

CULTURAL IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY FASHION: RETHINKING NATIONAL MOTIFS IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT

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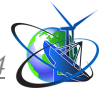
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Abstract. *The aim of this article is to comprehensively examine the mechanisms of transformation and adaptation of national elements in contemporary fashion design, taking into account the influence of global aesthetic and commercial processes. The methodological basis of the study is a combination of cultural, semiotic, and comparative-analytical approaches, which made it possible to trace the historical and cultural origins of embroidery, ornament and silhouette, as well as analyze changes in their semantic content in the context of the global fashion market. The work employs methods of theoretical generalization, interpretation of visual forms, and critical analysis of scientific sources and contemporary design practices. The study found that national elements in contemporary fashion function as open systems of meaning, capable of redefinition without completely losing their cultural origins. The main directions of semantic shifts associated with the change in the functions of traditional elements and their transition from local identification markers to universal signs of authenticity and cultural value were identified. It has been proven that the adaptation of ethnic symbols in international collections is based on a balance between recognizability and universality, which ensures their communicative effectiveness in an intercultural environment. The practical significance of the results obtained lies in the possibility of using the formulated theoretical conclusions in the professional activities of designers and brand managers when developing collections with the use of national motifs. The results of the study can be used to form responsible design strategies focused on the ethical integration of cultural heritage into the global fashion market. The proposed approaches to the analysis of semantic transformations can serve as a tool for assessing the risks of simplification or desemantization of traditional elements. The materials of the article are useful for educational programs in clothing design, cultural studies, and fashion studies. In addition, the results obtained provide an analytical basis for further empirical research on the perception of national motifs in the international fashion environment.*

Key words: *semantic content, design practices, authenticity, communicative effectiveness, intercultural environment.*

Introduction

In the 21st century, fashion operates in conditions of intense globalization, where design practices are increasingly shaped by transnational markets, digital platforms, and unified aesthetic standards. Under these circumstances, cultural identity ceases to be merely a local characteristic and becomes a complex dynamic construct that is constantly reinterpreted in the interaction between the global and the national [1]. Contemporary designers actively draw on national motifs – traditional embroidery, ornamental systems, historically conditioned silhouettes – integrating them into current



fashion collections. However, such integration often occurs in a fragmentary, superficial manner or with a reduction of the original meanings, which creates the risk of stylization without deep cultural content and commercialization of cultural heritage [2].

The relevance of the study is determined by the lack of a systematic scientific understanding of the mechanisms of transformation of national elements in contemporary fashion design, specifically in the context of global cultural processes. Scientific publications are dominated either by art descriptions of individual collections or by sociocultural studies of identity without sufficient attention to specific design tools – ornament, cut, composition, materials [3]. At the same time, the question of how the semantics of traditional elements change when they are adapted to the global market, what semantic losses or, conversely, new meanings arise in the process of such reinterpretation, as well as where the line between creative interpretation and cultural appropriation lies [4].

Contemporary fashion research increasingly goes beyond aesthetic analysis and considers fashion as a sociocultural and economic phenomenon. In a fundamental review of the state and prospects of sustainable fashion development, A. Mukendi et al. [1] concluded that the research focus in this area is gradually shifting from environmental aspects to a broader understanding of fashion as a system that combines production ethics, cultural meanings, and consumer practices.

The psychological dimension of the interrelationship between culture and identity is fundamentally outlined in the works of Y. Kashima [2], who substantiated the thesis about the dynamic nature of the “self” in a cultural context. The author established that culture not only sets the framework for individual identification, but also constantly transforms under the influence of social practices, in particular consumer practices.

The empirical dimension of fashion as a space for identity change is presented in a study by H. Argun et al. [3], devoted to the transformation of consumer practices of Generation Z in Turkey in conditions of financial constraints. The authors found that young consumers are increasingly abandoning conspicuous consumption in favor of more restrained and functional models of behavior.



The link between fashion, identity, and sustainable development is revealed in a study by A. Gjoni [4], which concludes that fashion can be an effective channel for transmitting cultural and social values within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals. The author showed that aesthetic forms of clothing shape perceptions of social responsibility and cultural belonging.

The theoretical foundations for understanding identity in the context of globalization were laid in the works of S. Hall [5], who proved that modern cultural and ethnic identities are not static, but are formed through a constant rethinking of historical experience. His conclusions about the multiplicity of identities and the loss of fixed meanings of cultural symbols are of fundamental importance for the analysis of fashion as a space of representation.

