



A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE OF NUMERICAL SYMBOLISM IN UZBEK AND ENGLISH FOLKLORE

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Abstract. The article examines the symbolic functions of numbers in Uzbek and English folklore, with particular attention to the numbers seven and thirteen. Numerical elements in folk narratives are considered not simply as quantitative indicators but as culturally determined signs that preserve mythological, religious, and ritual conceptions. The comparative analysis demonstrates that the number seven possesses a marked symbolic status in both traditions, although its semantic realization depends on the cultural context. By contrast, the symbolism of thirteen reveals a greater degree of cultural differentiation, particularly in relation to European beliefs concerning misfortune. The study argues that numerical symbolism represents an important component of the cultural memory encoded in folklore and should be interpreted within the mythological and historical environment of each tradition.

Keywords: numerical symbolism, Uzbek folklore, English folklore, number seven, number thirteen, mythopoetics, cultural memory, comparative analysis.

Numbers have occupied a significant place in human culture since the earliest stages of civilization. Although their primary function is to express quantity, their use in mythology, religion, ritual practices, and folklore demonstrates that numerical units may acquire meanings extending far beyond mathematical reference. Within traditional narratives, a number can organize time and space, determine the number of characters or trials, mark repetition, and indicate the transition from an ordinary situation to a supernatural one. Consequently, the study of numerical symbolism provides an opportunity to reconstruct certain elements of the worldview underlying a particular folkloric tradition.

The symbolic meaning of a number cannot be separated from the cultural environment in which it functions. J. E. Cirlot observes that numbers occupy an important position in symbolic systems and that certain numerical patterns are closely associated with traditional conceptions of cosmic order (Cirlot, 1971). In folklore, such meanings are preserved through repeated narrative formulas and motifs. Numbers therefore operate simultaneously on two levels: they retain their quantitative meaning while acquiring an additional symbolic function determined by mythological, religious, and cultural associations.

This phenomenon is particularly evident in the use of the number **seven**. Seven occurs frequently in the folklore of culturally and geographically different peoples and is commonly associated with completeness, transition, sacred order, or magical repetition. Its recurrence in oral narratives is rarely accidental. It may determine the duration of an action, the number of



characters, the stages of a journey, or the boundaries separating ordinary and supernatural spaces.

In English and broader European fairy-tale tradition, the symbolic function of seven can be observed in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. The seven dwarfs form a complete narrative group and inhabit a space separated from the world controlled by the hostile queen. Their house functions as a temporary place of security for Snow White. Seven in this context does more than indicate the number of characters: it contributes to the structural organization of the tale and reinforces the perception of the dwarfs as a unified folkloric group. Similar numerical organization is characteristic of fairy-tale poetics, where repeated numbers often provide stability and recognizability to narrative structures.

The number seven is equally significant in Uzbek folklore, although its semantic foundations are closely connected with the traditional worldview of Central Asian peoples. M. Jo‘rayev associates the conventional magical character of seven with archaic mythological conceptions and ancestral beliefs preserved in Uzbek folklore (Jo‘rayev, 2014). The symbolic meaning becomes particularly apparent when an action or temporal period is repeated according to a sevenfold pattern.

An illustrative example is found in the Uzbek folk tale *Hunarli yigit*, in which a giant remains ill for seven years and recovers within seven days. The parallelism between “seven years” and “seven days” transforms the numeral into an organizing element of narrative time. The first period marks prolonged disorder, whereas the second indicates recovery and the completion of that state. The motif is also associated with the traditional expression *yetti – ketdi*, reflecting the folk belief that the seventh temporal boundary may represent a decisive stage in the development of an illness (Jo‘rayev, 2014).

The significance of seven in Uzbek tradition extends beyond an individual tale. It occurs in conceptions of space, ritual practices, phraseological units, and oral narratives. Such forms as *yetti tog‘ ortida* (“beyond seven mountains”) and related expressions demonstrate how the numeral may mark spatial remoteness and the boundary between familiar and extraordinary worlds. Thus, seven becomes a means of conceptualizing not only quantity but also distance, transition, and symbolic completeness.

