

**Original Research Article****An Analysis of the Role of Mountain in Mythological Rituals of the Sahand Cultural Landscape Based on Lotman's Semiotics\***Behrouz Tavakkoli<sup>1\*\*</sup>, Gholamreza Kiani Dehkiani<sup>1</sup>, Minou Gharehbaglou<sup>2</sup>

1. Department of Restoration and Rehabilitation of Historical Buildings and Contexts, Faculty of Conservation and Restoration, Art University of Isfahan, Iran

2. Department of Architecture, Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism, Tabriz Islamic Art University, Iran

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**Abstract**

Ancient rituals and symbolic customs, as cultural signs, are representations of human perception throughout history and expressions of a land's cultural identity and values. They are shaped within the temporal and spatial context of cultural landscapes. Sahand Mountain, as a cultural-natural landscape with numerous peaks, has played a pivotal role in shaping the rituals of its resident communities, owing to its mythological and ceremonial status in historical narratives and local beliefs. In this context, this research seeks to answer the following question: How do the circumambulation ritual at the Sultan peak of Sahand and the cow sacrifice ritual of Esfanjan on the slopes of this mountain, as semiotic systems, function within the ancient Iranian, Islamic, and Turkic semiospheres and contribute to the representation and transmission of cultural values? The objective of this study is to examine and analyze these rituals through the lens of Juri Lotman's cultural semiotics in order to understand the role of rituals in representing and enriching the cultural identity of local communities. This research employs a descriptive-analytical method. Data were collected through library and field studies and analyzed based on Juri Lotman's theory of cultural semiotics. Within Lotman's theoretical framework, Sahand Mountain is examined as a focal semiosphere. The findings of the research indicate that these rituals, as dynamic semiotic systems, not only reflect cultural beliefs and values but also actively participate in the process of meaning-making and enriching the cultural identity of local communities. These rituals provide a platform for the transmission and preservation of cultural heritage over time.

**Keywords:** *Cultural Landscape, Sahand Mountain, Mythological Rituals, Cultural Semiotics, Juri Lotman.*

**Introduction**

Sacred natural sites, as domains of profound spiritual value for human societies, have consistently

been a focus of scholarly attention. These sites represent a blend of cultural and natural elements and symbolize the collective identity and religious beliefs of communities. The narrative of each cultural landscape—comprising events, activities, individuals, and the cultural and aesthetic values of its inhabitants—is manifested sometimes through tangible heritage (such as buildings and historical

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\*\* Corresponding author: b.tavakkoli@au.ac.ir, +989149158578

sites) and at other times through intangible and spiritual heritage (such as rituals, oral stories, and local literature). In such landscapes, separating the cultural value from the natural value of the site is impossible. Many traditional societies worldwide have ascribed special significance to natural places like mountains, rivers, springs, caves, and trees. The reasons for the sanctity of these sites are diverse; they may be regarded as the dwelling places of gods and spirits, sources of healing water and medicinal plants, points of contact with the supernatural, places of transformation and revelation, burial sites for sacred individuals and spiritual leaders, temples and pilgrimage destinations, or locations associated with specific events (Wild & McLeod, 2008, 7). Awareness of the origins of sacred natural sites and their associated traditions is often embedded in the stories and myths of the communities that hold them sacred (Kabiri Hendi & Danehkar, 2012, 148). The fusion of natural features (both organic and designed) with the cultural, ritual, and traditional characteristics of a society plays a fundamental role in the formation of sacred cultural landscapes. Examining the environmental, historical, aesthetic, and social attributes of these landscapes reveals important dimensions of a nation's ethnic, identity, and cultural roots. In the mythologies of most nations, a sacred mountain exists that serves as the abode of the gods, and

places of worship have been built on high grounds for all celestial deities. Mount Kailash in Tibet, Tai Shan in China, Fuji in Japan, Altai in Turkestan, the San Francisco Peaks in Arizona, as well as Mount Olympus and Parnassus in ancient Greek literature, Alborz in Iranian mythology, Qaf in Islamic narratives (such as Qisas al-Anbiya' and Resaleh-ye Aql-e Sorkh [The Crimsoned Archangel]), Mount Meru for Hindus, Fuji for Shintoists, Sinai for Christians, and Savalan in Azerbaijan have all been considered among the most important pillars of the cosmos and a link between earth and sky (human and God) (Wijesuriya, 2001, 53). Ritual spaces, as an inseparable part of any society's culture, are the tangible expression of the mindsets and beliefs of the inhabitants of that region. Sahand Mountain, with over 50 peaks exceeding 3000 meters, holds a sacred place in the beliefs of the people of Azerbaijan and is regarded with special reverence (Khamachi, 1991, 73). The peaks of Sultan, Jam (Ojaq), Haram Sahand, Darvishlar, and Kamal are among the most famous peaks of Sahand (Zadgholamhosein, 2021, 15) (Fig. 1). The performance of rituals such as the circumambulation of the Sultan Sahand peak and the apotropaic rituals for livestock at its summit, the cow sacrifice ceremony in the village of Esfanjan, the pilgrimage to Pir-Sang, the pilgrimage to Jam peak and the blessing of its springs (such as the Qirkh Bulakh

