TURKMEN MATERIAL CULTURE: PROBLEMS OF INTERPRETATION FOR CARPET STUDIES

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Much literature about Turkmen rugs, at least that of previous decades, deals almost exclusively with the woven products of these people and makes only passing reference to other aspects of their material culture. While there may be occasional references to ethnographic information, even carpet and textile scholars who have visited Central Asia usually have little to say about the way people actually live, leaving undisturbed the romantic notions that have grown up around the weavers of Central Asian carpets. There is a growing understanding that the life of a nomad is quite unlike the modern Western mythology (Eiland Jr. 1990, 116-117).

Coming to grips with ethnographic information from the field is never straightforward. On the one hand there are differences of language to be overcome, which in many ways is the least taxing. On the other, there is the ever-present question of the issues that will be addressed, which will directly influence the kinds of questions one will pose. This is where most of the difficulty lies. When approaching another culture, the issues that are important to an observer may not be significant to the studied culture. Some of the questions one may pose may be so basic that informants may not have thought significantly about the subject. If the roles were reversed, some of the difficulty may be explained, but at the same time, one has to be acutely aware that this is not the case, and the informants may be totally unfamiliar with a scientific viewpoint while the researcher may be only dimly aware of the cultural context of the subject.

The kind of information an anthropologist may bring back may be garbled and have little consistency from one informant to another. In the end an elaborate scientific study may say more about the culture of the researcher than the society of the study. Anthropologists have long been aware of this, and there are many ways of minimizing this bias. But if one wants to study the Turkmen of the last century,

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one must be particularly careful. There is no one alive to interview when the great majority of collectable Turkmen rugs were produced (Pinner and Eiland Jr. 1999).

For Turkmen studies, perhaps the two most useful guides are *Journey to Kiva* (Oguz Press, London, 1977, abbreviated here as *Kiva*) and *The Country of the Turkomans* (Oguz Press, London, 1977: abbreviated here as *Turkmen*). The former contains the travel log of Nikolay Murav=yov who was sent to establish contact with the Khivan Khanate in 1819-20. It is a wonderfully written story with much useful information. The latter volume contains accounts from a number of travelers from 1835-1885 which, in keeping with the motivations of the expeditions, is largely a collection of geographical data, with particular emphasis on those issues that involve the passage of people and supplies through Central Asia. As part of the so called AGreat Game,@ England and Russia vied for supremacy in Central Asia, and in the course of these expeditions, some important ethnographic information was also recorded.

But before delving deeper into the narratives, it is notable that there exist several distinct biases in this literature. One of the most frequently cited is the Turkmen custom of taking captives - usually Persian but also Russian - for sale. While many authors were opposed to the Russian advance through Central Asia, those who covered this period note with great favor that the Russians freed captives where they found them, and after gaining control of the region, outlawed further slave-taking. One account, by Edmund O=Donavan (1882), leaves little doubt as to his position of the Russian freeing of the slaves: AThis was one great step in progress, something that had never been heard of before, perhaps in the whole of Central Asian History; and if to-day these devastating Turkomans are wiped out by some who perhaps are not as liberal as we should be, who shall say whether it is not for the better@ (*Turkmen*, 207). This attitude, far from the kind of romanticization that can plague the Western appreciation of these people, is no less dangerous for scholarship. Most of the reports in this volume express similar sentiments that securely place this Victorian scholarship with the abolitionist movement of the day. Unlike what may be considered a liberal view today, many abolitionists at the time would have favored taking colonies in an effort to bring civilization, including abolishing such practices as slavery. Many authors appreciated Turkmen society in this light, as when compared to the mores of England or the educated city elite of Iran (with whom the English had a long relationship), these nomads were found to be incapable of building anything civilized and sorely in need of colonization, if not complete extermination, as suggested by O=Donavan. But by reading Ain between@ the narrative, which often emphasizes that the Turkmen live in the ruins of civilizations that were far beyond their own culture, one begins to see a different picture, one that is more consistent with what can be observed today.

