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Building on the Past, Making the Future

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Politics as Duration

Many people who attended the 2012 Textile Society conference *Textiles and Politics* will have been drawn to historical or ethnographic textiles. That is, they may be interested in textile arts with a past, created using materials, techniques and materials which are either rarely practised now or not at all, by societies which may not exist as they were when such textiles were made. Indeed, very often, an important feature of the textile arts we delight in is that, alongside their beauty and quality, they have endured and been made in a similar or coherent form over time – often a long time.

This enduring aspect of such a fragile and ephemeral art form as textiles is a factor that I wish to address in this paper. My understanding of politics encompasses this capacity to endure, and in this paper I argue that this is an aspect of textile art that is often overlooked. Textiles provide texture to the lives of past societies. If politics is about power, then it is a special form of power and politics that produces artefacts which retain such aesthetic integrity over generations. This is especially so given that textile artefacts are often produced in the domestic arena, that they survive through historical upheavals or, if they do not, then the skills and practices which ensure their production do, and that the imagery and practices featured in textiles continue to be meaningful to the societies who made or make them, even drawing people of future generations to learn more about them. Any society that participates in such a tangible textile legacy must be doing something right.

The Duration of Kyrgyz Textile Practices

My discussion focuses on a special case-study, Kyrgyz nomadic textiles, especially Kyrgyz felt production, from past use in nomadic tents to contemporary use in fashion and textile arts. In regard to Kyrgyz textile production, I am concerned to ask how such a dynamic tradition, which has experienced so many political regimes, from rule by nomadic Khanates, to fragmentation and localization, to Russian conquest, Sovietisation and now globalization, – how can it have retained any form of integrity throughout these changes in political structure and economy? And yet there has clearly been a continuity in the textile production among nomadic pastoralists in Central Asia from at least 500BCE until very recently, and Kyrgyz textile artists continue to produce work which incorporates past practices and influence into their work (see Ivanov 1969; Gryaznov 1969; Rudenko 1970; Makhova and Cherkasova 1972; Bunn 2010a).

While it is impossible to say that early felts, such as those from burials at Pazyryk, South Siberia, in 450 BCE, were made by Kyrgyz people (whose existence was first noted over 10 centuries later), there would appear to be an aesthetic and technical integrity between early Central Asian nomadic felt design and Kyrgyz felt and other textiles of the recent past. This is still evident in technique, composition and pattern. This coherence suggests a related and developing cultural dynamic and set of influences at play. Techniques used in ancient felt saddle cloths and wall hangings from Pazyryk and in Kyrgyz felt carpets

such as their iconic *shyrdaks* are very similar. Both use the mosaic method (intarsia) to create the textile, which in turn influences composition, creating a positive and negative design. Pattern designs such as the *umai* motif and the ram's horn (*kochkor muyuz*) motif are also encountered on artefacts from both eras, despite the 2500 year gap between their making. This is despite all the large scale political changes and smaller scale regional factors, from changes of political allegiance (whether to Khan to party leader), seasonal migrations and territorial movements, and the simple improvisatory nature of textile practice.



Figure 1, left. Felt shabrack, Pazyryk tombs, South Siberia, 450 BCE.

Umai motif down right hand border and positive and negative composition.

Figure 2, right. Kyrgyz shyrdak, Kochkor, Kyrgyzstan. Kochkor muyuz motif and positive and negative imagery.

So how does this happen? Certainly this is not a practice where patterns or techniques have been intentionally repeated across generations through conscious intent. A felt is not made with the aim of stamping one family line's credentials through patterns and motifs – in fact patterns move with women as they move between male lines in marriage. Kyrgyz felt and other textiles were also rarely used as large scale symbols of political identity, although status accrued in possession of such felts, in sitting on them in the place of honour in a tent, and in marriage to a wife who could make them. Such textiles were women's work, rarely made for sale at all until the Soviet era, but rather made for gifts or dowries. Furthermore, the making process was, and is, largely informal and dynamic. Kyrgyz felt makers don't say, "I am going to make this felt exactly like the last one". Never in the past, were patterns directly copied or traced from an old piece. Each piece was made anew, drawing upon a vocabulary of regional motifs. So this textile art form expresses a kind of domestic political integrity, created through improvisatory, rather than intentional means, 'on the hoof', as it were. This appears to be an aspect of its capacity to endure.

