

# National Cultural Identity in the Scenography of Karakalpak Puppet Theatre

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines how national cultural identity is represented in the scenography of the Karakalpak State Puppet Theatre and how traditional cultural elements interact with puppet design, costume, stage space, decorative imagery, lighting and contemporary theatrical technologies. The study adopts a qualitative multiple-case design. Four productions staged between 2018 and 2025 – *Qirq qiz* (2018), *Qushlarni kutgan bolalar* (2022), *Chopon afsonasi* (2023) and *Sehrli uzuk* (2025) – were selected as cases representing different dramaturgical sources: a folk epic, a contemporary original play, a folk legend and a foreign fairy tale. The data comprise repertoire materials of the theatre, interviews with the stage designer T. Shardemetov and the puppet master M. Baygaldiyev, and visual analysis of the productions. Each case was analysed against six parameters: dramaturgical source, organisation of stage space, puppet system, costume and ornament, light and technology, and symbolic markers of national identity. The results show four distinct modes of representing national identity: epic-symbolic condensation (*Qirq qiz*), socio-ecological contemporisation (*Qushlarni kutgan bolalar*), ornamental-legendary transformation (*Chopon afsonasi*) and intercultural localisation (*Sehrli uzuk*). In all cases, national identity is expressed not only through ethnographic details but through the artistic and plastic structure of the performance as a whole. The study concludes that the scenography of the theatre is moving from the direct reproduction of traditional elements towards symbolic, transformable and technologically mediated interpretations of Karakalpak cultural heritage.

## Introduction

Puppet theatre occupies a special place in the cultural life of Karakalpakstan. Addressed primarily to children and young audiences, it performs not only an artistic but also an educational and cultural-transmissive function: through visual images, the young spectator becomes acquainted with folklore, epic heroes, legends, customs and the material culture of the people. The repertoire of the Karakalpak State Puppet Theatre includes numerous performances based on national drama, folklore, legends and oral traditions. This makes the representation of national culture in scenography an important subject of scholarly analysis.

In puppet theatre, national identity cannot be limited to the depiction of an ethnographic environment or the use of traditional decorative details. It is formed through a complex artistic system that includes the visual appearance of puppets, costumes, colour, ornaments, stage objects, scenery, lighting and the plastic characteristics of the puppet itself. Therefore, the national character of a performance should be considered not simply as a collection of recognisable cultural signs, but in relation to the dramaturgical content and the artistic interpretation of the characters. Traditional elements

become scenographically meaningful when they contribute to the development of the performance, reveal the nature of the characters and participate in the formation of the overall stage image [1, 46 p.].

Studies devoted to the development of Uzbek puppet theatre identify national sources as an important factor in its artistic evolution. M.S. Ubaydullayeva connects the origins of puppet theatre with folk rituals, religious beliefs, festivities and traditional ways of life [2, 11 p.]. F.N. Kobilova, examining the scenography of puppet theatres during the period of independence, emphasises the growing attention to historical, folkloric and classical works, as well as the development of puppet types, technologies and artistic-plastic solutions [3, 7–8 p.]. S.M. Qodirova notes that the construction and technical possibilities of the puppet directly influence its scenic image and plastic expressiveness [4, 148 p.]. These approaches make it possible to consider national identity in the Karakalpak State Puppet Theatre not only as a question of repertoire but also as an artistic phenomenon manifested in the visual and plastic organisation of the performance.

International theatre scholarship provides a complementary theoretical lens. S. Tillis describes the aesthetic of the puppet as a "double vision", in which the spectator simultaneously perceives the puppet as an inanimate object and as a living character [20]. H. Jurkowski demonstrates that the history of puppetry is inseparable from the local traditions, rituals and visual cultures in which puppet forms develop [21]. P. Howard defines scenography as the total visual-spatial composition of a performance, in which space, objects, costume, light and the performer's body form a single dramatic statement [22], while J. McKinney and P. Butterworth emphasise the active, meaning-producing role of scenography rather than its decorative function [23]. P. Pavis's semiotic approach to the analysis of performance makes it possible to read stage elements as signs whose meaning depends on their relationships within the theatrical whole [24].

