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1-1-2008

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Hart, Kimberly, "Culture Brokers: Weavers, Photographers, Scientists, and Textile Experts" (2008). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings.* Paper 98.
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TEXTILE SOCIETY OF AMERICA
11TH BIENNIAL SYMPOSIUM
SEPTEMBER 4 - 7, 2008
2008
TEXTILES AS CULTURAL EXPRESSIONS
HONOLULU, HAWAI'I

Culture Brokers: Weavers, Photographers, Scientists, and Textile Experts

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Preface

Today I will present the history of the founding of the Yuntdag cooperative in Orselli village in western Turkey. This cooperative is a member of the DOBAG Project, or the Natural Dye Research and Development Project (Dogal Boya Arastirma ve Gelistirme Projesi). DOBAG consists of two projects, one in Orselli and another in Ayvacik, both in western Turkey. By telling this story, I will show how "insiders" and "outsiders," villagers, expatriates, textile experts, international dealers, and friends worked collaboratively to commodify a women's heritage product and transform rural life in western Turkey.

Figure 1. *Photograph of Harald Bohmer and Weaver in Orencik, Turkey, by Kimberly Hart.*

Introduction

Harald Bohmer, who founded DOBAG in 1980, is famous for revitalizing natural dyes and inspiring similar projects around the world in new production textiles of "indigenous" or "traditional" design. DOBAG is also known for its work in sustaining women's artistic production and economically developing rural villages. Dealers promote the project by describing the cooperative as one, which socially and culturally emancipates women, because it provides them with a steady income and forbids child labor. I leave aside the question of whether and how the project achieves these goals today, and focus on the collaborative, intercultural efforts needed to found the business.

The Ayvacik and Yuntdag Cooperatives

To understand the importance of the foundation of the Yuntdag cooperative, it is important to distinguish it from the cooperative based in Ayvacik. While both are in western Anatolia, produce knotted carpets and "kilims" (actually cicims) with hand-spun, plant-dyed wool, the

Yuntdag cooperative is a “women’s” cooperative. In the Ayvacik, cooperative members are the male heads of household, with some exceptions resulting from widowhood. The weavers are all female.

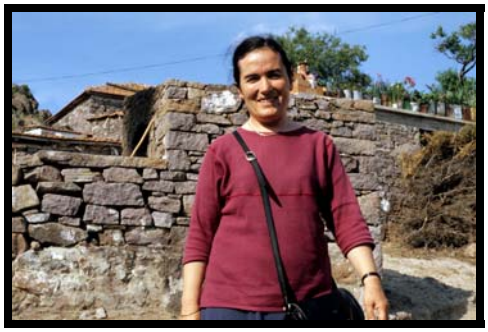

Figure 2 (left). *Photograph of Yuntdag Cooperative Families in Orselli, Turkey, by Kimberly Hart.*
Figure 3 (right). *Photograph of Serife Atlihan in Orselli, Turkey, by Kimberly Hart.*

The Yuntdag cooperative was founded as a women’s cooperative; the members, president and managers are female, but the director and dyers are male. There are also some male weavers in the Yuntdag cooperative. Gender is important in both cooperatives, in how power relationships inside the household where weaving takes place, and across the village, effect the organization of labor, the distribution of resources, and the strength and survival of the enterprise. In Orselli, these gendered relationships enable the cooperative to function as an extended family, with men taking public roles in administration and women, with the exception of Cennet Deneri, the President, acting inside the household as weavers.

While villagers administer the day-to-day operations, Professor Serife Atlihan, a textile scholar and professor at Marmara University, is the quality control expert who works with the weavers in both cooperatives to achieve a marketable product.

Harald Böhmer’s Work in DOBAG

In all written accounts of DOBAG, the story begins with Harald Bohmer, who went to Turkey in the early 1960’s as a teacher at Galatasaray High School in Istanbul. After travel and exploration in Anatolia, he became interested in Turkish textiles.

Figure 4 (left). *Photograph of plant-dyed yarns in Orselli, Turkey, by Kimberly Hart.*
Figure 5 (right). *Photograph of Josephine Powell, by Selim Eyuboglu.*

Unlike many who focus on design or pattern, Harald became interested in color because in the textiles he saw in Istanbul, in villages, and among nomads colors were made from aniline dyes. He was drawn to older textiles, he realized because they were woven with plant-dyed fibers. As a chemist, he was able to study old textiles, isolate the indigenous plants used and figure out recipes for reproducing these colors. He then taught the recipes to weavers throughout Anatolia. The recipes traveled fast and weavers began to knot with these "new" colors. However, he also saw the difficulties weavers had in earning a fair price for their hard work. To address this question, he founded the DOBAG cooperative in Ayvacik in 1981.

