

FELT AS A SURVIVING PART OF MATERIAL AND SPIRITUAL WORLD CULTURE

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1. Introduction

Modern Russian research welcomes interdisciplinary studies, in particular, in the field of folklore and ethnography. Investigating the representation of material culture in folklore is one of the major current research topics that needs to be addressed in more detail [1-3]. The present article examines such a relationship using the example of felt.

Felting seems to have had a rich and fascinating history, given that felt and felt products used to be an integral part of the everyday life of many peoples throughout the world. A people's daily lifestyle is reflected in their folklore, including oral traditions and arts (speech, tales, songs, poetry), and having played a major role in many societies and cultures, it naturally forms part of their heritage. As such, it is a valuable source of information which is worth studying. Analysis of Bashkir folklore sources has revealed that felt is mostly mentioned in fairy tales whereas epic poetry makes only passing references to felt. In this connection, this research study draws mostly upon Bashkir fairy tales.

Bashkir ethnographer, Z. M. Davletshina, wrote a number of articles on felt [4] and its revival [5], as well as traditions and innovations in Bashkir felt making techniques [6]. Of special interest to the topic under investigation is her research entitled *Felt in Bashkir rites* [7], which overlaps – to some extent – with the present research study. Bashkir cultural studies comprise a number of articles focusing on the presence of

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various cultural artefacts in Bashkir oral lore and literature. Among them are studies by G. R. Khusainova [8, 9, 10], A. M. Khakimyanova [11], G. V. Yuldybaeva [12], I. R. Sharapova [13], F. B. Yunusova [14, 15] and F. S. Fazylova [16]. Cf. a research study by Yakut linguist, L. M. Gotovtseva [17] on the vocabulary for outerwear, its elements and details in Olonkho texts, as well as the structure and semantics of words for headwear and its components.

The aim of the study is to investigate the history and symbolism of felt making, to identify Bashkir fairy tales mentioning felt and to examine its function in them. Research into the representation of a cultural artefact – felt – in popular culture, notably, in folklore, is of considerable importance for Bashkir folklore studies and ethnography because it proves the existence and active use of felt in the Bashkirs' everyday and spiritual life.

2. Materials and methods

Bashkir fairy tales and field data collected by present-day folklore specialists and ethnographers served as the major primary sources for the present research project. Other sources included information contained in the publications and research studies of pre-revolutionary and present-day researchers.

The study adopted a holistic and systemic approach combining historical, cultural and comparative historical research methods based on a system of universal categories, contrasts, images and symbols.

3. Results

3.1. History of felt

Felt (from the Turkic word *ojlyk* “cover”) is a gross, non-woven textile material made from felted wool; it is breathable and has low heat conductivity. Items made from felt such as felted cloths, clothing, headwear and footwear are also in high demand. In ancient times, felt was an indispensable part of the everyday life of people living in severe climatic conditions and involved in herding activities. Consequently, felt making is a very ancient art. *“A great steppe corridor passing through all of Northern Eurasia stretches from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific one. Semi-legendary warrior and nomadic tribes who knew no other dwelling, but one made from felt used to live here. They slept on felt, wore felt clothes and felt would always accompany marriages, births and deaths, great military campaigns, religious rites and communication with gods. Felt protected people from cold, hardships, evil spirits and enemy arrows, and everything in their tough lives was related to felt”* [18]. Felt helped people survive, protected them from cold and heat and served them as clothing and building material, therefore, it is hard to imagine the life and culture of nomads and peoples living in severe climatic conditions, such as the Urals, without felt.