The author's earlier studies examined the formation and specific features of theatre art in Karakalpakstan [14, 15], the development of scenography in the Berdaq Karakalpak State Academic Musical Theatre [12], the contribution of Qidirbay Soipov to Karakalpak theatre scenography [11], the formation of national opera and ballet scenography [8], contemporary scenographic solutions in drama theatre [13] and the historical origins of scenography as a form of theatre art [19]. Adjacent research on Uzbek animation has shown how historical themes and national images shape the worldview of children through visual media [9, 16–18], and how historical works contribute to the formation of social values [10]. However, the scenography of the Karakalpak State Puppet Theatre in the 2018–2025 period has not yet been the subject of a systematic comparative analysis, and the mechanisms through which national identity is translated into the visual language of contemporary puppet productions remain insufficiently described.

The aim of this study is to identify and characterise the scenographic means through which national cultural identity is represented in contemporary productions of the Karakalpak State Puppet Theatre. To achieve this aim, the following objectives were set: (1) to outline the repertoire context of the theatre's interest in national and local themes; (2) to analyse the scenography of four productions based on different dramaturgical sources; (3) to compare the means of representing national identity across the productions; and (4) to determine the main tendencies in the development of the theatre's scenography.

## **Materials and methods**

### **Research design**

The study employs a qualitative multiple-case design that combines art-historical, performance-analytical, semiotic and comparative methods. The case-study approach was chosen because scenographic meaning in puppet theatre emerges from the interaction of many components within a particular production and therefore cannot be adequately described through isolated examples.

### **Selection of cases**

The repertoire of the theatre demonstrates a continuous interest in national and local themes. Productions such as *Oriq mergan* (1990), *Oq uloqcha bilan ko'k uloqcha* (1992), *Otam aytgan afsona* (2005), *Cho'pon bola* (2010), *O'mirbek Shimboy bozorida* (2017), *Qirq qiz* (2018), *Qushlarni kutgan bolalar* (2022), *Chopon afsonasi* (2023) and *Sehrli uzuk* (2025) demonstrate different approaches to the theatrical interpretation of national and local cultural material [5]. From this repertoire, four productions staged between 2018 and 2025 were selected according to three criteria: (a) the diversity of the dramaturgical source (epic, contemporary original play, legend and foreign fairy tale); (b) the presence of a distinct scenographic concept in which national cultural elements play a structural role; and (c) the availability of documentation and of members of the creative team for interviews. The selected cases and their creative teams are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. Productions selected for analysis**

| Production                                                       | Year | Dramaturgical source        | Creative team (as documented)                                                                                |
|------------------------------------------------------------------|------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Qirq qiz</i> (Forty Maidens)                                  | 2018 | Karakalpak folk epic        | Adaptation and direction: M. Begimov; visual design: T. Shardemetov; puppets: T. Shardemetov, M. Baygaldiyev |
| <i>Qushlarni kutgan bolalar</i> (Children Waiting for the Birds) | 2022 | Contemporary original play  | Play: M. Begimov; director: A. Qudaynazarov; designer: T. Shardemetov                                        |
| <i>Chopon afsonasi</i> (The Legend of the Chapan)                | 2023 | Folk legend                 | Play: M. Begimov; director: Xotam Oxunov; designer: T. Shardemetov                                           |
| <i>Sehrli uzuk</i> (The Magic Ring)                              | 2025 | Foreign fairy-tale material | Play: X. Abidova; director: B. Parmanov (Astana); designer: A. Govyazin (Russia)                             |

*Source: compiled by the author on the basis of the theatre's repertoire materials [5] and interviews [6, 7].*

### Sources of data

Three groups of sources were used. The first comprises the repertoire materials and documentation of the creative practice of the Karakalpak State Puppet Theatre [5]. The second consists of the author's interviews with the stage designer T. Shardemetov [6] and the puppet master M. Baygaldiyev [7], which provided information on the design concepts, the construction of the puppets and the technical problems encountered during production. The third is the visual analysis of the productions themselves – their stage space, puppets, costumes, lighting and transformations of scenery.