Perhaps the most significant information I gathered while I was in Turkmenistan concerns my realization that a large segment of the Turkmen now and probably at least for the last several hundred years have been an agricultural people (see also O'Bannon 1974, 28-29). This is what the Turkmen themselves told me when we ventured into subjects not directly connected with rugs. The largest group of Turkmen peoples are now the Tekke, and most of them have lived for at least the last century and a half in three areas: the Merv oasis, the Tedjend oasis, and the narrow but well watered strip of land watered by streams leaving the Kopet Dagh. The reason these lands are valuable to their occupants relates to their ability to produce abundant crops. The desert to the north of the line of settlements along the Kopet Dagh - as well as the desert between Tedjend and Merv - are desolate and could not support a substantial population. Flying over these areas gives one a clear indication as to just how harsh life away from the agricultural lands would be, even for nomads.

And, indeed, the History Museum in Ashgabat shows such artifacts as Turkmen ploughs and other agricultural implements. (FIGURE 1), and everywhere in the oases and along the Kopet Dagh, there is abundant agriculture. This should not be surprising when we reflect that the ceremonial capital of the Parthian Empire was located at Nisa, just a few miles outside of Ashgabat. Merv allegedly had a million people when Genghiz Khan arrived in 1221, and this is readily understandable when one notes that the cultivated region around Merv measures about 40 by 50 miles. The fact that the oases, as well as the lands adjacent to the Amu Darya, were contested in warfare suggests that the Turkmen also appreciated the agricultural potential of this area.

Turkmen living near the Caspian, including the sedentary Ogorjali, took part in the Transcaspian trade, and a model of a large Turkmen cargo boat is also on exhibit at the History Museum in Ashgabat. Turkmen fishnets and other paraphernalia of a seagoing and fishing life are also displayed. (FIGURE 2).

Perhaps the most interesting revision of traditional thought about the Turkmen may relate to use of the yurt (Andrews 1997). While much has been written about Turkmen movements in migrating from one area to another - along with descriptions of how rapidly the yurt could be disassembled and loaded onto pack animals - there has been little discussion of the yurt as a permanent or semi-permanent home. While the modern city of Ashgabat resembles other cities of the Former Soviet Union, one does not have to travel far to see evidence of a different mode of existence. Just outside the city, and dotted throughout the countryside in general, are areas where yurts and houses stand in close proximity (FIGURE 3). Clearly designed for use by one family, these dual structures stand in contrast to one another as Anomad@ tent and permanent structure. Many earlier settlements show evidence that such a dual dwelling system existed centuries ago. There are

often foundations of mud or mud brick houses with a ring of stones nearby to secure a tent. The Victorian literature offers clues as to the reasons for these dwellings. Murav=yov records that while there were Turkmen villages on the Caspian shore, he found that Turkmen yurt settlements near Khiva had regular stables or sheds, which were surrounded by a wooden fence or mud wall, for their cattle (*Kiva*, 45). In 1879 Rawlinson (*Turkoman*, 112) records that Turkmen Aobahs@ [a type of settlement] are scattered along the base of the hills where there is water and pasturage, but little room between the mountains and the desert for migrations. These settlements have a Amore permanent character@ than the settlements of other tribes. Each settlement consists of tents pitched within reach of a stone enclosure, which serves as a refuge from Kurdish attacks.

In 1881 Colonel Stewart records the dwellings of the Turkmen in the vicinity of Merv, called then Kala Kaushid Khan, where there were about 6000 tents. The Achief man@ has a guest house of mud or of sun dried mud brick. AThey themselves@ live in a felt tent, or in a dwelling made of reed mats if reeds are available. Both of the latter dwellings are recorded as being able to be carried away by camels (*Turkmen*, 150). Perhaps the most interesting aspect of these two accounts is that there are three different, but not mutually exclusive reasons, why a sedentary dwelling would be used. For defensive purposes, either a stone or a mud dwelling offers protection. On the other end of scale, a Aguest house@ made of the same materials could also be used as a dwelling or for storage. One may also suggest that this Aguest house@ as described by Stewart also served - when not entertaining foreigners - to house cattle.

