1998

Brokers of Textile Traditions: The Case of the Shopkeepers in Turkey

Marlene Breu
Western Michigan University

Ronald Marchese
University of Minnesota-Duluth

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf
Part of the Art and Design Commons

http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/150

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Textile Society of America at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.
BROKERS OF TEXTILE TRADITIONS: 
THE CASE OF THE SHOPKEEPERS IN TURKEY 

Marlene R. Breu, Western Michigan University, 
Ronald T. Marchese, University of Minnesota-Duluth

Over the course of the past twenty-five years a cultural transformation has taken place in the Turkish Republic. Overshadowed in more recent years by the political confrontations between secularists and Islamists, an unchecked inflationary spiral that has devalued the national currency, and the social upheavals associated with economic disparity, this cultural transformation has garnished little attention from the more traditionally defined scholarship on the modern Middle East. Revolutionary in nature, it is the result of several factors, among them socio-economic changes brought about by a shift in world markets and the liberalization of the Turkish economy. It is responsible for changes associated with the position of the merchant, specifically the shopkeeper, as a broker or continuer of the cultural heritage of the past, especially in the highly descriptive impressions associated with the textile arts. Market factors and the marketability of specific goods are no longer dictated by familial concerns or cultural factors inherent within the general ethnographic structure of Turkish society. Instead, the integration of Turkish society into a more global economy has had a radical impact on those items that are usually considered staples of Turkish folk tradition.

The focus of this paper is to illustrate the role the shopkeeper plays in the cultural heritage of human society. Unconsciously, the shopkeeper simultaneously contributes to (1) a loss of the ethnographic characteristics inherent in textile objects originally produced for the home, and (2) the continuation of the traditional production methods associated with weaving, but defined by market concerns that are not relevant to the traditional concepts of production. Thusly, external market factors have affected changes in the product: (1) configuration, (2) surface design, and (3) coloration. A propositional model to explain the process of cultural change from ethnographic textiles to econo-ethnographic products is offered as a regional evaluation which may be applicable to the study of textiles in a number of cultural settings.

SHOPKEEPERS

The term shopkeeper has varied meanings. It is used here to designate an individual involved in an exchange system between the producer, procurer, and the consumer. The shopkeeper either procures his merchandise directly from villages, or he hires or buys from another individual who acts as procurer. The procurer's activities form an hour-glass configuration of distribution from producer to consumer, or more precisely from wholesale to retail. Each component of the system can change. Wholesalers become retailers and retailers wholesalers, depending on shifting market conditions and the general demand on objects. Objects are collected from many sources (i.e. semi-nomadic groups, related kin-associated villages,) by "pickers"/procurers who then distribute goods through an elaborate social network of shopkeepers. Shopkeepers may also buy directly from villagers who bring items to their place of business.

Shops are not necessarily associated with permanent space, for any area can be designated a shop, from open air facilities to enclosed permanent structures. Portable shops exist in vans, along roadsides, or in designated areas during regional market days.
Permanent shops also serve a variety of functions, especially as social gathering places and focal points of news and information.

The role of the shopkeeper in post-1980 Turkey has had a major impact on the continuance of traditions that have always been associated with handicraft industries. In many respects, the shopkeeper is now pivotal in the maintenance of "traditional" Turkish textiles, metal crafts, and other productions. The exchange system of the past involving transference of material goods, especially woven goods, from village production to wholesale/retail trades in larger urban areas, has now expanded to global concerns. Wider distribution of traditional Turkish handicrafts associated with carpet (hali) and flat weave (kilim) production is particularly evident, the former having a lengthy history of limited export from the fifteenth century, while the latter is associated with a late twentieth century phenomenon associated with the collection of tribal artifacts.

**ETHNOGRAPHIC TEXTILES**

Prior to 1960, Turkey was predominately a rural society somewhat isolated from either a regional or limited global economy. Items were produced with readily available raw materials in order to satisfy local needs within an economy of state monopolies which focused on self-sufficiency. Mutual cooperation and interaction satisfied societal needs in a more regional and sub-regional context. Fiber was used to produce objects such as carpets, rugs, bags, covers and clothing needed in and around the home (Landreau, et al 1983). In addition to their practical purposes, items were invested with meanings which had common understanding within the culture. Objects reflected the life of the producer. They were produced to meet the space requirements of family dwellings, either in a permanent context or within a semi-nomadic lifestyle (Marchese 1991).

