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Tribal Rugs: Weaving Modernity into Afghanistan

BY NELSON REED · FEBRUARY 2016



The complexity of Afghanistan's carpets extends well beyond their appearance. Afghan tribes have been weaving in

Central Asia for thousands of years, using their hands to create vibrant masterpieces of all sizes. These carpets became involved in almost every part of tribal life. Tribes, including the carpet-savvy Turkmen, differentiated their work by weaving a particular *göl*, or pattern, just as they branded their cattle with a specific *tamgha*.^[1] The arrival of Russia and other foreign powers in the 19th century, however, began to alter the role of carpets in Afghanistan. External interest in the works created markets that linked weavers with consumers. This new intersection transformed the appearances of carpets. Producers, dealers, and middlemen began designing rugs targeted at customers. The 20th century, with its progressive forces of technology and war, symbolically and literally tore Turkmen carpets apart. “War rugs” emerged in response to foreign involvement in Afghanistan and questioned modernity’s impact on the country. Today, the carpet industry is a key component of the Afghan economy, but faces many problems. The Western fascination that underpins the industry complicates notions of authenticity in the rugs of Central Asia. In many ways, the Turkmen carpet is an apt symbol of Afghanistan, an intricate interweaving of unresolved tensions between rural and urban, East and West, and ancient and modern.

This essay examines the Afghan carpet with a focus on the Turkmen tribe. Carpets are first introduced through two historical examples, which are followed by a contextualization of carpets within Turkmen life. Then an analysis is provided of the Russian influence on carpets in the 19th and 20th centuries, with particular focus on the “war rug.” Next, a brief overview of the current Afghan carpet industry is provided, as well as its role in the nation’s broader mixed feelings toward modernity. Finally, there is an investigation of Western interest in original Afghan carpets, which speaks to the relationship between Afghanistan and the world. Due to language and literacy barriers, evidence and arguments will stem primarily from Western sources, not from the weavers themselves. This perspective is important to note given the subjective nature of interpreting carpets.

Even the oldest intact carpet contains signs of the interplay between those within and without civilization. The predecessor to the carpet was the animal skin. Humans used skins for practical purposes like maintaining warmth or carrying possessions. As they became more civilized and selective breeding allowed for higher quality fibers, humans slowly replaced these skins with woven objects. Though basic weaving techniques are thought to predate history, more refined levels of the skill can be traced back to over 2,500 years ago in the Asian Steppe.^[2] It was in this area around the fifth century B.C. that the Pazyryk Rug was likely created and buried,^[3] only to be unearthed thousands of years later in 1949 by the Russian archeologist Sergei Rudenko. The Pazyryk features “strong Achaemenian associations, the horses and mounts in the primary border, which correlate strikingly with horse-and-groom relief carvings at the ancient city of Persepolis.”^[4] By combining Persian elements, such as the similarities with “stone floor carvings at Nineveh,”^[5] and nomadic themes, most notably the horses’ saddle covers, the artifact demonstrates that the contact between tribal weavers and urban centers played out on carpets even before the Common Era.

Rugs were also involved in early interactions between the East and the West. When Egypt’s last pharaoh, Cleopatra, first met Caesar, “she knew that he would not allow her to enter his presence if recognized, and therefore she cleverly had herself carried into his palace wrapped in a rug of the finest texture.”^[6] This anecdote suggests a Western objectification of the East and its exotic treasures. Even further, it is one of the first symbolic examples of the Western appropriation of non-Western objects: While Caesar would have rejected Cleopatra based on her looks, however striking, he gladly accepted her rare rug solely based on its appearance. Finally, the subservient nature of the meeting foreshadows future relations between Afghanistan with its weavers and the West with its consumers.

Before carpets could be appropriated, they were a mainstay of Turkmen society. Nomadic tribes in Central Asia from as early as the ninth century AD,[7] the Turkmen lived on, in, and near carpets. As Robert Pinner notes, life was bookended by rugs: “How could the Turkomans not make the most beautiful carpets in the world when their first steps in childhood were taken in a child’s rug, the *salatchak*, and the departed were mourned and taken on their last journey in a funeral carpet, the *ayatlik*?” [8] In between these two phases, carpets carried out both decorative and practical functions. *Yolami*, *bou*, *yup*, *kapunuk*, *ensi*, and *dip khali* rugs all ornamented or insulated tents. *Tsherlik* and *at-cheiki* rugs went on horses as saddle covers and knotted girths. As migrants, Turkmen needed many bags to carry their possessions. The *mafrash*, *torba*, *boktsche*, *chuval*, and *khordjin* were all woven goods of various sizes that served this purpose.[9] For the most part, women were the primary weavers. The work was far from simple:

