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## Painted Clouds: Uzbek Ikats as a Case Study for Ethnic Textiles Surviving and Thriving Culturally and Economically in the 21st Century

Shannon Ludington

There is a common idea in the textile world, especially among those who work with textiles and development, that textile traditions belonging to non-Western cultures are automatically on the verge of extinction by globalizing forces and therefore need saving. This usually involves sales to the west, which may require changes to pattern or colours to appeal to Western audiences. While there are unfortunately many textile traditions which are no longer a regular part of cultural practices, it is offensive and overbearing to assume they need us to save them. Along with the growing movement against cultural appropriation by Western designers, especially in fashion and home design, we need to be aware and conscious of our attitudes towards traditional textile practices and products. In this paper I am going to consider Uzbek *ikats* as a tradition which has been surviving and thriving culturally and economically in the 21st century.

*Ikat* is an Indonesian or Malay word (sources differ) meaning 'tied' or 'bound' which has been adapted into the English language to describe textiles created using the techniques resist dyeing the warp or weft prior to weaving which creates the signature fuzzy edges in the patterns, no matter where the textiles in question originate. In Uzbek *abrabandi* describes the entire class of Uzbek *ikat* textiles. *Abra* is the word for cloud and *bandi* refers to the tying of the warp during the dying process. While there are some variations and some experimentation is being done by individual manufacturers there are four common types of Uzbek *ikat*. *Atlas* is a satin weave fabric with a silk warp and weft. *Khan atlas* is a lighter satin weave, therefore finer and more expensive but durable. *Adras* is woven is a plain weave fabric, often warp faced, with a silk warp and cotton weft. *Shoye* is a plain weave all silk material and is very light, generally used to make scarves or used for decoration<sup>1</sup>. All are warp *ikats*, with two to seven colours. The repeats are usually between a meter and two meters long. About twenty-four meters are bound at a time, and the fabric is between fifteen and twenty-four inches wide, very occasionally wider, but the ratio of the extreme length and narrow width allows the most efficient use of work in the labor intensive practices of binding the warp, dying, and threading the looms.

The history of the Uzbek *ikat* industry is intimately tied to the politics of the Uzbek people and region. The land that is now generally considered to be part of Central Asia or 'the Stans' was up until the 1860s grouped into city states which at various times have been conquered by every empire from Alexander the Great to the Soviet Union. The Timurid Empire founded by Amir Timur or Tamerlane on the basis of his descent from Genghis Khan was the golden period of Central Asia. It was one of the centers of Islamic learning and tradition. The textiles extant from this era are magnificent and compete with anything from either China or the Sassanid or other western empires. These are much more technologically and technically advanced than the beautiful *ikats* produced today and include *lambas* and damask weave silks of incredible fineness. I say this not as a judgment but as recognition of the changes that took place in society and culture leading up to this time.

<sup>1</sup> "The Revival: The Revival of Silk Ikat Weaving in Uzbekistan, *Selvedge* 55, (2014): 45.

The courts of the various city-states employed a *tiraz* system from the 12th centuries until the 17th, a legacy of their time as part of an Islamic empire in which royal favour was bestowed not through medals but textiles. In Central Asia these took the shape of intricate *ikat* robes in silk, sometimes even velvet. Each year a new style was produced which enabled instant recognition of rank and power. It can be extrapolated from similar systems elsewhere that there was also different qualities or styles for different levels in the court hierarchy.

In the 1860s the Russian empire conquered these city-states as part of their 'Great Game' for territorial power with Great Britain. They affected sweeping political change which nevertheless did not seem to affect daily life too greatly. The Russians made Tashkent the capital of the area now called 'Russian Turkestan.' Tashkent was previously a backwater and choosing it and now one of the capitals of one of the Khanates forced local leaders to travel to the Colonial government and emphasized the shift in power. The various Khans and emirs were relieved of administrative power but allowed to continue in their cities. The *tiraz* system was ended and *ikats* became simply luxury textiles. They began to make their way to Europe where they were highly valued as exotic textiles. Russian trade cottons had been available since the early 19th century and were used as linings and clothing and furnishing materials but local textile production continued, especially of *ikats* and other silks. Aniline dyes slowly began to make their way into the area during this time, but they were not completely widespread until the Soviet times and many textiles of this area show a mix of aniline and natural dyes.