### Analytical framework

To ensure comparability, each production was analysed against six parameters: (1) the dramaturgical source and its cultural origin; (2) the organisation of stage space and the function of the puppet screen; (3) the puppet system – type, construction, mechanics and manipulation; (4) costume, colour and ornament; (5) lighting and technological devices; and (6) the symbolic markers through which national identity is articulated. The analysis proceeded in three stages: description of the scenographic components of each production; semiotic interpretation of their function within the dramaturgy [24]; and cross-case comparison aimed at identifying common tendencies and distinct modes of representation.

### Limitations

The study focuses on the visual and plastic components of the productions and does not include a systematic study of audience reception. The interview data reflect the perspectives of practitioners directly involved in the productions. These limitations are taken into account in the interpretation of the results.

## Results

### The collective nature of scenographic authorship

An important feature of puppet theatre revealed by the analysis is the collective nature of the creative process. The artistic integrity of a production cannot be attributed exclusively to the director or the stage designer. The playwright, director, designer, puppet maker, composer, actors and other members of the creative team participate in the formation of the final stage image. The puppet created by the designer acquires its complete theatrical meaning only through interaction with the actor's performance and the director's interpretation.

For this reason, scenography in puppet theatre extends beyond the conventional understanding of stage decoration. The designer's task is related not only to the creation of scenery but also to the artistic appearance of the puppet character, its construction, proportions, materials, movement possibilities, costume, stage objects, lighting and other visual components [4, 148 p.]. The specific audience of puppet theatre is also important. In performances intended for children, the clarity and expressiveness of visual imagery acquire particular significance. Animals, fantastic creatures, everyday objects and human characters can be transformed into animated stage images through puppetry, and visual and technical effects contribute to the creation of an imaginative environment accessible to young spectators.

### Case 1. *Qirq qiz*: epic heritage and symbolic condensation

One of the significant examples of the scenic interpretation of Karakalpak national culture is the production *Qirq qiz*, staged in 2018. Based on the Karakalpak folk epic, the production was adapted and directed by M. Begimov, while T. Shardemetov participated in its visual design. The performance was presented at the XI Traditional Festival of Puppet Theatres of Uzbekistan held in Tashkent on 9–14 July 2018, where it received third place.

The production interprets the ideas of love for the homeland, devotion to one's people and parents, courage and patriotism through the expressive means of puppet theatre. The plot centres on Guloyim and her warrior companions, who defend their homeland from danger. Thus, the personal destiny of the characters is closely connected with the destiny of their people and native land. The adaptation of the epic for puppet theatre makes its heroic content accessible to younger audiences through visual and theatrical imagery.

The scenography of *Qirq qiz* avoids filling the stage with numerous decorative elements. Instead of a conventional puppet screen, an elevated form resembling a small sandy hill is used. The performance begins in an almost empty stage space with a slowly moving caravan of camels and the image of a bakhshi seated on a camel. Later, the performer representing the bakhshi appears in live action at the edge of the stage and continues the narrative accompanied by the sound of the dombra.

The combination of puppet and live actor creates an important connection between traditional oral storytelling and theatrical performance. The sandy hill, caravan, bakhshi and dombra do not attempt to reproduce the historical environment of the epic in ethnographic detail. Rather, they function as concentrated visual signs of its epic atmosphere. The transformation of the bakhshi from a puppet image into a live performer further strengthens the relationship between oral tradition and contemporary stage interpretation.

The relatively open stage space allows the main visual emphasis to shift towards the puppets and their movement. Instead of functioning as a static representation of a historical location, the scenery becomes a flexible environment for stage action. Curtains are used in battle episodes to visualise confrontation with the enemy. This solution makes it possible to represent the broad narrative scale of the epic within the relatively compact space of puppet theatre.

A particularly important element of the production is the constructive and plastic design of the puppets. T. Shardemetov and M. Baygaldiyev created mobile tabletop puppets with articulated legs [6,

7]. Their legs were designed to enable walking movements and therefore became not simply elements of external appearance but functional components of the puppet's stage plasticity. Considering the heroic nature of the epic, including walking and battle scenes, this type of puppet corresponded effectively to the dramaturgical requirements of the production.