The issue of dwelling type rapidly leads to a consideration of what it means to be a nomad. In 1874 Stebnitzky records (*Turkmen*, 67), in unusual detail, the tribes and their way of life. Of the Chomura (one of the Turkmen tribes) they are recorded as living in the Atrek and Hürgen valleys, where they are engaged in fishing and raising wheat, millet, barley and sesame. The encampments are Anot always stationary@ and can be moved for short distances. The Charva, in contrast, are nomads, and remain in the same region in the cold months of December-February. During most of the year they wander Awherever there are wells@ particularly in the Kizil Kum desert. Stebnitzky also adds an important passage that outlines the plasticity in modes of life:

The Chomura [settled] and Charva [nomadic] Turkomans are closely connected; thus, for instance, a father lives a settled life, while the sons are nomads. Sometimes family circumstances compel them to change their nomad for a settled mode of life, as, for instance, marriage or poverty. It sometimes happens that fevers are prevalent in summer on the Attrek and Hürgen; in such cases more Turkomans migrate to the steppe.

This passage brings two important issues into focus. The first is that a

nomadic and sedentary group need not be antagonistic. In fact, they can be the same people. The second point is that other factors, such as wealth or climate can change the lifestyle of a particular group. Romantic concepts of the purity of the Anomadic life@ are not sustained when one studies how nomadic societies are organized. Unlike many Western works that outline various modes of subsistence - each mutually exclusive - as Anomads@ and Aagriculturalists,@ modern ethnographic observations of the Marri Baluch demonstrate that these peoples simultaneously exploit a number of different environments.

Meaningful definitions of Asedentary@ and Anomadic@ individuals are difficult to apply. Land for farming can be held by individuals or communities, and may be held more or less permanently by an individual line or be subdivided at intervals. Many large landowners lease their land for others to work. As a result of the nature of land ownership, individuals or families may be sedentary for a period, only to engage in a nomadic lifestyle at a later time. The residence of the tribal chief may be either a collection of semi-permanent dwellings or a settled village with a fortress and houses for his headmen (Pehrson, 1977: 9-11). The picture that emerges is one of individuals exploiting the opportunities available to them at any given moment.

The Baseri of the Fars province in Iran have a similar organization. The ruling chiefs of the tribe and their immediate family cannot be classified as Anomads.@ While they usually own large flocks, they leave day to day administration to local overseers. They live in Shiraz and are engaged in politics at a national level. One of their most important functions is to represent the tribe in cases against sedentary communities (Barth, 1961: 74-76). Qashqa=i khans lead a similar lifestyle. While they may celebrate their Anomadic@ heritage and receive their nomadic subjects in tents - weather permitting - their mode of life is sedentary (Barfield, 1993:112). This is not to suggest that the nomadic lifestyle is regarded as inferior to a sedentary existence. On the contrary, for the majority of the tribe, a forced settlement means the loss of status, which comes from life as an independent herder. While most nomads owe allegiance to their chief, they have enough capital to remain effectively self-employed. If they were to settle, the majority do not have sufficient capital to purchase enough land to give them comparable status as a self-sufficient landowner (Barth, 1961: 108-109). It is for this reason that two groups out of the nomadic population are likely to settle. The wealthiest chiefs find sedentary comforts enticing. The poorest nomads - who through natural disasters or mismanagement - have no security or status, find more secure work in a sedentary community. The organization of the community is one of the most important issues to address, particularly the artisans.

As Vasjev (quoted by Kalter 1984) noted in 1888, the Turkmen did not apparently have a stable group of artisans. The model instead was one of a peasant

who practiced agriculture and one or more crafts. Trades such as blacksmiths, silversmiths, builders and millers were not nomads [FIGURE 4]. When Kalter attempted to find if any copper was produced by the Turkmen in Afghanistan today, he found that they were probably made by other groups. He notes that the A...slight inclination towards craftwork seems to have virtually disappeared in Turkoman settlement areas after colonization and political stabilization@ (Kalter, 1984: 55).

It is interesting to note that the vessels the Turkmen eat and drink from [FIGURE 5] are not like those found among nomadic Eastern Turkic groups, such as the Khirgiz. The latter people are well known for their leather vessels, made from various parts of the animal and richly ornamented.. Instead, the Turkmen use wooden, ceramic and metallic vessels. Wooden vessels are particularly versatile, and are used by a number of nomadic and semi-nomadic groups. Unlike ceramic vessels, which do not travel well, wood is shock resistant. It is also light, and, importantly, such vessels can be made with simple tools. A simple lathe can be made using a central pole attached to a pivot on one end, and the vessel to be carved on the other. Knives are used to cut away wood on the interior and exterior of the vessel as the lathe is turned. Rotary motion is supplied by an assistant pulling on a cord wrapped around the pole.[1] Such a simple lathe would not be out of place even among the Turkmen nomads, as the parts are neither complicated nor heavy.