By selling to foreign dealers directly, he hoped to by-pass the injustices weavers experienced, when they sold to middlemen and dealers in Turkey. He established a price based on the number of knots, or for cicims, by the area of the woven piece. This fixed a relationship between the quality of the piece and its price. In the Yuntdag, for many years, weavers were paid for their labor, not for the piece, which provided them with a guaranteed income, even when their work was of a low quality.

Harald's story, while true enough, does not engage the atmosphere of the early 1980's, in Istanbul, a time of military rule following the coup, when many who had been politically active were forced to find other outlets for their interests. Intellectuals and expatriates, many of whom were interested in-for a number of reasons-Anatolian folk arts, formed a vital community in Istanbul. Harald was friends with this group, some of whom were also investigating natural dyes and Anatolian textiles, and remaining rural peoples of diverse ethnic, religious and cultural practice in Turkey. Among these was Josephine Powell. Josephine was an American photographer, who traveled to Afghanistan often. She had moved her base from Rome to Istanbul in the 1970's. As well as traveling eastwards, she had been studying Anatolian flat weaves for several years, traveling with interpreters and sometimes with Harald to nomadic camps and villages, and buying pieces from dealers. Josephine was interested in Harald's work to found the cooperative and became a participant in founding a second one.

Figure 6 (left). *Photograph of Fields outside Orselli Village, by Kimberly Hart.*
Figure 7. *Photograph outside Orselli Village, by Kimberly Hart.*

After the foundation of the first cooperative in Ayvacik, Harald and his wife, Renata, began to explore weaving in other regions in order to found a second cooperative. They learned that there were many weavers in the Yuntdag, a rural and mountainous area north of Manisa and south of Bergama. Harald went to several villages, but Orselli became the most important.

In 2001 at the end of the bulk of my doctoral research, Orselli had about 350 individuals, living

in about 89 households. The place had changed considerably since Bohmer's first visit in the early 1980's when villagers suffered from the state's abandonment of the region. Villagers struggled to eek out an existence herding, trading, and working as laborers in cotton and tobacco fields near Manisa. The Yuntdag's isolation and poverty helped maintain weaving in the villages. Marriage practices did as well. Future mothers-in-law and their daughters-in-law worked to create a trousseau of hand-woven household goods, the furniture of village homes.

Although weaving survived, the villagers felt isolated and frustrated that they had not been noticed by the state. Elderly villagers describe a life of desperation. Many families could not feed or properly clothe their children. Elderly women describe the number of babies they lost to illness. It was difficult to afford cooking gas, even firewood, since they had chopped down their oak trees, and transported the resulting charcoal by camel to cities as fuel. Brackish water from communal wells was the only source of drinking and washing water. The villagers had already made overtures to the state to improve their condition by petitioning to be attached to Manisa, divorcing themselves from Bergama, the much-hated town to their north. This eventually led to a road, electricity, and more assistance, but at the time of Bohmer's visit, the villagers were quite poor.

Harald Böhmer Meets Ahmet Çinar

When Harald Böhmer and his wife Renate made their first trip to the Yuntdag in November 1981, they were invited by Cavit Bey, a retired banker from Manisa. They went to the coffee houses, where they talked to weavers' husbands explaining they could introduce plant dyes and thereby increase the money they could earn from their weavings. While in Orselli, they stayed with Ali Acarkoc, called Ali Bey. Ali Bey was the *muhtar* (the village headman, an elected position), the *bakkal* (shopkeeper) and the *hoca* (imam). He was, therefore, the most powerful man in the village. The only man who wanted to learn dyeing was Ahmet Çinar, Ali Bey's son-in-law. Ahmet was a poor shepherd with a few sheep and a growing family.

Cennet, president of the cooperative and Alaattin, her husband, one of the dyers, described Harald and Renate's first visit. Cennet began, "I'll never forget that day, Alaattin came home and said that "*gavur*" (infidels) were in the village." She said, she slapped her knee and exclaimed in surprise, "anaaa!" This was, Alaattin pointed out, "before there was a good road, there was no electricity, and they had never met a *gavur*. The people in the village had never seen a *gavur*!" Cennet recounted the story with relish. She said laughingly, she had thought infidels had "cone heads." She said, "the next day everyone went to look at the *gavur*." "We saw," she said, "that they were normal human beings! Now, they have become like our brothers and sisters," ("*kardes*") and she laughed.

