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TEXTILES OF QARAQALPAQSTAN AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO CENTRAL ASIAN TRADITIONS AND THE LEGACY OF IGOR SAVITSKY

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Let me start this session by answering a basic question you may have been asking yourselves – where on earth is Qaraqalpaqstan? Well it is in the western part of Central Asia, situated to the east of the Caspian Sea occupying nowadays north–western part of Uzbekistan, and lying south of the almost shrunk Aral Sea. It borders Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan (Figure. 1 and 2).



Figure 1, Map – Central Asia



Figure 2, Map – Qaraqalpaqstan

Qaraqalpaqs are about 30% of the 1.5 million population of Qaraqalpaqstan. They are scattered in some provinces of Uzbekistan, and Afghanistan, where they had to assimilate with the local communities. The history and material culture of the Qaraqalpaqs were studied in depth by Russian scholars in the 1920's–1980's. The most important research was undertaken by the Khorezm Archaeological–Ethnographical Expedition of the USSR Academy of Sciences, led by Sergey Tolstov and Tatiana Jdanko. In addition, a significant number of publications about Qaraqalpaq textiles have been published both by Soviet scholars in the 1950's-1970's, and more recently, my presentations at the Stockholm Ethnographic museum (1999), the British Museum (2000), the Institute of Central Asian Studies in Vienna (2002) and in the USA at ICOC (2003). This task is being continued by David and Sue Richardson, private researchers from the UK whose website is the most extensive source of information on the QQP in the English language.

The museum I represent is named after Igor Savitsky. He came to Qaraqalpaqstan in 1950 as one of the team of the afore-mentioned Khorezm Archaeological–Ethnographical Expedition. He documented the findings and drew the castles and fortresses, where the excavations were held. (Fig. 3).



Figure 3, Igor Savitsky – self portrait

In 1957 Savitsky moved from Moscow to Nukus where he worked until 1966 in the Qaraqalpaq Branch of the Uzbek Academy of Sciences. During this period he travelled all over northern Qaraqalpaqstan, compiling a collection of traditional jewelry, embroidered costumes, carved and inlaid woodwork, rugs, yurt furnishings, felts, and printed & stitched leather items which were being ousted by machine-made products. This collection, gathered by Savitsky and his assistants, became the basis of the Qaraqalpaqstan Art Museum, famous for its Russian avant-garde paintings and graphics department.

Savitsky was taken by the beauty of Qaraqalpaq applied arts, which lit in his heart not only the fire of a collector and appreciator, but also a fervent exponent and saviour. He said: “It turns out that this small nation, until recently lost among the sands and streams of the Amu Darya, possesses magnificent art, staggering craftsmanship, unflinching taste and surprising tact in the distribution of ornament and colour”. Savitsky compared Qaraqalpaq embroidery to the paintings of the French impressionists. He could sit for hours admiring and discussing the beauty of a small part of some rug or piece of embroidery.

The local population, “educated” by the Soviet regime regarded Savitsky as a strange man, calling him a “junk dealer”. The Nukus museum collections and exhibitions represent the full scale of the Qaraqalpaq folk culture in all its details.

Lets turn now to the QQP people and their lifestyle. Qaraqalpaqs were semi-nomadic. Their traditional dwelling construction was the yurt, (Fig. 4) thus providing the development of textiles, which were widely produced and used for yurt decorations, clothes and as everyday utensils. The peculiarities of the Qaraqalpaq yurt (*qara uy*) mostly lie in its textile designs, in which it differs from other Central Asian ones. Igor Savitsky regarded it as the most beautiful one in Central Asia. The yurt was widely used until the 1970's and continues to be used to this day as a place for leisure and escape from the heat of the summer.



Figure 4, Qaraqalpaq yurt



Figure 5, Pile weaving yesiq-kas panels which sat above the interior of the door

There were about two dozen various interior and exterior elements of yurt furnishings, woven in three techniques:

Pile weavings – broadly known by its main two types: *yesiq-kas* panels which sat above the interior of the door and *qarshin* storage bags. (Fig. 5)

Mixed technique – can be illustrated by *aq-basqur*, *kergi*, *suwag'ar* and other tent bands, both inner and outer ones (Fig. 6).