The sociological approach to fashion as an autonomous cultural field is presented in the works of A. Rocamora [6], who, based on the ideas of P. Bourdieu, showed that fashion is a space of symbolic production. Rocamora [6], who, based on the ideas of P. Bourdieu, showed that fashion is a space for the production of symbolic capital and social differentiation. The author has established that cultural codes integrated into fashion products acquire new value in the market environment. Despite the existence of fundamental theoretical approaches to culture, identity, and sustainable development, the issue of the semantic transformation of national elements in contemporary fashion design remains insufficiently researched.

The aim of this article is to identify and analyze the mechanisms of adaptation of national artistic elements in contemporary fashion design practices.

Results

In contemporary humanitarian and sociocultural research, cultural identity is increasingly less likely to be viewed as a stable and unchanging characteristic of a community. The dominant approach is that identity is formed as a dynamic process that is constantly reproduced in the context of social, political, and cultural transformations. In this context, the conceptual contribution of Stuart Hall is key, who emphasized that cultural identity is not a “given” rooted only in the past, but rather the result of continuous formation, representation, and rethinking [1]. This position allows

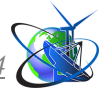


us to consider fashion not as a secondary aesthetic phenomenon, but as an active space for the construction of identity, within which national motifs take on new forms and meanings.

An important theoretical direction is the understanding of fashion as a system of symbolic communication. Clothing, ornamental elements, and silhouettes function as signs that convey complex cultural codes related to history, ethnic origin, and social status. In this sense, the sociological perspective proposed by Pierre Bourdieu, in particular his concept of symbolic capital [2], is productive. Applying this approach to the analysis of fashion makes it possible to explain why, in the context of the global market, national motifs can be transformed from elements of traditional culture into markers of prestige, exclusivity, or authenticity. In contemporary design, such elements often go beyond the local context, acquiring new value in the eyes of an international audience.

At the same time, a postcolonial approach is actively developing in scientific discourse, within which cultural identity is analyzed through the prism of unequal relations between different cultural spaces [3]. Applying this approach to fashion allows us to critically reflect on the processes of borrowing and reinterpreting national motifs, especially when they are integrated into global design practices without due consideration of their cultural origins. In this context, fashion emerges not only as a sphere of creative dialogue between cultures, but also as a potential field of symbolic asymmetry, where traditional elements may undergo simplification or loss of their original semantics [4].

At the same time, the concept of glocalization is gaining increasing attention, allowing us to overcome the binary opposition between the global and the national. Within this approach, cultural identity in fashion is seen as the result of the interaction between local traditions and global aesthetic trends [5]. National motifs do not oppose globalization, but are transformed in accordance with its logic, while retaining certain semantic markers of origin. This theoretical framework is particularly productive for analyzing contemporary design, where traditional ornaments, embroidery, or silhouettes are adapted to universal formats of mass or luxury production [6].



In the structure of traditional clothing, national elements never served an exclusively decorative function. They were formed as complex cultural markers that combined aesthetic, social, and symbolic meanings. That is why the use of embroidery, ornamentation, and silhouette in contemporary fashion design cannot be adequately understood without analyzing their historical and cultural origins, which determined the original functions and meanings of these elements (Table 1).

Table 1 – Historical and cultural characteristics of national elements in traditional clothing and their semantic potential for contemporary design

Historical and cultural origins	Primary functions in traditional culture	Symbolic and semantic meaning	Potential for use in contemporary fashion design
Embroidery			
Formed within the framework of local craft traditions; passed down from generation to generation as an element of intangible cultural heritage	Identification (region, community), ritual, social status	Consolidation of collective memory, symbolization of worldview ideas, marker of authenticity	Used as a visual sign of cultural depth; may preserve or reduce the original semantics depending on the designer's interpretation
Ornament			
Emerged as an orderly visual system associated with mythological models and natural cycles	Communicative, protective, sacred	Encoding ideas about cyclical order, harmony in the world	Serves as a universal language of stylization; adapts to global aesthetic formats with partial preservation of cultural codes
Silhouette			
Shaped by climatic conditions, lifestyle, and social norms	Practical, socio-normative, regulatory	Reflection of collective ideas about physicality, modesty, status	Used as a form of cultural quotation; provides a link between traditional form and modern design solutions

Source: compiled by the author based on [7; 8]

Embroidery in traditional cultures appears as one of the most saturated forms of visual symbolism. It originated within craft practices and was passed down as an element of intangible heritage, embedded in local communities [9]. Ornamental motifs, techniques, and color schemes were formed over a long period of time and were closely



linked to ritual beliefs, calendar cycles, and the social structure of society. In many cultures, embroidery served as a kind of “text” that was read within the community and contained information about the origin, status, or stage of life of the wearer [10]. It is this multi-level semantics that makes it particularly attractive for contemporary design, where embroidery is often used as a universal sign of authenticity, even if its original meaning has been partially lost.