Silverman (1993:12-15), in his discussion of Middle Eastern rugs, uses the term ethnographic to refer to rugs woven for non-commercial purposes. He writes that "ethnographic rugs are likely to be oddities, one-of-a-kinds," or they may be like one another, "the result of a long, unvarying tradition." Further, he describes ethnographic rugs as 1) having relatively high quality of work, 2) being products of peoples who are outside the normal routes of commerce, and 3) having resisted the artistic stagnation which inevitably comes with market influence. Silverman's definition of the term ethnographic is useful here, but we expand it to include textile objects in addition to carpets and rugs, and to recognize the dimension of symbolic representation inherent in the objects. Thus, our use of the term ethnographic refers to those objects which were produced for personal use only and which contained within their design, production, and use constructs of the culture involving repeated behaviors recognized and commonly understood by members of that cultural group. We use econo-ethnographic to refer to objects produced in villages by villagers under external market forces. They are made by traditional methods, but may or may not be traditional in their design, color, configuration or end use. An econo-ethnographic object can also be an exact copy of an ethnographic piece in all respects including production, but is produced for a trans-regional consumer.

We define tradition as that which has some association with the past in production, use, or design and which is drawn from a narrow social context of family, clan, and tribe. Shils' (1981:1) explanation of tradition elucidates this concept. He refers to tradition as "that which is handed down" or "which already existed when its present possessors came upon it."
Traditional objects may be produced and used within the socio-cultural group without any intervention from a market economy (ethnographic), or they may be produced and used outside the socio-cultural group which has limited or no understanding of its past associations. Machine-made carpets in use in Turkish homes today are traditional in that traditional patterns are employed. However, the patterns are often out of their cultural context, and the method of production is not traditional.

**FROM SHOPKEEPER TO BUSINESSMAN/ENTREPRENEUR IN AN EXPANDED MARKET**

Not much escapes the global economy. Its influences on commerce in various parts of the world is pervasive. This most important factor, together with socio-economic conditions which have recently developed in Turkey, account for the evolution of production and acquisition of textile objects from everyday use to a commodity of exchange or from ethnographic to econo-ethnographic objects which have value in a larger market environment. Paradoxically, this has contributed to the continuation and availability of selected textile traditions which might otherwise have disappeared in a market-oriented economy where consumer demands dictate production.

The most critical factors which have brought about these changes are improved infrastructure, emerging markets for agricultural products, and increased tourism. Secondary factors which affect carpet and rug commerce is the dwindling supply of antique Turkish carpets and kilims, curtailment of the antiquities trade in general, and the influx of antique pieces from Central Asia and the Caucasus into Turkey which have replaced demand for Turkish production.

As a consequence of the foregoing factors, the shopkeeper serves today's market in a different manner than his predecessor. Items with a long traditional heritage are contracted for production and distribution beyond the cultural, political, and economic barriers of Turkey and the Middle East. This is especially evident in the mass-marketing of carpets and rugs which are clearly associated with the Middle East. To meet the demands of the marketplace, some of the traditional shopkeepers have become businessmen/entrepreneurs. Traditional shopkeepers distribute goods without altering the material expression of the object; that is, they are culturally passive to the defined heritage of society. They sell to a select clientele who wishes to purchase ethnographic items. There is no emphasis on production, rather the emphasis is on procurement of goods that have value and the distribution of those goods to a clientele that wishes to possess them. The role of the shopkeeper in this instance, therefore, has little impact on the tradition except in their ability to transmit knowledge or what they believe is knowledge of the items they are selling.

The businessman/entrepreneur, on the other hand, moves beyond the mere process of procurement to production. This impacts the traditional cultural heritage of the product since the entrepreneur takes an active role in redefining the cultural characteristics of society. He defines objects according to their marketability within a larger domestic or international market. Wider distribution impacts the traditional cultural heritage of the product and the cultural traditions such as value systems and work patterns. (Figure 2)

**EFFECTS ON THE PRODUCT**

Foreign markets impact configuration, surface design and use of color in traditional textile objects. The dimensions of carpets and kilims made for nomadic, semi-
nomadic or village dwellings are often not suitable for modern homes. In the past, objects that did not fit the dimensions of the rooms of the American nouveau rich were simply cut down to size. Today, proportions of newly made products are standardized to foreign household dimensions, having been dictated by the touristic customer seeking a specific product from the shopkeeper/entrepreneur.

