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M. Catherine Daly

University of Nebraska at Omaha

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**Afghan After a Fashion:
The Fusion of Politics with Religion and
Women's Textile Craft Economies ¹**

**M. Catherine Daly, Ph.D.
Research Associate and Consultant
Center for Afghanistan Studies
University of Nebraska at Omaha**

Afghan men and women have been restricted in their use of traditional and contemporary items of textiles during several "jihad" periods of Afghan history, first during the Mujahedeen period of the late 1970's and since the mid-1990's by the Taleban Islamic Movement of Afghanistan (Daly, 1998b).² "Use" during either period reflects varying viewpoints that govern not only the wearing of textiles but also involvement in the textile craft economies. In either circumstance textile craft economies have economically supported both men and women (Daly, 1999b). Most "outsiders" presume that the strict measures imposed by first the Mujahedeen then followed by strident sanctions imposed by the Taleban on Afghans have diminished their creativity and production. However continuity and change, tradition and fashion is evident in the textile techniques of production.³ It is also evident in a variety of cultural forms of expression. Techniques used by women include but are not limited to rug, dress and print making, embroidery, knitting and crocheting (Majrooh, 1989). This presentation focuses on Afghan women's embroidery traditions and provides examples of how static/dynamic characteristics of tradition/fashion survive austere political and religious sanctions using the medium of textiles.

Several factors have contributed to the ongoing plight of Afghans and their textile craft traditions. Briefly summarized these factors include:

- According to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, Afghans are the largest refugee population worldwide (<http://www.unhcr.ch/statist/98oview/ch1.htm>). They live as internally displaced peoples in Afghanistan, as refugees in camp and non-camp settings of Pakistan, and in diaspora communities worldwide. Employment and economic development is essential to their survival and frequently textile craft economies are a means to this end.
- Patriarchy governs the everyday life of Afghans. Afghan society is patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal (Dupree, 1980). Paradoxically, an estimated 75% of Afghan women are single, married or widowed living in female headed households. In many instances regardless of their marital status women must sustain themselves and their families. Textile craft economies are an acceptable form of women's sustainable development within the family context especially in disrupted family contexts.

- Also, centuries of internal ethnic and regional conflict continues to dominate Afghan social and political history (Magnus & Naby, 1998; Maley, 1998; Marseden, 1998; Rashid, 2000; <http://www.Taleban.com>). During each of these periods, women's rights referred to as the "woman question" has been repeatedly negotiated. Some of these rights include a woman's right to dress with or without head coverings, the right to appear in private and public contexts and the right to be gainfully employed within as well as outside the home.
- And finally, ethnic and religious codes of conduct seemingly limit and restrict women's choices. Pushtunwali (regional ethnic codes of conduct) coupled with Islamic Sharia law (religious codes of conduct) invoke women's honor and virtue which remains a central feature of all cultural and economic activities. Gender politics therefore appears a critical issue to Afghan textile craft traditions (<http://www.feminist.org>).

It is estimated that 75% of Afghan women are involved in textile income generating projects (Daly, 1998a). The range of textile crafts that Afghan women have expertise is greater than those that are currently exploited for economic means. The major textile crafts include embroidering household items and clothing, weaving rugs and pillows and sewing women's clothing (figure 1). However, embroidery is a particularly favored skill by Afghan women which supports their economic sustainability for a variety of reasons. These reasons are economic, resource availability, spatial requirements, and informal education.

Compared to other textile craft economies, embroidery practice requires the least costly tools and materials. The only required tools are a needle and in some instances an embroidery hoop. Embroidery materials include a variety of fabrics but usually woven cotton and wool are typical while embroidery threads depending on the tradition consist of cotton, wool and silk. Other additive surface materials are incorporated (Harvey, 1996; Paiva and Dupaigne, 1993; Paine, 1990) such as mirrors, shells, braids, beads, coins etc. Regardless of embroidery tradition, most tools and materials are available at a nominal cost to nearly all women regardless of geography or community residence.

Another reason embroidery practice is favored by many Afghan women is that the tools and materials are compact and transportable compared to other textile crafts. The compact spatial demands of embroidery within the Afghan household are minimal. Though most Afghans are sedentary it is not uncommon during periods of internal displacement within Afghanistan and diaspora contexts of camp and non-camp settings for Afghan families to frequently change residences. Therefore issues of availability of space and ease of transportation requirements are important.

Embroidery practice is viewed by Afghan Muslims as a legitimate economic activity for women during "jihad" periods. That is, textile craft production for consumption outside the family context is valid more so during the jihad periods (Dupree, 1998).

In previous presentations I have defined, outlined and classified the terminology, techniques and styles of Afghan embroidery. From an Afghan point of view, there are at least five distinctive embroidery categories and though they are not necessarily parallel ones their characteristics are distinctive (figure 2).