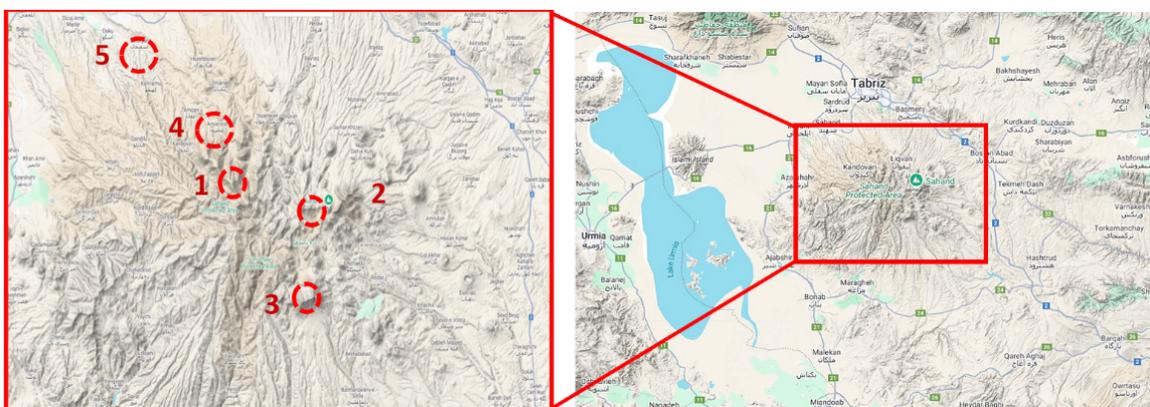


Fig. 1. Location of the Sahand mountain range, its prominent peaks, and the villages under study on the northwestern slopes (Location of the prominent peaks of Sahand and the villages under study, 1. Soltān Sahand Peak, 2. Kamāl Sahand Peak, 3. Jam Sahand Peak, 4. Ansarud, 5. Esfanjān). Source: Authors.

spring, which has an inscription identifying it as the ablution site for Sahand pilgrims), and many other ancient rituals all emphasize the ceremonial importance of this mountain range and can be interpreted as a representation of the thought and cultural identity of local communities. Accordingly, due to the lack of significant research in the field of semiotics concerning the Sahand cultural landscape, the present study aims to address this research gap. After reviewing the foundations and concepts of semiotics and presenting the research methodology, this study will analyze the circumambulation of the Sultan Sahand peak and the cow sacrifice in Esfanjan on the slopes of Sahand Mountain within the three semiospheres of ancient Iran, Islam, and Turkic culture. The primary research question is: How can the tools of Lotman's cultural semiotics be used to analyze the processes of production and representation of cultural meanings in these rituals and their role in shaping collective identity? By analyzing the signs and semantic systems present in these rituals, this research examines their connection to the indigenous culture of Azerbaijan, Islam, and ancient Iran, and explains the role of these rituals in transmitting cultural values and their historical transformations. This analysis will contribute to the preservation and revitalization of intangible cultural heritage and enhance the understanding of the cultural and identity roots of the region.

### Literature Review

Despite the importance of the cultural landscape of Sahand Mountain and its associated rituals, few studies have been conducted in this area. Most existing studies have focused on the ethnographic description and analysis of these rituals and have not addressed them from a semiotic perspective. Researchers (Miri-Khosrowshahi & Faridaghae, 2014; Mashhadi Noushabadi, 2022) have investigated the cow sacrifice ritual in Esfanjan. However, these studies have concentrated more on the historical

and religious dimensions of this ritual, paying less attention to its semiotic aspects. Falsafi (2006), in an article titled "The Thirty-Sixth Day of Spring in the Village of Esfanjan" published in the *Dilmaj* journal, has also described his field observations of the aforementioned ritual. In the field of the semiotics of cultural landscape, studies such as the one by Fayaz et al. (2012) have explored the general concepts of this domain. However, these studies lack case studies to demonstrate the practical application of semiotic methods in the analysis of cultural landscapes. Additionally, other research (Majedi & Zarabadi, 2010; Noghrekar & Raeisi, 2011; Dabbagh & Mokhtabad Amrai, 2014; Ghaffari & Folamaki, 2016; Nejad Ebrahimi et al., 2019) have examined a city, a building, or its function from a semiotic perspective. Some research, such as that by Mirshahzadeh et al. (2011), has conducted a semiotic reading on a part of a building, such as an *iwan* or a dome.

In the field of ritual semiotics, Hamejani et al. (2018), in a study titled "The Semiotics of the Pir Shalyar Ritual in the Cultural Landscape of Hewraman," have introduced and semantically reconstructed the Pir Shalyar ritual within the Hewraman cultural landscape from a semiotic viewpoint. Furthermore, Khani (2003) have studied the symbolic significance of Mount Razavi in Islamic culture. Hemati & Zeynali Onari (2014), in a study, have examined the interpretation of the meaning of Savalan as a sign within the urban space of Ardabil by its citizens.

### Research Method

The present study is qualitative and employs a descriptive-analytical method. It is a fundamental research project aiming for a deeper understanding of the processes of meaning production and representation in the rituals associated with Sultan Sahand Mountain and the cow sacrifice of Esfanjan, approached through Juri Lotman's cultural semiotics.

