CULTURAL MEANING AS A RELATIONAL REALITY: INTERPRETATION, PRACTICE AND CONTINUITY

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Summary. What persists when a cultural practice changes its form? This article argues that the survival of an artefact, the repetition of a performance, and the continuity of cultural meaning are different phenomena. It advances a relational account of cultural meaning as a publicly accessible yet historically revisable pattern of interpretation, embodied competence, and transmission. The argument reconstructs Simmel's tension between objective and subjective culture, Gadamer's account of historically situated understanding, MacIntyre's practice-based conception of tradition, and Assmann's distinction between communicative and cultural memory. It then engages Russian-language philosophy of culture and Central Asian intellectual and performance traditions. Rather than claiming to discover a new universal theory, the article develops the Meaning–Agency–Continuity (MAC) framework into a diagnostic matrix with explicit rival explanations and conditions under which it fails. The Karakalpak jiraw–bakhshi tradition is discussed as a documented illustration, not as original fieldwork. The result is a non-deterministic account of cultural continuity: preservation, critical reinterpretation, and competent participation can diverge, and none is sufficient in isolation. This framework is intended for philosophical comparison and future evidence-based cultural research.

Keywords: philosophy of culture, cultural meaning, social ontology, hermeneutics, cultural memory, embodied practice, Karakalpak epic tradition, cultural continuity.

1. Introduction: the problem of meaningful persistence

A manuscript can survive in an archive after its language has ceased to be widely understood. A melody can be performed with considerable technical accuracy while the social occasion that once gave it force has disappeared. Conversely, a community may alter the words, setting, and instruments of a performance while recognising it as part of a continuing tradition. These possibilities reveal a problem that the familiar opposition between preservation and change does not solve: what, exactly, continues when culture continues?

Three answers are often conflated. Material continuity concerns the survival of objects, recordings, and documents. Formal continuity concerns recognisable conventions, genres, and sequences of action. Meaningful continuity concerns the availability of historically connected interpretations and forms of participation. The third is neither reducible to the first two nor entirely independent of them. It requires an account of how public meanings exist, how persons acquire competence, and how interpretations can change without becoming arbitrary.

This question is not new. Simmel identified tensions between the accumulation of objectified cultural forms and their appropriation by living persons [1, 2]. Gadamer rejected the picture of understanding as an escape from historical belonging [1]. MacIntyre described traditions as historically extended arguments rather than inventories of unchanged propositions [2]. Ricoeur also emphasised the difficult relation between memory and historical reconstruction [3]. Assmann examined how collective remembrance depends on distinct media and temporal scales [4]. The problem is therefore not a shortage of general concepts. It is the lack of a sufficiently discriminating account of what each concept explains when the object of inquiry is a particular practice that has been archived, taught, performed, and revised.

The article offers a focused contribution. It defines the mode of existence of cultural meaning as relational and institutionally supported rather than simply subjective or object-like, distinguishes four diagnostic questions that cannot be collapsed into one another and specifies counterexamples and rival accounts. It does not claim that cultural disagreement signals decline or that one form of reasoning must govern every tradition. The question is philosophical and comparative, not an assessment of any country, faith, or political programme.

2. Method, scope, and the limits of inference

The study employs conceptual analysis and critical comparison of philosophical positions. The selected literature comprises primary philosophical works and recognised interpretive studies, together with regionally relevant scholarship on culture and epic performance. The corpus is purposive, not systematic. Its

selection reflects the concepts needed to test the proposed distinctions rather than the frequency with which a term occurs in a database. No interviews, observations, or statistical tests were conducted. Descriptions of Karakalpak performance are drawn from published documentation [5, 6] and should not be confused with independently verified field evidence.

The argument proceeds through five steps. First, it distinguishes a cultural form from the meanings and competencies through which it is enacted. Second, it compares hermeneutic, practice-based, symbolic, and social-ontological accounts. Third, it derives four questions for examining meaningful transmission. Fourth, it asks what would count against the proposed account and what a rival theory might explain better. Fifth, it considers the documented jiraw–bakhshi tradition as a bounded example. Claims about specific performances, transmission rates, or contemporary practitioners are deliberately avoided where the cited material does not establish them.

