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## Documentary Film Presentation Local Colors: Natural Dyeing in a Milas Carpet Weaving Village

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**Documentary Film Presentation**  
**Local Colors: Natural Dyeing in a Milas Carpet Weaving Village**

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**Supplemental Technical Notes and Analysis to the Film *BOZALAN*, written by Ulara Tamura (2008, Filmed and Edited by John Wells, Edited and Translated by Ulara Tamura, Produced and Directed by Ulara Tamura & John Wells, 38min, <http://bozalan.com>.)**

This documentary, filmed in 2006, examines the process of naturally dyed carpet production in a village in the Milas region of Muğla Prefecture in southwest Turkey, a region well known as a traditional Turkish carpet production area. In large numbers of villages of this region, carpet weaving is the household based work of every woman who lives there.



*Figure 1. Maps of Turkey and Milas region. Drawing by author.*

In this paper, I aim to add more detailed information and discussion specifically on the colors and dyes of the carpets shown in this film (see the abstract). First I will introduce the varieties of the natural dye materials the villagers use one by one. The natural dyeing process is quite laborious and difficult, so what can be their incentive to refrain from using synthetically pre-dyed yarns as most people in other villages in this region do? Secondly, to explore the matters around this question, I will examine the changes in the dye materials and thread production over time. Although Milas carpets had been traded for several centuries, drastic changes in their production affected by market pressure have been observed over the last 20-30 years. Bozalan village (Fig. 1) was not the exception. It did have a period when some people suddenly began using synthetic dyes mostly for their ease as well as the novelty of the bright colors. But in the course of time, the Bozalan

villagers, unlike most people in other villages, returned to the traditional natural dyes voluntarily. How do some people sustain the use of natural dyes while the majority of others shift to using synthetic dyes? I try to analyze these transformations in the general shift to synthetic dyes, as well as the shift back to natural dyes in the case of Bozalan, though the examination of what was going on in the transitional period. And thirdly, I will briefly describe the present situation of carpet production and sales in the village, to put their preference of natural dyes into the context.

### **Natural Dye Materials: Botanicals and Mud**

The basic procedure of dyeing yarns for carpet pile begins with the preparation of yarns and of dye materials and finishes with the actual dyeing process. After being washed, the combined labor from over 20 neighbors, yarn strands are doubled into balls then unwound and looped to be soaked into dyes. Dye materials such as madder, mud, and herbs are gathered or purchased. Some of these are ground into a fine powder. With enough firewood gathered, water is boiled and first dyestuff is added (usually *napuz*, *Mentha pulegium*) with ground alum used as mordant. As they rely on natural materials and conditions such as sunlight, the dyeing process requires continuous checking and making adjustments for the changing conditions. The ability to understand and make these adjustments is related to the level of experience one has with the process. Although there are a number of major dyes and methods of dying that are common to all of the villagers, there are also some minor differences in the dye repertoire of every household where one can find materials and methods of dyeing that are rather uncommon in the village at large. It is analogous to the different home recipes that may be found in individual homes in a generally homogenous food culture.

Here is a list of the major botanical dyestuffs<sup>1</sup> used in Bozalan that I observed in 2005-2006: (*local name* /scientific name /English name /parts being used /color tone /local names of the color produced/habitat notes.)

1. *Napuz* / *Mentha pulegium* / pennyroyal mint / whole / cream beige (without mud), grayish green (with mud) / *napuz moru* / a herbaceous plant that grows wild
2. *mineç, çetirmek* / *Pistacia palaestina* / pistacia / leaves, nuts / cream yellow / *mineç moru, çetirmek* / a local arbor that grows wild or planted in gardens
3. *kök boya* / *Rubia tinctorum* / madder / roots / dark red / *al, kızıl, boyama* / a herbaceous plant that grows around the area but generally purchased from stocks originating in the Manisa region
4. *palamut, palamut meşesi* / *Quercus macrolepis Kotschy* / oak (genes) / nuts / yellow / *palamut sarısı* / an arbor grows wild but generally purchased from stocks originating in Bodrum
5. *piren* / *Hypericum empertrifolium* / St. John's wort / whole / light yellow / *piren sarısı* / a herbaceous plant that grows wild
6. *ceviz* / *Juglans regia* / walnuts / leaves, nuts skin / dark green (with leaves), brown (with nuts skin) / *ceviz moru, ceviz* / an arbor that grows wild

Other than these major botanical dye materials, Bozalan villagers sometimes use minor materials such as unripe grapes or orange skins adding them to these major dyes. What is much more important is the use of mud. Mud is explained by villagers as being used in

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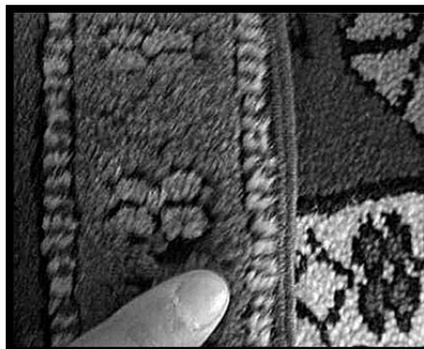
<sup>1</sup> For identification of plants, I referred [Böhmer 1980].