Data were gathered through library and documentary studies concerning the cultural landscape of Sahand Mountain, the sacred aspects of the mountain among its surrounding communities, its associated rituals, myths, and local beliefs. To collect qualitative data on the beliefs, experiences, and perceptions of local people regarding the rituals under study, semi-structured interviews were conducted. In some cases, the participant observation method was used for direct observation and recording of the rituals. Utilizing the theoretical tools of cultural semiotics, the sign systems present in the rituals were analyzed based on the mechanism of meaning production and intersemiotic translation within Lotman's framework. Specifically, the interaction and dialogue among the three semiospheres of ancient Iran, Islam, and Turkic culture in the development and formation of the sacred Sahand Mountain semiosphere were examined. The limited access to written sources on the rituals in the Turkic language and the possibility of bias in the interviewees' responses are among the research limitations that should be considered in the results of this article.

## Theoretical Foundations

### • Cultural semiotics

Semiotics is the science concerned with how signs create meaning; a sign itself is a tangible representation of an absent concept or phenomenon intended to communicate with an audience (Nejad Ebrahimi et al., 2019, 179) that studies the mechanisms of meaning production, transmission, and reception (Hamejani et al., 2018, 62). Cultural semiotics is a field of semiotics that, as an interdisciplinary approach, analyzes cultural phenomena using various theoretical and methodological tools. This approach finds its roots in the Tartu-Moscow School. By publishing a series of articles in the 1970s, this school, led by researchers such as Lotman, Ivanov, and Toporov, presented a new approach to cultural analysis (Sarfaraz et al., 2017, 77). Cultural

semiotics is, in fact, a shift from structuralism towards a more comprehensive and complex study of cultural systems (Semenenko, 2017, 12). This type of semiotics, by emphasizing the active role of humans in shaping the world around them, studies the mental and material patterns that constitute culture (Lonnberg, 2011, 126). Furthermore, this approach breaks down the boundary between nature and culture, unlike restrictive views that separate the two. It considers any phenomenon that humans perceive and interpret as a cultural phenomenon (Namvar Motlagh, 2011, 12). Generally, explaining the mechanisms of meaning production in cultural systems and analyzing the dialogic interactions between them are considered the most important functions of this type of semiotics.

Juri Lotman, the founder of the school of cultural semiotics, by proposing his cultural theory centered on the concept of the semiosphere, describes and explains the mechanism of the semiotic functioning of culture as a semiosphere. The semiosphere is the semiotic space outside of which semiosis cannot exist (Lotman et al., 1978, 222; Hoseinpour Mizab et al., 2021, 31). By introducing the concept of the semiosphere, Lotman offers a complex and multi-layered structure for analyzing cultural phenomena. This structure, composed of a set of communication subsystems, is not only limited to culture but is a necessary condition for the emergence and development of any culture. The semiosphere plays a central role in shaping human experience by enabling the creation of identity, communication, and order (Lotman et al., 1978, 211-232). Lotman, by emphasizing fundamental dualities, provides a dynamic and multi-layered structure for analyzing cultural phenomena. These dualities act not only as analytical tools but also as driving forces in the formation and transformation of culture (Hoseinpour Mizab et al., 2021, 31).

The theory of the semiosphere, with its emphasis on the dual structure and dynamism of cultural systems,

helps to understand cultural phenomena in a complex and multi-layered way. Dichotomies such as nature/culture, order/chaos, center/periphery, and text/non-text, as fundamental principles of this theory, show how meaning is produced and transmitted within these systems (Sonesson, 2011, 76). In Lotman's view, the dialogue and interaction between two cultures take place at what is called the "border," and this border defines the frames within the semiosphere (Fig. 2). Through this dialogic principle, we can understand the sign systems related to Sahand Mountain and its rituals not as fixed realities, but as social and historical constructs (Semenenko, 2017, 60).

Culture, as a hierarchy of sign systems, finds its meaning through interaction and opposition with other cultures (Torop, 2002, 400). Within the framework of Lotman's cultural semiotics, culture is defined in opposition to non-culture (such as nature or other cultures), and this duality leads to the dynamism of sign systems. The process of intercultural translation, which occurs at the "border" of the semiosphere, allows for the redefinition of cultures and the enhancement of their value (Sojoudi & Basiri, 2015, 22).

Based on the principles of Lotman's cultural semiotics, this research analyzes the signs in the rituals associated with the cultural landscape of Sahand Mountain (such as the circumambulation of Sultan peak and the cow sacrifice of Esfanjan). Sahand Mountain, as a focal semiosphere, provides

a platform for dialogue between the ancient Iranian, Islamic, and Turkic semiospheres. This analysis, by examining the processes of meaning production and intercultural interactions, reveals the deep connection between nature and culture in these rituals and takes a step towards preserving the intangible cultural heritage of the region.