3. The social ontology of cultural meaning

The phrase "cultural meaning exists" conceals at least three different assertions. A manuscript exists as a physical object, a linguistic pattern exists as a reproducible form and the significance of that pattern exists only in a historically situated practice of interpretation. These claims are not interchangeable. A recording may survive the death of its performer while the practical knowledge required to interpret it becomes rare. Conversely, a performance may depart from the wording of an archival recording while preserving a recognizable narrative relationship. Cultural meaning is therefore neither a material property of an artefact nor a private impression added by an isolated spectator.

Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms treats cultural expression as constitutive of a human world rather than as a mere reflection of external objects [7]. Geertz's interpretive anthropology directs attention to publicly intelligible webs of significance [8]. Taylor emphasizes background understandings that render shared activities imaginable [9]. Yet these accounts are not equivalent. Cassirer emphasizes symbolic mediation, Geertz the interpretation of socially situated signs, and Taylor the historically available horizons of collective understanding. Their differences matter because a symbol may be recognizable without its evaluative significance being shared, and shared expectations may persist even when participants dispute a symbol's meaning.

A second dispute concerns what holds a social meaning in place. Searle's account of institutional reality highlights collectively recognized status functions [10]. Gilbert's plural-subject approach makes joint commitment important for certain collective phenomena [11], whereas Tuomela distinguishes forms of we-mode participation from merely parallel individual conduct [12]. Epstein questions whether a single formula for collective acceptance adequately captures the grounding and anchoring of social facts [13]. These accounts caution against a loose appeal to "intersubjectivity." A festival programme, a customary performance and a museum classification can be socially established in different ways. Not every meaningful practice is an institution with a formally assigned status, and not every shared practice rests on explicit joint commitment.

This article adopts a modest relational ontology. Its relata are (a) material or performative carriers, (b) historically learned interpretive competences, (c) socially organized expectations and permissions, and (d) episodes of enactment and reception. Meaning is sustained through patterned relations among these relata, not by any one considered separately. The claim is relational in Emirbayer's methodological sense of giving priority to transactions and unfolding connections over isolated substances [14]. It does not imply that every relation is equally important, that interpretations are unconstrained, or that an analyst may infer shared meaning from mere co-presence.

Two consequences follow. First, the same recorded narrative can remain materially identical while its social significance changes because competences, audiences or conditions of performance change. Second, variation in wording need not entail discontinuity where participants sustain recognizable relationships of narrative, skill and purpose. This is an ontological claim about the conditions of meaningful cultural existence, not a claim that all transformations are desirable. It must be examined alongside power, inequality and material resources, which may explain why some participants can maintain these relations and others cannot [15].

4. Why existing accounts are necessary but insufficient for this question

4.1. Objectification and the interpretive gap

Simmel's discussion of the tragedy of culture identifies a structural tension: objective cultural products can multiply beyond an individual's capacity to appropriate them [16]. Levit's Russian-language reconstruction clarifies the continuing relevance of this tension for philosophy of culture [17]. Yet a growing archive does not necessarily imply alienation. Specialist institutions can extend access through translation, teaching, and collaborative interpretation. The unresolved issue is not whether cultural products multiply, but

whether the pathways linking products to living competencies remain available. That is a more specific question than Simmel's diagnosis alone supplies.

4.2. Historical understanding and contested inheritance

For Gadamer, understanding takes place within historically effected horizons rather than from a view outside tradition [1]. MacIntyre adds that practices and traditions contain standards of excellence and internal disputes [2]. These positions are close to the present argument. The article does not claim priority over them. Their limitation for the present purpose is analytical rather than philosophical: neither supplies, as such, a compact procedure for separating archival survival, tacit mastery, justified authority, and intergenerational reinterpretation in a particular cultural case. The MAC matrix is proposed as a bridge between these concerns, not a replacement for hermeneutics.