The effects on uses of color are pronounced. In the case of carpets and kilims, colors once dictated by the sources which were available for natural dyes and later duplicated by chemical compounds are eliminated in favor of coloration dictated by the foreign customer who is seeking objects which fit a pre-existing color scheme.

The effect on surface design is the most notable change in carpets. Where pieces were produced using designs often belonging to specific tribal or ethnic groups or villages, designs may be copied from a variety of sources. (Figure 4) The most notable change is the increase in simplicity of design, dictated to some degree by the tastes of the foreign customer, but in large measure by the weaver who refuses to weave complicated patterns which limit her productivity and revenue. (Figure 3) This simplicity of pattern along with the loss of traditional abraq or color tone variation, results in a loss of field or dimensionality.

Another notable difference in the econo-ethnographic process is the perfection of the design. While good workmanship and good design was the end result of the training of young village women, the emphasis on absolute perfection of design was absence. In fact, ethnographic pieces suggest an attempt at purposeful imperfection or asymmetricism. This could have been part of a mythological construct in which the perfection of God is not to be superseded, the imperfections of man are recognized, or a talisman is desired.

CASE STUDIES

In 1998, two shopkeepers, who are based in Istanbul and are now entrepreneurial producers of carpets were interviewed. Two other entrepreneurs, one who owns a shop in Izmir and the other in Bursa, were also interviewed over the course of several years. All four have crossed over from the procurement of textiles to the moderate production and distribution of econo-ethnographic objects. They typify the general trends in econo-ethnographic production in Turkey and are not considered unique.

Hasan Semerci

Hasan Semerci began production of Uşak-based carpets in 1982. His original concern was to revitalized the older motifs associated with carpets from the Uşak region. These important carpets are among the collections of the Turkish and Islamic Arts Museum in Istanbul and can be found in early Renaissance and Flemish masterpieces of the 14th through 16th centuries.

Initially, Hasan was a shopkeeper who periodically made trips into the hinterland of Turkey, primarily in the western mountainous regions of the Yuntdağ near Izmir. He purchased antique or semi-antique pieces directly from villagers, or procured items from "pickers" who scoured the countryside. As long as the market demanded the procurement of ethnographic textiles or fragments of ancient carpets, kilims, yastiks (cushions), and çanvals (bags), there was no impact on the cultural elements of the item. This was purely a procurement and redistribution system of business.
In the early 1980s Hasan and other procurement-based shopkeepers made the transition to entrepreneurial-based businessmen, with only a few well-established shopkeepers continuing to focus on the more difficult task of procuring historic tribal art. This change was necessary because of a dwindling supply of ethnographic pieces, and new sources of procurement from the Caucasus and Central Asia which flooded the market with lower-priced ethnographic carpets and rugs. A network of production which fed the growing demand for "genuine Anatolian textile art" developed. For shopkeepers like Mr. Sermenci, the decision to move to quality reproduction of antique pieces was the only logical method to stay in business. As Hasan stated, "You must change according to the times."

The rapid increase in tourism throughout the 1980s brought further changes in Hasan's business. Customers began making demands for specific characteristics in the carpets. Hasan now has a volume-driven market with production pieces offered in feet and in dimensions which are requested by his largely American clientele. Patterns are simplified and have less irregularities as a result of the computer-generated designs that can be manipulated to meet market demands. Materials such as the wool yarn are costed out and a specific amount given to the weaver for a project. The end result is standardized proportional configurations and patterns which conform to modern living spaces, and colors to meet requirements of fashion-generated interior color schemes. Hasan states, "If you want it, we can make it."

These changes in the market are having an impact on the weaver and the weaving tradition. The older, more complicated patterns have been driven out of the market because of the weaver's desire to increase production and personal revenue. Complicated structures in design limit volume. Weavers often reject his request for anything but simple, easily produced patterns which are disconnected from the weaver's familial heritage. Weavers become contract laborers with specific goals and desires far removed from the intent of the original ethnographic production.

