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## Atlas Today: Patterns of Production, Bazaars and Bloomingdales Uzbekistan and Xinjiang, China

Mary M. Dusenbury

University of Kansas, mdusenbury@attica.net

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Mary M. Dusenbury

[mdusenbury@attica.net](mailto:mdusenbury@attica.net)

## History



**Figure 1.** *Ikat Coat, Uzbekistan. Nineteenth century.*  
*The Textile Museum 2005.36.98. The Megalli Collection.*

In nineteenth century courts of the khanates and oasis cities of Central Asia, rulers, wealthy merchants and other well-to-do men and women wore boldly patterned warp-ikat and ikat velvet robes, often stunning in their patterning and variety. Nineteenth century ikat costumes and other textiles are well documented in private and museum collections today and have been the focus of considerable attention by collectors, dealers, and scholars since the 1970s. This robe is from a Turkish collection of Central Asian ikats given to the Textile Museum in Washington D.C. in 2005 by the collector Murad Megalli (Fig. 1).

Nineteenth century ikat textiles are also well documented in photographs such as an 1871-72 portrait of the last Khan of Kokand (Fig. 2).



**Figure 2.** *The Khan of Kokand, Seyid Mohammad Khudayar Khan,*  
*wearing an ikat robe. Turkestanskii al'bom, 1871-72. Library of Congress.*

These dynamic ikat textiles appear to have burst upon the scene in splendid complexity in the early years of the nineteenth century supported by the wealth and sophisticated taste of the khanate courts in what is today Uzbekistan. Their use spread and by the end of the nineteenth century, *atlas* was worn not only by a wealthy elite but, in simpler versions and various garment styles, by many peoples throughout Central Asia.



*Figure 3. Kyrghiz woman in an ikat robe, riding a yak. Turkestanskii al'bom, 1871-1872. Reproduced in Fitz Gibbon, Kate and Andrew Hale. Ikat. Silks of Central Asia: The Guido Goldman Collection. London: Laurence King Publishing in association with Alan Marcuson, 1997.*

They were – and are - also worn by the Turkic Uighur people in what is today Xinjiang China. In 1865 Ya'kub Beg, commander in chief of the armies of the Khan of Kokand in the Ferghana Valley, marched over the Pamir mountains to what was then Chinese Turkestan, conquered Kashgar and the surrounding territories and established a lavish court supplied by ikat weavers and other artisans brought with him from the Ferghana Valley. A few years later, when the tea merchant and mountaineer Robert Shaw visited the cities of Khotan, Yarkand and Kashgar on the branch of the old Silk Road that skirted the Taklamakan desert to the south, he was presented with several splendid ikat coats in the Uzbek style, some of which are now in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.<sup>1</sup>

The Russian conquest of Central Asia in the decade following 1865 hastened the demise of the khanate courts and speeded the introduction of inexpensive industrially produced textiles. Both factors contributed to the deterioration of the splendid nineteenth century ikat tradition. True ikat textiles were largely replaced by inexpensive imitation or faux ikat, cloth industrially printed with ikat patterns. At the same time, Russian and Central Asian entrepreneurs collaborated to turn the Ferghana Valley into the center of commercial silk production that it is today -- if one understands 'commercial' to include both collective hand and machine production.

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<sup>1</sup>Clark, Ruby. *Central Asian Ikats from the Rau Collection*. London: V&A Publications, 2007, 24. Shaw, Robert. *Visits to high Tartary, Yarkand, and Kashgar (formerly Chinese Tartary), and return journey over the Karakoram pass*. London: J. Murray, 1871, 139-140.

### ***Atlas Today in the Ferghana Valley, Uzbekistan***

The heart of ikat weaving in Central Asia today is in the Ferghana Valley in Uzbekistan. It is the product of a revival of ikat weaving by several families of fourth, fifth and sixth generation atlas weavers after the collapse of the Soviet Union and Independence in 1991. Among them is Fazlitdin Dadajanov, a fourth generation atlas weaver whose father was head designer at the Yodgorlik Silk Factory under the Soviet Union. Figure 4 shows him with his family in the courtyard of his house – where we stayed last May.



*Figure 4. Fazlitdin Dadajanov with his family in the courtyard of their house. Margilan, Ferghana Valley, Uzbekistan, May 2008.*



*Figure 5. Fazlitdin's velvet ikat, September 2007.*



Rasuljon Mirzaahmedov (Fig. 6) is a fifth generation ikat weaver whose father, Turghunboy, was also a designer at the Yodgorlik factory. Turghunboy is credited with being the first to begin the revival of ikat velvet weaving.