The account must nevertheless resist a tempting distortion of Gadamer and MacIntyre. If every practice is historically conditioned, it does not follow that its inherited authority is automatically justified. Equally, a tradition need not submit every action to continuous discursive examination. Its standards may be enacted in apprenticeship, correction, and the judgement of experienced practitioners. The relevant question is whether forms of answerability exist within the practice, including embodied and relational forms, rather than whether every participant offers abstract philosophical arguments.

4.3. Memory, invention, and historical difference

Assmann distinguishes communicative memory from longer-lived cultural memory supported by symbolic forms and institutions [4]. Hobsbawm and Ranger show that practices presented as ancient may have relatively recent histories of formalisation [18]. Shils, by contrast, emphasises the significance of transmission in the very idea of tradition [19]. Together these positions prevent two errors: equating age with authenticity, and treating adaptation as proof of rupture. The historical task is to reconstruct which elements were used, modified, or retrospectively attributed to an earlier period. A philosophical framework must leave room for such findings rather than predetermine them.

4.4. Contributions from CIS and regional scholarship

Russian-language scholarship provides a complementary vocabulary for the relation between culture, historical forms, and meaning. Gurevich's discussion of classical traditions resists reducing cultural philosophy to one school [20], Perov stresses historical dimensions of cultural understanding [21], Pisarchik's interpretation of Weber, read alongside Weber's interpretive sociology [22], draws attention to rationalisation and the distinction between means and ends [23]. Popov foregrounds the category of meaning [24]. These studies are interpretive contributions, not substitutes for the primary texts of Simmel, Gadamer, or Weber. Their value lies in showing how questions of meaning and historicity have been articulated within a different scholarly conversation.

Central Asian sources offer additional intellectual contrasts. Al-Farabi's account of human cultivation and ordered association raises questions about the ends served by shared practices [25]. Al-Biruni's comparative description of unfamiliar customs exemplifies the importance of careful contextual inquiry [26]. Navoi's ethical-literary reflections attend to conduct and the relations through which values become perceptible [27]. None should be assimilated without remainder to a contemporary theory of autonomous agency. In particular, an account centred on ordered excellence may sit uneasily with unrestricted reinterpretation. The comparison is valuable precisely because it makes that tension explicit rather than claiming a seamless historical genealogy.

5. Reconstructing the MAC framework as a diagnostic matrix

Meaning–Agency–Continuity (MAC) is introduced here as a diagnostic framework rather than a new general theory of culture. Its three terms identify three problems: what is understood, who can act in relation to it, and how relations between successive enactments are maintained. Four diagnostic questions follow from the interaction of these problems. Interpretive access concerns the availability of competences and contexts required to understand a practice. Situated agency concerns opportunities to learn, perform, adapt or decline participation. Answerability concerns whether participants can respond to challenges in locally meaningful forms, including demonstration and apprenticeship rather than only verbal debate. Temporal connection concerns whether a later practice retains a historically traceable relation to earlier performances, without demanding textual identity.

Answerability should not be confused with a universal obligation to offer abstract rational justifications. A learner may demonstrate knowledge by performing a sequence, adjusting to a mentor's correction or explaining a narrative decision in the terms of the practice. Polanyi's account of tacit knowing [28] and Bourdieu's analysis of embodied practice [15] explain why propositional speech cannot exhaust cultural competence. The point is not that tradition must pass an external philosophical examination. It is that claims about continuity should remain open to evidence from practitioners and their actual modes of learning.

The framework adds little where an existing theory already explains the case. Its narrower contribution is a comparative test: it separates the continued presence of a cultural carrier from continued competence, participation and intergenerational linkage, then asks which distinction actually changes the interpretation of a documented case. A purely archival explanation may establish preservation but not performance competence. An oral-formulaic explanation may establish patterned recomposition but not the conditions of access to apprenticeship. A heritage-governance explanation may account for public recognition but not necessarily the social distribution of interpretive authority. MAC is useful only when bringing these distinct explanations into a discriminating comparison.

Table 1 provides a conceptual rather than quantitative matrix. The four questions do not form a scale, and there is no defensible rule requiring all four to score positively. The framework would lose explanatory value if cases routinely showed meaningful continuity without any demonstrable relation to inherited competences, or if a rival account explained all relevant differences with fewer assumptions. The proposed questions should therefore be used to search for counterexamples as actively as confirming instances.

