THE SILENT LANGUAGE OF SHAME: CULTURAL AND EMOTIONAL DIMENSIONS OF UYAT IN KYRGYZ LIFE

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Abstract - The present study explores uyat, a culturally embedded form of shame in Kyrgyz society, as both a social regulator and an embodied emotional experience. Drawing on qualitative thematic analysis of expert interviews and grounded in cross-cultural psychological theory, the study conceptualizes uyat as a multidimensional construct integrating moral norms, social evaluation, and emotional restraint. The findings demonstrate that uyat operates as a collective emotion regulating behavior, reinforcing social hierarchies, and shaping gender norms. At the same time, cultural constraints on emotional expression contribute to the somatization of distress, positioning the body as a primary medium for communicating unarticulated affect. The study identifies 325 initial codes that were systematically organized into six overarching themes. The findings highlight the dual nature of uyat: as a mechanism of social cohesion and as a source of psychological tension. These results contribute to the development of culturally sensitive frameworks for understanding emotion, mental health, and help-seeking behaviors in Kyrgyzstan.

I. INTRODUCTION

Emotional life is profoundly shaped by cultural frameworks that define what can be felt, expressed, and communicated. In Kyrgyz society, one of the most influential of these frameworks is uyat, a concept often translated as "shame," yet encompassing a far broader range of moral, social, and emotional meanings. Uyat functions as a system of unwritten rules governing behavior, regulating social relationships, and maintaining collective harmony.

Despite its centrality, uyat remains underexplored in empirical psychology. Existing research in cross-cultural psychology has demonstrated that emotions such as shame and guilt vary significantly across cultural contexts, particularly in societies emphasizing interdependence and social harmony (Markus &Kitayama, 1991; Heine, 2008). In Central Asian contexts, uyat represents a culturally specific form of socio-moral regulation that integrates internal emotional states with external social evaluation (Stewart, 1996; Khalid, 2016).

This study seeks to explore uyat through qualitative thematic analysis, focusing on its cultural meanings, social functions, and psychological consequences, with particular attention to its embodied dimensions.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Shame and guilt are self-conscious emotions central to moral functioning and social behavior (Tangney & Dearing, 2002). While guilt is typically associated with specific actions, shame involves a global negative evaluation of the self (Tangney et al., 2007). Excessive shame has been linked to depression, anxiety, and maladaptive coping (Kim et al., 2011).

However, these constructs are not culturally universal in their expression. In collectivist societies, emotions are deeply intertwined with social evaluation and group harmony (Mesquita& Walker, 2003). Cultural systems shape not only how emotions are experienced but also how they are expressed and regulated.

Within this framework, uyat emerges as a culturally specific form of shame that functions as a social regulator governing behavior through the anticipation of public judgment and the preservation of social reputation (Thibault, 2019; McBrien, 2021).

III. METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design using semi-structured expert interviews and thematic analysis. The approach was chosen to capture the depth, nuance, and cultural specificity of uyat as a socio-emotional construct. The study followed established principles of qualitative inquiry, prioritizing contextual understanding and interpretive analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Participants

A purposive sample of ten experts was recruited to provide diverse and interdisciplinary perspectives on uyat. Participants included anthropologists, cultural scholars, linguists, historians, mental health professionals, social workers, and representatives of traditional and community knowledge systems. This sampling strategy ensured both academic and culturally grounded insights.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews lasting between 60 and 120 minutes. Interview questions explored definitions of uyat, its manifestations in everyday life, its role in regulating behavior, and its influence on emotional expression, gender norms, and help-seeking practices. All

interviews were conducted in a flexible format, allowing participants to elaborate on culturally specific meanings and lived experiences. Interviews were transcribed verbatim for analysis.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis combined deductive and inductive approaches: initial coding was informed by theoretical constructs related to shame and cultural psychology, while remaining open to emergent patterns in the data.

A total of 325 initial codes were identified across the dataset. These codes were iteratively reviewed, refined, and grouped into higher-order categories. Through a process of constant comparison and conceptual abstraction, the codes were ultimately organized into six overarching themes that capture the multidimensional nature of uyat.

To enhance analytical rigor, themes were reviewed for internal coherence and distinctiveness, and interpretations were grounded in participants' narratives.

V. RESULTS

The thematic analysis yielded six major themes, reflecting the complexity of uyat as a cultural, emotional, and social phenomenon. These themes emerged from the systematic organization of 325 initial codes and are presented below.

1. Uyat as a Moral and Social Regulator

Participants consistently described uyat as a system of unwritten rules that governs acceptable behavior. It functions as a moral compass rooted in collective expectations, with behavior constantly evaluated through the lens of social judgment. The phrase "what will people say" encapsulates this regulatory mechanism, highlighting the central role of public opinion.

2. Collective Emotion and Internalized Surveillance

Uyat was conceptualized as a collective emotion rather than an individual experience. Participants emphasized the internalization of social evaluation, describing a persistent sense of being observed and judged. This results in a form of internalized surveillance, where individuals regulate their behavior in anticipation of external scrutiny.