A Pastoralist Ideology in Textiles

If there is an ideology expressed through Kyrgyz textiles, it is a pastoralist ideology, expressed aesthetically. Some scholars, such as Tani, in relation to Central Asian nomadic pastoralist belief systems, refer to this as the Central Asian 'ideology of nature' (Tani 1996). This 'ideology' could be argued as a very specific set of relationships with the environment, with its roots in the informal

practices associated with shamanism (Humphrey 1996). It takes a unique approach to power relations, encompassing a very inclusive understanding of nature as the environment, or ‘everything that there is in the world’, including humans (Batchuluun 2000). In this view, nature is full of sentient beings, of which humans are just one form. Other beings might be animals and their spirit masters, including sheep or deer, but also powers, or *e’e*, in natural sites such as springs or mountains, even the weather (Bunn 2010b).

Within this ideology is a notion of ‘balance’, where the destinies of such powers in nature are interdependent. This links to former hunting practises in the region among Kyrgyz and associated groups, where to kill an animal for food meant a change in the balance of animate souls in the world. Shamans negotiated with these powers to ensure that any imbalance didn’t impact on their community, causing illness or death (Hamayom 1990).

The importance of balance and the interconnectedness of all beings in the environment is manifest in the aesthetic of Kyrgyz textiles, both in the composition and the design. It is seen in the balanced positive and negative composition and in the zoomorphic and other naturalistic imagery and motifs used – birds, rams, skeletons, mountains and so on. It is manifest even through the cut-out mosaic technique employed, where the centre field of each piece is made up of mosaic inset felt, cut to fit in a balanced composition. Neither centre field nor background is predominant. Instead, the inset pattern mirrors and recurs upon itself, so that one is never sure which is pattern and which is field (Bunn 2010a; 2011). Even when people innovate, which they have always done, a similar aesthetic of the integrated aspects of nature is still featured.



Figure 3. Composite, intertwined shirdak centre-field featuring ‘pattern of the heart’. Jer Köchku’u, 1950.

The Contemporary Situation

So how has all this fared since independence and joining the global economic market in 1991? My most recent visit – March 2011 (twenty years on from my first visit in 1991) revealed many developments. Ironically, in 2011, I had never been so confronted with politics in all of its aspects. International events during my visit included the Fukushima disaster in Japan, the early uprisings of the Arab spring, the invasion of Libya, and the News International phone hacking scandal in the UK. Developments in Kyrgyzstan kept apace. It was the anniversary of the previous year’s revolution when over 100 people were killed by the forces of President Bakiev, who was subsequently ousted. During my visit, everyday at the Kyrgyz White House (the Beli Dom) there were protests. Photos of last year’s dead would be tied to the railings in the evening only to have been removed by someone the next day.

Small groups of people would huddle together looking intently at the line of guards over the road from them, protesting at shortages of work, food prices or perceived corruption. There were parallel economic upheavals. The right to rent kiosks and craft workshops around Bishkek's Osh Bazaar was being eroded, for example. People were being moved out from their places of livelihood, or excessive rents were being charged. Similar events were being accessed through the newspapers, the TV and internet, and being discussed every evening by my hosts and friends.

Such specific political events set an atmosphere, a context, through which one views and interprets a research visit. As a foreign scholar, I have not usually been so directly confronted with political events during my field studies in Kyrgyzstan. I have tended to focus on my subject matter as cultural, historic, aesthetic, collaborative, ritual... and my discussions with practitioners, artists, and users have always been well-rounded, reflecting their practices and concerns within their communities. Political matter have arisen within this framework, but rarely been at the fore. This visit emphasized that, as in all other aspects of Kyrgyz life, one cannot separate such factors. What follows is an account of my visits and impressions of a series of Kyrgyz makers in 2011, through which I hope my main questions about power within continuity and change shine through, but which also reveal the minutiae of detail arising through the political context of that time.

The programme of my visit was to meet the range of Kyrgyz textile specialists working today. We visited Kyrgyz designers with their own fashion houses; designers with small home-based workshops; contemporary textile artists; interior designers; art college students and art teachers; rural practitioners; regional NGOs; craft entrepreneurs; and national craft dynasties. I also found myself witnessing the transformations in textile production which had taken place in the 20 years since I first visited the region. And, perhaps because I was working on an exhibition about all this later in the year in the UK, I was attending Kyrgyz Fashion Week just before I left, having taken on the unlikely role of 'judge'. In the process of all these activities, I aimed to witness the contemporary relevance of notions such as the 'ideology of nature' in women's work, the continued (or not) balance in composition, and I also was drawn to notice a third factor, the importance of the ancestors and the past in developing, discussing and naming artists' work.