- Gul dozee are “easy” stitch patterns and techniques of “simple” singular floral designs;
- Khamak dozee includes a variety of more complex natural and geometric designs in repetitive or multiple patterns incorporating a combination of stitch patterns and techniques;
- Taarshumaar dozee and taarkarshee dozee are two embroideries based on geometric patterns requiring advanced technical expertise (to count or to pull threads);
- “other dozee” refers to embroideries that include additive surface objects and are named as such; mura dozee (beads), chaarma dozee (metallic braids) etc.

It is important to keep in mind that historically, items were embroidered for family members, friends and on occasion guests; the social relationships of everyday. In this context, Afghan embroidery can be differentiated by those textiles used for the home versus textiles used as clothing; level of technical expertise and sophistication of design; and ethnic and regional association. These embroidery categories can be further classified according to general embroidery traditions, traditions based on technical ability and traditions of regional and ethnic distinctions (figure 3).

- For example, general embroidery traditions are found primarily on household textiles and children’s clothing; gul and khaamak dozee.
- Those textiles exhibiting more technical ability are found on adult clothing worn in more public social contexts; taarshumaar and taarkashee dozee.
- Those textiles considered more ethnic in association are reserved for special occasions that are the most public and significant to the community; mora and chaarma dozee.

These classifications, however, are ideal ones. Textile production for the consumer market is a recent phenomenon. Afghans fleeing Afghanistan did so on foot walking days through treacherous mountainous terrain of the Khyber Pass and through regions of armed combat. Consequently any textiles that survived the journey were worn in multiple layers. In Afghanistan and refugee camps, textiles owned are textiles worn or used. Whether living in camp or non-camp settings most Afghan refugees have limited material possessions. These items include full and partial head and body coverings, overdresses and pants, and some household textiles. Though Afghan textiles are socially valued they

also provide the first means towards economic survival. Fortunately for Afghans, textiles are highly prized commodities in the market economy.

Consumers of Afghan embroideries fall into three separate but at times overlapping arenas (figure 4);

- Afghan merchants, non-profit organizations and Afghans who live in diaspora communities. Afghan merchants sell textile crafts to tourists, collectors, curators and infrequently to Afghans for cultural and aesthetic value.
- In contrast non-profit organizations supporting economic development projects for Afghans sell textile crafts to tourists, human rights advocates, and to a lesser degree other Afghans for social and economic value.
- Diaspora Afghans purchase embroidered clothing for cultural and ethnic value and identity. The majority of textiles owned by Afghans are more recent hand and machine made items as opposed to the traditional ones made by family members.

Textile items available through Afghan merchants are plentiful. Depending on the shopkeeper, some items are visually displayed on walls while others are so plentiful they are in heaps of piles wherever there is space. Some are complete embroidered items while others are bits of embroideries cut away from the original textile or garment. For example a variety of purses are used for storing monies, eye makeup, tobacco etc. They are embroidered in numerous techniques unique to specific ethnic groups or regions of Afghanistan. Gul and khaamak dozee, taashamar and taarkashee dozee and additive surface design embroideries.

Items sold, then, by non-government organizations are newly made hand or machine sewn items. Similar to piece work women are paid for completed items. In some instances women are reimbursed for items produced independently of an organized development project. NGOs provide a variety of services for refugee women living in camp settings such as health and child care, education, transportation, skill training and employment. Some NGOs provide embroidery materials and cut/sewn patterns to specification with quality control monitored. NGOs market embroidered items as a result of income generating activities. The irony of NGO activity is that development projects that support women also strain male and female relationships and provide a potential contentious environment between the genders.

The majority of textile items produced for NGOs tend to fall in two separate categories; those designed and produced by Afghan women versus those designed by NGOs who provide the materials for Afghan women to complete. Items designed and produced by Afghan women are characterized by simplicity of design, questionable expertise because of an indiscriminating audience eager to support Afghan women. Exclusive NGO designed items are typically marketable items made to compliment other cultural demands; camera cases, key chains, napkins, skirts and vests, dresses, lingerie bags,

Christmas ornaments. Motifs are often large, abstracted, simplified and singular techniques. The most successful NGOs are the Danish DACCAR Sewing Project and the British Ockenden Venture.

Items sold for Afghan diaspora communities are usually commissioned items of clothing and adornment. Very few household textiles fall in this category of consumption. These items are made by Afghans to be worn by Afghans. Items such as women's overdresses, pants, headcoverings, and shoes are mostly machine stitched and embroidered. They are commissioned by a young woman's family for engagement and wedding ceremonies. Collectively these items are referred to as Kaala Afghani or Afghan clothing. The entire ensemble costs the family from \$100-600. However the seamstress/ embroider receives approximately \$10 for her efforts. Negotiations for women's textile work is often arranged by male kin networks. Women provide the labor but it is unclear if they have access to the profits of their work.

