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Something Borrowed, Something Red –Textiles in Colonial and Soviet Central Asia

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We should like, of course, to send the paranji and chachvon to hell, but we cannot always get everything we want by issuing decrees.

Nadezhda Krupskaya¹

Introduction

This paper traces the appropriation and manipulation of traditional textiles and textile designs for political purposes from the Russian colonial period to the present in Central Asia. It is less focused on identifying specific borrowings back and forth between the dominant Russian and dependent Central Asian geographical spheres, and more on incidents that illustrate the use of textiles and the manipulation of textile design in ways that furthered this political paradigm. Within these back and forth equations, the most important textile by far (although also the least interesting in terms of aesthetics, invention or multiplicity of use) is the *chachvon*, the horsehair veil, but other textiles and textile designs functioned as symbolically representative of Central Asian identity or as symbolizing a change taking place in society.

Over the last hundred and twenty five years, the Transcaspian Turkoman deserts and independent Central Asian khanates of Bukhara, Kokand and Khiva were transformed first into Russian colonial territories then briefly into semi-independent states after the collapse of Czarist power. The final victory of Bolshevik forces brought Central Asia under Soviet control, where it remained for the next 75 years; the region was divided into Soviet republics, and then, with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, these former SSRs emerged as the independent republics of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

Within approximately this same time period, textile and carpet production underwent drastic changes, moving from homemade and small artisan production for local use to a commercially-sensitive industry producing goods for worldwide distribution. In most cases too, the general appearance, technical level, and aesthetic qualities of these textiles changed substantially in response to the new goals of the production.

Colonial period

From the earliest period of Russian colonization, patterns drawn from Central Asian textile designs were used in Russia as decorative elements to represent an exotic, Central Asian identity. Central Asian products, especially textiles, which were displayed in the expositions and world fairs popular at the end of the 19th century, became stock emblems of Russian colonial empire. Turkoman guls (distinctive carpet field patterns related to tribal identity) were particularly adaptable as decorative elements in books and other

¹ Speaking at the All-Union Conference of Workers among Eastern Women, 1928, quoted in Douglas Northrop, *Veiled Empire, Gender and Power in Stalinist Central Asia*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 2004, on pg. 284. I am deeply indebted to Dr. Northrop for the major contributions he has made to this field of Central Asian studies.

graphic design. In these contexts, the designs had obviously lost any connection with their specific tribal origin. Clichéd images of Uzbeks, Turkomans and Kazakhs based on Russian observations of Central Asian culture became fixed as archetypical social models in the minds of the Russian public through Orientalist painting and other genre arts. These same stock images were adapted to illustrate the texts of newspaper articles, magazines, and numerous books of Central Asian travel. Central Asia's 'public image' was very similar to the popular Orientalist vision of Turkey, the Near East and Africa held in the European mind; a familiar combination of luxury and exotic dress, feminine sexuality, male degeneracy, cruelty, and ignorance.

In colonial period Russia the influence of Central Asia's incredibly rich textile traditions was found primarily in their usage as household decoration and costume. Embroideries, shawls, and carpets were used to accent European style homes. The export of literally hundreds of thousands of traditional silk and cotton robes from Central Asia to Russia encouraged the fashion of wearing Central Asian dress as at-home wear, especially among intellectuals and the artistic community. Not only among the colonial populations in Central Asia, but in Russia itself, it is common to find photographic portraits of whole families of Russians in Central Asian (and other colonial) dress.

In much the same way, the theater and ballet embraced the exoticism of the East, utilizing dramatic 'Islamic' sets and utilizing rich Central Asian silks for costuming. These popular borrowings were essentially a public celebration of Empire. The Russian government, in its turn, concentrated on making productive use of the newly acquired lands by exploiting Central Asia's natural resources and agricultural wealth. In comparison to large scale cotton production, the marketing of finished goods like silks, hand-printed cotton cloth and carpets were small enterprises, but many Russians and others of European descent were engaged in private business as wholesale importers and traders of Central Asian goods. By the end of the 19th century, foreign entrepreneurs were certainly a economic force in organizing various types of weaving manufactories inside Central Asia.

In the time leading up to the Revolution, privately owned textile 'factories' under European style management remained a relatively minor influence in comparison to the traditional guild organizations which were the backbone of the urban weaving and embroidery industries. These textile guild organizations, some of which dated back to the 16th century, performed many functions. They supervised the relationships between masters and apprentices to the trade, maintained quality checks on materials, regulated the market prices both at wholesale and in the local bazaar, and supervised the important ritual and spiritual traditions associated with each specialized trade. A major revelation – contained within an 1870 Moscow exhibition catalog of Central Asian flora, fauna, arts, and manufactures – indicated that there were well-established, all male guilds involved in the production of *suzani* (embroidered wall hangings) as well as other embroidery work dating back to the early part of the 19th century. This art has been thought to be based solely on household production by women, at least until later in the colonial period. The existence of these all-male embroidery guilds undoubtedly facilitated the expansion of embroideries made specifically for export. By the last quarter of the 19th century, traditional Central Asian embroidery patterns were used on many non-traditional items: tablecloths, tea-cosys, napkins, and shawls.