In summarizing what can be learned from the field, several issues emerge. First to consider are the negatives. In many cases cultures that have historically woven rugs have undergone cataclysmic change, leaving little, or in some cases no record of local material culture of the recent past. In another example a Afeedback loop@ can be generated, and a Western hypothesis can be Aconfirmed..@ Many rug travelers can attest to finding Western rug books or auction catalogues in even the most remote areas, and it becomes difficult to determine whether a given piece of information comes from a rug book or from the local people themselves. While in Turkestan, I met a woman who earns money by translating parts of the western carpet literature for local carpet specialists.

At the same time there are many positive aspects to fieldwork. There is still an enormous amount to be learned by visiting the descendants of people who made the rugs we collect. With travel faster, cheaper, and safer than ever before, many have taken the opportunity, and ethnographic information, often little more than hastily collected snips from whirlwind tours, is making an impact on the rug field. It would indeed be ironic if the great Victorian travelers, who in a real sense risked life and limb to travel to remote locales, were the last scientists to learn from the

[1] A simple lathe similar to the one described was observed by the author in Syria, there is a picture of one use by Kirgiz in Basilov *et al.* (1989:131-132).

people, geography, art, and artifacts of these places. What is needed - and it can be no more than alluded to here - is a thorough re-assessment of earlier travels in the light of modern first hand experience. By comparing and contrasting modern and Victorian accounts, there is some hope of salvaging valuable information about Central Asian cultures.

One of the most interesting observations to be gleaned from the literature is that the Victorian period was far from stable in Turkmenistan. The Turkmen are recorded as only moving into the Merv region in 1830. Their movements were stimulated by warfare, and throughout the nineteenth century there was constant strife in the region. The powerful Khans of other Central Asian states, such as Khiva, clearly did not want the Turkmen to form a powerful entity, as did the Persian Shah. This trend continued with the Russian advance, which in some ways spelled an end to an incipient state. The nineteenth century can be largely characterized as one of protracted civil war. During such a period, one could hardly expect for the Turkmen to develop cities, along with the craft specializations that went along with the generation of an agricultural surplus. Farming could be undertaken in regions that could support it -during periods of calm - while keeping an eye on often hostile neighbors.

It is therefore in adversity that some of the greatest Turkmen art was created. Although the Turkmen did have Asedentary@ and Anomadic@ elements, all groups were prepared to move from place to place as the political climate demanded. As we look at some of the large Turkoman main carpets, or the Eagle Gul group of rugs, we can appreciate that these were not the work of nomads so much as the art of a coalescing nation [FIGURES 6-7].

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Captions

1. The History Museum in Ashgabat displayed ploughs and other agricultural implements from the beginning of the century (if not before). Wherever water was abundant, particularly the shores of the Caspian sea, in river valleys or at the foot of the mountains, sedentary communities could exist.

2. Models of boats in the History Museum, Ashgabat. As Mrav=yov makes clear, the Turkmen used boats on the Caspian. This fish net demonstrates yet another mode of life practiced by the Turkmen.

3. Model of traditional arrangement of tents and permanent shelter (History Museum, Ashgabat). The function of the structures is unclear, but it is likely that they were used for a variety of purposes.

4. This painting (History Museum, Ashgabat) may suggest that even a jewelry-maker would have been prepared for flight. While the dwelling is a tent, the equipment for making jewelry would be less than simple to transport. At the same time, in an area that could suffer raids from a number of hostile neighbours, such a scheme may have existed in the past.

5. Ceramics were not uncommon in the last century, as is clear from archaeological remains, but wooden vessels no doubt were also important, as is depicted here (History Museum, Ashgabat). Wood is light, and not as susceptible to breakage as ceramics. From ethnographic collections, it appears metallic vessels, such as the small one at the back of this picture, were not common.

6. Tekke bag (chuval). This small weaving may be regarded as a typical nomadic product. It would have been made on a small loom and it uses simple designs that could be memorized by a weaver. Wiedersperg Collection, San Francisco.

7. Tekke main carpet. These large carpets have often been assumed to have been made for the export market only. Their large size suggests they were made for Western rooms, yet it is possible that carpets such as these could pre-date the late 19th century. Wiedersperg Collection, San Francisco.