Ornamentation, unlike individualized embroidery, functioned as a more universal visual language of culture [11]. Its structure was based on repetitive rhythms, symmetries, and compositional patterns that reflected worldview ideas about order, cyclicity, and harmony. Geometric, plant, or zoomorphic motifs were not random: they were fixed in the collective memory as stable images that referred to mythological narratives, the natural environment, or sacred meanings [12]. Historically, ornamentation served as a recognizable cultural code, capable of preserving identity even in the event of migration or social transformation. In contemporary fashion design, ornamentation often undergoes stylistic reduction, but its origins as an orderly sign system continue to influence the perception of such elements as carriers of cultural depth.

No less important, but often underestimated, is the silhouette of traditional clothing. Its formation was directly linked to the material conditions of communities, climatic characteristics, way of life, and ideas about physicality [13]. Loose or fitted shapes, multi-layered or laconic cuts reflected not only practical needs, but also social norms and symbolic ideas about the acceptable limits of displaying the body. The silhouette became a visual embodiment of collective experience, reinforcing certain patterns of behavior and identification [14]. That is why its use in contemporary design is often associated with an appeal to the “traditional form” as a bearer of cultural stability in the context of rapidly changing fashion trends.

Together, embroidery, ornamentation, and silhouette form a coherent system of national elements, within which each component has its own history, function, and semantic meaning [11]. Their historical and cultural origins determine not only their visual characteristics but also their potential for further interpretation. Awareness of



this origin is a necessary prerequisite for the analysis of contemporary design practices, as it allows us to distinguish between a meaningful reinterpretation of tradition and superficial stylization [13]. It is on this basis that it becomes possible to further explore how national elements are transformed in a global fashion context, preserving or changing their original meanings.

The adaptation of traditional elements to contemporary fashion design is accompanied not only by formal changes, but also by significant semantic shifts. The transition from a local cultural context to a global market inevitably changes the way embroidery, ornamentation, and silhouette are “read” [14]. What functioned in traditional culture as a carrier of collective memory or a marker of social identity often acquires a different semantic status in contemporary fashion. This process is not instantaneous. It unfolds gradually, in the interaction of consumer aesthetic expectations, branding logic, and the requirements of mass or luxury production (Table 2).

The key prerequisite for semantic transformation is the change in the function of traditional elements. In the original cultural environment, embroidery or ornamentation played a communicative role, addressed to “their own,” while in contemporary design they are oriented towards the widest possible, often culturally heterogeneous audience [15]. As a result, there is a reorientation of meanings: complex symbolic structures give way to generalized visual images. Traditional elements begin to be perceived not as part of a holistic cultural system, but as autonomous decorative motifs that can be easily integrated into various stylistic contexts.

At the same time, contemporary fashion is witnessing a process of semantic reduction, which manifests itself in the simplification or universalization of meanings. Embroidery can lose its regional specificity and turn into an abstract sign of “handicraft,” and ornamentation can turn into a graphic pattern devoid of sacred or mythological connotations [16]. Such simplification does not always mean a complete loss of meaning, but it does change the level of its interpretation. Instead of a deep cultural reading, a superficial, emotionally oriented reaction is formed, corresponding to the rapid consumption of visual images in the modern fashion industry.

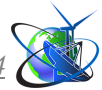


Table 2 – Semantic transformations of traditional clothing elements in contemporary fashion

Semantic meaning in traditional culture	Mechanism of adaptation in contemporary fashion	Contemporary meaning in design practices	Risks of semantic loss
Embroidery			
A carrier of collective memory, regional identity, ritual and social codes	Decontextualization, scaling, stylistic reduction of motifs	Visual marker of authenticity, manual labor, and product uniqueness	Simplification of symbolism, loss of cultural specificity, transformation into a decorative element
Ornament			
An orderly sign system associated with mythology, sacred beliefs, and worldview	Graphic abstraction, repetitiveness, adaptation to universal patterns	Aesthetic pattern, a tool for stylistic brand identification	Desacralization, depersonalization of cultural content
Silhouette			
Reflection of social norms, physicality, and community lifestyle	Stylistic quotation, reconstruction, conceptual reinterpretation	A means of cultural allusion, a form of individual self-expression	Loss of connection with historical context, superficial stylization

Source: compiled by the author based on [9; 14; 15]

Along with reduction, a process of redefinition also takes place. Traditional elements are incorporated into new aesthetic systems, where they begin to function according to different rules [8]. The silhouette, which previously reflected the social norms and lifestyle of a particular community, can now serve as a stylistic reference or conceptual gesture in contemporary design. In this case, the semantics do not disappear but are transformed, shifting from the plane of collective identity to the plane of individual self-expression [3]. It is this ability to redefine that ensures the viability of traditional elements in the modern cultural environment.