Changes in urban commercial textile production resulted in part from the competitive marketing of large quantities of cheap cotton Russian manufactured goods. Stylistic alterations may also have resulted from the movement of many Jewish dyers and other textile specialists from Bukhara (which had remained under the nominal, but still quite oppressive rule of the Emir) into the Russian-governed, more liberalized towns of the Ferghana Valley. The export of vast quantities of commercially made silk cloth to Russia undoubtedly gave added impetus to the use of simplified designs that could be produced more quickly by less specialized workers.

By 1885, European fashions had had a substantial impact on traditional dress styles in Central Asia. Initially, this amounted to the addition of collars, cuffs, and pockets to traditional robes. Women's dresses were also adapted to a fitted cut that resembled European styles, although women's tunic-like dresses continued to be worn with trousers. Closer to the 1917 Revolution, a small over-vest became very popular in rural and urban communities. Urban women's outer garments for street wear remained almost unchanged into the 1920s and even 1930s. The *paranja* or *paranji*, a full-length robe worn over the head, was ubiquitous. This false-sleeved robe was usually made of attractive, finely striped half-silk fabric, and worn in conjunction with the *chachvon*, a horsehair veil. The *chachvon* was made of heavy, black net, and was suspended from the collar of the *paranja*, completely covering the face and chest of the wearer. Unlike the embroidered silk veils worn at marriage by the Turkoman, or the all-enveloping, but colorful Afghan *chadri*, it was undecorated and seemed deliberately ugly.

Most older men and country-dwellers continued to wear the traditional tunic-shirt and wide pantaloons beneath silk or cotton robes, but many young, educated urban men adopted European dress.

In the Turkoman regions, despite long-term armed resistance to Russian rule, a number of tribes had lost not only their independence, but also practically all of their goods and livestock. An 1888 book on the Akhal Tekke oasis (*Akhal-tekinski oazis*), written not long after the massacre of Tekke men, women and children at Geok Tepe and subsequent confiscation of all property as reparation by Russia) describes in detail the lives and miserable economic condition of the Tekke Turkoman. It fails even to mention carpets among the household goods of these famous weavers. However, the Tekke appear to have soon rebounded, and become once again major producers of carpets for the commercial market. The carpets dating to this late 19th century period do bear witness to their deliberate adaptation to the demands of the foreign market – the rugs are stiff, very tightly woven, and crammed with tiny designs in a fairly repetitive format, a condescension to Russian taste. Most lack the subtlety of color and interplay of design found in earlier carpet production.

The further ethnic groups dwelt from the cities, the more conservative their cultural traditions remained. There was a close relationship between women's costume and major life traditions that tended to preserve pre-colonial modes of dress. Among the Turkoman, adolescence, marriage, and the birth of a child all required a major alteration in daily dress, ornament, and hairstyle.

By far the most important official Czarist period policies had to do with reorganizing the production of cotton to provide raw material for Russian factories. Indeed, an

important motive for the Russia conquest of Central Asia in the 1860s had been the hope of competing on the world cotton market with Egypt and the United States, at a time when cotton production was severely compromised in both countries.

During the Empire, Russian was satisfied with pacifying the Central Asian region: substituting large, plantation-like cotton farms for the traditional small producers; establishing factories to do initial processing of raw materials; securing land trade routes and building railroads. These central-government policies set the stage for the eventual breakdown of the Central Asian economy when cotton production had become almost the single industry within the entire region. During the devastating agricultural reverses of the twenties and thirties, Central Asia, which had provided ample sustenance to its people before the revolution, could no longer feed them. At this time, as a direct result of the Soviet expansion of the former Imperialist policies of forced settlement of nomads and single-crop cotton farming, hundreds of thousands of people succumbed to starvation, and three-quarters of all the livestock in the region died.

Soviet Period

In is against this backdrop of continual stress and the failure of Soviet officialdom to make effective policy based on the industrialized European model that the manipulation and usage of textiles and textile design in the Soviet period must be seen. The making of Russia into a Soviet state involved nationalization of industry, factory reorganization, the mobilization of workers into cadres, and the building of a new hierarchy of administrators loyal to communist ideas. Central Asia's economy was almost entirely agricultural. Whatever urban manufacturing that did exist was based on guild production and small workshops. Absent a working class, a proletariat, how could a Soviet cultural and social identity be established?