Recent research on Uzbek ethnoculture similarly identifies seven as an important component of traditional symbolic thought. Sayfiddinova (2026) relates its semantic development to cosmogonic beliefs, religious representations, folk tales, rituals, customs, and linguistic expressions. This wide distribution indicates that the folkloric semantics of seven cannot be reduced to a single meaning. Rather, it constitutes a complex cultural model in which sacredness, completeness, repetition, and transition intersect.

A comparative examination therefore reveals both similarity and cultural specificity. In English fairy tales, seven frequently contributes to the structural organization of characters, events, and supernatural spaces. In Uzbek folklore, it additionally preserves pronounced connections with ritual repetition, traditional beliefs, temporal cycles, and mythological



representations. The similarity lies in the marked status of the number itself, while the difference concerns the cultural mechanisms through which its symbolic meaning is realized.

A different situation can be observed in relation to the number **thirteen**. In European cultural tradition, thirteen acquired a persistent association with misfortune, violation of order, and danger. The development of this symbolism has been connected with different religious and cultural explanations, particularly those originating in Christian tradition. Regardless of the historical accuracy of individual interpretations, the negative connotations of thirteen became sufficiently established to influence folklore, literature, and everyday cultural practices.

The structural significance of thirteen is particularly interesting when it appears in opposition to twelve. Twelve traditionally represents an ordered and completed system: twelve months, twelve zodiacal divisions, and numerous religious configurations employ this number as a marker of completeness. The appearance of a thirteenth element may consequently represent an intrusion into an already completed order. In variants of the *Sleeping Beauty* narrative, the opposition between twelve accepted figures and the excluded additional fairy provides an illustrative example of this principle. The thirteenth figure becomes associated with disruption and the introduction of the curse.

The comparison with Uzbek folklore is revealing because an equally stable negative interpretation of thirteen is not evident in the material considered here. This distinction demonstrates one of the central principles of comparative research into numerical symbolism: identical numbers do not necessarily carry identical semantic values across different cultures. Their meanings emerge from the historical experience, religious traditions, mythology, and collective beliefs of particular communities.

Numerical symbolism should therefore be approached as a culturally conditioned component of folkloric poetics rather than as a universal system in which every number possesses a fixed meaning. Recent comparative research into English and Uzbek folklore and paremiology likewise shows that culturally significant numbers may overlap across traditions while differing in their frequency, semantic range, and cultural associations (Abdusalomov, 2026). Such observations are particularly important because they shift the focus from identifying “magic numbers” to examining the functions these numbers perform within particular narrative and cultural systems.

From this perspective, numbers in folklore perform several interconnected functions. At the compositional level, they organize characters, actions, repetitions, and temporal intervals. At the mythopoetic level, they reflect conceptions of cosmic structure, sacred cycles, and boundaries between different spheres of existence. At the cultural level, they preserve beliefs and associations accumulated through collective historical experience. These functions may overlap within a single folkloric motif.

The comparison of Uzbek and English material consequently demonstrates that numerical symbolism combines elements of universality and national specificity. Seven illustrates a considerable degree of typological similarity, since it occupies a marked position





in both traditions and is associated with completeness and extraordinary circumstances. Nevertheless, its semantic realization in Uzbek folklore is particularly closely related to ritual repetition and traditional mythological conceptions. Thirteen, by contrast, reveals cultural divergence: its established negative connotations in European tradition do not have a directly equivalent position in the Uzbek folkloric material examined.

In conclusion, numbers in folklore should not be regarded merely as quantitative components of a narrative. Through repeated cultural use, they become symbolic units capable of organizing narrative structure and preserving elements of collective memory. The comparative analysis of seven and thirteen demonstrates that numerical symbolism develops through the interaction of recurrent mythopoetic patterns and culturally specific beliefs. The interpretation of such motifs therefore requires attention both to their textual function and to the historical and cultural traditions within which they acquire meaning. The study of numerical symbolism from this perspective contributes to a deeper understanding of the mechanisms through which folklore preserves and transforms the worldview of a community.

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