#### • The cow sacrifice ritual in Esfanjan

The ritual of sacrificing a bull takes place on the first Thursday after the thirty-sixth day of spring in the village of Esfanjan, located on the northwestern slope of Sahand, with the aim of warding off natural disasters (fierce local winds and famine). The ceremony begins by bringing the bull to the square in front of the village mosque before sunrise and reciting the Holy Quran. Then, the bull is paraded through all the neighborhoods of the village, during which prayers, eulogies, and special acts are performed, and residents offer their votive offerings to the accompanying group. All participants, except for women, then lead the bull to the Qanat (subterranean channel) spring (Miri-Khosrowshahi & Faridaghae, 2014, 134). After the bull has been watered from the Eidava Qanat, the villagers lead the victim towards a hill south of the village. The victim is circumambulated three times around the Qarah Dash (Black Rock) and the adjacent shrine, and then they proceed towards the sacred sacrificial mountain, Qorbangah, 1.3 km from the hill. The sacrifice must be performed on top of the mountain at a distance of thirty-six steps from the neshangah (a pit marked with a stone pile); the blood of the victim must flow through a channel to reach the neshangah. During this time, a pious elder from the village symbolically places a knife on the bull's neck while invoking God's name and sending blessings upon the Prophet; then the designated butcher performs the act of sacrifice. The sacrifice is considered accepted only when its blood reaches the neshangah; otherwise, the ceremony is repeated the following Thursday

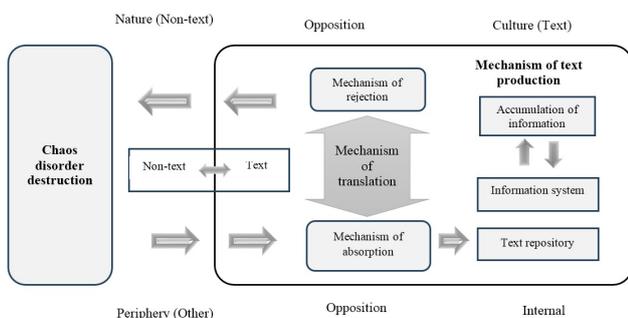


Fig. 2. The Tartu school model. Source: Sonesson, 2011, 76.

(Mashhadi Noushabadi, 2022, 435). The meat of the sacrifice is distributed among all residents to cook a special meatball dish (kufteh) (Fig. 3). After the ceremony, the residents bury the bones or throw them into the river so that unclean animals cannot access the sacred parts of the sacrifice.

Oral stories and mythological narratives about the cow sacrifice ritual are told in various forms among the villagers. According to the most prominent narrative, in ancient times, a Zoroastrian (Gabr) shepherdess from the village secretly gave milk from her sheep to the wounded soldiers of the Islamic army and helped nurse them. When her brothers found out, she was threatened with death. She fled to the mountaintop, prayed to God, and by divine will, disappeared into the earth at the site of the neshangah. Following severe and destructive storms that same year, an elderly woman from the village dreamt that the girl told her the disasters would be averted if a sacrifice was made at the place where she vanished. When this promise came true, the villagers began performing the ritual annually at the specific time and place (Falsafi, 2006, 21). The cow sacrifice ritual in Esfahan, as a multi-layered sign system, includes important spatial elements (such as the mosque, square, Qanat, Qarah Dash, shrine, Qorbangah, and neshangah) and semantic elements (such as historical beliefs and local narratives) that form the context for the ritual's performance. These local beliefs and narratives, rooted in the region's culture and history, produce meaning within the

framework of the semiosphere, turning this ritual into a dynamic sign system.

#### • The circumambulation ritual of mount Sultan

Sultan peak, at an altitude of 3451 meters, is the highest peak in the northwestern part of the Sahand mountain range. The circumambulation ritual of Sultan peak takes place on the first day of autumn in the village of Ansarud (Astari), located at the foot of this mountain, for the objectives of thanksgiving, pilgrimage, and fulfilling vows at the historic cemetery atop the peak. In the book Rowzat al-Jenan, it is written about Sultan peak: "On the peak of Mount Sultan, which is part of Sahand Mountain, is the grave of Usama ibn Sharik. People call him Usama Sultan and go on pilgrimage to him" (Ebn Karbalai, 1970, 22-23). On the last day of summer, the residents of Ansarud village ascend "Sultan Daghi" (Sultan Mountain) on foot or with pack animals, prepare a place for an overnight stay, and, accompanied by the voice of a eulogist, spend the night in mourning and prayer beside the historic cemetery and around a shrine, which some believe is the tomb of Usama ibn Sharik and others (Mashkur, 1973, 739) consider it the tomb of Baysunghur Mirza. Before sunrise, they circumambulate the tomb and, after the Morning Prayer, watch the sunrise.

Following this ceremony, the village flocks, along with their shepherds, arrive at the peak and gather around the tomb. Then, from the west, the flocks and shepherds circumambulate the tomb and receive



Fig. 3. Qarah Dāsh, the Sacrifice Ritual and the Cooking of Nazri. Source: Author's archive.

gifts from the villagers (Fig. 4). The villagers believe that if a sheep turns back or turns its face towards the shrine while circling the tomb, it is sacrificed. Additionally, each herder sacrifices one goat or sheep. At the end of this ceremony, one day's milk from the flock is donated to the shrine. After the ceremony, the sacrificial meat is distributed among all the villagers of Esfanjan and also the surrounding villages that participated in providing the sacrifice. The belief in warding off calamities from the flocks and livestock and the belief in the increase and blessing of dairy products through the performance of the sacrifice and honoring the shepherds have made the arduous ascent to the peak bearable for the villagers each year.