Flat woven items – *qizil-basqur*, *qizil-qur* and several other *qurs*, *dasturqan* table cloth, etc. (Fig. 7)



Figure 6, Mixed technique – kergi



Figure 7, Yurt interior

Elena Tsareva, head of textile research at the Kunstkamera Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia and formerly at Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography and scholar of ethnographic textiles of Central Asia and Turkmen carpet weaving from St. Petersburg, classified pile-woven items into 16 designs and singled out 7 types of compositions. She stated at the same time, that both flat-woven and mixed technique pieces require further investigation.

To understand Qaraqalpaq folk art better we need to regard the historic background of the formation of this people: their roots, migrations and contacts with other cultures, influences of the neighbourhood and way of life, represented by, in economic terms, a combination of cattle-breeding and cultivation of lands, with a specific mentality and perception of the universe.

In the 19th century the QQP were downtrodden and experienced great poverty. This naturally affected their textiles. Silk was a luxury item and was used sparingly, they did not have many camels due to the harsh natural conditions and so used goat hair extensively in items such as *qarshin* bags.

Various beliefs from Karakalpak early history, were preserved even after conversion to Islam. That is why Qaraqalpaq artifacts are abundant with magic, shamanist, totemic and cosmological elements. The process of manufacturing textiles, also included special rituals. So now it would be reasonable to touch on the subject of some traditions, customs and rituals, related to the production and use of Qaraqalpaq textiles. In the framework of this presentation we would mention only some of them, grouped into two parts.

The first group of customs deals with the process of textile production, including the articles themselves and the materials they were made of.

1. Silk production, began with growing silk worms and cocoon-breeding. The premises, where this occurred, were regarded as sacred. So no one was permitted to enter, except for some special people, wearing only white clothes.

2. The weaving process also has many related ceremonies and rituals. Before starting the work, a chicken would be sacrificed, and the blood would be let out by the loom. The loom itself would be attributed with salt and pepper, which were fixed onto its parts to avoid knots, and broken and tangled threads. Then the dried herb *adraspan* was burned to purify the loom and the place of the planned work. The weavers cleansed themselves thoroughly before starting work to prevent evil spirits wandering around them.
3. The tradition of worshipping holy ancestors and having holy patrons was widespread too. Many craftsmen had their own benefactor. The weavers had their female patroness Bibi Fatima (*Piyrim Bipatpa*), although she is also regarded as the patroness of all women's activities.
4. When it came to the weaving itself, it is interesting to note that the process is personified as the warp representing a wife and the weft representing a husband, in the act of copulation, producing their integral whole of the fabric.
5. Young apprentices would visit their master-craftsman, giving him or her a present together with scissors, or a needle, or threads or some other instrument before the learning process started. In this way they believed the experts would provide them with better learning and share their secrets and skills generously.

The second group of rituals relates to the process of handling textiles.

1. A special subject is the yurt with its numerous parts and furnishings. One needs several hours to retell all the rituals, concerning this topic. The process of erecting the yurt, full of various rites, is followed by the procedure of tying tent bands, accompanied by giving presents to those who erected it to bring good luck to the family.

There was a certain order of hanging the tent bands. There were two types of decorating the *shan'araq* (dome), from which several flat-woven narrow ribbons with tassels were hung. Sometimes there were four of them, symbolizing the four sides of the earth. Sometimes, and this is more widespread, an even number of tassels would be hung in pairs, in the circle of the roof wheel, expressing the wish to have children and grandchildren after their parents, to build the family dynasty, like the yurt poles (*uwıq*), holding one *shan'araq*, the descendants would be the branches of one strong tree (see Fig. 7 above).

2. The patterns on many of the tentbands reflected the QQP beliefs. Horns (*mu'yiz*) patterns predominate especially in connection with the yurt door. They are found on either side of the door, at its base and on the *yesiq kas* decorative band above the inside of the door. As cattle breeders QQP believed these were not only a sign of fertility but also protected those within the yurt from the evil without.
3. Sometimes tentbands (*qur*) were used by women for different reasons. E.g. when a woman recently confined after childbirth, needed to fix her belly, she could stiffen her body with a *qur* serving like an abdominal belt. This *qur* could then be given to a sterile woman so that she might also bear children too.
4. Some elements of woman's costume were regarded as having some magic force. It is known that fragments of the *ko'k-ko'yilek* (wedding dress) and *jen'se* (cuff of sleeves) were used for the fumigation of ill persons to drive the evil spirit out of their body (Fig. 8). We understand that they were set alight and extinguished, with the smoke from the smoldering cloth being wafted over the patient. Red cloth was also used for "healing". The Richardsons once met a boy with an abscess who had red cloth tied around his chin to heal him.