The history of felt making dates back to the 5th or 6th millennium BC. *“Pieces of wool falling from wild sheep and accumulating inside caves were the distant ancestors of felt. With the passage of time, the accumulated wool would thicken, and men used it as flooring”* [18]. Felt was invented much later than weaving, which had first appeared

some 20,000 years ago. This is because felt making could not appear until sheep breeding was fully developed. The wool of wild sheep cannot be felted and has no scales that would tie fibers to one another, hence the need to breed domestic sheep. Furthermore, very large amounts of wool were needed. For instance, a minimum of 100 kilograms of wool is required to cover one yurt (tent), so big flocks of sheep were necessary. Although sheep were domesticated fairly early on, they could not be organized into flocks until the domestication of horses, which dates back to approximately the 5th or 6th millennium BC. This period is generally regarded as the birth of felt making when local manufacturing assumed a wider and life-altering significance. *“The very first felt products, identified to have been made by proto-Iranian tribes and dated by archeologists to around 3000 BC, were found in Asia Minor. Felt making techniques have survived to this day and are still widespread among peoples living in Transcaucasia, Asia Minor, Iran and Central Asia”* [18]. The Turkmen are one of the major representatives of the Iranian felt making tradition.

Omnipresent pictorial representations of felt on Scythian gold artefacts reveal the existence of numerous felt products among northern nomads. Herodotus describes Scythian felt hats, kaftans and tents, i.e. *“even the Scythians were skilled at making”* felt [19]. (The Scythians are known to have appeared in Europe in the 7th century BC and to have disappeared some 2,300 years ago). The Russian researcher, V.I. Gulyayev, drew upon the materials of archeological research carried out in Ukraine and Russia, including his own excavations, to make the following conclusion: *“The dwelling of the Scythian nomad during the archaic period was a nomadic tent, covered with felt or skins and mounted on a cart”* [19]. Given the “sorry state” of the surviving Scythian clothing from the Northern Black Sea Region, he considers it fairly appropriate to turn to similar items from the Altai Mountains *“where ice-bound burials dating to the 5th-8th centuries BC have preserved the treasures of the long-gone nomadic culture known as the Pazyryk culture and closely related to the Scythians. The ice which had formed early in the Pazyryk burials preserved, so to say, the organic material made from wood, fur, leather, felt and fabrics”* [19]. Felt covers and appliqued felts were discovered in the “frozen” burials of nomadic noblemen, with fish, wolves and goats pictured on them” [19]. In ancient times, felt was used to keep dwellings warm and to make items of clothing (hats, felt boots with high tops, high white felt boots and fur jackets with felt lining) and household items (felt carpets, a felt pouch for a mirror and/or horn comb and many more) [19].

Excavations at the Pazyryk burials in Altai, dated to the 6th-4th centuries BC, have revealed intricately decorated felt items that are among the best known in the world. They are made from 1-2-mm thick panels, decorated with felt-over-felt applications and occasionally feature embroidery, white fringes or details cut out from gold foil. Perfectly preserved, these felt artefacts reveal the great technique and exquisite beauty of Scythian culture. Felts featuring fine applications have come to be known as the “Pazyryk line”. One particular example, a felt curtain measuring over 30-square-meters depicting a horseman kneeling before a deity has achieved truly cult status among felt lovers throughout the world.

A thick, multi-layered felt canvas covered with fabric, pictures of fighting animals and other mythological subjects, decorations in the form of applications with mandatory stitches and fringes using thick, curling cord are among the typical features of felting and decoration techniques used in the felt items uncovered in the Noin-Uly burial site (Xiongnu, 2nd-1st centuries BC) in Inner Mongolia. The Xiongnu were a bel-

ligerent people devoted to a nomadic lifestyle, so little space was given to weaving in their culture. The only textiles they made were felts, hence their great importance in the Xiongnu's daily life. The depiction of Genghis Khan's huge, felt-covered yurt (tent), as well as other traditional Mongolian felt items, both ancient and contemporary, confirm that the Mongolians are the direct successors of the Xiongnu felt-making tradition [18]. Many Central Asian peoples, including the Tibetans, the Tuvians, the Altai and the Kazakhs, have followed in this tradition. The Xiongnu felt-making techniques spread as far as the North Caucasus, with each people introducing their own national elements into the decoration of their felt items; all Steppe peoples have perceived felt as an essential element of their lifestyles. The Xiongnu felt-making tradition, born in the territory of modern-day Buryatia, still continues there today.