The visual design of Guloyim and Sarvinov provides another example of the interpretation of national culture. Red and dark colours dominate the costumes of the female warriors, while elements of traditional clothing are combined with features suggesting military dress. Geometric patterns on the headwear, decorative elements placed around the forehead and temples, long braids and details resembling metal ornaments on the shoulders and chest enrich the characters' appearance. This combination preserves the feminine qualities of the characters while simultaneously emphasising their heroic nature. National costume is therefore not reproduced as a simple ethnographic copy; it is artistically transformed according to the dramatic function of the characters.

Male characters are individualised through different visual devices. Facial structure, expressions, moustaches, beards, headwear, costume colours and body proportions distinguish the characters from one another. The puppet's external appearance therefore becomes not simply a means of identifying a character but also a visual instrument for communicating personality to the spectator.

At the same time, the construction of the puppets created certain practical difficulties. Their relatively small dimensions complicated some aspects of manipulation by the actors [7]. This demonstrates an important characteristic of puppet theatre: the artistic quality of a puppet cannot be separated from its technical functionality and the performer's ability to control it. Thus, in *Qirq qiz* the epic nature of the source material is transformed into a coherent theatrical system through the open stage space, the images of the bakhshi and caravan, the dombra, national costumes and the plastic possibilities of articulated tabletop puppets.

### **Case 2. *Qushlarni kutgan bolalar*: contemporary life and the ecology of the Aral Sea**

A different interpretation of national identity can be observed in *Qushlarni kutgan bolalar* (Children Waiting for the Birds), staged in 2022. The play was written by M. Begimov, directed by A. Qudaynazarov and designed by T. Shardemetov. Unlike *Qirq qiz*, which is based on epic heritage, this performance turns to contemporary Karakalpak life and the ecological problems of the Aral Sea region.

The action takes place in Muynak. The disappearance of water, changes in the natural environment, the departure of animals and birds and human migration form the dramatic background of the story. At the centre of the plot is a mother raising three sons. As they grow older, the elder sons leave their homeland in search of their dreams, while the youngest, Orolboy, remains with his mother. He later works to improve his native land, prevent the movement of sand and bring water to the dry territory. The return of water and birds at the end of the performance is accompanied by the return of his brothers.

The scenography of the production is based on a unified stage environment that does not undergo major structural transformation during the performance. Simple architectural forms reminiscent of old fishermen's houses in Muynak and a sandy landscape dominate the visual composition. The relief of the sandy foreground performs two functions: it represents the environmental condition of the Aral region and simultaneously provides a suitable surface for the movement of tabletop puppets.

One of the central symbolic elements is a suspended construction in the form of a shanaraq, the crown of the traditional yurt. In the performance, the shanaraq functions not only as a sign of national culture but also as a symbol of family unity and the integrity of the home. Small paper boats are suspended from it, connecting this image with the themes of water and the Aral Sea. The simple form of the paper boats also evokes the world of childhood; they become symbols of hope and of the children's dream of the return of water. Consequently, the shanaraq and the paper boats create a visual centre in which the ideas of family, childhood, homeland and the Aral Sea are brought together.

Although the main scenery remains structurally unchanged, the visual condition of the stage changes significantly in the final episode. Tulle fabric is moved by actors from both sides of the stage to create the impression of water waves. Combined with stage lighting, this produces the visual effect of returning water, and the reappearance of birds reinforces the idea of renewed life. Instead of physically replacing the scenery, the production transforms the meaning and emotional condition of the existing space through fabric, movement, light and colour; the initially dry and static environment becomes dynamic and filled with signs of life.

The puppets in *Qushlarni kutgan bolalar* were also designed with the functional qualities of the stage environment in mind. T. Shardemetov used tabletop puppets with articulated legs whose eyes and mouths were equipped with mechanisms allowing movement [6]. This expanded the mimetic possibilities of the characters and helped communicate their emotional states to the audience. The visual individuality of each character was developed according to age, personality and appearance; features associated with Karakalpak physiognomy were combined with nationally inspired costumes. The image of the mother is particularly noteworthy: since the story covers a considerable period of time, two separate puppets were created to represent her younger and older stages of life. The ageing of the character therefore becomes a visible sign of the passage of dramatic time.