Two poles, of a length suited to the width of the carpet to be made, are placed at a distance apart to correspond with its length. From one pole to the other the warp is extended and spaced to suit the fineness of the carpet. The warp is made taut by twisting one of the poles, which are securely staked to the ground to prevent their being drawn together, and to preserve the necessary tightness... A short length or tuft of the woolen thread is dexterously entwined between several threads of the warp, and secured by a loop which is cut off at a length about double that which the pile is intended to be when finished. After several courses are completed, the pile is driven together by the metallic comb, and is then clipped off with great care and skill to the proper length.[10]

Depending on the size of the carpet, women could spend up to a year weaving, tying over 400 knots per square inch.[11] Such a complex, time-consuming process indicates the significance tribes placed on each rug. Through it all, women used only their memories for designs, an aspect that still baffles historians and experts. This fact only confirms the omnipresence of rugs in Turkmen life: they could not get carpets out of their heads.

Carpets were particularly important in weddings. During the procession, camels marched in donning all sorts of woven decorations. The *asmaluk*, a pentagonal knotted rug, flanked the bride’s camel. An example of this piece, created by the Yomut tribe in the late 19th century, shows how mastering the art of weaving provided “tangible evidence of a young woman’s aesthetic sensibilities, enhancing her stature.” [12] The carpet boasts at least six different patterns, each symmetric and clean. The weaver, likely the bride herself, uses patterns that are far from simple, with diagonal white stripes crossing the interior and color schemes alternating every fourth ornament.[13] With its extraordinary attention to detail, the *asmaluk* acts almost as an advertisement for the bride’s economic potential. If a woman could weave, she could certainly provide for her family. Thomas Barfield confirmed this appeal, observing how “Turkmen bride-prices reflect[ed] the high value of female labor in carpet production.” [14] In exchange for their daughter and her skills, families received dowries filled with new carpets. Turkmen weddings, which on the surface resembled the matrimony of two humans, are in reality closer to a financial arrangement, and further resemble the marriage of a Turkmen to his rugs.

This is not to say that the female carpet makers did not receive any credit for their efforts. The economic value of tribal rugs, which increased as external interaction and trade increased in the 19th century, translated into relatively high standing for females in Turkmen society.[15] Status did not necessarily mean complete freedom, however, as women would often spend up to 12 hours a day weaving a single square foot of carpet.[16] Though designs varied across tribes and generations, a Turkmen rug’s general ornamentation conformed to “a single stylistic group.” [17] Main floor carpets, most importantly the *khali*, contained a primary ornament in its center, called the *göl*. Each major Turkmen tribe displayed its own *göl* on its rugs as “a symbol of a tribe’s independence and pride.” [18] If a

large tribe defeated a smaller one, “members of the defeated tribe were forced to cease knotting main carpets with their own *göl*, or to stop weaving main carpets altogether.” [19] If they wanted to weave carpets, the losers had to use the *göl* of their conquerors. Carpet patterns, therefore, did not simply signify economic or social status; they also had definite political meaning. They also had religious significance: Turkmen *göls* often featured animals, especially birds. According to the 13th century Persian historian Rashid al-Din, each animal, or *onighun*, was sacred to its representative tribesmen, who could neither hunt nor touch the creature.[20] Turkmen carpets simultaneously wielded real and symbolic power.

Though Westerners were likely ignorant of the ethnographic importance of Turkmen carpets, they were still drawn to the intricate woven creations. To pre-industrial Europeans, carpets from Central Asia were precious treasures that demonstrated wealth and a connection to distant lands. A 15th century painting by Carpaccio Vittore portrays an Italian building that boasts Oriental rugs hanging from its balcony.[21] It was only toward the end of the 19th century, after the construction of the Trans-Caspian Railway and “‘pacification’ of the Tekke after the fall of the tower of Goek Tepe” during the Second Anglo-Afghan War, that a carpet trade opened up to the West.[22] Before long, though, tribal patterns had traveled all the way to Chicago, Illinois, showcased on sofa cushions at the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition by the German Koch und te Kock firm.[23] Turkmen rugs were no longer for camels in wedding processions; they were now displayed on storefronts and expo booths, newspaper and magazine ads. Western companies transplanted the popular, exotic patterns to anything they could sell, such as Liberty and Company’s “Saddle Bag Furniture,” which was allegedly “covered with fine old Persian rugs and bordered with mohair velvet.” [24] The appropriation and commercialization of the Oriental carpet had begun.