Since ancient times, felting has been one of the traditional Buryat activities to be carried out during the short Siberian summer. The first step was sheep shearing (Figure 1). This process took place in late June or early July: shearing was not done any later because the sheep would not have had enough time to grow new wool before the winter and could die. The Buryats' initial processing of wool does not differ from that of other peoples specialized in felting. Small-sized felt items used to be felted manually. This job was considered to be relatively easy and, consequently, was done by women. Large cloths to be used as a yurt covering material were specially manufactured by men. A roll of would-be felt was sewn into raw cow skin, ropes were tied to the edges of a pole, the loose ends of the harness straps were then tied to the stirrups of a saddled horse, and the roll was passed over an even grass field until the felt was ready. A distance of 15-20 arrow flight paths, the equivalent of about 1.5-2 km, was thought to be sufficient to obtain high quality felt. Nomadic daily life activities needed large amounts of felt but, no matter how important it was for yurt covering, small-sized pieces of felt used inside yurts were also of great importance. People slept on felt mattresses and ate sitting on felt rugs. Felt was decorated with love: women would meticulously stitch centuries-old patterns with threads made from the tendons of horses and wild animals in order to protect themselves, their families and the entire tribe from evil forces, hoping for the best (Figure 2). Therefore, felt was regarded not only as an intermediary between humans and gods, but also as a good spirit and the guardian of the hearth [18].

The Slavs have never been involved in nomadic ways of life and have never lived in yurts, yet they had first-hand knowledge about felt and were skilled at producing both felts and half-felts typical of European felting. Old Slavic terms for wool fabrics, known to us from the surviving chronicles, sound unusual and mysterious to us: водмол (vodmol), апона (арона), орниц (ornits), ерига (yeriga) and сукно (sukno). The word *sukno* starts to appear in ancient manuscripts from the 12th century, but it is manifest that its manufacturing method dates back to a more remote period. In the territory of old Ladyga, archeologists have found fragments of felt (for unknown uses) and a head scarf dated to the 8th century. However, they have not yet found any felt footwear. Does it mean they did not wear *valenki* (traditional winter footwear)? We know of one method the Slavs used to felt *sukno*, or coarse woolen cloth: they put wool on a board and constantly poured a small amount of hot water over it; two strong men sat in front of each other near the board and moved the fabric with their feet back and forth, thus forming a thin layer similar to fine felt. In cold weather, Slavic women and men wore long, warm clothes made from *sukno*, called *svity* (from the word *svivat* meaning "wrap"). Felt was also widespread among the Slavs in making

horse harnesses such as draft collars, saddle linings and horsecloths. From Scythian times to this day, felt has been the most suitable horse harness material. In the remote past, the Slavs used to wage wars continuously. As a material, felt faithfully served them in military matters, being used as soft inner lining for helmets, it would cushion blows struck with an axe or a sword. Felts were equally widespread for military uses. *Myatel* or coats, which could be used as pieces of military clothing, were made from *sukno*. By wrapping this thick felted material around his arm, the soldier could protect himself as if with a shield, and this kind of coat served as both a blanket and a tent during military campaigns [18].

3.2. Felt in Bashkir culture

Felt made from sheep wool, using a special technique, was an indispensable material in the daily activities of the Bashkirs living in the Southern Ural. It was mostly used to cover their yurts (*мурма*) or their temporary summer dwellings and to make clothing, footwear, horse harnesses and so on.



Figure 1. First stage of felt making.



Figure 2. Felt making (Кейез баҫыу)

According to Z. M. Davletshina, “the Bashkirs have maintained a respectful attitude towards this universal product that served as an attribute of traditional family and domestic rites and rituals” [4]. Importantly, there are extensive Bashkir research works on felt and its significance for the Bashkirs [20].