Figure 4. Kyrgyz fashion Week, April 2012, featuring Burul Mambetova Collection, In the Way of the Ancestors.

Today, one can almost delimit Kyrgyz textile arts into two kinds of regional practice, textiles made in the city, and those made in the villages and mountains. City textile workers tend to be mainly designers and textile artists, linked into the formal education system and with more direct contacts with the international markets. They are more likely to be producing fashion, interior design and ‘one-off’ textile pieces we might call ‘art’. This work is less directly of a ‘traditional form’. They call their workshops, or brands, by their personal names, but will have a group of workers who produce much of the work for them who may be relatives, sometimes doing the work for favours as part of the reciprocal *** system, or for piece-work. Countryside workers are more likely to produce material with direct reference to past domestic techniques and styles, - especially *shyrdak* felts. They usually work in groups as NGOs, taking on a collective name. Here again, however, one woman will be the organizer, and many of the helpers will be working for reciprocal favours, or doing piece-work. The links with international markets are less direct, and frequently there will be a ‘middle-man’, who will advise on size, colour, and even design.

Textiles in the town

In 2011 when I visited Bishkek, the Kyrgyz capital, the poverty and inequality which had become endemic in the Bakiev period was more intense than I had witnessed in all my previous research trips to the region, beyond even the post-Soviet collapse. Yet in contrast with the low spirits on the streets, there was almost a sense of joy and pride in women’s textile work, especially the developing fashion world, a world inhabited in Kyrgyzstan almost entirely by women. Whether this was because of fashion’s close connection to clothing and other former domestic textile practices, which gave and still give people pride, or whether because of fashion’s apparent separation from political events, it was difficult to tell. But fashion in particular seemed to transcend even the ‘breaking news’.

In my view, one of the most successful Kyrgyz fashion designers I met was **Dilbar**. Dilbar has a fashion house in Bishkek, the Kyrgyz capital, and a second in Washington, as well as an American backer. Her Bishkek fashion house is unique in Kyrgyzstan in presenting the designer’s work on an international platform. The building is sophisticated, chic, new Kyrgyz design, brass plaque with intercom entry. It illustrates a feature of global fashion digested and reconstituted in Kyrgyz terms – the conflation of house ‘the dynasty’ or lineage with house ‘the building’. We were to encounter this every time we visited a textile worker during our visit, but this was the only case where a designer’s skill and name were so manifest in the building where her work was sold.



Figure 5. House of Dilbar

The dynastic aspect of fashion houses and artistic studios drew upon not just family lineage, but was also linked through educational institutions and celebrated teachers. Alongside the family dynasty of craftsmanship or artisanry, a Soviet Arts education provided an almost parallel lineage or pedigree. Dilbar went to the Moscow Academy of Fine Arts, alongside many other Kyrgyz artists and designers and illustrators of her era, including members of the well-known Kyrgyz artists' union, Kyal.

Again and again, collections' themes or titles also linked designers' sources of inspiration, to Kyrgyz heritage and the 'ideology of nature' mentioned above, to land and the natural environment, but also to the ancestors. This is not a formal notion of heritage, as in 'national heritage', but a heritage infused with an understanding of the past which incorporates the value of ancestors (*arbak*), belief and the sacred. Dilbar also made references to wider history. A recent collection, *Kyrgyz Court Interpretations*, evoked a stately form of Kyrgyz nobility, with overtones of a Chinese style.



Figure 6. *Kyrgyz Court Interpretations*. Dilbar collection, Bishkek, 2011

In practice, and in parallel, specific details of Dilbar's design were inspired by traditional nomadic clothing. The cut of the *beldemchi* (apron skirt) was mirrored in the cut of her contemporary skirts, the long sleeves of old kaftans emerged in new coat designs. The embellishments and decorations were also inspired by Kyrgyz motifs and patterns on celebrated ancient textiles. In Dilbar's case, examples included motifs from well-known felts in the Kyrgyz Museum of Fine Arts. Kyrgyz Silk Road heritage also played a part in regard to the continued circulation of available fabrics across the region. Dilbar's extensive knowledge of local materials meant that each garment in itself was like a voyage along the Silk Road. Brocade silk from India, ikat from Bukhara, velvet from Uzbekistan, leather from Italy. But there were also specifically Kyrgyz fabrics – pony skin handbags and hand-cured hide necklaces.