Another result of these conditions is the impact on the lifestyle of the weaver. Historically, women produced carpets in the home, an activity which simultaneously allowed for child-rearing. While some weavers remain in the home to work, others go to centralized locations in their village or leave the village to weave. Formerly the carpet was a means of personal and aesthetic communication for the weaver. Now the weaver is an animated machine who dictates the pace of production, and to an extent, the pattern. Symbolism is lost in the design. Also lost is the social processes of production and the oral interaction between family members which occurred when objects were woven for familial needs. The combination of market forces, a low supply of ethnographic carpets, refusal of weavers to produce complicated patterns, the ratio of cost to profit, and changing tastes of customers have created an econo-ethnographic carpet in which the only traditional characteristic is the process of weaving and knotting.

Kaplan Brothers

The second example involves a family of three brothers. Muzaffer Kaplan offered insights into the production processes during an interview in the summer of 1998. The family has focused on production of new carpets and flat weaves since the late 1970s. The Kaplans' business is largely retail sale of new production, but also includes wholesale of antique and semi-antique pieces to collectors. As with Mr. Semerci, their production facilities form a complete enterprise, in which cartoons are diagramed by employees. The
brothers hire wool buyers, and the wool is cleaned, then sent to the villages for spinning into yarn. The spun yarn is sent back to the production location in Konya to be dyed with either natural or chemical dyes.

The Kaplans have approximately 400 looms, involving over 400 weavers. They provide wool, cartoons, and all other items required to produce a carpet. Both the Kaplans and Mr. Sermenci own distribution shops in Istanbul, Bodrum, Izmir, and Konya. They sell directly in Turkey and distribute to the European market.

Problems, however, have occurred in this new economic structure. Many weavers go off as "privateers" but they do not resurrect familial motifs, clan signs, or other aspects of ethnographic textiles. They weave standardized patterns and sell directly from their homes, in village squares, and in the congested urban centers of Turkey. Current market pressures are greater due to the high volume needed for the export market which has gone from a passive market to an active market in determining what is wanted. The flow now is reversed from the level of consumption back to areas of production, with dictation of size, color, and pattern. If pastels are in, all traditional coloration is dropped. If 6'x 9' carpets are in, the elongated production that was once found in Turkish homes is out. The entrepreneur now determines the tradition, based on demands of his clients, since the entrepreneur is at the center of both marketing and distribution.

Muzaffer sees "selective tradition" at work in his business. Some old patterns sell, others don't. Color is more important than pattern and proportion. "We are keeping weaving and spinning traditions alive by our new products. Patterns, colors, sizes are incidental, but the handicraft is alive." But, as dealer/producer, his first concern is selling rather than tradition.

**Ayşe Ocay**

Ayşe Ocay (pseudonym) has located a small shop dedicated to village textile arts in an upscale area of Izmir. She carries flat woven textiles which would have been used as aprons and other objects of wearing apparel or for home use in villages. She also carries scarves trimmed with *oya*, a needlelace produced by village women to decorate the edges of their headscarves.

Ayşe develops many of the products in her store by collecting ideas and examples from numerous visits to neighboring villages. She purchases her own beads and yarn, according to her color decisions, and hires village women to use the supplies for objects made to her specifications. Ayşe's customers are largely Americans and other Western foreigners who come to Izmir as employees of NATO and multi-national corporations. While Ayşe is contributing to the continuation of handicrafts in villages, she is changing the traditions to meet the demands of her customers. Colors of yarn used for the *oya* are carefully selected to match or blend with the colors of the headscarf fabric. She may combine an *oya* trim once used exclusively for village men's head coverings with a patterned scarf used exclusively for village women. This practice exposes the village women to new forms of aesthetic expression and uses of objects. As in the case studies of the carpet developers, Ayşe's products are based on traditions with elements of color, patterns, configuration pulled from ethnographic pieces. But, her products are market-driven, created for a select clientele.