Table 1. MAC diagnostic questions, evidence requirements and rival explanations

6. Conditions of failure, counterexamples, and the problem of crisis

A conceptual model is useful only if it can misdescribe a case. The MAC framework would be inadequate if it systematically classified practices as discontinuous merely because practitioners could not articulate their reasons, despite clear evidence of skilled intergenerational transmission. It would also fail if historical comparison showed that what the model called "continuity" was an unrelated contemporary invention whose participants made no meaningful claim of connection. Finally, it would be too weak to explain a case where the relevant outcome depended principally on material resources, language policy, or access to institutions rather than on interpretive relations. These are reasons to revise or supplement the framework, not exceptions to explain away.

Crisis must also be separated from the model's definitions. It cannot simply mean "the four dimensions are absent," because that would make the conclusion circular. A claim of cultural crisis requires independent evidence of a valued capacity or practice becoming significantly harder to reproduce over time, together with an account of whose capacity is affected and according to which historically situated standard. The MAC matrix can help identify the character of a disruption after such evidence has been established. It cannot establish the existence, severity, or cause of a crisis by itself.

Consider three rival descriptions of a recorded performance tradition. A preservation account asks whether recordings, texts, and instruments survive. A practice-theoretical account asks whether embodied competence and standards of excellence are reproduced [15]. A memory-oriented account asks how groups connect present performances to remembered pasts [4]. MAC asks how these findings fit together and where they diverge. If all three rivals already provide a satisfactory explanation of the case, the MAC matrix adds little. Its contribution is strongest only where the divergence among archival survival, competent enactment, and claimed historical connection matters to the question under study.

7. Karakalpak jiraw–bakhshi practice as a bounded illustration

Karakalpak jiraw and bakhshi traditions offer a focused illustration of the difference between preserving a cultural product and sustaining a practice of making meaning. UNESCO's documentation of bakhshi art describes oral epic performance, instrumental accompaniment, transmission and training in the Uzbek cultural setting [5]. The 2026 study by Maxammatdinova and O'teshova discusses jiraw–bakhshi traditions and master–apprentice transmission [6]. These sources establish a relevant field of practice, but they do not by themselves document the full biography of any individual performer or demonstrate the effect of digitization on a particular community. The discussion below is accordingly a bounded interpretive application, not fieldwork.

The strongest theoretical bridge comes from oral-formulaic scholarship. Lord's The Singer of Tales shows that in studied oral epic traditions composition occurs in performance through learned formulas and themes [29]. Reichl's study of Turkic oral epic poetry explicitly includes Karakalpak traditions and treats performance, story-patterns, formulaic diction, memory and transformations as central analytical issues [30]. These works make it untenable to assume, without further evidence, that authentic continuity requires every performance to reproduce an invariant verbal text. The relevant question becomes which skills, narrative resources and audience expectations permit a new performance to be recognized as belonging to an inherited tradition. This conclusion needs a qualification. Lord's fieldwork is not direct evidence about every Karakalpak singer, and a theoretical analogy cannot replace local recordings, transcription or ethnographic observation. Reichl supplies the closer comparative frame, but a claim about a particular episode would still require a named performer, dated recording and documented comparison. For that reason the article does not invent a singer, a performance date or an archival sequence. The available documentation supports the

practice-level analysis that follows, while the absence of a paired performance corpus remains an explicit evidentiary limit.

Applying MAC at this documented practice level produces four different questions. Interpretive access asks whether a recording supplies enough language, performance and narrative context to be intelligible beyond the immediate audience. The evidence from UNESCO and the local study identifies transmission as relevant, but does not establish how comprehensively particular recordings are annotated. Situated agency asks what apprentices learn to vary, not simply what they memorize, oral-formulaic theory predicts that acquired compositional competence matters, while a specific Karakalpak learning sequence still needs documentation. Answerability asks how a performer's choices are evaluated in practice—through teachers, audiences or performance conventions—without assuming that legitimacy depends on a written statement of reasons. Temporal connection asks whether recurring narrative patterns, repertoires and learned performance relations sustain continuity despite variable wording.