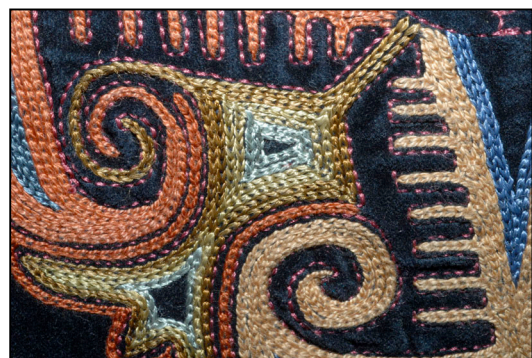


Figure 7 Dilbar collection, detail, Glasgow 2011. Photo Lesley Gorman.

Figure 8 Dilbar collection, detail, Glasgow 2011. Photo Lesley Gorman

Figure 9 Dilbar, leatherwork inset into velvet, detail. Bishkek 2011

A contemporary feature of international couture, into which Kyrgyz design fits comfortably, is that of ‘Artisan fashion’, and the growing trend of fashion houses from Prada to Levi jeans to incorporate the ‘hand-made’ into their collections. Dilbar’s work fits perfectly into this recent European and American trend. Her work *is* handmade. She, and the women who work for her, *are* artisans. Trained in leatherwork and shoemaking at the Moscow Academy of Fine Arts, her hand skills and her attention to detail are second to none. This artisanry extends beyond her clothing to the building of her shop, also designed and hand-made from wood and metal by her artist husband.

A second very successful fashion designer, **Burul**, is from a similar generation, and is also a trained designer. She makes her couture and ready-to-to wear collections almost entirely from felt, or felt and silk *nuno* felt, which provides her trademark style. Her exquisite development of this material is a direct reference to the important role felt played in Kyrgyz clothing and interior design pre-Russian conquest. Her house style and practice has been strongly influenced by two international initiatives directed at Kyrgyz women artisans. These include visits by European trainers, such as Katharina Thomas and Istvan Vidak, in the late 1990’s and early 2000’s. Burul also benefitted from the introduction of UNESCO ‘seals of excellence’, of which she has been awarded many. Her themes again draw on her personal heritage, her most famous collection, *In the Way of the Ancestors*, won prizes in Paris in 2010, where her work continues to be exhibited.



Figure 10. Burul collection, detail. Bishkek 2011

As mentioned above, whichever designer I visited, their ‘house’ played a critical role. In many cases, we were taken to women’s own family homes and, whenever possible, to their new houses which were part of the ubiquitous new-build springing up everywhere in Bishkek. Women whose houses weren’t finished got their new basement workshops ready, and we trod carefully across building sites to enter. Other women adopted reworked past Soviet accommodation, transforming old flats, and even factories into studios. Without a backer, Burul has little capital to invest in her public face. Her workshop is in an old school basement, reflecting the difficulties that many Kyrgyz artists experience.

Fariza Sheshe’eva, director of *Sayma* (embroidery), is a textile artist who makes exquisite embroidered felt and *chiy* (wrapped sedge work) wall-hangings. She also makes designer hats and tourist artefacts as a sideline. Fariza claims a strong dynastic tie to both family artisanry, attributing the influence of her mother’s more ‘traditional’ textile work at home, and also her arts education. She studied alongside one of the most renowned Kyrgyz artists, Jumabey Umetov, famous for his Matisse-inspired *chiy* and felt work. Umetov himself was probably among the first Kyrgyz artists to have a fine arts training in the Russian Academies. He also used his mother’s textiles skills as a source of inspiration. Fariza’s inspiration also draws upon the past, referencing ancient ancestral connections through incorporating imagery from rock art and petroglyphs from Kyrgyzstan and beyond in her work. Zoomorphic and other naturalistic motifs emerge continually in her pieces.