Ahmet Çinar described how when Böhmer first came to the village, people were afraid of him and the plant dyes. In this story, Ahmet was arguing that he was able to trust foreigners who introduced new practices, while many of his fellow villagers were too suspicious to do so. Ahmet was smart and charismatic, and he formed a close relationship with Bohmer, who taught him to become a master dyer.

Figure 8 (left). *Photograph of Cennet and Alaattin Deneri by Kimberly Hart.*
Figure 9 (right). *Photograph of Ahmet Cinar by Harald Bohmer.*

After Bohmer taught Ahmet dyeing and weavers began to use the new yards, Cavit Bey founded a cooperative in Orselli drawing on weavers in the Yuntdag. Members were husbands, the male heads of household. They attended weekly meetings in Manisa, for which the banker paid from the cooperative's profits. Apparently, Cavit Bey siphoned off money to purchase cars for himself and his family. While the cooperative looked like a collective enterprise, with an elected head, it functioned as a business owned by a man who distributed favors to consolidate and protect his position.

While the weavers were making carpets, Cavit Bey had few contacts to sell them. Böhmer, on the other hand, knew dealers abroad. Ahmet understood that Böhmer's contacts were an advantage over Cavit Bey's in Manisa and Izmir. In frustration, Ahmet approached Harald and asked if he would help them found a new cooperative. Harald was willing to help, but Ahmet's brother-in-law, who was the director of the cooperative, was suspicious. He suspected Ahmet was trying to undermine his position. As Ali Bey's eldest son, he regarded himself rightful heir to his father's position. Although these young men, related by marriage, vied for power, authority remained with their father-in-law, Ali Bey

Figure 10. *Photograph of tourists at Yuntdag Cooperative, Orselli, Turkey, by Kimberly Hart.*

Ahmet was not the only person who wanted to leave the cooperative. Discontent among the weavers who saw that their work supported the business, while they got little in return, spread. For this reason, they decided to make a break. To help, Josephine gave Ahmet a "gift" of cash. Josephine described how Böhmer agreed to purchase rugs at Ahmet's prices without bargaining, which built up Ahmet's capital. Bohmer then sold the carpets under the table. For Bohmer and Josephine this was a trial period to test if they could find steady markets for the carpets.

This new and secret cooperative did well, but the business needed a proper legal framework. Josephine asked a friend, Bilge Taner, a doctoral student in economics and fellow feminist to help. Together they read the cooperative law written by the Ministry of Tourism, which said, the "producer must be the member." Clearly the weavers were the producers. Establishing the new cooperative according to this law would make it a women's cooperative.

Josephine had learned from Serife Atlihan, the textile expert at Marmara University, who had conducted extensive research on the weavers in Ayvacik, that the women did not understand the relationship between their labor and their income. Since their husbands were the members, they collected their wives' earnings. As a result, the weavers did not understand, as Josephine saw it, that their work was making a significant contribution to their family's household income. While Josephine was eager to create a cooperative with a new structure, which would address this inequity, Böhmer and Ahmet were not convinced that making women weavers the members would be the best structure. However, Josephine insisted and because she gave money to found the new enterprise, her "gift" to Ahmet, she was able to "buy" the power to create a women's cooperative. The weavers and their husbands, however, had to be convinced. In Örselli, Harald Böhmer, Bilge Taner, and the villagers had a meeting to discuss the formation of a new cooperative. Josephine could not attend. There were misgivings and fear. Everyone in the village looked to Ali Bey, Ahmet's father-in-law for advice about what they should do. Ali Bey said, "*ne hoca derse olur" (*what the hoca says shall be), referring to Böhmer, as "*hoca*," a title of respect for teachers and religious leaders. Ali Bey's proclamation destroyed his eldest son's position, as well as his assumption that kinship tied guaranteed social status. There are still lingering resentments in the village over this shift in power.

Figure 11 (left). *Photograph Bilge Taner and village weavers and husbands by Harald Bohmer.*
Figure 12 (right). *Photograph of Sibel and Sultan Ertosun, Orselli, Turkey, by Kimberly Hart.*

Bilge described the meeting at Ahmet's house, which Bohmer commemorated with this photograph. At the meeting, Bilge explained that the problem with the first cooperative was

administrative and structural. The weavers and their husbands agreed that the old cooperative had squandered their hard earned profits. By arguing that "weaving is women's work and women should control the profits from that work, since they care for the cooperative as they do their children, " she connected weaving and membership to women's "natural" roles as mothers.