This comparison shows where rival explanations outperform MAC. Oral-formulaic theory is stronger for explaining how a skilled performer recomposes narrative material. Heritage studies, including Smith's critique of authorized heritage discourse [31] and Hafstein's analysis of intangible-heritage governance [32], are stronger for examining how official recognition shapes the public category of "heritage." MAC has a narrower role: it prevents these explanatory levels from being collapsed. An inscription, a digitized file, a successful apprenticeship and a newly composed performance are not four interchangeable measures of cultural survival.

The institutional relationship of the present author to the Nukus Branch of the Uzbekistan State Institute of Arts and Culture is relevant to interpretation of [6], which appeared in that institution's journal. Institutional proximity does not disqualify a source, but it requires transparent disclosure and independent triangulation. UNESCO's documentation and Reichl's independent comparative monograph are used here for that purpose. The journal article is treated as one contextual source, not as decisive evidence for the entire argument. Detailed scholarship by Karakalpak folklorists such as Maqsetov, Ayimbetov and Sag'itov deserves engagement in subsequent archival work, but no unverified title, year or quotation is attributed to them in this manuscript.

A concrete next study would compare two dated recordings of one identified epic narrative, document the performer's training history, distinguish formulaic variation from transcription error, and interview knowledgeable listeners about what remains recognizable. That design could reveal whether MAC identifies differences missed by a performance-centered or institution-centered analysis. Until such evidence exists, a general account of the tradition must not be presented as a verified case study of a specific performance.

8. Discussion: contribution and unresolved tensions

The article's argument is not that the MAC framework replaces hermeneutics, social ontology, oral-formulaic theory or heritage studies. Gadamer explains why understanding is historically situated [1], MacIntyre treats a living tradition as an extended argument about its own goods [2], Lord and Reichl explain mechanisms of oral composition [30, 31] and social ontologists disagree over the relations through which collective facts persist [10, 26–28]. MAC cannot claim originality by repeating these insights. Its limited contribution is to specify where an account of material survival, social recognition or performance variation has not yet demonstrated continuity of meaning.

Three objections remain. First, an analyst may misread unequal access as semantic loss when the decisive issue is economic exclusion. Second, answerability may be expressed in embodied forms inaccessible to an outsider. The absence of explicit explanation does not establish the absence of competence. Third, there may be practices whose continuity is sustained through ritual repetition with little permissible variation. Such cases are not ruled out in advance. They are counterexamples to any universal thesis that change is required for living tradition, and they restrict MAC to a diagnostic role rather than a law of historical development.

The proposed distinction between transformation and crisis must also avoid circularity. Crisis is not defined as failure to satisfy MAC. It is a historically substantiated disruption—for example, documented loss of training pathways or the inability of successive participants to recover a practice's use despite surviving artefacts. MAC asks which dimension of that disruption is relevant. Independent historical evidence establishes whether disruption occurred. A disagreement among performers or the emergence of a new variant is insufficient by itself.

The implications are methodological. Philosophical comparison can identify conceptual errors, but claims about actual Karakalpak performance require recordings, locally produced scholarship and participant testimony. Future work should consider the distribution of cultural authority and the potential gap between

heritage classification and practitioners' own categories. Such inquiry would be more informative than presenting institutional recognition as an unambiguous measure of cultural vitality.

9. Conclusion

Cultural continuity is not identical with the survival of objects, the repetition of formal features, or the declaration that a practice is ancient. It is better approached as a set of historically situated relations among interpretable forms, embodied competencies, claims of authority, and modes of transmission. A relational ontology explains why cultural meanings can be publicly accessible without being fixed properties of objects and why practices can be recognisable without remaining unchanged.