A dictionary compiled by R. N. Karimova provides extensive information on the existing Bashkir types of felt:

- by color: ак кейез (white piece of felt), аласа кейез (patchy felt with patterns);
- by composition: тышлы кейез (piece of felt with sewn-on palace), тәкиәмәт кейез (felt made from dyed wool);
- by thickness: қалын кейез (thick piece of felt). The Bashkirs must have also had thin felts and felts of medium thickness, which is not mentioned in the dictionary – Kh. G.;
- by application: түр кейезе (narrow, long felt rug) (let us also add һике кейезе, изәнгә йәйә торған кейез (felt rug for plank beds and floor) – Kh. G.), камыт кейезе (harness felt), ыңғырсақ кейезе (back band felt), төнлөк кейезе (piece of felt used to cover the yurt’s chimney throat);
- кейез итек / быйма (felt boots or valenki), кейез ката (short valenki), кейез олторақ (felt insole), кейез қалпақ (felt hat) can also be added to this list. Interestingly, felt hats also used to be worn by Scythian noblemen. During excavations of a royal kurgan (burial mound) near Kerch, among the once luxurious pieces of clothes, archeologists found a felt hat decorated with gold plaques [8, p. 18], “they (Scythians) wore pointed felt hats on their heads”, кейез менән көпләнгән ишек, кейез менән йылытылған күрәп and so on (felt-coated door; cold-proof felt box made from rods and used on sledges) [21].

In their summer camps, the Bashkirs are known to have washed in felt-covered tents [22]. In 2011, the authors also gathered information regarding felt from Kh. A. Akhmetova (Mutallapova) (b. 1935), a native resident of the village of Staroye Khalilovo (Gayski District in Orenburg Region): “Бында йәшәгән ир-аттың ат өстөндәге седлоға кейез йәйә торған ғәзәте булған. Шуны тукым тигәндәр” (Men who lived here had a habit of covering saddles with felt. This was called “tukym”), which is indicative of the uses of felt in the local residents’ daily activities. Being of great importance for the Bashkirs, felt is also mentioned in Bashkir folklore. Since no research has been conducted on this topic, this study intends to fill this gap.

Examination of available documents has revealed that the word кейез or “felt” is rather rare in Bashkir oral folklore. This can be attributable to the fact that Bashkir folklore was written down at a relatively late period, at the beginning of the 20th century, i.e. during Soviet times when people were massively involved in collective farming, folk arts and crafts having been even relegated to the background. In the 1960s, there was a severe shortage of felt in villages. People were unable to find felt for insoles (in those days felt insoles were not sold and people used to make their own), let alone felt for plank beds and floors, which was indispensable for those whose homes were cold).

If an item is no longer actively used, it is gradually forgotten and rarely mentioned. Nonetheless, the word кейез appears in rites and specific genres such as fairy tales and epic poetry, fulfilling specific functions. For instance, according to F. G. Khisamitdinova, “кейез is a mythologized object that has positive semantic connotations, attracts good luck, happiness and fertility” [23]. That is why, during the welcoming of the килән (“bride”) in the house of the groom, they would spread out *white felt* under her feet [24]; a white piece of felt would be thrown on the horse of the hero who won a horse race [25]; a piece of white felt had to be thrown in front of a white snake for the latter to leave its horn on it; historical writings also mention the habit of lifting the khan up on a piece of white felt: “башкорттар үзәрәненң шул қан кәрзәше Темәсийәнде ақ кейеззә йыһангир Сыңғыз-хан итеп күтәрәләр” [26]. White felt was regarded as a symbol of purity and prosperity; it also served as an amulet and the “continuation of a family line” [4]. This may be why white felt was often used as a feature in wedding ceremonies. According to the respondent G. M. Bulyakova, born in 1957 in the village of Abdulmambet of Burzianski District, felt was an integral part of the bride’s trousseau. The following tradition was common among the Bashkirs living in the Chelyabinsk Region: the girl spends the night preceding the matchmaking ceremony in the house of a female friend; in the morning, the girl’s female friends and sisters-in-law carry her home on a piece of felt. Interestingly, the girlfriends pull the felt towards themselves and the sisters-in-law towards themselves, which, in our view, illustrates the girl’s transition from one status to another [27]. Presumably, the color of the mentioned piece of felt was white.