Members repeat Bilge's formula when they justify the cooperative's administrative structure. The weaving members also remark, based on their experience with the first cooperative that men "eat the profits" and therefore should not be entrusted with the role of membership. In this manner, membership in the cooperative is tied to mother's protective and nurturing roles and wives' careful economy. However, it is not connected to a notion of female emancipation generally, in the way that western feminists, such as Josephine and Bilge would have imagined. Thus, the villagers never shared their desire that all female weavers' work should be promoted. Instead, they considered "women" to be, as they are from their perspective and language (kadin) married or once married women: wives and widows. The cooperative, in this way is a "mothers" cooperative; unmarried daughters, who are not "women" from the villagers' perspective, are barred from membership. Marriage, thereby, empowers women with membership.

In this paper, I leave aside the significance of the gendering of membership in the cooperative, which is one of the major foci of my dissertation, but tease you by hinting that this structure has effected the village and the cooperative in ways which neither Josephine nor Bilge would have foreseen. The men and women in the village accepted the idea that women would be the members, but they asked that the founding women be given a trip to Istanbul. Their request shows that by creating a cooperative and putting trust in Böhmer, Bilge, and Josephine, they were making a step in expanding their view of the world to include the outside. The women who took the trip still recount where they went and the things they saw.

Figure 13 (left). *Photograph of Josephine Powell, Fariye and Sabahattin Acarkoc, unidentified weaver from Orselli, Ahmet Cinar, Cennet Deneri, and Bilge Taner in Istanbul, by Harald Bohmer.*
Figure 14 (right). *Photograph of Bilge and Rukiye Yilmaz by Josephine Powell.*

Seven families and five board members signed the original contract for the cooperative with the Ministry of Tourism. Bilge took the paperwork to Ankara. Despite her plan to avoid the authorities in Manisa, in Ankara she encountered new troubles. The authorities at the Ministry of Tourism were not supportive of a village cooperative. Bilge pretended she was helping her "grandmother's" village, saying her family sent her because they were illiterate. Bilge described

how the bureaucrats were impressed by her dedication to her "grandmother's" village, despite her urban sophistication, and for this reason, they helped her.

As an interested intellectual and feminist, dedicated to development, Bilge supported the project on the grounds that it would be socially and culturally progressive, would help revitalize cultural traditions, and the local economy. Yet, the officials in charge of approving projects with these explicit goals did not value them without qualification. As Bilge described, from the perspective of the officials, the villagers were conservative, Sunni Muslims, illiterate rural people, who were outside the modernist, Kemalist project of the nation-state of Turkey. For this reason, they needed to be convinced on a personal level, finding sympathy with the narrative of a "secular" woman with rural roots, trying to develop her own family's village. After fifteen days, the papers, which declared Örselli to be the center of the cooperative were sent to Manisa, where they created a sensation. At this point, the villagers' ties to Cavit Bey were severed, but not without acrimony.

Figure 15. *Photograph of Cennet Deneri, Ahmet Cinar, and Kiymet Acarkoç, by Kimberly Hart.*

In the early years, there were attempts at undermining the business. On one occasion, Ahmet told a story about one such attempt to Alaattin, Cennet and myself. Businessmen from Manisa invited Ahmet to a meal with a proposition attached. Ahmet, who enjoyed good food, recounted

the event, describing with wide eyes how he had never seen such lavish food and drink before. Emphasizing his proper conduct, he said he refused to drink the alcohol, but as Cennet, Alaattin and I joked, apparently he did not refuse the food. The businessmen offered Ahmet an apartment in Manisa, a car, and a good salary. His job would be to oversee the creation of a weaving operation, which he would manage. He said, "at that time I had nothing: no car, no property." He knew he was expected to be dazzled by their offer. I asked why he did not take it. He looked intense and replied, "I said to myself: I am a shepherd." In other words, he considered that this offer to live in the city, own property, and manage a business was out of line with his experience and place in life. As he hesitated, the businessmen attempted to scare him into agreeing. They warned him that 99% of cooperatives in Turkey fail and that many people are jailed for corruption. I wondered why he hesitated. Why did he put all of his energy into creating a cooperative, when he could have managed a ready-made business? I asked, and Ahmet said very plainly that he loved his job.