Two formulae for social action were essential to the Soviet plan. Both served to intensify the conflict between the traditional past and the communist future, and to justify the dominant role of Russia in the evolution of the Soviet state. The first was to identify all forces resistant to Bolshevik rule as reactionary. This was done by exploiting the old Orientalist clichés of ignorance, luxury and vice to characterize all who opposed Bolshevik, and then Soviet rule. This formulation ignored independent, local political action like that of the Muslim Jadidists and other educationalist, modernist movements and covered up atrocities like the 1918 destruction of the city of Kokand by Bolshevik forces after the establishment of a locally-based independent socialist government. The deliberately offensive characterization of Muslim tradition was supported by the press, and later, in textbooks. A rural Muslim resistance movement that lasted well into the 1930s was described as being made up entirely of religious fanatics and bandits – and this type of characterization still colors Russian perception of the Chechen secession movement. The portrayal of modernist, nationalist movements as anti-social and religiously based was also used as justification for the closing of all schools run by Muslims, and the substitution of Russian language courses for all education in native languages. Consequently, literacy levels actually dropped in the early decades of Soviet rule.

The second path involved a major assault on what we might call 'traditional family values' in Muslim Central Asia. Here, the friendly hand of Russia, the Big Brother of the

Soviet family, was stretched out to lead backward Central Asia into the light of communism, and the hands Big Brother grabbed belonged to women. In striking contrast to the women's movement in European Russia, which was allowed to deteriorate virtually into nothing under Stalin (the Moscow party's Women's Department (*Zhenotdel*) was eliminated in 1930 and its lower level replacement Women's Section (*Zhensektor*) in 1934) the new communist cultural and social identity was powerfully focused on the women's movement in Central Asia. This social paradigm was crucial to Soviet Russia's conception of its leadership role, and women's liberation became the most important theme of the Revolution in Central Asia. Unfortunately for Central Asia's women (and men), the lifting of women from male subjugation did not include the lifting of Central Asian subjugation to Soviet Russia.

The broad strokes that defined – in Soviet eyes – what was wrong with Central Asia were all found within traditional culture, religion and the family, in which the patriarch played the dominant role and extended kinship relations based on clan or tribe created fairly large and potentially dangerous political and social units. *Pardah*, the seclusion and veiling of women was targeted as a means of disrupting ties to both custom and to notions of family honor.

In identifying the worst excesses of oppression of women with the traditional Muslim family, the Soviets again deliberately ignored the more moderate Muslim movements towards liberation already existing in Central Asia. The Soviets were particularly concerned with quashing the relationship of these local modernizing groups with pan-Islamic and pan-Turkic political movements abroad. They were also determined not to be outdone by the rapid steps towards modernization and women's liberation being taken at the time in Afghanistan, under King Amanullah Khan, who attempted to abolish the veil in the 1920s, and by the much more effective and permanent steps toward modernization in Turkey taken by Kemal Ataturk.

According to Douglas Northrop,

*Party activists launched this campaign [of women's liberation] in 1927... calling it a hujum, or assault, against the "moldy old ways" of female seclusion and inequality. This campaign took as its goal nothing less than the complete and immediate transformation of everyday life, or byt... in Uzbekistan it aimed above all on the eradication of the heavy head-to-toe veils... Party optimists aimed at a swift campaign, despite the almost complete absence from party ranks of Uzbek women to help lead the effort. Hopes thus fell to the mostly Russian activists of the Zhenotdel, who aimed to complete the heroic liberation of Central Asian women in less than six months...*²

Party activists insisted that Uzbek women publicly – and according to Northrop, sometimes at gunpoint – throw off their veils. Unveiling became symbolic of the entire Soviet enterprise in Central Asia, and consequently became a focus of resistance. From one of many social customs, veiling became symbolic of the whole of traditional Muslim and family life.

² *Ibid*, p. 12.

*Wearing a veil became more than a narrowly religious or moral matter; for many people it also became an act of political and national resistance to an outside colonial power.*³

Beyond the issue of the veiling of women, the Soviet government took other measures having to do with textiles with somewhat different political aims. Immediately after the revolution there was large-scale seizure of personal wealth from persons of the rich, merchant or landowning classes. For all but the wealthiest persons in Central Asia, family treasures and valuable goods consisted almost entirely of textiles. An Uzbek scholar in Tashkent, Dr. Sayora Mahkamova, told me that because her family was considered to be bourgeoisie, local officials from the town Soviet had seized all of her grandmother's robes and textiles. More than 60 years later, this was still deeply emotionally disturbing to her, and she described her frustration at not being able to take her mother to burial in a traditional family robe.