According to the respondent, felt was also used for medical purposes. For instance, if a woman had difficulty in giving birth, she was wrapped in a piece of felt and rolled back and forth on the floor (also see [23]). In case of intoxication, the sick person would be given milk and then treated similarly. A person suffering from a severe cold would be washed in a steam bath and then wrapped in the skin of a previously slaughtered sheep or goat or into a piece of felt. Z. I. Minibaeva, an ethnographer and researcher on Bashkir popular medicine, when in the Khaybullinski District, heard that the sick suffering from allergies are laid on pieces of felt, lifted and shaken, following which allergies are said to disappear. According to folklore specialist, R. A. Sultangareyeva, felt was also used for fumigation.

3.3. Felt in Bashkir fairy tales

Numerous fairy tales also frequently mention felt, thus supporting the allegation made about the presence of felt in Bashkir folklore. Felt assumes a specific role in Bashkir fairy tales. Let us examine those fairy tales where the word кейез appears.

First, there is a fairy tale entitled Кейезбай менән батша кыззлары (*Kiizbay and the Tsar's Daughters*) in which the name of the protagonist is directly related to the word "felt".

In Үгәй кыз (*The Stepdaughter*), "Шул вақыт һыйыр, телгә килеп, кызға: «Минәң алдыма аҡ кейез сығарып йәй зә ике мөгөзөмдә бәрәп һындыр. Бер мөгөзөмдән бер көтөү турғай, икенсе мөгөзөмдән бер көтөү сыпсыҡ осоп сығып, тары менән бойзайы айырырҙар», – ти" (Then the cow said: "Put a piece of *white felt* in front of me and knock my horns out: sparrows will fly out of one horn, and bullfinches from another; they will sort millet from wheat") [28].

In Кара көсөк (*The Black Puppy*), the protagonist also asks for white felt: "Миңә аҡ кейез, дүрт мөгөзгә һөт һауып бир... Көсөк аҡ кейез, дүрт мөгөз һөт алып сығып китә. Тизҙән йылға буйына барып, аҡ кейезгә йәйеп, дүрт мөгөзгә дүрт мөйөшкә ултыртып, үзә ситтән йәшенеп кенә карап ята башлай. Салт төш ваҡыты еткәс, һыуҙан ялтырап, алтын башлы, ынйы тешле, көмөш сәсле ике малай килеп сықты ла яр буйындағы комда аунай башланылар, ти. Уйнай торғас, кейез өстөнә килеп менәләр, қояш йылыһында йомшак кейезгә йөкләп киттеләр, ти... Малайҙар йөкләп киткәс, қара көсөк кейезгә дүрт мөйөшөнән тешләп алды ла сабып қайтып китте, ти. Килеп, кейезгә йәйеп ебәрһә, қатын аптырауынан қойолоп төшә. Кейезгә уның ике улы ята." ("Give me a piece of white felt and four horns full of milk... Having taken the piece of white felt and four horns full of milk, the puppy goes away. Soon he comes to the bank of a river where he spreads the piece of white felt, puts the four horns full of milk in four corners, hides and starts watching what will happen. At noon, two enchanted boys came out of the river. They had golden heads, pearly teeth and silver hair. The boys started playing in the sand on the riverbank. While playing, they sat on the piece of soft felt and fell asleep on it under the warm sun... When they fell asleep, the black puppy took the four corners of the piece of felt in his mouth and ran home. At home, he unfolded the piece of felt, and the woman was taken aback: her two sons were lying on the felt" [28].