### **Case 3. *Chopon afsonasi*: folk legend, ornament and transformable space**

Another approach to national culture can be observed in *Chopon afsonasi* (The Legend of the Chapan), which premiered on 27 December 2023. The play was written by M. Begimov, directed by Xotam Oxunov and designed by T. Shardemetov. The production refers to folk legends, traditional customs, national costume and ornamental motifs.

The plot develops around a prince suffering from an incurable illness who, according to the story, can be healed by a magical chapan. A shepherd's daughter begins making the garment and asks a desert fairy for help. Seeing the girl's love for nature, plants and animals, the fairy advises her to use desert flowers and plants as ornamental motifs. The magical chapan eventually cures the prince. The chapan therefore functions as more than a costume: it becomes the central artistic image connecting nature, national ornament, traditional beliefs and dramatic action, and this motif is continued in the scenographic structure of the performance.

The production combines live acting with puppet theatre. It begins with a conversation between a grandmother and her grandchild. The grandmother tells the child the legend associated with a traditionally ornamented chapan, after which the action moves into the world of the legend and puppet characters appear. This transition creates a link between contemporary life and the legendary past while symbolically presenting cultural heritage as knowledge transmitted from one generation to another.

In T. Shardemetov's design, the puppet screen is integrated into the overall visual composition rather than functioning merely as a technical structure. Stylised architectural forms create the city environment in the background. Different locations are indicated by adding functional elements to the basic stage structure: the palace gate provides entrances and exits for the puppets, the desert setting is suggested through a shepherd's house and a tree, and in palace scenes the throne becomes the compositional centre. An especially significant feature is the transformation of the side constructions at the end of the performance. According to the designer's concept, these elements rotate inward and form the image of a yurt [6]. Thus, they are not simply decorative framing devices but transformable scenographic structures whose function changes with the development of the performance.

National identity is also reflected in the puppets. Facial features, body proportions, headwear, costumes and colour schemes differentiate the characters. In some figures, exaggerated facial or bodily proportions intensify comic and fantastic qualities, which demonstrates that puppet characterisation depends on the relationship between external appearance, dramaturgical function and movement. The

production also reveals contemporary technological experimentation in puppet design. In the puppet representing the old witch, for example, tennis balls were used to construct the eyes, and internal lighting was installed so that they could glow [6, 7]. This device strengthens the fantastic quality of the character and shows how unconventional materials can become part of an artistic solution.

Lighting performs an active scenographic function as well. The same scenery is perceived differently when illuminated with warm yellow, blue or violet tones. Consequently, lighting does not merely make the decoration visible but transforms its colour, atmosphere and emotional meaning.

#### **Case 4. *Sehrli uzuk*: intercultural cooperation and localisation of a foreign fairy tale**

The fourth production, *Sehrli uzuk* (The Magic Ring), demonstrates another direction in the theatre's development: the adaptation of foreign fairy-tale material to a local cultural environment. The play by X. Abidova was directed by B. Parmanov from the M. Gorky Academic Russian Drama Theatre in Astana, Kazakhstan, while the stage design was created by the Russian designer Aleksey Govyazin.

The central scenographic image is a large ring-shaped construction directly related to the title of the performance. The dramatic motif of the magic ring is thus expanded from a single object into the main architectural and compositional structure of the stage, and the action develops around and within this construction. The interior of the ring is used to create different locations: in one episode a yurt appears inside it, in others urban views are presented. Instead of completely replacing the scenery for every change of location, the designers retain the central ring and modify the elements inside it. The ring therefore functions both as the main artistic image and as a multifunctional construction connecting different spaces within a single composition.

The appearance of the yurt inside the ring is particularly significant in terms of cultural interpretation. The original foreign fairy-tale material is brought closer to the local audience through a familiar traditional cultural image. National identity in this case does not originate directly from the dramaturgical source but is introduced through scenographic interpretation.