The main components of the Mount Sultan Sahand ritual can be stated as: the villagers' ascent for pilgrimage, the nocturnal circumambulation of the shrine, eulogies and pilgrimage prayers, watching the sunrise, the circumambulation of the tomb by shepherds and flocks, sacrificing, and making votive offerings to the shrine (Table 1).

Apart from these, similar rituals are held on the northwestern slopes of the Sahand mountain range in Ilkhchi (Gümüş Nana), Zeynjanab (Siyahpush), Dizaj (Sultan), and other villages adjacent to Ansarud and Esfanjan. The synchronic and diachronic connections of these communities and rituals form the totality of the Sahand semiosphere (Fig. 5).

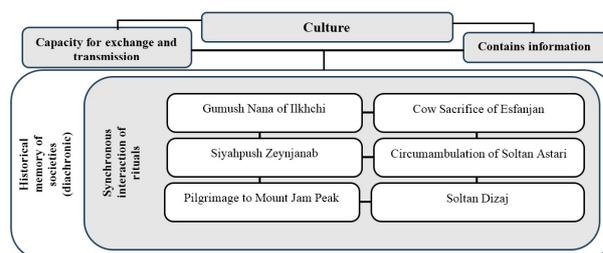


Fig. 5. Functional systems of rituals in the semiotic sphere of mount Sahand. Source: Authors.

### • The place of the mountain in the ancient Iranian, Islamic, and Turkic Semiospheres

In ancient Iranian thought, the earth was perfectly flat and untouched, and there was no movement among the earth, moon, and stars; but following the first onslaught of Ahriman, the earth suddenly transformed, and mountains were created (Hinnells, 2007, 22). In myths attributed to ancient Iran, the first human was created on a mountain and lived on a mountain, and the souls of the dead are judged at the Chinvat Bridge (Bahar, 1997, 96-99). In Vendidad, Fargard 22, paragraph 19, it is mentioned that Ahura Mazda spoke with Zoroaster on a mountaintop. Ghorashi (2001, 173), in his book *Water and Mountain in Indo-Aryan Mythology*, points to the status of Savalan and Sahand during the Sasanian period, writing: "Sahand Mountain gained greater ritual importance after the transfer of Iran-vej to Azerbaijan and overlooked the great fire temple of Azargoshnasp". In some Pahlavi sources such as the *Bundahishn*, *Selections of Zadspram*, *Dēnkard*, and a few others, the Azargoshnasp fire temple was built on



Fig. 4. The Shrine, historic cemetery, and circumambulation ritual at mount Soltān Sahand peak. Source: Author's archive.

Table 1. Comparison of the semiotic features of the Mount Sultan circumambulation and the Esfanjan cow sacrifice. Source: Authors.

Symbolic pillars of rituals	Ritual of cow sacrifice in Esfanjan	Ritual of circumambulation of mount Sultan
Spatial and locational center	Village Square – Mount Pir-e Sah – Mount Qorban	Mount Sultan Sahand – Shrine at the Summit
Type of sacrifice	Cow	Sheep
Objective	Warding off destructive winds from orchards and the village	Warding off livestock diseases – Seeking blessings for animal products
Semiotic elements	Cow, Qarah Dash Stone, Shrine of Pir-e Sah, Neshangah	Mount Sultan Sahand, Shrine at the Summit, Circumambulation

Mount Asnavand, which is considered a mountain in Azerbaijan. Some sources identify Mount Asnavand as Sahand and some as Savalan (Ghorashi, 2001, 180). In the Mithraic religion, Mithra, the possessor of vast plains whose birthplace is the heart of the mountain and in a cave, was born from two pieces of stone struck by lightning and performed the sacred sacrifice in a cave (Javadi, 2007, 15). The Avesta also speaks of a mountain named Arzur, one of the Alborz Mountains, mentioned as the gate of hell and the abode of demons (Kazazi, 2000, 244).

In the history of the Turks, each tribe or group adopted a mountain as the protector of its dynasty and considered it sacred, holding rituals and ceremonies for this mountain and its spirits (Seyidov, 2005, 101). In the Turkic creation story, it is said of the mountain: “While Ülgen was creating the world, he sat on the golden mountain woven with sunbeams. This mountain was between heaven and earth. It was so close to the sky that there was only a distance of a man’s height between the peak and the sky” (Sakaoglu & Duymaz, 2002, 175). Whenever they wished to approach the spirit of the mountain or needed its help, they would always climb the mountains and present their sacrifices and perform their ceremonies there. Women did not participate in the sacrificial ceremony but would join in during the cooking and eating of the sacrifice (Bayat, 2006, 57). Abdulkadir İnan describes the mountain sacrifice ceremony among the Scythians, as related by Katanov, as follows: every three years, a sacrifice ceremony of an adult animal was held on the mountaintop with the participation of 100-150 men,