The commercial dimension of fashion has a particular influence on semantic changes. In brand narratives, traditional elements are often used as a tool for shaping the uniqueness and added value of a product [10]. In this context, cultural origin is transformed into a marketing resource, and the semantics of the element shifts from



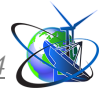
collective memory to consumer experience [12]. Embroidery or ornamentation begins to be associated not so much with a specific cultural tradition as with ideas of authenticity, environmental friendliness, or ethical production, which are attractive to the modern market.

The emergence of ethnic symbols beyond the local cultural environment transforms them into objects of a complex adaptation process that combines aesthetic, communicative, and market logics [10]. For international fashion collections, ethnic symbols cease to function as self-sufficient carriers of meaning and acquire the status of signs that require cultural “translation.” It is at this point that tension arises between authenticity and comprehensibility, between preserving origins and the demands of a global visual language.

The adaptation of ethnic symbols in international collections is rarely achieved through the direct reproduction of traditional forms. Instead, designers resort to the selective use of motifs, colors, or design solutions, separating them from their original context [13]. Such fragmentation allows ethnic elements to be integrated into contemporary silhouettes and standardized collection formats without overloading them with excessive symbolism. As a result, the ethnic symbol begins to function as a recognizable visual accent rather than a complex sign system.

An important aspect of adaptation is the balance between cultural recognition and design universality [9]. For an international audience, ethnic symbols must be distinctive enough to signal cultural origin, but at the same time neutral enough not to require special knowledge for their interpretation. This balance is achieved by minimizing ornamentation, using restrained color schemes, or combining traditional motifs with globally understandable forms [8]. In this way, the ethnic element becomes part of a broader aesthetic code that is easily read in different cultural environments.

Commercial factors play a decisive role in this process. International collections are formed taking into account the expectations of global consumers, retail requirements, and market competitiveness [7]. Under these conditions, ethnic symbols are often used as a brand differentiation tool, capable of giving the collection a sense of uniqueness and cultural depth. At the same time, their semantic content is



undergoing a transformation: cultural origin gradually recedes into the background, giving way to associations with authenticity, craftsmanship, or environmental responsibility, which have high consumer appeal in the international market.

The adaptation of ethnic symbols also involves a number of cultural compromises. In an effort to make a collection commercially successful, designers are often forced to limit the depth of symbolic references or change them in line with dominant aesthetic trends [6]. In such cases, the ethnic symbol takes on a new meaning, which is formed not within the culture of origin, but within the global fashion discourse. This does not necessarily mean a loss of meaning, but it does change its focus – from collective identity to individual consumer experience [12].

The distinction between adaptation and cultural appropriation deserves special attention. Meaningful adaptation involves reflection on sources of inspiration, respect for the cultural origins of symbols and, in some cases, cooperation with tradition bearers [6]. On the other hand, the superficial use of ethnic motifs as exotic decoration deprives them of their context and reduces them to a stylistic resource. In international collections, it is the method of adaptation that determines whether an ethnic symbol becomes a means of cultural dialogue or is transformed into an element of visual standardization [5].

Conclusions

The study allowed for a comprehensive understanding of cultural identity in contemporary fashion as a dynamic process formed at the intersection of tradition, global aesthetic practices, and market mechanisms. National elements – embroidery, ornamentation, and silhouette – appear not as static remnants of the past, but as open systems of meaning capable of transformation and redefinition in the context of the contemporary fashion space. It is this ability to adapt that determines their relevance in international design discourse.

The analysis has established that the historical and cultural origins of national elements determine not only their visual form, but also their primary semantic structure, which is preserved even in a transformed form. At the same time, adaptation to modern aesthetic and commercial requirements is accompanied by a change in



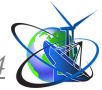
functions and semantic accents. Traditional elements are gradually losing their exclusively identificational or ritual role and acquiring new meaning as universal markers of authenticity, cultural depth, and symbolic value of a product.

The study pays particular attention to semantic shifts that arise in the process of incorporating traditional elements into the global fashion context. It is shown that the reduction and universalization of symbolism does not always mean complete desemantization. On the contrary, in many cases, redefinition occurs, whereby cultural content is transformed in accordance with new communicative and aesthetic codes. This process allows traditional motifs to remain recognizable and functional in the context of intercultural interaction.

An analysis of the adaptation of ethnic symbols in international collections has shown that design strategies are formed as a system of compromises between the preservation of cultural specificity and the requirements of universal design. The fragmentation of symbols, the minimization of ornamentation, and the combination of traditional motifs with globally understandable forms contribute to their integration into the global fashion market. At the same time, it is the method of such integration that determines whether an ethnic element becomes a means of cultural dialogue or is reduced to superficial stylization.

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