Traditional guilds were shut down and workshops making ikat and other silks were forced to close; artisans were placed in factory-like organizations, and students were brought in from Moscow to design new ikats. A book of official, rather formulaic and repetitive Soviet ikat patterns (collected in the 1930s but published in 1941) includes many adaptations of traditional designs with names like *sarik yak baz* (yellow-one-color) and *zangar karfa* (green-crow). One was named, "Jew's delight."⁴ (Late Soviet patterns for both authentic and faux ikat patterns were virtually identical to those of the 1930s, showing no imaginative growth or evolution of design, but with new names like 'Sputnik' and 'Red Square'.)

A few artisans continued to work quietly and many traditional textile arts remained alive because local officials closed their eyes to their existence. Locally made cloths were needed in order to compensate for periodic shortages of imported and manufactured cloth, especially during WW2. In the 1950s, during the first official Soviet revival of traditional arts under the rubric of 'folk arts,' a few elderly craftsmen were once again brought to light to instruct young students in the traditional crafts.

Newspapers published 'new Soviet' embroidery patterns beginning in the 1930s, and according to Dr. Mahkamova, they were said to have prompted violent quarrels between young brides preparing suzani for their dowries, and their grandmothers, who preferred the traditional designs.

Far odder things happened to carpet design. Precisely woven Turkoman carpets in very repetitive designs continued to be made for the international and Soviet markets, and looser, long-piled rugs for Uzbek, Kyrgyz, and Kazakh home use (though this production was much reduced by loss of herds, and the fact that women now had little time for weaving, as they were employed in various forms of farm labor). A purely Soviet variety of carpets can be seen in a type that began to be made soon after the Revolution that, while retaining traditional geometric and floral border patterns, integrated European style portraits of heroic figures and events into the field.

³ *Ibid*, p. 13.

⁴ This pattern book was made up of hand-drawn renderings of ikat designs collected in the town of Marghilan in the Fergana Valley by V. K. Rozvadovsky in the 1930s.

In the Soviet period tribal patterns were utilized as formal symbols of Central Asian provincial sub-identities within the Soviet Union. They were incorporated into architectural decoration, used in theater set design, in painting, and as a sort of tribal-identity-prop in every form of visual artistic expression. Similarly, a standardized “national costume” only superficially related to the actual traditional form of clothing was widely used in theater and performance art. In the theater, the wearing of a traditional costume, except in historical epics dating to many centuries before, was generally a good indication of the actor’s role; in this case, the bad guys wore robes and turbans instead of black hats.

Today, although the types of usage do not differ substantially from the Soviet period, traditional textile designs are important symbols of an independent, utterly non-Soviet Central Asian identity within the newly established republics. Still, many of the constraints of the Soviet period remain. The wearing of headscarves by young women is considered a potentially anti-social, overtly Muslim behavior, and has taken on, just as the veil did so many years before, the character of an active statement of anti-government sentiment as well as of religious piety.

Though no longer the most important of all Uzbek manufactures, textiles retain a symbolic primacy within the new republic. Since the early 19th century, ikat has often been considered the ‘national fabric’ of Uzbekistan, but now it’s official. Several Uzbek women’s business groups have undertaken projects of revitalizing and popularizing the use of ikat as a dress fabric outside of Uzbekistan, and now that certain 19th century textiles have achieved values commensurate with fine arts on the international market, the most enterprising of the always-enterprising Uzbeks have established workshops producing gorgeous and very exact reproductions of the most luxurious mid-19th century embroidered and ikat patterned fabrics, bringing these traditional arts full circle.

Photographs (*see below*)

Fig. 1 A Russian colonial family party in Central Asian dress. Nikolaya Studio, Tashkent, 1880s.

Fig. 2 Artist gazing at a fictitious rendering of a woman casting off her veil. Max Penson, 1930s.

Fig. 3 Women in traditional Turkoman dress examine new Soviet women’s clothing. Max Penson, late 1930s-early 1940s.

Fig. 4 Women voting at a meeting. Max Penson, 1930s.

Fig. 5 Young man helps his mother to vote for the first time. Voting area is decorated with embroidered suzani. Max Penson, late 1920s-early 1930s.

Fig. 6 Ethnic Russian waitresses in a café, wearing faux-ikat dresses. Anatoly Rahimbaev, Tashkent, 1990.



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Fig. 6. Ethnic Russian waitresses in a café, wearing faux-ikat dresses. Anatoly Rahimbaev, Tashkent, 1990.