The MAC matrix offers four questions—interpretive access, situated agency, answerability, and temporal connection—while explicitly admitting counterexamples and rival explanations. Its usefulness lies in distinguishing kinds of persistence and in preventing the rhetoric of cultural crisis from replacing historical argument. The Karakalpak jiraw–bakhshi example shows how local scholarship can expose the limits of an overly discursive model of agency. The next task is not to proclaim the model confirmed, but to compare specific documented traditions and establish where these distinctions clarify the evidence and where they do not.

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Rezyume. Madaniy amaliyot o‘z shaklini o‘zgartirganda nima saqlanib qoladi? Ushbu maqolada artefaktning saqlanib qolishi, spektaklning takrorlanishi va madaniy ma’noning davomiyligi turli xil hodisalar ekanligi ta’kidlanadi. U madaniy ma’noning jamoatchilikka ochiq, ammo tarixan qayta ko‘rib chiqilishi mumkin bo‘lgan talqin, mujassamlashgan kompetensiya va uzatish namunasi sifatidagi munosabatni ilgari suradi. Ushbu dalil Zimmelning obyektiv va subyektiv madaniyat o‘rtasidagi ziddiyatni, Gadamerning tarixiy vaziyatni tushunish haqidagi talqinini, Makintayrning an’ana haqidagi amaliyotga asoslangan konsepsiyasini va Assmanning kommunikativ va madaniy xotira o‘rtasidagi farqni qayta tiklaydi. Keyin u rus tilidagi madaniyat falsafasi va Markaziy Osiyo intellektual hamda ijrochilik an’analarini qamrab oladi. Yangi universal nazariyani kashf etishga da’vo qilish o‘rniga, maqola Ma’no-Agentlik-Uzluksizlik (MAC) tizimini aniq raqobatdosh tushuntirishlar va u muvaffaqiyatsizlikka uchraydigan shartlarga ega diagnostik matritsaga aylantiradi. Qoraqalpoq jirov-baxshichilik an’anasi asl dala ishi sifatida emas, balki hujjatlashtirilgan illyustratsiya sifatida muhokama qilinadi. Natijada madaniy vorisiylikning noaniq talqini yuzaga keladi: saqlash, tanqidiy qayta talqin qilish va malakali ishtirok bir-biridan farq qilishi mumkin va ularning hech biri alohida holda yetarli emas. Ushbu asos falsafiy taqqoslash va kelajakdagi dalillarga asoslangan madaniy tadqiqotlar uchun mo‘ljallangan.

Резюме. Что сохраняется, когда культурная практика меняет свою форму? В данной статье подчеркивается, что сохранение артефакта, повторение спектакля и продолжительность культурного смысла являются разными явлениями. Он продвигает отношение к культурному смыслу как к образцу интерпретации, воплощенной компетенции и передачи, которые открыты для общественности, но могут быть исторически пересмотрены. Этот аргумент воссоздает противоречие между объективной и субъективной культурой Зиммеля, трактовку Гадамера о понимании исторической ситуации, практико-ориентированную концепцию традиции Макинтайра и различие между коммуникативной и культурной памятью Ассмана. Затем он охватывает философию культуры на русском языке и интеллектуальные и исполнительские традиции Центральной Азии. Вместо того чтобы претендовать на открытие новой универсальной теории, статья превращает систему "смысл-агент-непрерывность" (MAC) в диагностическую матрицу с четкими конкурирующими объяснениями и условиями, при которых она терпит неудачу. Традиция каракалпакского жырау-бахши обсуждается не как подлинная полевая работа, а как документированная иллюстрация. В результате возникает неоднозначная интерпретация культурной преемственности: сохранение, критическая интерпретация и квалифицированное участие могут отличаться друг от друга, и ни один из них не является достаточным в отдельности. Эта основа предназначена для философского сопоставления и будущих исследований культуры, основанных на доказательствах.

Kalit so‘zlar: madaniyat falsafasi, madaniy ma’no, ijtimoiy ontologiya, germenevtika, madaniy xotira, gavdalangan amaliyot, qoraqalpoq epik an’anasi, madaniy vorisiylik.

Ключевые слова: философия культуры, культурный смысл, социальная онтология, герменевтика, культурная память, воплощенная практика, каракалпакская эпическая традиция, культурное наследие.