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## “IMAGINED COMMUNITY” AND TURKMEN ARTISANRY: A DAY IN THE ALTYN ASYR BAZAAR<sup>1</sup>

*This article aims to present another perspective in exploring the role of handicrafts and material culture as a source of national identity. By analyzing the links between the demand, consumption, and production of artisanal items, this article explores how artisanal practices and technologies help to maintain what Benedict Anderson described as “imagined community” within and beyond the space of the Altyn Asyr bazaar in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan. In the bazaar, Turkmen citizens are connected by the knowledge, traditions, values, and memory they hold in common. In contrast to a number of works that focus exclusively on the master narratives of ruling elites and emphasize the crucial role of the officials in developing and maintaining national identity, this paper focuses on ordinary people’s voices in Turkmen national narratives. The paper is based on field research in Turkmenistan in August 2013, October 2017, and April-May 2018.*

**Keywords:** Turkmenistan, artisanry, material culture, nationalism, “imagined community.”

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A TEKE WOMAN is an artist, and our beautiful ladies of Europe would be very surprised if they saw what a nomad woman does with her fingers; I have some embroideries of purenjeks<sup>2</sup> which are of true wonders. The carpets they make are the most beautiful and durable of all,” wrote *Henri Moser* (1844-1923), a Swiss traveler who visited the land of the Turkmen in the 1880s (*Moser* 1885: 330). Moser provides an illustration of Turkmen women. Though it is difficult to see the motifs and stitches of the embroidery in their full robe, we cannot fail to note its richness. Other western travelers also provide valuable information on the material culture of the Turkmen in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Traditional gowns were worn by Turkmen women during Soviet times. The images from that era show that Turkmen traditional clothing has not dramatically changed since then. Turkmen gowns designed in the 19th century are worn today. Moreover, embroidered elements of gowns are in huge demand in Turkmen bazaars. However, compared to the previous centuries when needlework was handmade, since the 20th century handmade stitches have coexisted with machine-made needlework. When computerized sewing-embroidery machines entered the Turkmen market in the 21st century, they led to the emergence of new designs. Still, the machine-made ornamental variations fit in local patterns with particular ethnic or national flair. Both handmade and machine-made motifs of Turkmen gowns distinguish themselves from ornamental motifs widespread among other national communities in Central Asia. A Turkmen woman wearing an embroidered traditional dress could not be confused with a Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Tajik, or an Uzbek woman in her traditional costume.

This article aims to present another perspective in exploring the role of handicrafts as a source of national identity by focusing on artisanal practices and technologies within and beyond the space of the *Altyn Asyr* bazaar in Turkmenistan. First, in contrast

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is partly based on my article published in the CAP papers 215, January 2019, <https://centralasiaprogram.org/archives/12806>. I would like to express my gratitude to Marlene Laruelle for her help in preparing the article and Catherine Poujol, Julia Obertreis and Jonas van der Straeten for their precious comments. For the unfamiliar reader, a bazaar is usually an open air market with individual stalls and booths usually rented by the merchant to sell his or her wares.

<sup>2</sup> *Purenjek* – an outer cloak worn by Turkmen women in 19th and the beginning of 20th century. See *Myradova* 1967: 72; *Morozova* 1989: 72.



Fig. 1. Turkmen women. Late 19th century.  
(Source: Moser 1885)

to a number of works that focus exclusively on the master narratives of ruling elites and emphasize the crucial role of the officials in developing and maintaining national identity; this article focuses on ordinary people's voices in Turkmen national narratives. The essay explores how artisanal practices, particularly clothing, carpets and needlework, stimulate Turkmen society to maintain what Benedict Anderson describes as "imagined communities" (Anderson 1983) and analyzes the links between the demand, consumption, and production of artisanal items.

This research is based on visits to the *Altyn Asyr* bazaar in Ashgabat in August 2013, October 2017, and April-May 2018. A combination of qualitative methods is applied to analyze artisanal practices, production, demand, and consumption of Turkmen handicrafts in Ashgabat. These include interviews and conversations with bazaar sellers and customers (both Turkmen citizens and international visitors), participant observation, and photo documentation within and beyond the bazaar. The author also relies on artisanal objects – carpets, tapestry objects, embroidered pieces, and silver ornaments that she observed and acquired during her numerous field trips.

### Nationalism and Post-Soviet Central Asia

Among the materials that explore nationalisms in post-Soviet Turkmenistan and Central Asia, the first and the most significant group of publications focus on states' narratives as created and disseminated by official authorities. They emphasize a top-down approach and how the nation and nationhood is "imagined" by political elites (Marat 2007, 2008, Peyrouse 2012, Polese, Horak 2015; Megoran 2017, Fauve 2015, Clement 2014, 2020). Both top-down and bottom-up approaches are scrutinized in the second group (Laruelle ed. 2017, Isaacs 2018). However, very few reflect upon ordinary citizens' narratives, particularly in connection with crafts and artisanry (Özcan 2014, Mentges, Shamukhitdinova 2017, Botoeva, Spector 2013).

