

## **Ties that bind the daily lives of carpet traders**

An ethnographic exploration of the everyday lives of carpet traders through their kinship ties, moral economies, and acts of everyday diplomacy in Iran, The Netherlands, Belgium, and Germany

Felix van den Belt

[Felixvandenbelt@gmail.com](mailto:Felixvandenbelt@gmail.com)

Introduction: In presenting the short-written version of my master thesis given during the 2020 Textile Society of America online meeting in Boston, first of all, I wish to thank my Iranian friends who helped me navigate in the country and the carpet traders who opened up their stories to me. Globalization and economic sanctions have far-reaching effects on the Iranian carpet trade. The understanding of these phenomena on the daily lives of traders, and of people in general, in Iran is scarce as the Iranian government does not promote research. Statistics tell us that the Iranian carpet trade has plummeted. In this context, it is examined how carpet traders do business on a local level. This paper is an ethnographic exploration of the everyday lives of carpet traders through their kinship ties, moral economies, and acts of everyday diplomacy in Iran, The Netherlands, Belgium, and Germany.

Not many studies have been done on the everyday lives of carpet traders. There is a gap between the understanding of their social lives, the cultural representations, success, in relation to global trade, especially in the context of economic sanctions. In February 2019, I returned to Iran with several questions in mind: How do carpets traders do their work in the context of sanctions? How do they find interesting ways of doing business on a local level?

### My position, research in Iran, and Globalization

My position is that of a traveler, a business person, and a researcher. Research in Iran is problematic, so I mostly introduced myself as a carpet trader. The people that are included in the research all agreed with that. The sanctions in Iran also affect the safety of researchers and more importantly, the people that participate in it. Therefore, the people included in the research cannot be recognized.

Globalization is not a linear phenomenon. To gain a better understanding of the global scale, economic strategies on a local level have to be considered first. In the context of Iran, economic sanctions opened up surprising business strategies. To gain an understanding of these local economic strategies, I let carpet traders reflect on their work as traders. These reflections allow us to see these traders as agents of globalization rather than as the ‘fortunate’ survivors of its destructive tendency to wipe out local entrepreneurship.

In this context, the carpet acts as a commodity that plays an intermediate role between these trade networks. Because, the social conditions that people attribute to the circulation of goods, such as carpets, are derived from human transactions and motivations across countries, languages, trust, and social and cultural institutions. These social conditions entail unwritten contracts and moral obligations, and carpet traders often act as diplomats, negotiating ties between different ethnicities, countries, and languages. Examining these social conditions reveals how carpet trader’s networks are maintained by a fine line between trust and betrayal. These observations all add to the image of globalization from below.

In following these traders, their stories depict a ‘bottom-up’ understanding of the everyday lives of these carpet traders. This is referred to as ‘globalization from below.’ The ethnographic data is interpreted and categorized into three themes that, I argue, make up the

most of the carpet traders' everyday lives: kinship ties, moral economy, and acts of diplomacy. It exposes the intimate experiences of trading routes, markets, practices, and people in locations across which carpets are traded. The social conditions in which the trade is embedded entail unwritten contracts, and moral obligations. These traders act as diplomats, negotiating bonds across different ethnicities, countries, and languages. Examining these social conditions, it becomes clear how carpet traders' networks are maintained by a thin line between trust and betrayal. As such, this research fits into the wider field of the social lives of objects, initiated by Arjun Appadurai's book: *The Social Life of Things*.

In sum, the analysis of these carpet traders' everyday life trajectories is based on the following research question: How do carpet traders value the social and cultural practices that are intertwined in the trading of carpets by following their everyday life trajectories?

### Kinship

In Iran, I met Hooman who is a 30-year-old Iranian American and claims to have returned to Tehran in order to radically change the carpet business, by giving it a new direction. He grew up in New York, where most of his family members live today. Other members of his family live in Canada, Singapore, Kuwait, and Iran. Hooman studied banking in the United States and the United Kingdom. He speaks American English and Farsi. "My father disagrees with my plans to do this in Iran, but he still supports me. Most Iranians do not have such a huge family network outside of Iran, which plays a significant role in my trade." In the situation of contemporary Iran, the ability to use family networks dramatically reduces the negative effects of geopolitical tensions on trade. However, these family networks require constant negotiation to function properly.

Here, it is easy to assume that kinship ties are central to the production of forms of trust on which these networks rely, thereby overlooking the extent to which kinship is always an ambivalent relation.

### Families shared Ideas and Symbols

In early writing, transnational trade communities, such as Humans, were portrayed as culturally defined. This idea of culturally defined communities leads to the assumption that "trading communities are naturally trustworthy because of kinship or family ties." More recent ethnography disputes this observation, as the assumption of a trustworthy bond within these networks ignores the practices these carpet dealers use to maintain their "in-group" trust. Analyzing these practices reveals a nuanced and complex reality; they can be sets of shared ideas and symbols that inform human action.