Commissioned textiles are possibly the most fashion oriented items possibly because they are made by Afghans in one social context to be used by Afghans in another such as the United States. They are made to order according to consumer preferences of fabric, color, embroidery style, and surface design embroideries. For those diasporan Afghans it has become fashionable to "look" Afghan or ethnic or traditional especially during special occasions. Items commissioned for engagement and wedding ceremonies are then subsequently worn for other Afghan community events such as celebrations following Ramadan and Nawroz the New Year.

In summary, there are a range of embroidered items that Afghans have historically produced in the context of the domestic environment for family member use in social settings that cross private and public domains. However given the current socio-economic, geo-political and religious realities of displaced and refugee status, Afghan women struggle to maintain their honor and virtue by exploiting the textile craft traditions for economic viability.

Notes

1. The transliteration of Afghan and Arabic terms is according to Burhan's and Goutierre's Dari for Foreigners (1983).
2. Nancy Dupree, Personal Communication. Peshawar, Pakistan. April 1998.
2. During the past 6 years I've worked with Afghan refugees in the United States and in refugee communities in Central and South Asia. During this period I have been struck with the complexity of understanding Afghan textile and clothing practices from an Afghan point of view in Afghanistan as well as in diaspora settings (Daly, 1998a; Daly, 1998b; Daly, 1999a; Daly 1999b; Daly, 2000). What are the distinctive cultural practices that differentiate Afghan textile craft traditions from "others"? Similar to our panel presenters I have struggled with

definitions of textile & clothing traditions, the fashionable aspect of these traditions, and their potential for globalization.

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The Feminist Majority Foundation//<http://www.feminist.org>
(A non-profit group that advocates for the human rights of Afghan women)

The Taleban Islamic Movement of Afghanistan//<http://www.Taleban.com>

United Nations High Commission for Refugees//<http://www.unhcr.ch/statist/98oview/ch1.htm>

The Major Income Generating Textile Skills of Afghan Women

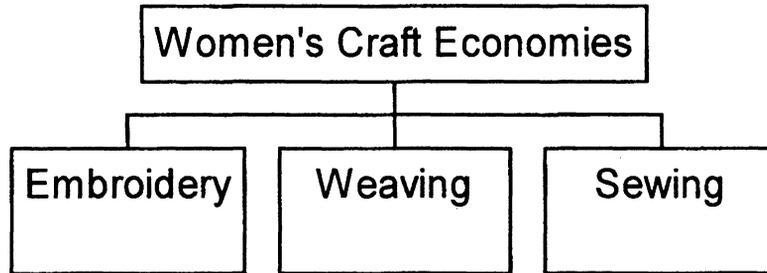


Figure 1

Afghan Embroidery Classification

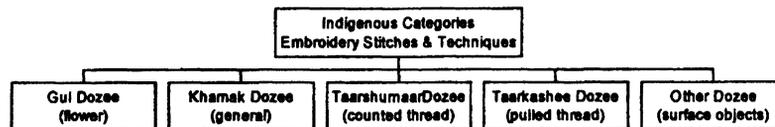


Figure 2

Afghan Embroidery Traditions

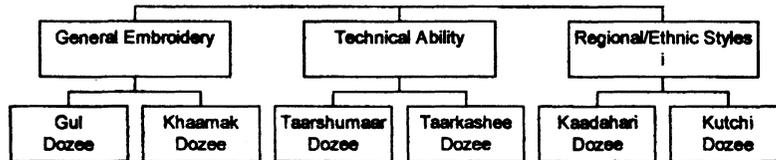


Figure 3

Consumers of Afghan Embroideries

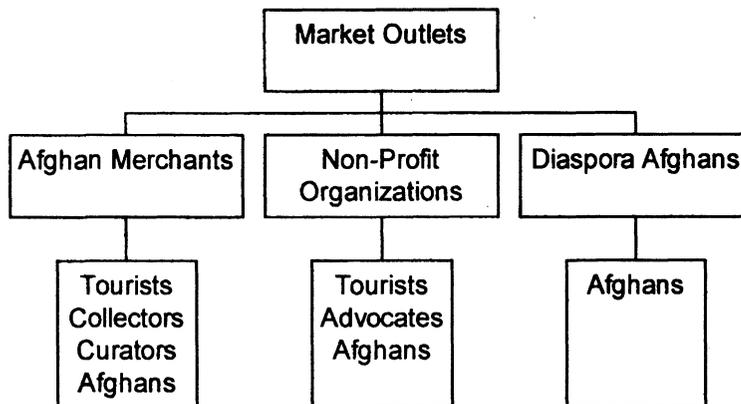


Figure 4