In the 1920s with the formation of the USSR daily life in what was now the Soviet Socialist Republic of Uzbekistan was completely disrupted. The USSR was not simply a political empire whose goal was simply territory; it was an ideological empire who wanted to improve the lives of its citizens to create the perfect state. This meant free education for all, collective economies, standardized culture, women's rights, freedom from religion and superstition and many other life changing directions. Under Stalin the USSR created a system whereby each Soviet republic was encouraged to have their own cultural expression, as long as it fit into the overall goals and norms of Soviet society. Therefore a standard Soviet form of each culture arose dictating music, dress, literature and food. There was a violent revolution by Uzbeks against the Soviet system but it was put down and many Uzbeks fled into northern Afghanistan to avoid being executed for their involvement.

In textile terms the USSR meant standardized forms and production of the traditional Uzbek *ikats*. A collective factory in the city of Margalan was founded to produce *ikats* which were distributed through the state-run department store system. *Atlas* was the primary material woven now with factory spun silk. Aniline dyes were used and the most common colour was a golden yellow, with most patterns consisting of the supposedly traditional seven colours; black, white, red, yellow, purple, green and pink. Later strips of metallic acetate were woven into the warp to increase the sparkly affect. The weft was generally red and so the fabric was very different on each side, with one being primarily red and the other full colours of the *ikat*. The material was used in ceremonies promoting Uzbekistan as part of the Soviet Union, and the integral 'Sovietness' of Uzbek culture. As the fabric of the Soviet Republic of Uzbekistan it was not only ethnic Uzbeks who wore it but citizens of the Uzbek republic which included Russians, Germans, Koreans, Tajiks, Kyrgyz and Turkmen. The tribe was no longer the primary cultural organizer and ethnicity was not supposed to matter. There was probably a black market in the markets for textiles, and certainly some families involved in *ikat* production secretly trained members in the different techniques.

In 1991 Uzbekistan became an independent republic and its own country for the first time. The government remained primarily the same. In the constitution it is a democratic republic; Islam Kharimov continuing in power from the late 1970s has been elected in every election since independence. With the new state came new ideas of national, cultural and ethnic identity. Amir Temur is held up as a national hero and Uzbek *ikats* have become an important part of cultural identity and the pomp of statehood. In the early 1990s large public, televised spectacles for every major holiday were a major part of identity building. Choreographed dancers doing traditional dances to pop music by local musicians with traditional instruments and they all wore Uzbek *ikats*. *Ikats* had two sets of meaning, the public part of national Uzbek identity and privately, as sign of a traditional and virtuous family life.

For the first ten to twelve years after independence the factory woven *atlas* was still the most common of the *ikats*. However, in the late 90's and early 2000's there was a movement towards returning to more traditional production, patterns, and dyes and there was an outpouring of foreign aid to promote traditional craft and culture. USAID sponsored an *ikat* workshop in Samarkand. The UN cultural fund has been involved, but by far the two most influential non-profits involved have been Fund Forum, which was started by Uzbek president Islam Karimov's daughter, and the British Council who brought in Philippa Watkins, a senior Tutor at the Royal College of Art. Watkins worked with the factory in Margalan to return to natural dyes and experiment with colours and forms more appealing to the west. This was partially funded by Fund Forum, a theoretically non-government cultural agency which has sponsored many cultural events and groups in Uzbekistan. It also has promoted a return to traditional methods and natural dyes and sponsored the foundation of workshops set up in the traditional manner in Margalan. Fund Forum and Gulnora Karimova have also sponsored a fashion week each year in Uzbekistan where local designers are strongly encouraged to use *ikats*. The Fund Forum is generally seen as a PR attempt by Karimova, as many in Uzbekistan see her as spoiled and greedy, but it has helped support some truly great crafts masters<sup>2</sup>.

In 2005 Oscar De La Renta included *Atlas* in his Fall collection suddenly bringing Uzbek textiles into high-end Western fashion. De la Renta commissioned his fabrics from Rasuljon Mirzaakhmedov, a Uzbek master from Margalan who had worked with Watkins. Other couture houses including Balenciaga and Dior have used Uzbek *ikats* from Uzbekistan. Many western designers have not been so fastidious and it is possible to buy both traditional and new patterns copying Uzbek *ikats* on every product and material one can imagine. It is illegal to take Uzbek *ikats* out of Uzbekistan but so far that has not hindered merchants from taking thousands of meters a year to Istanbul. This is then brought into Europe and America to be sold or is ordered online directly from Istanbul. Several workshops have been represented at the Santa Fe Folk Art Market and have been quite successful.