One such example of the ambivalent relation of kinship becomes evident from the conversations I had with Hooman. He uses his family companies inside Iran, Kuwait, and other countries to make his trade economically possible. It took Hooman much effort to convince his family network to help him. As a start, he had to convince his father, who owns many of the family companies. In the beginning, his father did not understand his move to go back to Iran and pursue a carpet business. After all, his father brought him to New York and let him study in one of the best banking universities in the United Kingdom. His family left Iran for a better future in the West and were successful in doing so. Why would Hooman want to go back to Iran to start a business in the "already dying Iranian carpet trade?" Despite all doubts, Hooman's father gave him economic advice. These carpet traders often rely on

bonds of trust and money, contesting the assumption that they are culturally bounded groups or that kinship ties are always based on trustworthy relations.”

### Moral economy

One day when I entered his shop of Jamshid, a carpet trader in Tehran. He was busy talking on the phone and had a stern look on his face. His friend had alcohol problems, which led to relationship issues. The friend’s wife threw him out of the house. He was now homeless. The friend came to Jamshid, as he had some emergency cash left in Jamshid’s safe. Jamshid was now helping his friend to buy a new house.

### Responsibilities and unwritten social contracts

The economic activities of carpet traders are embedded within their evaluations of their moral lives, social modes, and identities. These evaluations are often neglected in the ethnographic material on carpet traders since most writing on carpet traders is about their economic gain. But, carpet traders often have multiple responsibilities within their social networks apart from business activities.

As shown by the example of Jamshid, who helps a friend buy a house and save money, carpet traders often have multiple jobs and responsibilities within their direct community. Carpet traders often told me that establishing a good reputation and relation with their community is essential to their success. The very bond with the community is constantly reinforced by sharing tea, discussing family relations and political issues. Often, carpet traders take great pride in being of help to others. The example of Jamshid, helping with money issues, is especially interesting considering the geopolitical circumstances of Iran. As the local currency devalues, carpet traders, play an increasingly important role in, for example, keeping people’s money. I learned that, for some, storing money at a local bank is not always considered to be safe.

### Everyday Diplomacy

While driving toward the south of Tehran, where the business meetings took place, Mehruz often ignored red traffic lights and used the bus lanes. He assured me to not worry about his driving manners. He stated, “If the police stop us, I will tell them that you are a Dutch diplomat.” When I asked why he has such confidence, Mehruz quickly explained that he “knows people,” and is involved with “the government.” Mehruz explained that he is involved with the development of public roads, hospitals, and universities all over Iran. He has great pride in being able to take these responsibilities for his country.

“I do not trust that guy, he is foxy. Everyone knows that. I have known him for many years. It is all a lie; he keeps the carpets that are in better shape, always hidden. It is like a game, I have to study his eyes, to know what his intentions are. This man tells eleven lies in ten words.”

### Diplomatic practice in the everyday, social mobility, and trust and betrayal

I approached everyday diplomacy as the diplomatic practice that is under-examined in the discussion of geopolitical situations that affect everyday human life. It is the intention to focus on how the practice of everyday diplomacy requires the differences between cultures and individual actors to become blurry while not disappearing altogether. Within these

boundaries, a clever diplomat who knows which words to use can redefine arguments and is flexible during disputes between certain groups. What makes everyday diplomacy risky and blurs the boundaries of their behavior is that these actions can simultaneously make them be seen as traitors.

As carpet traders sometimes betray their networks, they continually break and recreate their ties of trust. These ties allow them to balance “the rationale of maximizing economic gain, while still being able to continue their transnational trade.”

Mehrüz’s negotiation skills were also demonstrated during the meeting with the other trader. The two of them were both aware that the other would “conceal the truth” to a certain degree before the meeting even started. Afterward, Mehrüz referred to this as “the game.” Later, after the negotiations, I saw them drink tea and have lunch while being friendly and engaging with one another’s families.

### Conclusion

I aimed to answer the question of how carpet traders value the social and cultural practices that are intertwined in the trading of carpets by following their everyday lives. To answer that question, the project focuses on the trading networks of carpet traders as they operate in Iranian bazaars and European carpet shops in the context of globalization from below. I asked myself the following research question: How do carpet traders value the social and cultural practices that are intertwined in the trading of carpets by following their everyday life trajectories? The main findings of this research are; it is easy to assume that kinship ties are central to the production of forms of trust; to be a successful carpet trader, one “is obliged” to be involved with societal, cultural, and governmental systems; a clever diplomat who knows which words to use can redefine arguments and is flexible during the disputes between certain groups. What makes everyday diplomacy risky and blurs the boundaries of their behavior is that these actions can simultaneously make them be seen as traitors.