Modern technological means and lighting also occupy an important place in the production. Different lighting conditions transform the appearance of the ring construction; small points of light intensify its fairy-tale quality, while the combination of light and stage smoke creates a mysterious atmosphere. The production uses tabletop puppets manipulated in an open stage environment. The dark costumes of the performers visually merge with the general background, directing the spectator's attention towards the puppets, whose brighter costumes make them clearly visible within the stage composition. Puppet manipulation, actor movement, colour and lighting therefore function together as elements of a unified visual system.

#### **Comparative summary**

The results of the cross-case analysis are summarised in Table 2. The comparison shows that each production represents national identity through a different combination of scenographic means and that the dominant carrier of national meaning shifts from case to case – from the epic narrator and costume in *Qirq qiz* to the shanaraq and the Aral landscape in *Qushlarni kutgan bolalar*, the ornamented chapan in *Chopon afsonasi* and the yurt placed within the ring in *Sehrli uzuk*.

**Table 2. Comparative analysis of scenographic means of representing national identity**

| Parameter                 | <i>Qirq qiz</i> (2018)                                                             | <i>Qushlarni kutgan bolalar</i> (2022)                                   | <i>Chopon afsonasi</i> (2023)                                                               | <i>Sehrli uzuk</i> (2025)                                        |
|---------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Stage space               | Open space; sandy hill instead of a puppet screen; curtains in battle scenes       | Unified environment: Muynak fishermen's houses and sandy relief          | Screen integrated into the composition; stylised city; locations added to a basic structure | Central ring construction containing changing locations          |
| Puppet system             | Tabletop puppets with articulated legs; puppet-actor transformation of the bakhshi | Tabletop puppets with moving eyes and mouths; two puppets for the mother | Puppets with exaggerated proportions; glowing eyes of the witch                             | Tabletop puppets in an open stage environment                    |
| Costume, colour, ornament | Red and dark tones; traditional and military elements; braids, geometric patterns  | Nationally inspired costumes; Karakalpak physiognomy                     | Ornamented chapam; desert plant motifs                                                      | Bright puppet costumes contrasted with dark performers' clothing |
| Light and technology      | Restrained; emphasis on movement                                                   | Light and moving tulle create returning water                            | Colour light (yellow, blue, violet); internal lighting in puppets                           | Points of light and stage smoke                                  |
| Key symbols of identity   | Bakhshi, dombra, caravan, epic heroines                                            | Shanaraq, paper boats, Aral Sea, birds                                   | Chapam, yurt formed by side constructions                                                   | Yurt inside the ring                                             |
| Mode of representation    | Epic-symbolic condensation                                                         | Socio-ecological contemporisation                                        | Ornamental-legendary transformation                                                         | Intercultural localisation                                       |

Source: compiled by the author.

## Discussion

The analysis of the selected productions demonstrates that national cultural identity in the scenography of the Karakalpak State Puppet Theatre is represented through diverse artistic approaches and cannot be reduced to the use of national costume, ornament or ethnographic objects. National identity is formed through the interaction of dramaturgy, stage space, puppet construction, costume, colour, lighting, movement, symbolic imagery and the creative relationship between the director, designer, puppet maker and actor. This finding is consistent with P. Howard's understanding of scenography as a total visual-spatial composition [22] and with the view of McKinney and Butterworth that scenography is an active producer of meaning rather than a background for action [23].

The four cases reveal four distinct modes of representation. The first, *epic-symbolic condensation*, is characteristic of *Qirq qiz*: instead of reconstructing the historical world of the epic, the production condenses it into a small number of highly charged signs – the bakhshi, the dombra, the caravan and the sandy hill. The second, *socio-ecological contemporisation*, is realised in *Qushlarni kutgan bolalar*, where national identity is connected with present-day Karakalpak reality and the ecological tragedy of the Aral Sea, and where the traditional shanaraq acquires new meanings related to family and hope. The third, *ornamental-legendary transformation*, is found in *Chopon afsonasi*, where ornament is not decoration but the plot-forming element, and where the transformable side structures turn into a yurt. The fourth, *intercultural localisation*, characterises *Sehrli uzuk*, in which a foreign fairy tale is brought closer to the local audience through culturally recognisable imagery introduced by the scenographer.