3. Gendered Dimensions of Uyat

The findings revealed pronounced gender differences in the experience and enforcement of uyat. Women are positioned as primary bearers of family honor and are subject to stricter behavioral expectations, particularly regarding modesty and public conduct. At the same time, men experience uyat in relation to honor and social status, though in distinct ways.

4. Embodiment and Somatization of Emotional Experience

A central theme concerned the embodiment of uyat. Participants reported that strong emotions are often not verbally expressed but instead manifest through the body. The body functions as a culturally acceptable channel for emotional expression, with common symptoms including physical tension, chest discomfort, heat sensations, and sleep disturbances.

5. Uyat as a Barrier to Help-Seeking

Uyat was identified as a significant barrier to seeking psychological and medical help. Fear of stigma, public exposure, and social judgment discourages individuals from disclosing distress. This contributes to delays in treatment and reinforces the privatization of emotional suffering.

6. The Dual Nature of Uyat

Finally, participants emphasized the ambivalent nature of uyat. On one hand, it promotes social harmony, moral behavior, and cohesion. On the other, it contributes to emotional suppression, internal conflict, and psychological distress. This duality reflects the tension between collective expectations and individual well-being.

VI. DISCUSSION

This study set out to better understand uyat as it is lived and experienced in Kyrgyz culture. What emerges is a picture of uyat not simply as an emotion, but as a deeply woven part of social life—something that exists between people as much as within them. This aligns with broader perspectives in cultural psychology, which emphasize that emotions are shaped within relational and social contexts rather than existing purely inside the individual (Mesquita& Walker, 2003).

One of the most striking insights is how naturally uyat becomes internalized. Participants described it less as a rule and more as a feeling that develops over time. As one noted, "Uyat is not something people explain to you—it is something you begin to feel, as if others are always present, even when you are alone." Another described it as "an internal voice that asks, 'what will people think?' before you even act." These reflections echo the idea that in interdependent cultural contexts, the self is shaped through internalized social expectations (Markus &Kitayama, 1991). Over time, external norms become part of one's inner world.

What is particularly interesting is that uyat often works ahead of behavior. People do not simply feel shame after doing something wrong—they adjust their actions in order to avoid feeling it at all. As one participant put it, "You do not wait to feel shame—you act in order not to feel it." This anticipatory

quality resonates with existing work on shame as a regulatory emotion that helps maintain social norms (Tangney & Dearing, 2002), but the findings here extend this understanding by showing how strongly this regulation can operate before action takes place.

The role of the body in experiencing uyat also stands out. Instead of being spoken about directly, emotional discomfort is often felt physically. Participants described this vividly: "People don't say 'I feel ashamed'; they say 'my chest is tight' or 'I cannot breathe properly.'" Another explained, "It comes as heat, as pressure—you feel it physically before you even name it." This supports cross-cultural findings that in contexts where emotional expression is constrained, distress is often communicated through somatic symptoms (Panter-Brick, 2014). It suggests that the body becomes a culturally acceptable channel for emotions that cannot easily be verbalized.

Gender plays an important role in shaping how uyat is experienced. Women, in particular, are under constant social visibility. As one participant noted, "A woman represents the family—her behavior is always visible, always judged." At the same time, men face their own pressures. As another explained, "For men, it is more about failure—if you cannot provide or succeed, that is uyat." These patterns reflect broader observations about the role of shame in maintaining social norms and hierarchies, including gendered expectations (Mahmood, 2005).

The findings also help explain why many people hesitate to seek help. As one participant said, "Going to a psychologist can itself be seen as uyat." Another added, "People prefer to keep things inside rather than risk bringing shame." This reflects well-documented links between shame and avoidance, withdrawal, and reluctance to disclose distress (Tangney et al., 2007). In this context, uyat contributes to the privatization of suffering and may delay access to care.

Future Perspectives: Change and Continuity

At the same time, uyat is not unchanging. Participants described noticeable shifts, especially among younger people. As one observed, "Young people still understand uyat, but they question it more." Another noted, "There is more openness now—people talk more, especially online." These changes can be understood within broader processes of globalization and cultural transformation, where traditional norms are increasingly negotiated rather than simply accepted (Heine, 2008).

Digital spaces seem to both intensify and transform uyat. As one participant said, "Before, it was your neighbors—now it can be the whole internet." This reflects how mechanisms of social evaluation are expanding in scale and visibility. At the same time, online environments also create opportunities for new forms of expression and support, potentially reshaping how shame is experienced and communicated.

Looking ahead, participants suggested that the future of uyat lies not in its disappearance, but in its transformation. As one put it, "We cannot remove uyat—but we can change how it is understood." This perspective is consistent with culturally sensitive approaches in psychology, which emphasize adapting interventions to existing cultural frameworks rather than attempting to replace them (Panter-Brick, 2014).

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