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The Effects of War on Afghan Textile Production Contrasting with the Effects of the End of Communism on that of Uzbekistan

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My first exposure to the textiles of both Afghanistan and Uzbekistan occurred in Afghanistan in the early 1970s before the disastrous wars that have engulfed the former country and before the break-up of the Soviet Union liberated the latter.

Afghanistan was a country of very poor peasants and nomads who produced exquisitely crafted embroidered and woven articles mainly for domestic consumption, for every day wear and for festival, particularly marriage use.

There were professional weavers, dyers, block-printers and embroiderers in the towns and in the north of the country particularly at Akcha and Andkhai silk tie-dye and ikat textiles were made after the Central Asian fashion.

The ordinary dwellings in Afghanistan, whether mud hut or nomads' tent were very limited in size. The hangings and ornaments made to decorate these spaces were of necessity small in scale. Cushions and decorations for piles of quilts on the one hand and purses, teapot and gun-covers on the other though beautifully embellished were always small. Embroidery was lavishly added to both male and female costume often with motifs to encourage fertility and the protection of both children and the mother in child-birth.

Towns like Herat and the towns of the north still have a thriving weaving culture. In the centre of Herat one is never far from the clack of the pit-weavers loom and there is a steady sale of silk and synthetic fibre shawls and head-cloths. Near Gohar Shad's great tiled mosque in Herat are drawn out the so-called "Hunting Cloths". Images of Leopards, snakes and fighting quails are drawn out in ball-pen on recycled calico, then shaded in black ink using a rolled up sock. Black dots are printed on in the same black ink. One speculates that these "Hunting Cloths" were used to tell stories to an illiterate audience.

Beside the traditional trade in woollen rugs and saddle-bags (often brought into town by the husband of the female weaver) trades that date back to the "Hippie Trail" of 40 years ago still prosper. The most important of the latter type of trade is the knitting of slipper socks. Imported bales of second-hand American acrylic sweaters are unravelled and distributed to female knitters to turn into socks.

A goat leather sole is added and the slipper-socks are ready for export through a network originally set up by western Old Afghan Hands of the "Hippie Trail" days. Uzbekistan on the other hand has taken a completely different path. It was home to some of the world's most beautiful textiles, "Abra" silk warp-ikats, velvet-ikat, large scale Suzani embroideries, block-printing, silk and cotton weaving and both

domestic and professional embroidery in silk and metal-thread. Standards of production had markedly declined from the dazzling heyday in the 19th and first quarter of the 20th Century owing to the Socialization of both the society and economy from 1929 onwards. Although the Abra ikats were still woven in places like Margilan in the Ferghana valley production had been standardized to such an extent that the designs were very much lowest common denominator. Velvet ikat was no longer woven. By 1990, weaving in silk and cotton, block-printing and professional embroidery like Abra ikat weaving itself was at a very low ebb. With the break up of the Soviet Union and the new found independence of the modern state of Uzbekistan things began to change.

One of the agents of textile change in Uzbekistan was the secondment under the auspices the British Council of Philippa Watkins Senior Tutor in Woven Textiles at the Royal College of Art in London to the silk factory at Margilan. She encouraged the weavers there to produce ikats of more complex design using better materials and dyes. The difficulty was the marketing of these handsome products. At first it was through personal contacts in London and elsewhere.

Dealing with the state bureaucracy used to a Communist command and control economy was extremely difficult. Though once the original seed of inspiration had been sown and enough talented young workers could envision a future livelihood based on the production of high quality textiles though the scene was set for the entrepreneurs of the Istanbul bazaar to take over.

They found ways to overcome the barriers to trade put into place by the state of Uzbekistan. From the early 2000s fine ikats, ikat velvet and Suzanis have been marketed through the Istanbul bazaar and have appeared in decorators' emporia in London, New York and Tokyo.

Though the standard of the Suzanis for sale in Istanbul have inevitably declined, an Uzbekistan-wide traditional textile industry has been revived and remains in rude health employing thousands of workers.

I was going to propose that the Uzbekistan route to textile revival should be emulated in Afghanistan. This model of textile development may be taken up in the future. This may be possible but political developments do not augur well. The future looks bleak. With the imminent withdrawal of western forces an intensification of the bloody civil war seems most likely, conditions not conducive to textile production.

The war with the Russians left the country littered with mines ending millennia of the old nomadic culture. The latest "American" phase of the war has meant that there is an awful lot of cash floating around the Afghan economy. Nowadays a young bride to be is much more likely to buy a Chinese factory made purse as a gift for the young groom than to sew and embroider one for him.

One day peace will come to the "Cockpit of Asia" and then we will see beautiful textiles made again. But please don't ask me when.