In Тук-тук тукмағым (*Self-Beating Stick*), the protagonist has a piece of felt spread in front of a donkey: "Әбей, аҡ кейезендә йәй, – тигән бабай. Әбей аҡ кейезгә йәйгән. 'Алтын қоҫ! Алтын қоҫ!' – тип икәүләп ишәккә ялына башлағандар. Ишәк аҡ кейезгә бер нәмә лә һалмаған" ("Old woman, spread this white felt!" shouted the old man. The old woman did so. "Give us gold! Give us gold!" they started asking the donkey. The donkey, however, put nothing on the felt) [29]; "Зур аҡ кейез йәйгәндәр, ишәкте баҫтырғандар за: «Алтын қоҫ! Алтын қоҫ!» – тигәндәр. Аҡ кейез алтын менән тулып киткән" ("They spread the white felt and put the donkey before it, saying: 'Give us gold Give us gold!' And the white felt filled with gold") [29].

In the above-mentioned fairy tales, the white felt is spread in front of the protagonist's magical helpers: in the first tale, it was used to separate the wheat and millet that the stepdaughter had to sort, and in the other two tales, the protagonist needed it to obtain the missing gold and his missing sons. The objects mentioned here – wheat, millet and gold – were, in people's consciousness, very expensive and even sacred to a certain degree, just like the sons from the other fairy tale and, as

such, deserved to be put upon the white felt, which the Turkic peoples, including the Bashkirs, regarded as particularly important. As mentioned above, white felts used to be spread on special occasions, as is the case with a nameless fairy tale written down by L. K. Salmanova in the Samara Region in 2005, which says: “Убыр әбей мейестәр эсенә ут яға ла, бер тирән ям, ямдың өстөнә ап-ак кейезен яба ла, был әбей белән бабайзы сақырырға килә: ‘Әбей, бабай, безгә кунакка барығыз, әйзә’, – ти” (“The old ogress makes a fire in a deep pit, covers it with felt and invites the old man and the woman over”) [30]. This excerpt reveals that, despite the ogress’s bad intentions (she is going to roast her guests in the pit), she still observes the practice of spreading white felt when getting ready for guests. Additionally, yurts prepared for newly-weds, guests or festivities also used to be covered with white felt. It is also worth mentioning another tale about a stepmother and a stepdaughter, which the authors recorded in the Kurgan Region in 2010. In this tale, the dog welcoming the old man’s daughter starts barking as follows:

Аҡ капканы асығыз,	Open the white gate,
Аҡ кейеззе йәйегез.	Spread the white felt.
Апайым килә һунарҙан.	My sister is returning from the hunt.

By analogy, when meeting the old woman’s daughter, the dog barks:

Кара капканы асығыз,	Open the black gate,
Кара кейез йәйегез.	Spread the black felt.
Байығырға киткән апайым	The sister, who left to become rich,
Байығып килә-ләү.	Is returning very ‘rich’.

This was a real boon for the ethnographic expedition. Despite hundreds of published or archived adaptations of the popular Bashkir story about the stepmother and the stepdaughter, researchers had had no texts with such a song included. In our view, this is the best and the oldest sample so far, and the ethnic and genetic popular memory has preserved it to this day. Firstly, national specificity is manifest here, because the Bashkirs used to do this only in special circumstances: they would spread white felts in their dwellings on festive occasions such as weddings, and black felts – of more practical use – on ordinary days. The return of the old man’s daughter with a lot of money is a special, solemn occasion whereas that of the old woman’s daughter is not. Secondly, the location and color symbolism are also of significance. White felt is reserved for the positive character (the stepdaughter), and black felt for the negative one (the old woman’s daughter).