**Erol Bilmer**

In the days when Erol (pseudonym) and his father visited villages near Bursa in...
order to procure items for his father's shop, Erol created close alliances with the villagers. An avid defender and self-proclaimed "protector" of a variety of Turkish "traditions," Erol has continued his father's business, with great success in attracting customers from many parts of the world, particularly Europe and the United States. In 1998, he reported an increase in upper-income Turks in search of items from the collection of traditional textiles and non-textiles in his shop. Among his merchandise are headscarves trimmed in oya and sequins, objects of traditional dress which can be purchased singly or as complete ensembles, hand-loomed towels and table cloths, traditional jewelry, wood cuts used for printing fabrics, and varieties of other objects, both textile and non-textile.

Because of his success, Erol has created a market for objects of traditional dress which today are used by very few people in the villages where they are produced. Rather, they are sought by folk dance groups in Turkey and by foreigners. In some cases, he purchases the supplies used to make the items and takes them as gifts when he visits the villages. In other cases, he purchases finished items on his visits to the villages or from villagers who bring finished products to his shop.

It is not uncommon to find that objects created for sale, such as the dizge or woman's long waist belt, are debased by simplification of design or configuration to make their prices more competitive. These and other changes occur as a result of changes in the availability of raw materials. Villagers receive cash from cash crops which allows them to purchase fabrics, yarns, and trims rather than produce their own.

Erol's economic activity is a combination of a genuine desire to see the textile arts continue and the need to make a living. He remains the quintessential Turkish shopkeeper who seized the opportunity to built a clientele of people wanting to buy traditional textiles. Textile traditions change or disappear over time. His effect is in continuation of traditional textiles, albeit sometimes of lower quality and price to meet customer demand.

**Conclusion**

We investigated the role of the shopkeeper in Turkey who over the years has made traditional textile objects available on the market. Formerly shopkeepers procured and sold ethnographic textile objects: those which were originally produced for use in the home and not for sale, and were invested with meanings shared within the social group where they were produced. As a result of market forces, some shopkeepers have become businessmen/entrepreneurs in an attempt to meet market demands and remain in business. In this new role, shopkeepers are satisfying changing market tastes while keeping "traditions" alive. This activity is dynamic, mediated by the shopkeepers and the producers within a global market. Effects are exerted downward from the global market through the shopkeeper to the woman who weaves carpets and produces or embellishes flat textile objects. Effects of larger markets directly affect the weaver who also has opportunity for other revenue in cash agricultural crops, resulting in economic and time constraints on the use of her time and labor. Together, these forces are creating changes in the village settings in which traditional textiles were originally produced and used.

In their new role as entrepreneurs, shopkeepers attempt to satisfy changing market tastes, while keeping the production traditions alive. The shopkeepers are simultaneously contributing to the loss of the ethnographic characteristics inherent in textile objects originally produced for home use and to the continuation of the traditional production methods. These new market factors have affected changes in the product: configuration, surface design, and uses of color. They take an active role in redefining culture and
cultural systems which emphasize efficiency of production, minimization of cost, and maximization of profit. Concepts of "tradition" are meaningless. They are dictated by external concerns far removed from the cultural heritage of the indigenous population.

Carpets, headscarves, and other objects which are being produced today as a result of market forces may be the traditional Turkish textiles of tomorrow. They may be considered valuable for their documentation of the transition from the ethnographic objects produced for non-commercial use to those produced under the influence of the distant markets. Glassie (1993:9) recognized the changes in tradition when he wrote that tradition "is rooted in volition and it flowers in variation and innovation." Missing in this transformation is the depth of meaning within the culture - the ethnography. Absent are expressions of hopes and fears, clan identities, situations of everyday life, and the communicative nature of objects in a time and culture in which verbal expression was limited.

1 The term ethnographic has varieties of meanings from the strict academic, anthropological perspective to a much broader-based definition of popular culture. For the purpose of this paper, we have chosen to define ethnographic in its broadest possible sense rather than according to strict academic principles.

2 Color combinations found in other objects such as headscarves trimmed in oya needlelace have changed as well. Combinations considered unmatched by western standards are usually carefully matched, as in the case of the scarves with the oya thread matching one or more colors in the scarf patterning.

REFERENCES
Figure 1. Market day in Sındırı in the Yuntdag region of northwest Turkey

Figure 2. Special order products available in Istanbul

Textile Society of America 1998 Proceedings 173
Figure 3. “Econ ethnographic” carpet with simplified surface design.

Figure 4. Regional tribal carpet from Van in eastern Turkey.