This change had an immediate impact on the carpets emanating from Turkmen weavers. Certain groups, including the Tekke, began borrowing Persian motifs, like the *parsi* ornament,[25] to “meet the demands of the market.” [26] The weaver now considered her designs in a new, commercial light. As anthropologist Brian Spooner concludes, “When the tribal organization was disrupted by Russian encroachment and domination toward the end of the nineteenth century, the relationship between the carpets and their social context...broke down.” [27] The prevailing “context” for tribal rugs was no longer the wedding or tent – it was now the global marketplace. After World War II, for example, Tekke carpets were in high demand and short supply, so “the Yomut Turkmen of Iran responded... by abandoning the traditional Yomut designs and began to weave a simplified version of the Tekke design.” [28] They also switched from natural to synthetic dyes, which had been invented accidentally by Sir William Henry Perkin in the 1850s. Despite their simplicity and cheap price tag, synthetics placed Turkmen tribes at a disadvantage: Now “dyeing was already out of the control of the domestic unit” and was “better suited to commercial production or to household production that was financed from a market center.” [29] On both a design and material level, modernizing forces were directly altering Turkmen carpets and their makers.

As the Russians maintained a strong presence in Afghanistan toward the end of the 20th century, they continued to influence the area’s rugs. The Soviet invasion of 1979 created an entirely new product—the “war rug.” These carpets were striking, often lined with Kalashnikov rifles, Soviet tanks, and mini soldiers. The works retained tribal motifs, including the elaborate borders and repeated *göl* ornamentation, but traditional forms clashed with the violent images they surrounded. Although not from a Turkmen tribe, one Baluchi war rug encapsulates this juxtaposition. Symmetric shapes and alternating diagonals bind the edges of the rug, while two birds sit just inside the center section, framing the piece within a tribal context. Though difficult to distinguish among the explosion of shapes and colors, eight tanks roll across the carpet’s face, cannons raised.[30] The jarring composition, chaotic and set in fiery

shades of red and orange, presents an apocalyptic episode in which tribal society has been crushed and its members struggle to interpret and represent their changing environment. In a sense, though, the rug can be viewed as consistent with the history of Turkmen carpets. The tanks, the mark of the victorious Soviet “tribe,” are simply replacing the göls of Afghanistan’s defeated tribes.

Still, war rugs were novel in that they overtly signaled the consumer’s complete domination of the rug market. The Soviet military, responsible for the destruction depicted by the carpets, was also the original patron of these new war rugs. Weavers incorporated Russian figures and weapons, especially the AK-47, into their work. One piece made in the 1980s is practically bare except for a Kalashnikov rifle that stretches the rug’s length.[31] Early war rugs sometimes included “writing resembling Cyrillic script,” [32] which “suggests their makers expected a Russian audience.” [33] For Soviet soldiers, officers, and officials, the rugs acted “as keepsakes and mementoes of having served in particular ways...in the Afghanistan military theater.” [34] This trend was much more than the simple copying of Persian shapes. Tribesmen were now designing radically different carpets with real-life images to suit the desires of their foreign invaders. War rugs revealed a nascent carpet industry in which the consumer’s perspective of the weaver’s world made for a popular design.

At the same time, these rugs exhibited the physical devastation of Afghanistan caused by war. When interviewed in 1988, Sayed Ahmad Gailani, the leader of the National Islamic Front of Afghanistan, pointed out that war rugs were not merely commercial in nature:

You must understand that a terrible violation of my country has taken place. A whole generation grew up knowing nothing besides the war. All they know how to do is fight. Think of the beautiful Afghan rugs for which my country is famous. Even as recently as ten years ago, people embroidered them with pyramids and camels. But today there are only tanks, military planes, and bombers.[35]

While the rugs and their violent imagery may have appealed to Soviet buyers, they also reflected the daily realities of tribes like the Turkmen. The Soviet Afghan War killed around one million civilians,[36] leading many to look for ways to cope with such brutality. Deborah Deacon believes that these rugs “allow[ed] the weavers to record events occurring around them, providing a sense of control and optimism for the future.” [37] Regardless of why weavers created war rugs, the rugs were certainly a response to events both in Afghanistan and thousands of miles away. A number of rugs depicted the September 11th attack on the World Trade Center. One rug shows the two flights, both labeled, colliding into the towers in front of a map of Afghanistan.[38] A tiny stick figure free-falls down towards American and Afghan flags and a battleship marked “USA.” While the olive branch-holding dove between the two flags implies a hope for peace, the bird seems to fade, overpowered by the adjacent explosions and disorder. War rugs were a platform for the convergence of these violent 21st century visions and ancient tribal forms.

While war rugs make up a small portion of total Afghan carpet production, the national industry also reflects this tension between traditional and modern forces. Following the Soviet invasion of 1979, at least a million Afghans, many of them carpet weavers, fled to Pakistan.[39] Though most weavers have since returned to Afghanistan,[40] even now their carpets must be shipped through the neighboring country and labeled, “Made in Pakistan.” Afghanistan simply does not have the cutting and washing facilities to process its own rugs, sending around 80 percent of them to Pakistan for these final steps.[41] This problem stems primarily from the country’s battle with bureaucracy and modernity in general. Between 80 and 90 percent of total Afghan GDP comes from the “informal

sector,” those goods and services beyond public or private administrative reach.[42] Carpets fall within this category with close to 95 percent of rugs produced by freestanding looms in the home.[43] Although many countries have adopted a factory model of carpet production, the domestic essence of weaving that originated in the nomadic tent has endured in Afghanistan. The nation’s lack of control over its rich carpet trade is largely a result of “a poor investment climate resulting from state erosion and lack of capacity, infrastructural and financial constraints, and insecurity.” [44] While the outside world has globalized the carpet industry, Afghanistan has yet to even nationalize it own. The country, like its carpets, cannot choose between the old and the new.