*Figure 6. Rasul Mirzaahmedov with velvet ikat, Margilan, Ferghana Valley, Uzbekistan. May 2008.*

Muboshir Mamadjanov (Fig. 7) is a major but less high profile producer who lives and works in Namangan in the northern Ferghana Valley.



*Figure 7. Muboshir Mamadjanov (holding bolt of cloth). Namangan, Ferghana Valley, May 2008.*

All three of these men – and several others - are the head and point person for dozens of craftsmen who each perform only one of the thirty or more specialized operations necessary to

produce a finished ikat textile. Except at the Yodgorlik “factory” and a very few other production centers where much of the process happens in one compound, most textiles travel from specialist to specialist, each working in his or her own household.

Muboshir Mamadjanov, for example, works with two hundred independent households in the city of Namangan and in surrounding villages, each household performing one specialized task. He is not the oldest member of what is, at core, a family operation but was chosen as point person, head designer, and marketer. He works with a team of five young women who scan fashion on the internet, targeting the ikat textiles they design for specific domestic and international markets. Many of their finest textiles are bought by Turkish dealers. Muboshir’s father used to travel to Turkey frequently, but Muboshir conducts most of the family business on the internet. In figure 7 we see him leaving the workshop of a velvet weaver, coordinating our visit with picking up a finished warp.

Each textile needs an overseer who initiates and finances its creation and oversees its progress from workshop to workshop. This might be a merchant or a prominent weaver/producer such as Rasuljon, Fazlitdin or Muboshir. The textile might be made on speculation for a specific market, or it might be a commission. We saw both.

### **Patterns of Production: Ferghana Valley, Uzbekistan and Xinjiang, China**

In both the Ferghana Valley and in Xinjiang, the interlinking networks of production are complex and somewhat fluid. Some weavers, for example, own their own looms and take in work or purchase warps that are ready to weave. This is a pattern we saw in Xinjiang.



**Figure 8.** Nisawarhan family in Jia Village near Hotan, Xinjiang, China, May 2008.  
*Mother and son setting up the warp on a power loom they purchased from the Tur Elix Hajim Mill in Jia.*

The Nisawarhan family in Jia village near Hotan, Xinjiang bought an outdated Chinese-made power loom (Fig. 8) from one of the two government factories in Jia. The Tur Elix Hajim factory supplies a tied and dyed warp which the son and mother set up, weave and return to the factory. They are paid by the piece.

In the village of Opal on the highway leading from Kashgar to the Pakistan border, another mother-son team also purchased a loom from a factory in Hotan. Abduheni Jan and her son work independently, ordering tied and dyed warps in patterns they choose from the factory where the son trained for five years. Abduheni Jan, the daughter of a former mayor, told us that a few years ago she “decided to introduce something new. People love atlas,” she said, “and no one weaves it anywhere in the Kashgar area.” She and her son sell locally from their home and through merchants at the large international bazaar in Kashgar.



**Figure 9.** Yunus Ahun’s atlas stall in the Kashgar bazaar, Xinjiang, China, May 2008.  
*The merchant is seated in a white shirt and hat.*

We first saw the Abduheni family fabrics and heard about their workshop from Yunus Ahun, proprietor of one of the most popular of many atlas booths in the ancient – and thriving – Kashgar bazaar (Fig. 9). He later kindly gave us the necessary information to visit the workshop in Opal – which we did the next day.

In the Ferghana Valley in Uzbekistan, the several household weaving workshops we visited used hand looms with fly shuttles such as the two in the velvet ikat workshop in Margilan (Figs. 10 and 11).





**Figure 10 (left).** Husnuidin family weaving room and looms, Margilan, Ferghana Valley, Uzbekistan.  
**Figure 11 (right).** Detail of cutting the velvet warp at the Husnuidin workshop, Margilan, Ferghana Valley, Uzbekistan. Photograph courtesy of Frieda Sorber.

Most weavers we visited in the Ferghana Valley do not own their own equipment, but work on looms supplied by the producer and weave whatever warp is given them to weave. Several members of the Husnuidin family weave for Fazlitdin Dadajanov. Fazlitdin's son accompanied us to the family compound where they live and work.

