the Scythians and Huns clearly classify the deer as a solar animal. The golden-red color of the deer skin complements the sunny semantics of the animal. The idea of the "magical power" contained in the crest probably comes from the hunting experience of ancient people who came into contact with predatory animals. The clawed paw of a predatory animal has always been perceived by them as a carrier of strength and protection of the animal. Finally, the predator's clawed paw, in the form of a crest, is a convincing argument in favor of accepting the power contained in the comb.

It is quite possible that man expressed his awareness of his superiority over other animals with a simple sign of a comb that imitated a human hand. The idea of potential strength and an important means of protection embodied in the human hand was reflected in the Paleolithic petroglyphs depicting human hands on the walls of primitive caves. These images were certainly the product of the magical actions of primitive people.

The fact that these prints and contour images of hands are not meaningless traces of random human curiosity is evidenced by the fact of the deliberate orientation of the images in relation to the spatial coordinates of the axis. Absolutely all hands are depicted in a position with fingers pointing up. In reality, this is the position of the hand, ready to protect a person in case of danger.

Bronze and copper amulets in the form of comb-shaped pendants were widespread in the Bronze and Iron Ages. The sharp teeth of the magical protective
comb were supposed to prick evil spirits who were trying to harm a person. And the narrow gaps between the teeth of the comb served as a magical filter through which an evil spirit could not pass.

The magical symbolism of the crest is preserved in subsequent historical eras. It is appropriate to recall that even in Muslim symbolism, the magical protective comb continues to exist as an amulet in the form of a human hand "Khamsa" (five). The Muslim "Khamsa" did not exactly repeat the shape of the human hand. It was rather a magical symbol than an image of an ordinary, human hand. At the same time, numerous amulets of the Muslim “Khamsa” have been preserved, which can equally well be considered an image of a comb and an image of a hand.

With the spread of Islam, many talismans, which for thousands of years performed their functions as a talisman, began to acquire new forms, new semantics and new contexts. Based on Islamic doctrine, Muslim amulets had to have Islamic, not pagan, ancestry and have an Islamic narrative. A similar "reconstruction" of the form and correction of semantics was also undergone by the ancient symbol in the form of a comb. The main reason for the restyling was that it too clearly imitates the human hand. Worship of a part of a person is tantamount to worship of the whole person, and this is already contrary to the idea of monotheism.

The ancient pagan symbolism of the comb also changes and, according to the new Islamic doctrine, is declared a symbol of the equality of all people before Allah. The identical and equal teeth of the comb were perfect for such a narrative of this ancient symbol.

The postulate of the equality of all people before Allah and the comparison of this equality with a crest is found in the Muslim Hadith from the Hanafi imam Sheikh Abu Bakr as Sarkhazi, who said: “Prophet Muhammad said: “There is no difference between an Arab and a non-Arab, between white and black, and all people are equal to each other like the teeth of a comb.”

But, no matter how Islam tries to “reformat” the ancient symbol, its ancient symbolism associated with talismanic magic has been preserved in folklore and folk rituals. Islam's struggle with this popular superstition is also reflected in the "Hadith" that describe the events that happened to the Prophet Muhammad. Reactions of the prophet to various life events are legitimizied as a standard for every Muslim who finds himself in a similar situation.

Qur'an and Hadith’s testify that Islamic doctrine postulates a negative attitude of Muslims towards primitive magic and sorcery. Islam hints at the existence of ancient magic associated with the crest, however, gives it a negative assessment.

The story of magical transmission of corruption through the comb is recorded in one of the righteous (sahih) Hadith from Al-Bukhari, which is also repeated by Imam Muslim ibn Al Hagag. Aisha said: “Once a man from the tribe of Banu Zureyk named
Lubayd ibn al-A’sam brought damage to the Messenger of Allah, and the Messenger of Allah began to think that he was doing something that he had never actually done.