To analyze the link between the handicrafts and the national community, I address Anderson's "imagined communities," in which individuals "will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them; yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (1983: 6). Together with vernacular print language, artisanal practices and handicrafts narrate the story of the nation from a bottom-up perspective. The members of the national community in Turkmenistan are connected by the knowledge, traditions, values, and memory related to artisanal practices and handicrafts. Carpets, traditional clothing, and its embroidered elements – made and worn on an everyday basis – identify national belonging.

The majority of Turkmen women wear long dresses with embroidery. Every Turkmen family has wool carpets (*haly*), felt mats (*keçe*), and amulets (*alaja*) as an obligatory detail in one's car or in many Turkmen homes. Turkmen society can be divided into those who make and those who use Turkmen handicrafts – carpets, embroidery, dresses, and jewelry. These categories overlap each other. Made and used on an everyday basis, Turkmen handicrafts represent mandatory attributes of almost every member of the national community, though not imposed by the authorities. In the next sections I will develop how the case from Turkmenistan enlarges Anderson's approach and add artisanal practices and handicrafts to the list of identifiers of national community; such as language, beliefs, and ceremonies.

### In the Bazaar: Handicrafts, Sale, and Demand

It takes 25 to 35 minutes to reach Turkmenistan's main bazaar, *Altyn Asyr*, from the city center. The bazaar is located in the northern part of Ashgabat, in the Choganli district. The market complex was built in 2011 on the former site of the chaotic and charming *Tolkuchka* bazaar. Made in the form of a *teke-göl*, the marble market *Altyn Asyr* is controlled by state entities and, at minimum, it represents the economic policy of the country. At the same time, the new market was rebuilt in place of *Tolkuchka*, which existed for many years almost spontaneously. Both bazaars, *Tolkuchka* in the past and *Altyn Asyr* in the present, could not exist without their content which includes a huge flow of carpets, embroideries, national clothes, and many other artisanal products.

The vast territory of the bazaar is divided into specialized trade zones, each of which focuses on certain types of products. In the center is a zone intended for food products. Around it, there are zones devoted to household goods, building materials and furniture, textiles and footwear, electronics and household appliances, haberdashery and perfumes, jewelry and carpet products, etc. All in all, *Altyn Asyr* has over 2,000 stalls, divided into five sections: A, B, C, D, and E. National handicrafts are presented in section C. Carpets, felt mats, and tapestries are sold between section A and section D. Additionally, one can find some handicrafts in other sections. In total, between 40 to 60 percent of the bazaar's offerings are handicrafts or can be considered part of the traditional life of Turkmen: embroidery, national clothes, headdresses, scarves, jewelry, carpets and felts, amulets, and so on.<sup>3</sup> The bazaar is very popular in Ashgabat and

<sup>3</sup> This figure is based on visits to the *Altyn Asyr* bazaar, where they constituted 60 percent during weekends and holidays, and 40 percent on other days.

throughout the country, attracting people from all social groups. The marketplace operates on Wednesdays, Thursdays, Saturdays, and Sundays, with the busiest days being the weekend and festive days when many kiosks with handicrafts are added. In the spring and summer, one can meet women-artisans who offer their embroideries and tapestries outside the bazaar.

### *Carpets*

Artifacts indicate that carpet-weaving has taken place on the territory of present-day Turkmenistan since the Bronze Age (Tsareva 2013, 166). In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, carpets acquired an “individual-tribal character” (Cassin, Hoffmeister 1988) that made it possible to differentiate between the carpets of the main Turkmen tribes, if not even more specifically. The ornaments of the Turkmen tribes date back to the totem symbols of the Oguz (Cassin 2019). The Oguz *tamgas*<sup>4</sup> were described by Makhmud Kashgari in *Divanu Lugat-it-Turk* as far back as 1077 AD. Such designs (e.g., *göl*) coexist with motifs characteristic of the material culture of the region. Five carpet *göl*, each corresponding to a Turkmen tribe—Teke, Yomut, Salor, Chovdur, or Ersary—are represented on the national flag of Turkmenistan. Each carpet has a small geometric pattern along the border, while the center is filled with a medallion *göl*. “The range of carpet products manufactured by the Turkmen [...] is more than 30 types,” (Tsareva 2000: 203) and the existing varieties are constantly supplemented with new ones.<sup>5</sup> Besides traditional carpet types, carpet-weaving techniques are used to produce novelties like clutch purses, handbags, cushion covers, and cell phone cases; all of which are available at the bazaar. Handmade carpets and tapestries represent about 30% of the artisanal masterpieces in the bazaar. Both types of carpet production are well received by the Turkmen general public.