both grayish color dyes and as a fixer of botanical dyes. The mud is gathered from the bottom of ponds around highlands (*yayla*) nearby. Villagers emphasize that the mud cannot be simply any mud around them, but should be gathered from ponds where herding people let their sheep and goats drink water. According to some local carpet dealers and researchers, the reason is that the mud they use contains animal excretal substances which help the dye fix on woolen yarns. Its justification needs further examination but it is true that mud dye has been commonly seen all over the world, utilizing the chemical reaction of iron [Yoshioka 1974:105]. The Bozalan villagers used to make the black color with mud, through a weeks-long repetitive process. For them, dyeing black was the most laborious and time consuming. Nowadays, unlike other colors, they buy commercially dyed black yarns as they totally stopped dyeing black on their own. I would like to make a short point regarding the distorted situation surrounding black thread in the context of marketing and of the internalization of others' tastes. It is one point that we could not cover in the film.

### **Black: Contrasting Colors, Contrasting 'Ours' and 'Theirs'**

When you go to carpet shops in the Aegean region of Turkey or in Istanbul, you will surely find Milas design carpets and many of them have been through certain processes in common by dealers in order to add some marketing values. One is chemical wash and the other is hand-clipping of black piles. As Jirousek demonstrated, both procedures are usually done by dealers to 'age' them [Jirousek 1994]. The faded color makes them old-looking as normally any colors become faded as a carpet ages. The shorter black strands buried between longer strands of other colors 'shows' it as antique. It derives from the mud dyeing process for black.

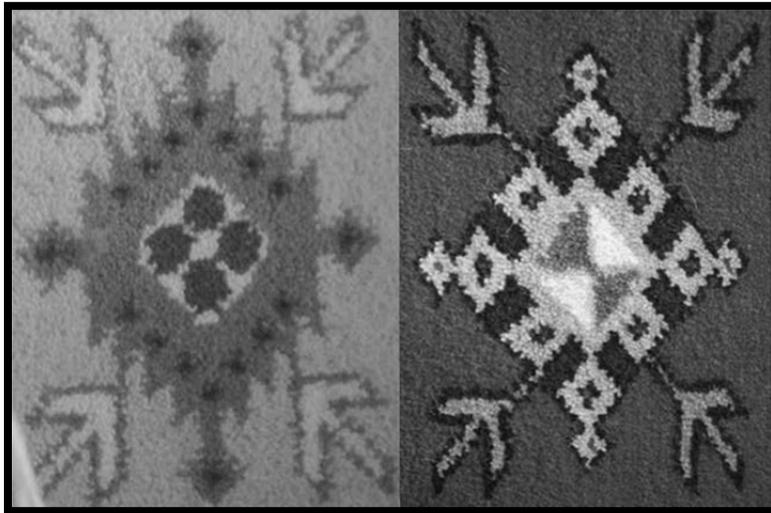
The natural method of dyeing black consists of botanical pre-dyeing and a repetitive process of soaking yarns into muddy water and spreading them under the sunlight. They had to repeat soaking and spreading for several weeks until the grayish color gets dark enough. For its being the longest and harshest dyeing process among all the color yarns, the black yarn gets exhausted and thus deteriorates the most quickly. Black yarn is usually used for outlining each motif or frame in Milas carpets. You can still find some small sized old rugs called *paspas* at villagers' houses, and when you examine them carefully, you will find very short or almost completely deteriorated dark gray strands buried among other color strands (Fig. 2).



*Figure 2. An old rug's black knots worn out fast and buried, Bozalan village, Milas, Turkey. Photo by author.*

It is easy to imagine that some people might check the comparative length of the black strands to judge the age of the carpet. Clipping the black strands is thus a process of creating imitations of antique carpets. A fairly big local carpet shop keeper was clipping the black knots of a Milas carpet when I interviewed him, and told me that he usually asks for the task to be done by a professional hand-clipper in Mumcular, a small town which used to be a center of Milas carpet production and trade near Bodrum city (see map, Fig. 1). He also explained that the process is aimed just for softening the carpet's total color tone by making black outlines invisible. He insisted that softer hues are favorable for modern furnished rooms of domestic upper-middle class or foreign customers.

It is difficult to judge if his story illustrates the true trend of the market or not, but I understand from their explanations that the weavers in this area, including Bozalan people, have a common recognition that Westerners or people from urban areas prefer pastel tones for their modern interiors. Some told me that the dealers familiar to each of them encouraged them to buy pastel tone yarns to weave for it would be much more marketable. It is true that the stock of the synthetic dyed yarn dealers in Milas is mostly pastel or softer hues compared to ones naturally dyed by Bozalan villagers. And to make it harmonious with pastel tones, people are beginning to use light brown instead of black for the outline knots or even refraining from outlining the motifs altogether (Fig. 3). Thus we can trace the interesting process of how local people internalize "others' tastes" through material settings, and through their networks. But now it becomes more and more mysterious to consider the reasons why Bozalan people do not use pastel hues and even cling to using the black outline knots as if they are swimming against the stream.