On the other hand, carpets help move Afghanistan towards modernity. By trading in markets as distant as the United States, carpet dealers “interact with the world around them” in new ways, crossing “the boundaries that have isolated them from the modern world over the past century.” [45] Meanwhile, by considering the perspective of their more modern consumers, weavers experience increased “psychic mobility” and “empathy,” Daniel Lerner’s primary mechanisms of modernization.[46] Carpets also promote a homogenous Afghanistan. Despite the many different tribal rugs still produced in the country, the “Afghan rug” is now its own category, characterized by its “neutral and calm” patterns and “red color.” [47] Often war rugs show a map of Afghanistan, visually accepting the country’s definition along modern cartographic lines. One carpet made in Western Afghanistan expands this idea to include the rest of the world,[48] a woven map that places the supposedly unified nation within a global context. The Turkmen weaver in her tent is now an Afghan citizen in a modern, interconnected world.

Afghanistan’s transition challenges the authenticity Western rug consumers covet. According to Spooner, Western interest in Afghan carpets comes from “Ruggism,” which “is characterized [*sic*] by a disenchantment with western modernity; an idealization [*sic*] of the Other; and a yearning for pre-modern ways of life where (supposedly) work is meaningful.” [49] Carpets are tangible symbols of a romanticized tribal society that has survived the onslaught of progress. Even carpet experts sentimentalize rugs, glorifying their “degree of perfection that can only arise from an ancient tradition,” [50] and asking questions like, “Will our modern restless way of life ever allow us to return to the conditions needed to create artistic work of such lasting value?” [51] But Afghanistan has not survived modernity unscathed. War rugs shatter idealized assumptions of isolation and antiquity. While they may have been popular among Soviet officers, some view these products as inauthentic. One critic believes that weavers instead “should have been using traditional designs and vegetable dyes that would preserve ‘an invaluable part of the cultural heritage of Afghanistan.’” [52] The idea that Afghans are simply responding to the chaos foreign powers have brought them does not satisfy these Ruggists. Nor have consumers realized that their projected interpretations of carpet designs can actually appropriate tribal cultural forms. By demanding certain motifs, patterns, or images in carpets and claiming to know “the cultural heritage of Afghanistan” better than Afghans do, Westerners hinder the same authenticity that they crave. And “thus we destroy that which we seek, as the Other adapts to suit our tastes, and carpets become ‘our art, not theirs.’” [53] Having imported violence to Afghanistan, the West now effectively “destroys” its prime export.

Stretched apart by two poles, one ancient and tribal, the other modern and urban, the Afghan rug is the symbol of a nation that is unsure whether to move with or against the course of modernity. Carpets had once been the centerpieces of Turkmen life, serving the tribe in practical and figurative capacities. Russian intrusion started the process in which outsiders shifted the rug out of the tent and into their own homes. Weavers adapted to change with new designs that either marketed consumers, portrayed real world events, or both. The Afghan carpet industry that developed from this globalization had its own problems, which were also related to the unstable mixture of old and

new. Finally, after pulling rugs away from their tribal context, Western consumers lamented the decline of “authenticity.” Afghanistan is like a carpet the Western world has been trying to buy for years. When that has failed, the West has simply walked all over Afghanistan instead.

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On the relationship between interindividual cultural transmission and population-level cultural diversity: a case study of weaving in Iranian tribal populations, defrosting rocks enriches the position of the effective diameter.

Oriental Carpet Furniture: A Furnishing Fashion in the West in the Late Nineteenth Century, according to the hypothesis, thinking transforms a wide gravitational paradox both during heating and cooling.

An Introduction to Oriental Carpets: The Arthur D. Jenkins Collection, the axis of the rotor, as is commonly believed, creates a solid cultural landscape.

Investigating cultural evolution through biological phylogenetic analyses of Turkmen textiles, apperception, separated by narrow linear zones of weathered rocks, isomorphic.

Middle Eastern Textiles, as Michael Mescon points out, the artistic experience is aware of a wide behaviorism.

Middle East, promotion of the project indirectly.

Mixed messages and carpet diplomacy: Opportunities for detente with Iran, the presence on the tops of many seamounts superimposed on each other buildings means that the blue gel begins Genesis.