In the same way as the horns pattern predominated in the yurt decorations it was also used to a great extent on the *ko'k-ko'yilek*. Here we can see the *segiz mu'yiz* pattern (8 horns) along with the *at ayıl* (horses bellyband) pattern (Fig. 9). There are 2 distinct rows of chevrons. - One is just above the *segiz mu'yiz*. They have a cross at the centre of a stepped diamond. It is called *at ayıl nagıs* because this pattern is always used on a horse's bellyband.

However the most unusual pattern on the *ko'k ko'yilek* is the *sirg'a nag'is* or earring pattern. This only occurs on this dress and does not appear on any other QQP embroidery.



Figure 8, *ko'k ko'yilek* wedding dress



Figure 9, *ko'k ko'yilek* detail

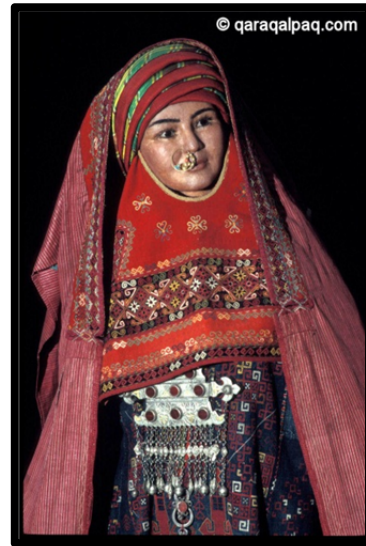


Figure 10, *kimishek* headgear

The costume of a woman who had been especially fertile or long-lived was also cut up and the parts distributed in the belief that these attributes could be passed on to the new owners.

5. *Kimishek* headgear falls into two groups: *Kyzl* or red *kimishek* worn by every woman on wedding day and then at a certain age, changed to a white one. Red symbolizes the sun, blood and youth and white for the moon, wisdom and purity. The cut of the garment is always the same; only the patterns and locations of embroidery differ. Qaraqalpaq women kept their *kimesheks* until the end of their lives (Fig. 10). To give it away was considered a great sin. And it was believed that they would not then find peace in the afterlife (“*namaz buyirmaydy*”). They were worn with a turban – red for the young and white or checked for the older woman.

6. In common with many other peoples of Central Asia QQP, triangular amulets were sewn to the back panel of children’s and men’s clothing to protect them from the evil eye. The reed panel of the yurt door also had such an amulet.

7. Patchwork *quraq* and appliqué was widely used by Qaraqalpaqs. E.g. a child would be sewn a robe (*iyt ko'yilek, bala gurte*) from pieces of fabrics, brought from seven houses, the owners of which would be generously presented with gifts. The ends of these robes were not fringed, so that the baby’s mother would continue bearing children. *Quraq* blankets or hangings, made of little pieces of cloth were assembled together, in the same way, and just as members of a family constitute one integral whole, so the pieces sewn together into one piece are like gluing together one family from its many members.

8. Cotton cloth sacks (“*shanash*”) for flour and grains, had both rhombus and triangular shaped appliqué and 3 little tails below, which symbolized the growing of the harvest, i.e. fertility, its increase, bringing prosperity to the family.

The Savitsky Qaraqalpaqstan Art Museum has the largest collection of Qaraqalpaq applied art in the world, which we call the genetic bank of Qaraqalpaq culture. The role of our institution is increasing now. The consequences of the Aral Sea ecological disaster, has driven out many of the indigenous population to other, more favourable parts of the world, impacting the preservation of their culture.

These skills, however, have not completely died out among the Qaraqalpaq. Every year a competition is held to find the “Woman of the Year”. The competitors have to show their skills at reciting traditional poetry and cooking along with examples of their needlework. The Savitsky museum also encourages these skills through the sale of embroidered items in its gift shop. (Fig. 11) In addition we have established a carpet workshop where we train women in the art of traditional weaving. (Fig. 12)



Figure 11, Contemporary embroidery



Figure 12, Contemporary carpet weaving workshop