who performed the ceremony with specific rituals (Inan, 2016, 416). Throughout history, the tradition of burying political and religious leaders and heroes on mountain heights or their slopes among Turkic peoples has been rooted in religious beliefs and myths. This was done not only for proximity to the upper world and sacred manifestations but also to display the status and power of the deceased. In Azerbaijan, Mount Eynali in Tabriz, Goy Zangi and Alamdar in Misho Marand, Mount Pir in Varzaqan, and Sultan in Sahand are prominent examples whose tombs on the peaks have now become revered pilgrimage sites for local communities. “Since in the belief of ancient Turks, all beings, animate and inanimate, had a specific spirit within them, mountains also had a great spirit, to which the Altai people would sacrifice a mare? The bull, as a symbol of the Göktürks, was also sacrificed to the greatest gods in a special ritual” (Uraz, 2017, 211).

According to Turkic mythological beliefs, these peoples usually performed their sacrifice and oath-taking ceremonies on their sacred mountains (Seyidov, 2005, 357). In this regard, Inan (2016, 65) writes that the Turks would offer a sacrifice to the sky god annually on the sacred mountain “Han Yuan.” He also adds that the Khagans of the Huns would seal their treaties with the Chinese on a mountain peak called “Hun-daghi” by taking an oath and offering a sacrifice. According to Turkic myths, the animals chosen for sacrifice to the sky god (light) were white, while animals of a dark color were sacrificed to the underworld god (darkness) (Seyidov, 2002, 36). In the ritual of

Esfanjan village, where the sacrifice is performed to be safe from fierce winds, a dark-colored bull is usually chosen.

In Islamic culture, mountains are recognized as sacred places associated with spiritual experiences. For example, the revelation to the Prophet (PBUH) in the Hira cave and the story of Moses' (AS) meeting with God on Mount Tur, as mentioned in the Quran, demonstrate the spiritual status of mountains (Khani, 2003, 132).

#### • Semiotic analysis of the rituals

Since this research aims to analyze and examine the symbol of the mountain in the rituals of communities related to the Sahand cultural landscape from the perspective of Lotman's cultural semiotics, Sahand Mountain can be considered a focal semiosphere that provides a context for the interaction of Turkic, Islamic, and Mithraic cultures in the circumambulation of Sultan peak and the cow sacrifice on its slopes. To read the Sahand Mountain semiosphere, we need an understanding of the sign systems composed of codes within the related rituals, which are analyzed alongside other sign systems (Table 2). According to Lotman, two components define culture: a) that culture contains information, and b) this information is exchangeable and transmissible (Lotman et al., 1978, 2). It is clear that these two components are functional and define and contribute to the functional aspect of cultural systems (Sarfaraz et al., 2017, 78). Based on Lotman's definition of culture as an informational and transmissible system (Lotman et al., 1978, 2), the rituals associated with the Sahand semiosphere (such as the circumambulation of Sultan Sahand peak and the cow sacrifice of Esfanjan) have achieved two goals: first, shaping new cultural content throughout history; and second, transmitting this content synchronically (through connection with similar rituals in neighboring villages like Gümüşli-Nana, Sultan Dizaj, and Siyahpush in Zeynjanab) and diachronically (by preserving

a shared historical memory in local narratives) (Miri-Khosrowshahi & Faridaghae, 2014, 140).

The Sahand semiosphere, as a dynamic sign system, has undergone continuous transformations at the level of symbols and rituals under the influence of numerous cultural interactions. The process of intercultural translation in this sphere has led to the creation of complex semantic layers and the gradual transformation of symbols at both objective and semantic levels. According to Lotman's mechanism of intercultural translation, the signs in the rituals related to the Sahand cultural landscape are categorized into two levels: the first level includes material and objective signs (such as Sultan Sahand Mountain, the Qorban Mountain and neshangah, Qarah Dash, shrines and tombs, sacrificial blood, Qanat), and the second level includes semantic signs (such as the myth of the Dokhtar-e Gabr (Zoroastrian Maiden), the cycle of life and death, circumambulation of the peak, etc.). These signs, in interaction with the Turkic, Islamic, and Mithraic semiospheres, produce multi-layered meanings.

The opposition between culture and "non-culture" is a constructive and identity-forming opposition for culture, which is effective in defining, recognizing, delimiting, and bordering culture, and ultimately in establishing or not establishing communication with the other and intercultural translation. It can take three forms or three pairs of opposing dualities: the opposition of culture and nature, order and chaos, and self and other (Lotman et al., 1978, 25). Accordingly, everything that belongs to the collective life of humans on the slopes of Sahand is culture, while nature includes the space of the mountain and its numerous peaks, rivers, winds, and short-term biological needs. The regular and annual performance of rituals and adherence to principles throughout history form the space of order (the space of cosmos), while the harsh and unpredictable nature of the region and destructive winds form the space of chaos, creating the opposition of order and

Table 2. A breakdown of the ritual codes in the semiospheres of Sahand mountain. Source: Authors.