Labor-saving devices of various kinds are often introduced at one or another point in the process of producing an atlas fabric: silk reeling is usually speeded up with power equipment and, as we have seen, a hand-drawn and hand-tied warp might well be woven on a small, mid-twentieth century power loom.

Despite the introduction of labor-saving devices at one or another point in the process, the basic pattern of production, web of intricate human relationships and division of labor into many highly specialized tasks is probably quite similar to production patterns in the nineteenth century.



**Figure 12.** Designer at the Yodgorlik silk factory, Margilan, Ferghana Valley, September 2007.



The core of the ikat process – the steps that distinguish these textiles from other silk textiles - is the designing and marking of each ikat warp – and that is done by hand whether or not the textile is then woven on a power loom in a factory setting, or hand woven in a small workroom opening onto the courtyard of a family residence (Fig. 12).

### The Market



*Figure 13. Two small atlas shops on a street in Hotan, Xinjiang, China. May 2008.*

The many markets that we visited throughout Uzbekistan and in Xinjiang (Fig. 13) were full of atlas and one merchant in Kashgar, who has sold atlas for fifteen years, told us that demand is growing.



*Figure 14 (left). Peddler's cart with faux atlas, Kashgar, Xinjiang, China. May 2008.*



*Figure 15 (right). Atlas stalls in the Thursday market in Margilan, Ferghana Valley, Uzbekistan. May 2008.*

A great deal of the of the so-called atlas sold locally is faux – or printed – ikat (Fig. 14), produced primarily in textile mills in Hangzhou and Zhejiang province in China and in Seoul, Korea for the Central Asian market. What this paper has discussed thus far is true atlas, but most of the “atlas” one sees on the street and in the bazaars is the much less costly faux atlas woven (or knitted) from synthetic fibers. As an aside, we found ourselves intrigued by some of this printed ikat, such as a glittery voided- velvet printed ikat synthetic knit from Korea. But that is another story.

The Thursday market in Margilan is at the heart of atlas production in Central Asia today (Fig. 15) . Two long, double rows of atlas booths offer the greatest number and variety of hand-tied ikat textiles in all the bazaars we visited. Merchants from other parts of Uzbekistan and neighboring countries come to the Margilan market to purchase atlas in a stunning array of patterns and colors that change from season to season – one indication, we thought, of a thriving industry. Lotus Stack and I noticed different patterns and weave structures in May than we had seen the previous fall - and MUCH more lurex, making these already vibrantly colored ikat textiles shimmer.

In Uzbekistan today, women’s ikat garments, in a variety of shapes, styles and materials, have become an emblem of cultural heritage and national or ethnic identity - as they have for Uighur minority women in Xinjiang, China (Fig. 16). Atlas is worn by popular singers, television personalities, merchants, young girls, students, fashion models and foreign diplomats. The wife of the ambassador of Uzbekistan wore a handsome atlas jacket to attend the opening of Lotus Stack’s exhibition of Uzbek embroidery in Minneapolis in June 2007.



*Figure 16 (left). Uighur shopper in the vegetable bazaar, Hotan, Xinjiang, China. May 2008.*



**Figure 17 (right).** *Ralph Lauren collection at Bloomingdales, spring 2008. New York Times, Sunday June 8, 2008.*

Atlas has been picked up by international designers. Oscar de la Renta first used Rasul Mirzaahmedov's velvet ikat and adras in 2005 and Diane von Furstenberg and Ralph Lauren (Fig. 17) both introduced atlas and faux atlas fabric in their spring 2008 collections. From the bazaars of Central Asia to the department stores of New York, the bold patterns and vibrant colors of twenty-first century atlas textiles attest both to the perseverance of several generations of craftsmen who kept their skills alive through the difficult years of Soviet domination, and to the vision, determination and skill of their descendants who are reviving and nourishing atlas for a new century.

### **Acknowledgments**

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### **Note on Terminology**

Abrband – “bound clouds” – is the general term for the warp ikat technique in Uzbekistan, but throughout the region, the term we most commonly heard as we traveled around was atlas. In its narrow meaning, atlas refers to satin-weave warp ikat, but I will use it here in its general sense (interchangeably with ‘ikat’) to include all true Central Asian warp ikat textiles – warp ikat with a silk warp and silk weft and warp ikat with a silk warp and cotton weft (a combination included in the term adras) - and including all weave structures.