In 2011 the Soviet *ikat* factory in Margalan closed. There is now no factory producing *ikats*; all production is done at the home workshop level, with one or more masters, journeymen and apprentices similar to the Medieval European system. In Uzbekistan this system is heavily family orientated, workers drawn from an extended family network. Most production is centered in Margalan still. The other traditional centers have not revived. The families who were involved in the work have moved into different trades. At least one family of my acquaintance attempted to

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<sup>2</sup> "Uzbekistan: Karimova's Philanthropic Activities Raise Concern," last modified April 26, 2012. <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/65319>

revive their trade in the late eighties and early nineties but was unable to make it financially viable.

*Ikats* are still worn and used in traditional ways in Uzbekistan. While the export market continues to grow, and sales to tourists can be fairly profitable, most Uzbek *ikats* are produced for a local, traditional, market. In this way Uzbek *ikats* continue to be successful. This popularity has had less impact on Uzbekistan than I had imagined it might. Firstly, *ikats* have a solid place in Uzbek culture which does not seem likely to change. It is frequently featured in collections by Uzbek designers but it is only infrequently worn in modern styles on the street. It is worn in traditional styles for daily life, especially in the regions and regional cities. Generally it makes up trousseaus, wedding dresses and special occasion clothes and cloths for engagements and wedding guests. Every woman has several atlas dresses no matter how Westernized she is. It always signifies the 'Uzbekness' of the wearer, and her part in Uzbek culture. So when worn by a prospective bride it highlights to the groom's family that this woman will play her part in the family and continue traditions. Every bride is given a trousseau of four to eight dresses by the grooms family and wears these dresses for at least the first week after the wedding to show her loyalty to her new family. Wearing an *atlas* dress is the strongest statement a woman can make of her participation in Uzbek culture and her traditional values. Other signs that might be used in other similar cultures such as dressing modestly or wearing a headscarf in Uzbekistan are seen as signs of political dissension by the Uzbek government. However, since *ikats* are embraced by the government as part of national culture, a bride wearing a traditional dress is showing her Uzbekness, and the loyalty of her family to the government. Depending on the quality of the fabric, where it is bought, what type of *abrabandi* the price ranges from 2000 sum per meter to almost 60,000 sum, or between seventy five cents and a little under twenty dollars. Cost, therefore, is not a deterrent. Under the Soviet system *atlas* was democratized so there is no class significance to the fabric itself, but only to the quality and number of dresses owned.

Traditionally men's robes were also made from the heavier *atlas*, *adras*, and velvets but that is very rare today. Occasionally they are worn by grooms or presented as a prize or award in some sort of event. Wrestling is strongly promoted by the Uzbek government as a traditional sport and *ikat* robes are often given as part of the prize, again reinforcing the 'Uzbekness' of the competition and winner. *Ikats* are also used for household use, especially in the most formal parts of the house where guests are welcomed. Hospitality is one of the most important traditional virtues that is encouraged to be upheld. While there is always a chance that a sudden coup or change in government could change the use of *ikat* in Uzbekistan, I believe that it would still continue to succeed because the embrace by the Uzbek people of *ikats* as part of life and identity. For now the governmental embrace of *ikat* will help it to remain a foundation of culture and daily life in Uzbekistan and it seems set to grow even more in importance in the next hundred years as Uzbek people continue to balance the continuation of tradition with the addition of Western ideas and opportunities.

In conclusion, Uzbek *ikats* are maintaining their central place in Uzbek culture and even spreading out and being embraced in the West. Through a unique set of circumstances Uzbek *ikats* have been able to face situations that could have ended production but instead have strengthened traditions and encouraged Traditional textiles face huge obstacles in competing in the modern globalized world that it is all the more exciting that Uzbek textiles continue to thrive and grow both in Uzbekistan and around the world. While they have a fairly specific set of circumstances that have enabled this popularity, I hope that we are at the turning point of the

extinction of traditional textiles and that in this new century other cultures will be able to embrace and continue to produce and wear their own traditions.

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