Ritual sign (objective & conceptual)	Ancient Iranian sphere (Mithraism)	Islamic sphere	Turkic sphere
Ritual calendar (first week of Ordibehesht) (last day of summer)	-	-	•
Ritual objective (averting the aḡ yel wind) (averting natural disasters & honoring shepherds)	-	-	•
Starting point of ritual (in front of the mosque) (Mountaintop)	-	•	•
Start before sunrise	•	-	•
Quran recitation	-	•	-
Procession through neighborhoods with residents	-	-	•
Votive offerings	-	•	-
Eulogies and prayers	-	•	•
Non-participation of women (in Esfanjan ceremony)	•	•	•
Watering from the Qanat	-	-	•
Circumambulation of Qarah Dash and the shrine on Sultan peak	-	•	•
Pilgrimage to the shrine	-	•	-
Miraculous journey (Tay al-Arz to the sacrificial site)	-	•	-
Sacrifice and flow of blood to the Neshangah	-	•	•
Myth of the Dokhtar-e Gabr (Zoroastrian maiden)	•	-	•
Burying the bones to prevent animal contact with sanctified bones	•	-	-
Distributing sacrificial meat and cooking Kufteh	-	-	•

chaos. Finally, culture is the space belonging to the self (oral literature, stories, myths, and shared beliefs of the region), and non-culture is the space belonging to the other. In addition, the dualities of life and death in the cow sacrifice ritual, earth and sky in the circumambulation of Sultan peak, and winter and spring in the timing of both rituals are definable dualities in the Sahand semiosphere.

According to this definition, the rituals associated with Sahand Mountain can be considered a sign system that has formed within the Sahand semiosphere and is constantly changing and evolving. According to Lotman's interpretation, the traditions of the communities living in the Sahand landscape, including rituals, literature, production methods, and narrative myths, manifest as a functional, non-static object, like a text that is constantly changing. This is due to the existence of the "semiosphere" as a network of relationships

upon which the texts operate. Thus, the rituals associated with Sahand Mountain, as a sign system, continue to exist as long as they play a role in the process of producing and exchanging information among the villagers and migrants to the city. These rituals reproduce themselves by constantly changing their face and renewing, thereby producing new information. The semiotic phenomena in this sphere give meaning to the culture in the form of an organized continuum called the "Sahand semiosphere." The rituals associated with Sahand Mountain are constantly evolving through processes of acquiring and losing components and changing the way their codes and memory are defined and modified. In Lotman's mechanism of intercultural translation, elements of the rituals are summoned from different semiospheres and, after re-coding, are transformed into new sources of information. For example, the recitation of the Quran and Islamic

prayers in both rituals have entered the text of the ritual from the Islamic sphere, and the practice of ascending the peak on foot has evolved with lifestyle changes to new methods (like using vehicles), transforming from the “foreign” to the “familiar” (Fig. 6).

In the intercultural discourse between different semiospheres, the cultural codes of Azerbaijan have had a constructive and dynamic interaction with Islamic and ancient Iranian codes. This interaction has led to the absorption, rejection, and modification of cultural elements over time, ultimately resulting in the evolution of the Sahand semiosphere. For example, the local season of “Ağ Yel” in the fifth and sixth weeks of spring, coinciding with festivals like Khidr-Ilyas and Tappeh Naneh in the Turkic semiosphere of Azerbaijan, has, by absorbing elements from Islamic culture, added the first Thursday of this period to the “repertoire of texts” in the Esfanjan ritual as a “result of the absorption mechanism.” Also, in the nocturnal pilgrimage of Sultan, we witness an intersemiotic exchange at the border of two semiospheres. In this ceremony, eulogies and lamentations, which are elements of Islamic culture, have replaced Mithraic elements such as Haoma drinking and nocturnal sacrifice. As seen in Fig. 7, the process of text production, accumulation and exchange of information, absorption of some elements from Islamic culture, rejection of some others from Mithraic elements, etc., in the cultural dialogue of the discussed spheres, has created the dynamism and historical evolution of the Sahand semiosphere.

### Conclusion

Focusing on Juri Lotman’s theory of cultural semiotics, this research has analyzed the place of the mountain in the cultural rituals associated with the Sahand cultural landscape. The findings indicate that Sahand Mountain, as a focal semiosphere, has played a significant role in producing meaning and



Fig. 6. Change in the approach route to the summit in recent years during the circumambulation ritual at mount Soltan Sahand peak. Source: Author’s archive.

preserving the cultural beliefs of local communities by hosting rituals such as the circumambulation of Sultan Sahand peak and the cow sacrifice of Esfanjan. In this semiosphere, the mountain is not merely a natural phenomenon but a multi-layered “sign system” that accommodates numerous codes. These codes, rooted in the depths of the region’s history and culture, have produced and reproduced meaning through interaction with other semiospheres, including the ancient Iranian, Islamic, and Turkic semiospheres.