Figure 11 Fariza Shesheeva, Wall Hanging, Bishkek 2011

Gulmira Kutueva, also from this generation of designers, focuses on interiors and embroidered wall hangings. She also makes hats, and was completing a bulk order for China when I visited, claiming to have given one to Julia Roberts on a recent training visit to Mongolia. Again her inspiration draws upon her cultural heritage. Her inspiration focuses on Kyrgyz concern with nature and the mountain environment, with themes such as the *Four Seasons* and the *Summer Pastures*. She recently produced all the interior textiles for *Supara*, the contemporary, nomad-style restaurant on the outskirts of Bishkek.



Figure 12, left. Gulmira Kutueva, detail from cushion cover, Glasgow, 2011. Photo Lesley Gorman.

Figure 13, right. Aidai Asangulova, detail of scarf, Bishkek 2011. Photo Laura Hamilton

In regard to fashion houses and generations of designers, all these women were educated in the Soviet era, and like all the artists and designers I met from this period, took their work and its quality very seriously at a personal and aesthetic level. A legacy of a Soviet education was that art and artisanry were valued and respected professions. Women would take the time to make the work, and take time to explain its meaning and visual references. This gave them the space to incorporate both Kyrgyz notions of heritage and views on the environment into their work, and they often did.

The younger generation of Kyrgyz designers also take inspiration from Kyrgyz cultural heritage and the natural environment, but in contrast with the older generation educated in the Soviet period, they take a more commercial approach, reflecting the more market-oriented focus of some of the new universities and development agencies. Aidai Asangulova, a very successful contemporary fashion designer with an American backer, was taught at the Slavonic University. To create a collection, she 'must have the music'. Her recent collection was inspired by a fusion of Kyrgyz *komuz* (lute) music and Mendelssohn. She sells to large stores such as Beta Stores and the Red Centre in Bishkek and also exports to the USA. She has made collections inspired by the Kyrgyz nomadic tent, and a wedding collection of felt dresses in 2011. Her awareness of the market extends to her emphasizing 'Hand-made in Kyrgyzstan' on the *Aidai* label. (Figure 13.)

Aidai Chochumbayeva attended the Kyrgyz State University of Construction, Transport and Architecture. Her workshop is in an old Soviet-era flat and she has benefitted greatly from her European *nuno* silk felt training. Many contemporary Kyrgyz designers make silk felt scarves, which are

ubiquitous in the tourist market, but Aidai has taken this to another level, both in terms of quality and use of materials. She uses metallic dyes and hand-made wool lace scarves in her technique, and also incorporates *nuno* into interior design for light shades.



Figure 14. Aida Chochunbayeva, scarf, Bishkek 2011

The in-between generation, post-Soviet but pre-large-scale privatisation, have had less opportunity for training. Kadyrkol and Farzana had no formal arts education other than from foreign trainers, but they draw on the skills of their family dynasty. Their uncle was a famous saddle-maker and their aunt, Kenzhekhan Toktosunova (see below), is one of the most famous felt *shyrdak* makers of our era. Their determination and market savvy has resulted in the development of new techniques of embossed felt, as well as an in demand collection of hangings and quality scarves with classic Kyrgyz motifs.



Figure 15. Wall-hanging by Farzana and Kadyrkul, Bishkek 2011. Photo Laura Hamilton

Textiles in the countryside

Those few Kyrgyz felt makers still making felt in a more ‘traditional style’ at home in villages and the countryside have mainly formed small NGOs to sell small floor felts abroad through catalogues, the internet, or agents in the city. Many of these are making good work, but they are also particularly subject to the vagaries of the free market, and the difficulties of producing beautiful, entirely hand-made felts at a comparable cost to machine-made alternatives from other parts of Asia (a factor not appreciated by foreign buyers) are challenging.

A few, like Kenzhekhan Toktosunova, mentioned above as a *shyrdak*-maker known also in the Soviet era, have incorporated new techniques learned from foreign trainers which gives her work a more ‘contemporary’ feel. Kenzhe’s use of blended multi-toned wool in her new signature *shyrdaks*, she says, enables her to make felt inspired by the changing colours of the sky. She has had no formal arts training, but comes from a Kyrgyz dynasty of artisans and these days claims its strongly. Her brother was a saddle maker to the first Kyrgyz President.