Once, when he was near me, he began to diligently pray to Allah, and then said: “Oh Aisha! Did you feel that Allah gave me the knowledge that I asked from Him? Two men came to me, one of them sat at my head and the other at my feet. Then one of them asked the other, "Why is this man suffering?" He replied: "He is bewitched." The second asked: "Who bewitched him?" He replied: "Lubead ibn al-A’sam." The second asked: "Where is witchcraft?" He replied: "In the comb with hairs and a dried palm petal" The second asked: "Where are they?" He replied: "In the well of Zrvan."

The Messenger of Allah with several companions went to the well, and when he returned, he said: “O Aisha, its water was like an infusion of henna, and the crown of the palm tree was like the heads of devils”.

I said: “O Messenger of Allah, will you not expel the witcher Lubaid ibn al-A’sam”? The prophet said: “Allah has already given me well-being, and I do not like to turn it into evil for people”. Then he ordered to bury the comb with hairs (5).

For example, in the tradition and rituals of Azerbaijani women, until recently, the symbol of the “comb” was linked with the idea of marriage and the birth of children’s (comb teeth). Thus, the image of a comb on traditional carpets was woven by girls who wanted to get married and have children (7.72-83).

Numerous images of the comb symbol can be seen on prayer and wedding carpets woven in Azerbaijan. In carpets and embroideries, two outwardly similar symbols are often combined and interchanged: a crest and a triangular amulet - Hamail (tumar, muska, nazarlik).

The crest as a protective symbol is also depicted on numerous medieval tombstones in Azerbaijan. Despite the Muslim context of these grave monuments, the image of the comb still performs on them the magical function of protecting the grave and the deceased from evil.

The sign of the comb is found on the ancestral brands (tamqa) of many Turkic peoples. A similar tamqa called "Tarakh-tamqa" (tamqa-comb) was on the flag of the Crimean Khanate, which is reanimated today by the Crimean Tatars.

Among the Siberian Tatars, the female symbolism of the comb was preserved in the form and name of female grave structures. In contrast to male grave pillars, symbolizing a combat spear (sungi) or an arrow (ok), female grave monuments were called "tarakh" (comb) (6. 260-264).

Numerous artifacts confirming the recognition of the magical power of the comb are in the arsenal of Azerbaijani culture and the symbolism of traditional arts. The chronology of these artifacts covers the primitive, ancient and medieval periods of the history of the people, which once again confirms the vitality of the ancient magical beliefs associated with the comb.
References

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Illustrations
Petroglyph. Gobustan (Azerbaijan) 8-7 thousand BC.
Pict. 6.7 Bronze comb-shaped pendants. 3-2 thousand BC. (Azerbaijan)
Bronze pendant in the form of a comb. Gadabay region Azerbaijan. 2 thousand BC

Bronze pendants in the form of a comb. Mingachevir (Azerbaijan). 2 thousand BC
Bronze pendant in the form of a comb. Khinalyg (Azerbaijan) Middle 1 thousand BC

Bronze pendants in the form of a comb. Minqachevir (Azerbaijan) Middle 2 thousand BC

Bone comb with swastika. Altay Turks. 3rd-6th centuries
Comb on the head of a rooster

Comb on the head of a hoopoe
Comb on the wings of an eagle

Deer antler comb
Comb in the paws of a bear

Handprints on cave walls
Khamsa (amulet) and Khamsa on a prayer carpet

Comb, tree. 19th century Azerbaijan
Comb, 19th century. Azerbaijan

Tombstone with a picture of a two-sided comb. 19th century Azerbaijan
Tombstone with a picture of a two-sided comb. Azerbaijan 19th century
Prayer carpet depicting a comb, late 19th century. Shirvan, Azerbaijan
Prayer carpet with multiple images of comb. Quba, Azerbaijan, 19th century
Tamqa in the form of a comb "Tarakh-Tamaqa" on the flag of Tatarstan

Comb is the mother goddess. Altay. 3rd-5th centuries