The semiotic analysis of these rituals shows that their formation has been a dynamic and multi-layered process. Various elements from these three semiospheres have intertwined through mechanisms of intersemiotic and intercultural translation, creating a complex structure. In this process, each

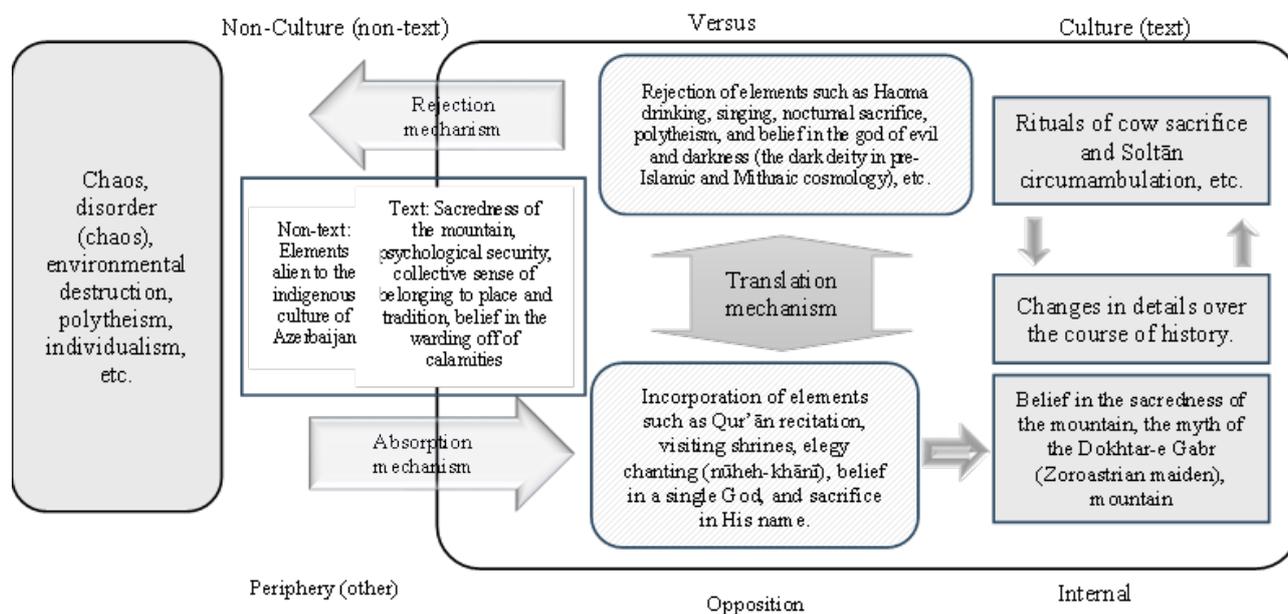


Fig. 7. The process of text production in the semiotic sphere of mount Sahand in the Tartu–Moscow school model. Source: Authors.

sphere has played a special role and contributed to the semantic enrichment of the rituals. The Turkic semiosphere, with its emphasis on connection with nature, reverence for ancestors, and belief in supernatural forces, forms the main foundation of these rituals. The Iranian semiosphere, with its emphasis on Mithraic myths and rituals, has given these rituals semantic depth. Finally, the Islamic semiosphere, with its emphasis on moral and spiritual concepts, has also influenced these rituals. The studied rituals, as cultural and semiotic texts, are not only a reflection of these meaning systems but also actively participate in the process of meaning-making and transmitting cultural values. These rituals, using signs such as the mountain, sacrifice, circumambulation, etc., represent and reinforce the beliefs, values, and collective identity of local communities. The cow sacrifice ritual, focusing on the symbols of sacrifice, the mountain, and the neshangah, represents and reinforces the belief in averting calamities and seeking the satisfaction of deities. The circumambulation ritual of Mount Sultan, with its emphasis on the symbols of circumambulation and the mountain, reinforces

the belief in pilgrimage and seeking blessings from saints, religious figures, the sky god, and Mithra.

This research, by emphasizing Lotman's cultural semiotics approach, shows that the analysis of cultural phenomena, including rituals, requires attention to the complexity and multi-layered nature of meaning systems. This approach, by emphasizing the active role of humans and nature in the process of meaning-making, provides a deeper understanding of cultural and natural phenomena and their role in shaping individual and collective identity. In conclusion, this study, while providing a comprehensive picture of the place of the mountain in the cultural rituals of Sahand, emphasizes the importance of preserving and revitalizing this intangible cultural heritage. Given the dynamism and continuous evolution of culture, the continuation and reproduction of these rituals require attention to their cultural, social, and historical contexts. Future research can contribute to completing and deepening this study by focusing on other dimensions of these rituals, including the role of historical structures on the mountain, historical changes, and a comparative study of these rituals with similar ones.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in conducting this research.

## Endnotes

1. To identify the cultural signs in the customs and traditions of the communities within the Sahand cultural sphere, it is essential to examine Turkic myths and culture alongside those of ancient Iran and Islam, due to the pivotal role of the Azerbaijani Turkic language as the native medium of cultural transmission throughout history.

2. According to the poems of village poets and accounts from the elders, in earlier times during the performance of the ritual at the mountain summit, playing the *sāz* (long-necked lute) and reciting poetry were customary.

(Tirə sāngin qurbānīm – dolandırdıq başıma – çoxları busə vurdu – tirə sāngin daşına, heyf ola Əkbərçara – yollər bir az qolaydır – dağda sazın yerinə – növhədir ah o vaydır) Excerpt from a poem by Akbar Barādanī Esfanjān about the cow sacrifice ritual.

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