In the fairy tale Таш һын (*Stone Sculpture*), the tsar makes the protagonist find “донъяла булмаған ике метр кейез» (“a non-existent two-meter piece of felt”); “егет ил қарты менән ил қарсығының өйөн эзләп таба. Егет донъяла булмаған кейеззең бында икәнән ишетеп килеүен әйткәс, қарттар аптырап қалалар. ‘Бындағы кейеззе тик қоштар ғына белә’, – тизәр. Егеттең кош телен аңлауына хайран қалып, улар ике метр кейеззәрен биреп ебәрәләр. Егет тиз генә кейеззе ала һалып, батша қызын алам тип қилгән пароход эйәһенә бирә. Кейеззе ул батшаға индерә. Батша, кейеззе күргәс, аптырап қала” (The young man finds the house of the world’s old man and woman. When the young man said that he was searching for the non-existent two-meter piece of felt, the old people were very surprised. ‘Only

birds know about this felt', they said. The old people were astonished to learn that the young man knew the language of the birds and gave him their felt. The young man took the felt and handed it over to a steamship owner who intended to marry the tsar's daughter. The man brought the felt to the tsar, and the latter was very surprised to see the felt" [28]. The fact that the story revolves around a felt (кейез) seems to point to its national specificity, and the fact that the tsar needs this "кейез" highlights its value and significance. Unfortunately, the tale does not make it clear why the tsar needed the felt. The role of the felt remains obscure. In all likelihood, it is a sort of magic felt carpet similar to those from fairy tales such as *Осар кейез (A Flying Piece of Felt)*: "Ерет осар кейезгә ултырған да оскан" ("The young man sat on the flying piece of felt and flew away") [3], and *Таздың төшө (Taz's Dream)*: "ултырған кешене осортоп йөрөтө торған бер кейез" ("a piece of felt on which one can sit and fly") [29]. In both cases, the flying piece of felt made it into the hands of the protagonists from the children of a shaitan/devil who fought for the magic objects, including the flying piece of felt, which had belonged to their father.

In fairy tales, as in real life, felt is used in popular medicine. For instance, in *Акъял батыр*, *Urman-batyr* cut a strip of felt off, set it on fire and cauterized his wound. The fairy tale *Алхан улы менән Ҡарахан кызы (The White Khan's Son and the Black Khan's Daughter)* mentions кейез only in passing: "ақтыңа йәйәргә кейезебез юк" ("we have no felt to make a bed for you") [28]. The same goes for the fairytale *Габдрахман*: "кейез-юрғандарын ишек алдына сизәмгә түшәй" ("he spreads the piece of felt, the blanket, on the grass of the courtyard") [29]. In the fairy tale *Йылан Йәркәй (Yarkay the Serpent)*, told by Nuria Utyabayeva (b. 1927) and recorded by the authors in the village of Buranbayevo (Baumaksky District) in 2012, the serpent says to the young girl: "Тәзрәләрзе кейез менән қор" ("Close the windows with felt"), which is indicative of the Bashkirs' use of felt as mattresses and curtains. In the tale, however, the serpent then transforms himself into a handsome young man, i.e. felt also plays a magic role.

4. Conclusion

Analysis has revealed that felt is frequently mentioned in Bashkir fairy tales, especially white felt, which had a special place in Bashkir culture and in the cultures of other felt-producing peoples. Felt is mentioned as an ordinary household item in just a few tales. White felt is present even in the modern record of two Bashkir tales, which points to the specific uses of felt in material and spiritual folk culture, in particular, in fairy tales.

In the late 20th century, felt had almost fallen into disuse in daily life. However, felt-ing experienced a revival in the Republic of Bashkortostan at the beginning of the 21st century and has flourished since then. Today, felt is produced in a number of Bashkir districts: for example, it has become an everyday product in the Abzelilovsky District. This material is warm and water-resistant due to the particles of animal fat preserved in it. Felt has remained in widespread use among rural dwellers to this day and felt making itself remains a sort of celebration or a ritual for them. There now appears to be a revival of interest in this ancient folk craft in educational institutions. As an example, for over two decades, students enrolled in the Art and Graphic Design Department of the M. Akmulla Bashkir State Pedagogical University (Dean: T. Kh. Masalimov, Candidate of Pedagogical Sciences) have been choosing felt as a topic for their diploma work.