The results also confirm the importance of the puppet's "double vision" described by S. Tillis [20]. The transformation of the bakhshi from a puppet into a live performer in *Qirq qiz*, and the transition from the grandmother's live storytelling to the puppet world in *Chopon afsonasi*, consciously play with the boundary between object and living being. In the Karakalpak context, this device acquires an additional cultural meaning: it reproduces the situation of oral transmission, in which the narrator connects the listener with the world of the epic or legend. Puppet theatre thus becomes a stage model of the transmission of cultural memory from one generation to another.

A further observation concerns the relationship between artistic form and technical functionality. The case of *Qirq qiz*, in which the small size of the articulated puppets complicated manipulation, and the mechanised eyes and mouths in *Qushlarni kutgan bolalar* show that the expressiveness of national imagery depends on engineering decisions as much as on visual design. This supports Qodirova's thesis that the construction of the puppet determines its scenic image [4] and Kobilova's observation on the growing role of technologies and puppet types in Uzbek puppet scenography of the independence period [3]. For practice, this implies the need for closer cooperation between designers, puppet makers and actors already at the stage of puppet construction.

At the same time, the comparison reveals a potential risk. When national identity is reduced to recognisable signs, such as the yurt or ornament, it can become a decorative formula detached from the dramaturgy. In the productions examined, this risk is largely avoided because the national images are integrated into the dramatic structure: the chapman heals the prince, the shanaraq holds the paper boats of hope, and the yurt in *Sehrli uzuk* functions as a location of the action. Nevertheless, the repeated use of the yurt in two of the four productions indicates the importance of expanding the visual vocabulary of national identity – for example, by drawing on Karakalpak embroidery, jewellery, musical instruments, crafts and the landscapes of different parts of the region.

The international collaboration in *Sehrli uzuk* demonstrates that the participation of directors and designers from other theatrical traditions does not weaken national identity but can provide new methods for its scenic interpretation. Such cooperation contributes to the exchange of technological and artistic experience and to the integration of the Karakalpak State Puppet Theatre into the wider theatrical space of Central Asia.

The study has limitations. It is based on four productions, focuses on the visual and plastic components of the performances and does not include data on the perception of these productions by children and their families. Future research could include audience-reception studies, a comparison with puppet theatres in other regions of Uzbekistan and in neighbouring countries, and the systematic documentation of puppets and design sketches as part of the theatre's cultural heritage.

## Conclusion

The study shows that national cultural identity in the scenography of the Karakalpak State Puppet Theatre is expressed through the artistic and plastic structure of the performance as a whole rather than through isolated ethnographic details. In *Qirq qiz*, Karakalpak epic heritage is interpreted through the images of the bakhshi, caravan and dombra, national costumes and articulated tabletop puppets. In *Qushlarni kutgan bolalar*, national identity is connected with contemporary Karakalpak reality through Muynak, the ecological tragedy of the Aral Sea, the shanaraq, fishermen's houses, family unity and attachment to the homeland. *Chopon afsonasi* reveals national culture through folk legend, ornamental motifs, traditional costume, the chapman, stylised architecture and transformable scenery, with the magical chapman becoming both the dramaturgical and the visual centre of the production. In *Sehrli uzuk*, a foreign fairy tale is interpreted through local cultural imagery and contemporary theatrical technologies.

These four productions represent four modes of scenic interpretation of national heritage: epic-symbolic condensation, socio-ecological contemporisation, ornamental-legendary transformation and

intercultural localisation. Their comparison demonstrates a movement in the theatre's scenography from the direct representation of traditional cultural elements towards more complex visual, symbolic, plastic and technological interpretations.

National heritage in contemporary puppet theatre is not merely preserved as a historical or ethnographic form; it is artistically reinterpreted according to the dramaturgy, the nature of the puppet, the possibilities of stage technology and the perception of the modern young audience. The results can be used in the teaching of theatre studies and scenography, in the creative practice of puppet theatres and in the development of programmes for preserving and documenting the scenographic heritage of Karakalpakstan.

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