*Figure 3. The 'su' motifs; outlined with light brown in M village (left), with black in Boalan(right), Milas region, Turkey. Photo by author.*

This quotation from a woman of this village may help us to comprehend this phenomenon. Nerman (pseudonym), a 21 year-old woman who in 2005 had been weaving carpets for nine years, once casually expressed her feelings on their carpet traditions:

...We do know that most people of other villages use soft, pastel colors because then they can sell carpets more easily. But we, the people of this village, don't quit using natural dyes. We have wonderful water and a wonderful environment/ atmosphere (*ortam*) here. Everybody dyes and weaves here. I love our carpets. They look so nice to me. Maybe they are not attractive to foreign people, but we love these lively, vivid (*canlı canlı*<sup>2</sup>) carpets. To make them vivid, black yarns are also important. In such a way, all the motifs appear clear and alive. Many people use brown to make lines but then they appear dead (*cansız*) to me somehow. These lively (*canlı*) colors with black lines are ours. We love carpets made in this way... (July 2005, in Bozalan village).

She expressed her affection for their carpets and carpet traditions in the way of differentiating their carpets from others' carpets and others' tastes in terms of colors. It is notable that she defined their carpets as lively colors with black lines. When we reconsider the fact that the villagers did not stop using black even though they stopped dyeing black color on their own, this outlining black color seems fairly important for the composition of their carpets. She connected the liveliness of their carpets with the vivid colors. And, at least for her, black is the color used to sharpen the edge of other vivid colors, to make their naturally dyed colors more vivid and alive. Thus the black color adds contrast in the color palettes of their own carpets, and also creates a contrast between their own carpets and carpets of other villages.

Of course this is one of the assets that support sustained production of natural dyed Bozalan carpets. I do not mean to reduce the cause only to their sense of aesthetics or the rather problematic concept of 'identity' as such. Besides this and more importantly, the context shown in the film such as the embedment of carpet production and consumption in the village social life, I will make a brief notation of the economic assets.

	Bozalan, natural dye	Other villages, synthetic dye
Average price per m <sup>2</sup>	250 YTL	107 YTL

**Figure 4.** The average prices of the village carpets sold to dealers. Data collected and owned by the author.<sup>3</sup>

Whereas Bozalan people are generally proud of their carpets, they indeed often complained to me that they could not sell carpets as often as they want, or for as much as they want. There is no carpet dealer living in the village and many of the carpet dealers in

<sup>2</sup> *Can* in Turkish means life, soul or energy. *-li* is a suffix which is similar to *-ful* in English, whereas *-süz* is to *-less*.

<sup>3</sup> Data collected in Oct-Dec, 2006. 1YTL=0.69 US\$ at that time. The price in Bozalan was the set price the villagers officially agree at that time, and in other villages was the average price informed by the villagers of three other villages where synthetic dyed carpets are produced.

Milas said they seldom buy carpets in Bozalan for the prices are too expensive (Fig. 4). It seemed people in this village did not have any regular buyers in common either in the cooperative basis or in the household basis. But still when I examined the flow of carpets in a few households, I found that they keep producing and happen to sell carpets for about twice or nearly three times as much as synthetic dyed ones in the region as they sell carpets directly to occasional customers who appreciated their carpets, especially natural dyes. Among those customers are not only their own acquaintances through their friends or relatives living in towns or cities but also occasional tourists who are fond of carpets or handcrafts. The fame of their carpets, written about in books and tourist brochures, or passed on by word of mouth, enables them to sell carpets without being reliant on the hard bargain of a professional dealer. I also assume that even though dealers think it reasonable that Bozalan villagers ask a far higher price for their carpets, they cannot afford it for they cannot sell it easily considering that nobody except the villagers can assure customers that a carpet he or she provides is dyed naturally and made in Bozalan. I would say their total independence in business without any kind of authorities over their commodity is a kind of double edged sword which can produce certain economic benefits coupled with the hazards of isolation from dealerships, but this point needs further exploration.

### **Conclusion**

Bozalan villagers, on whom the film focuses, dye yarns with natural dyes for their carpets whereas most producers in other villages generally use commercially and synthetically dyed yarns. The film examined their carpets' embedment in the social context. Exchange of labor, relations with neighbors, dowry traditions, their way of stocking wealth, all these are strongly connected to carpets in the village. Carpet production and consumption are central to life in the village. In this paper, I focused mainly on specific features of the colors, especially the assets we could not cover in the film. Apparently their choice of colors and dyes goes in reverse of the general trends in the region, and perhaps the market at large. It is terribly laborious and difficult to produce colors made with natural dyes, and difficult to sell the carpets to dealers for the price which matches their efforts. However, they hold not only their affection for and pride in the objects, but also a marketable niche. Thus their vivid colored carpets stay 'alive' and appeal both to themselves and to outsiders.

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