Figure 16, left. Recent work by Kenzhe Toktosunova, Glasgow 2011

Figure 17, right. Home-made felt made from scraps, Tamchy 2011

There are now very few women who make felt *shyrdaks* using more traditional compositions and motifs for their own use, or for their daughters’ dowries, or for relatives (rather than for sale). Those who do also may also improvise by making floor coverings, doormats, kitchen runners, seat covers, out of scraps, and so on. This is where much of the innovation in the countryside lies.

Where there is also innovation in the countryside lies among the male members of the family, who have recycled old agricultural machines to make new felt-making machines from old engine components, camshafts and so on, in order to increase the supply of felt for the local women’s groups to make into *shyrdak*.

However, there seem to be several contradictions in felt made for sale in the countryside which are difficult to interpret in any other terms than ‘loss of quality’. To touch on just a few, they include lack

of evenness in quilting felt (a feature which contributes to both the design and strength of the finished article), with sometimes no quilting at all, and use of unusual sizes and colours, produced in response to foreign orders and tastes. New colours have caused some problems for makers, since all Kyrgyz mosaic felt, being positive and negative, usually results in two pieces of work, as each cut-out set of motifs is set into its background, leaving reverse pieces of felt. This means, that any foreign order creates a second, reverse batch of felt, the mirror-image of the ordered piece. But if the colourways are selected to foreign taste, the second, left-over piece may not appeal to local eyes, which means a lot of reverse image work ends up staying in stock. (Figure 19.)

Another negative factor is the influence of the middle-men or -women, who often bring in their own design ideas and even pattern-drawers, and even send out cut-out *shyrdak* patterns to be sewn up in different regions by different groups. Until the recent past, patterns were drawn by local experts, *usta* (masters), varying from place to place, who drew their designs for local women. In my most recent visit, following the lead of agents who have favoured drawers, the same woman may be providing patterns for At Bashi in Naryn and Bokunbaeva Issyk-Kul – two sites some 4-6 hours distant. This results in a loss of local distinctiveness, artisan de-skilling and loss of empowerment.

Conclusions

If a political feature of Kyrgyz textiles is their capacity to endure, then in some respects, they are faring rather well. Textiles continue to be produced and in many cases with continued concern for quality and heritage, and continued referencing to the natural environment, past beliefs, cultural practices and traditional imagery. Some artisans and designers are continuing to draw on these creative resources with great skill and innovation, building on the past while creating contemporary pieces for Kyrgyzstan's new future. This does seem to be enhancing the cultural coherence of Kyrgyz women's work, while promoting it at the same time.

But this scenario is not without its drawbacks. I have already outlined the various difficulties which have accompanied the commercialisation of Kyrgyz felt *shyrdak*-making in the countryside. There are no less contentious issues arising in the city. While it is a great pleasure to see work of great quality produced by both young and older artisans, there is also the concern that many of the unacknowledged workers producing work out of sight may not all be paid very well for their work. Also contradictory is the cutting up of old embroideries, *tush ki'iz*, to incorporate into skirts and handbags by some designers, imitating the artisan style of designers such as Dilbar. But unlike the emphasis which Dilbar puts on past textiles skills in her work, these recent practices, resonant of bricolage, are destroying older pieces of textile heritage in the process. In some cases *tush ki'iz* embroideries are also incorporated into the beautiful hangings of textile artists. Such concerns do, of course, reflect my own cultural background and priorities, and perhaps may be interpreted differently by the people concerned.

Recent possible good news is the UNESCO designation of Kyrgyz *shyrdak* felt as an example of 'intangible cultural heritage'. It is wonderful that this artform should be acknowledged for the very significant textile practice and skill that it embodies and for its central place in Kyrgyz cultural heritage. However, like all such attributions, the challenge will be to transcend those aspects of UNESCO designated heritage which appear to fossilize artesanry in an attempt to keep alive something of value from the past when the very making of it was ever a 'home-made', improvisatory, domestic textile practice. Kyrgyz *shyrdak* felts are born of skills and beliefs generated in the home and the landscape of a society which valued such textiles as fabrics of connection between generations and their cultural and

natural environment rather than in a commercial sense. There are few women who make it in this spirit today.

I would suggest that the spectrum of these developments tell us that such textiles are everywhere political and yet can also rise above it. In Kyrgyz terms I would like to think that what helps their textile art to endure have been their very domestic and improvisatory aspects, their practice on a small scale. They are not designed to be political, but having their roots in an 'ideology of nature' and their social context in Kyrgyz values from the past, somehow gives this form the greater power.

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