Figure 16 (left) . *Photograph Ahmet Cinar by Kimberly Hart.*
Figure 17 (right) . *Photograph of Ahmet and weavers in early years by Josephine Powell.*

While Ahmet structured his response around staying "in his proper place," I think Ahmet did not *only* want to manage a business. Even though he did not "own" the cooperative, he was the most powerful and important man in the village and the region. Instead of being "out of place" in the city trying to manage someone else's business, he remained where he had networks of kin and friends. These individuals have been essential allies and partners in running the cooperative and making it a success. The offer was not as attractive as the power, position, and prestige he was able to obtain by remaining in the village. Ahmet made more money than all the other villagers in the cooperative. While Böhmer gained fame, he did not profit, nor did Josephine. From the time of its foundation until Ahmet's death in 2003, Ahmet was able to parlay his resources and connections to achieve great wealth. This he amassed in cows and olive trees, two measurements of village wealth, and an apartment in Manisa, among other properties. He had enough cash to speculate in local markets in animal feed and other commodities. He began a system of shop keeping (bakkalcilik) in Örselli, in which weavers took goods on advance of their earnings.

In 2003, everything changed when Ahmet was diagnosed with cancer. In September, he died. In October 2003, I returned to mourn Ahmet's death with the villagers. Cennet and her husband Alaattin were traumatized by Ahmet's terrible illness. From the many descriptions of Ahmet's suffering, I learned that everyone had cared for Ahmet. Cennet made a point of saying that the

men slept beside him, bathed him while he was ill and suffering, and nursed him until his death. I found it extraordinary that all the men could put aside their anger and care for Ahmet in the most intimate ways, as he withered. By January 2004, when I was back again, Ahmet's death had been more thoroughly processed. Even then though, Cennet said, "I often look out to the cemetery (which is directly across from her house) and say, 'get up from your grave and help me! How could you have left me with these troubles!?'" I often saw Alaattin looking sadly across the road to the cemetery. Both cried often, as we sat together unable to speak because Ahmet's death was still so painful. After Ahmet's death, Cennet said, "I am very alone." Even in 2008, she says, "*bildigin gibi degil*," (it isn't how you knew it), meaning that the positive atmosphere and forward momentum of the cooperative has been lost, and many complain about the business.

Conclusion

The foundation of the Yuntdag cooperative shows how Ahmet Cinar, Cennet Deneri, and other villagers, Harald Bohmer and Josephine Powell garnered trust to work together and create the enterprise. Together, they revitalized plant dyes, a technique newly rediscovered by Harald Bohmer, and put weavers' creations in an international market in new production, indigenous, heritage products. DOBAG was one of the first such enterprises to commodify indigenous arts and sell not only carpets but the idea that through consumption, buyers could change villagers' lives. To achieve this goal, all brokered their skills and knowledge, their capital and clever abilities to make pieces, though divorced of local use-value, which are an indigenous art constructed for other people's homes. Though all has not worked as they may have hoped or expected, the Yuntdag cooperative has been successful in increasing village household income and sustaining village weaving. For two decades it staved off the villagers' desire to migrate to cities. As well, it enabled Ahmet and Cennet to exercise their intelligence and charisma in administering and running the business. While I did my fieldwork in 2000-1, Cennet and Ahmet worked together closely, discussing how they would maintain and develop the cooperative. Their collaborative efforts contradict the notion of separate "gendered spheres" in Islamic societies, in which women are understood (by western and westernized social scientists) as lesser in status.

After Ahmet's death, his brother Faik, one of the dyers, took over the administration of the cooperative and Ahmet's eldest son, Fatih, who is the new director, controls the financial end from his urban home in Manisa. Cennet has been pushed to the side and many weavers are, as one woman said, "throwing down their knives." Migration to Manisa and Menemen is swiftly transforming the village. In 2007, Josephine Powell died and though her death did not deal a blow to the cooperative, an era of feminist optimism seems to have closed in the village. Weavers now say, "if we move to Manisa, the men will work and we will sit at home and rest."

Acknowledgments

I thank Josephine Powell, Harald Bohmer, Bilge Taner, Serife Atlihan, Cennet and Alaattin Deneri, Ahmet Cinar, and the villagers in Orselli. I also thank the Koç Foundation for access to Josephine Powell's photographic archive in 2008. This research was supported with grants from Fulbright-Hays (2000), the Institute for Turkish Studies (2001 and 2008), and the American Research Institute in Turkey (2008).