In the Republic of Bashkortostan there are many artisans specialized in felting (Figures 3, 4 and 5). Some make valenki and slippers while others produce creative canvases that can be rightly called works of art. Felt has long become a favorite among those who enjoy doing arts and crafts. Present-day craftswomen create miniature toys and decorations made from felt [31].

Today, there is a growing interest in felt, and more and more people want to produce various felt items such as car and stroller seat covers. The artist, N. Bayburin must be right in saying that “another Bashkir brand product, namely, Bashkir felt has to come onto the Russian and, later, international markets, in addition to other Bashkir products, such as honey, koumiss (fermented milk product) and petroleum” [32].



Figure 3. A yurt



Figure 4. Felt hats



Figure 5. Felt footwear

In the 21st century, felt has not only remained relevant, but has also been further developed. Nowadays, felt is used to produce not only everyday objects, such as yurts and valenki, but also works of art, including felted blankets, souvenirs and decorations. Felt can be combined with the latest trends in art, thus changing from a vitally important craft into a vibrant form of artistic expression. Wool, obtained from sheep during a humane shearing process, is a 'living' material from which artists and craftsmen produce true wonders. Felt is a kind of loose textile obtained by means of interaction between natural wool, hot water and soap using human hands. The basis of this process is simple but ingenious, like everything created by nature. Felt is a solid, light and insulating material which, additionally, is good for health.

Present-day felting builds on an experience accumulated in the course of many centuries and actively uses the best creative practices of preceding generations. A bright and unique cultural phenomenon, felt is a universal material in terms of manufacturing, but it has a deeply rooted national identity in terms of processing and uses. As a result, felt is a steady, high-potential investment in the development of new technologies and applications.

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Summary

An analysis of academic literature and of specialized sources shows a serious lack of research studies and publications on the role of felt in Bashkir material culture. A review of available information about felt can provide the groundwork for further in-depth research studies in this area. This paper aims to introduce readers to the history of felt, its place in daily life and its reflection in Bashkir spiritual culture.

What makes this study relevant in the present context is that it fills the gap in research on felt as being an element of Bashkir material culture and its presence in Bashkir folklore.

Based on felt-related folklore and ethnographic materials drawn from the authors' published and non-published field notes, this paper seeks to show the rich history of felt from ancient times to our days and to identify its place in Bashkir spiritual culture. The analytical approach used for this study has revealed the strong presence of felt in folklore, particularly, in Bashkir fairy tales and customs highlighting the mention of white felt, which was widely used in rituals and traditional medicine.

Examples drawn from various fairy tales illustrate the authors' observations about the role of felt in Bashkir spiritual culture.

Riassunto

L'analisi sulla letteratura accademica e sulle fonti specifiche mostra una grave carenza di studi, ricerche e pubblicazioni sul ruolo del feltro nella cultura materiale dei baschiri. L'esame delle informazioni disponibili sul feltro può fornire le basi per ulteriori approfonditi studi in questo settore. Questo articolo ha la finalità di presentare ai lettori la storia del feltro, il suo ruolo nella vita quotidiana e il suo riflesso nella cultura spirituale baschirica.

Ciò che rende rilevante questo studio è il fatto che colma la carenza della ricerca sul feltro come elemento della cultura materiale e del folklore baschiro.

Questo lavoro, basato sul folklore legato al feltro e sui materiali etnografici tratti dagli studi sul campo, già pubblicati dagli stessi autori o inediti, cerca di mostrare la ricca storia del feltro, dai tempi antichi ai nostri giorni, e di identificarne il posto nella cultura spirituale baschirica. L'approccio analitico utilizzato per questo studio ha rivelato la forte presenza di feltro nel folklore, in particolare nelle fiabe e nei costumi di Bashkir, evidenziando la menzione del feltro bianco, che è stato ampiamente usato nei rituali e nella medicina tradizionale.

Esempi tratti da varie fiabe illustrano le osservazioni degli autori sul ruolo del feltro nella cultura spirituale baschirica.