### *Embroidery and Gowns*

Embroidered *yaka* are the most requested of the handicrafts presented in the *Altyn Asyr* bazaar. Women buy them to decorate their traditional dresses or modernized versions of traditional dresses. In the first half of the twentieth century, embroidery was confined to the neckline or cuffs of a dress. Today, by

contrast, the entirety of a woman’s attire can be lavishly decorated with embroidery. Usually, garments are embroidered in sections and then made into a dress (Vogelsang-Eastwood 2010: 355-368). Thus, there are three options for embroidered purchases: “*yaka*,” “*yaka* and cuffs,” and “*yaka*, cuffs, and additional sections.” Artisans, representing different Turkmen tribes, prefer particular embroidery stitches and motifs which makes it possible to identify the origin of a particular piece of embroidery (Ibid). This tendency should not be taken for granted. More recently, varied stitches and motifs are mixed in a Turkmen embroidered piece which does not help in tribal identification.<sup>6</sup> However, the mixed nature of tribal designs and stitches speaks to the unified Turkmen nation which is not divided with significant differences, at least in the design of artisanal objects.

The favored colors for embroidery and carpets alike are red, white, yellow, and green which symbolize the four elements of fire, earth, air, and water. The most elegant motifs decorate a woman’s *chirpy* or the coat that is part of the attire of a bride or married women. The traditional design used on a *chirpy* is called the “tree of life” which include stylized embroidered tulips reflected by silver ornamentation. Embroidery may also decorate a small, handmade bag (*bukja*), pants (*balak*), and a skullcap (*tahya*). In general, this category represents about one-third of the handicrafts in the bazaar.<sup>7</sup> With the advent and broader usage of embroidery sewing machines, embroidery is divided into two principal groups: handmade, machine-made, and mixed. In Turkmenistan, machine-made embroidery became largely widespread in the early 1970s. Machine embroidery takes less time and is ten times less expensive than hand-made embroidery. As the must-have element of women’s traditional dress, the *yaka* is one of the most popular items at the bazaar. The share of the *yaka* is 50 percent of all embroidered items in *Altyn Asyr*. While observing a line with *yaka* sellers, I noticed that every 10 to 15 minutes, at least two *yaka* were sold. Given the preponderance of machine-made items in comparison to handmade ones, I suggest that machine-made *yaka* prevail among the items sold. The overrepresentation of machine-made articles is explained mostly due to the promptness of their fabrication, by the low price, and the existing demand for the product in the Turkmen market.

<sup>4</sup> A *tamga* is the emblem of a particular tribe, clan, or family and is often placed on property and/or livestock. This practice dates back to the Bronze Age in Central Asia.

<sup>5</sup> These include the floor carpet (*haly*), the door curtain (*ensi*, *gapylyk*, and *dezlik*), carpet bags for storing utensils, dishes and clothes (*torba*, *çuval*, *horjun*), camel blankets (*asmaldyk*), prayer mats (*namazlyk*), burial mat (*aýatlyk*), yurt strap (*iolam*, *bou*, and *ýüp*), cradle rug (*sallançak*), and small bags (*bukja*).

<sup>6</sup> This is similar in relation to the designs on carpets.

<sup>7</sup> Included in this category are *telpeks* and men’s clothes.

### Beyond the Bazaar: Long Artisanal Traditions

Turkmen and Soviet scholars<sup>8</sup> devoted detailed studies to everyday Turkmen customs and traditions. Soviet ethnographer Anna Stepanovna Morozova remarked, for instance, on the simplicity, tunic-like silhouette, and preference for reddish brown colors in Turkmen clothing of the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Morozova 1989, 60). Traditional dress is an essential part of everyday and festive wardrobes alike; it is worn at work and at home. Collars and necklines are decorated with a *yaka*, a V-shaped embroidery that begins at the neckline and extends to the waist. *Yaka* can be large or narrow, with handmade or machine-made embroidery. Dress cuffs may also be decorated with embroidery. While common dresses made of staple and chintz are worn at home, velvet, panne velvet, satin, and silk are preferable for special festive occasions. For these occasions, *yaka* are always handmade, while machine-made embroidery may decorate casual dresses. The Turkmen bridal trousseau always includes a red dress and a red *çabyt*. The *çyrpy* can be any of a range of colors, such as rose, green, or yellow. “A wedding dress [...] is always decorated with embroidery and jewelry, sewn on the chest in several rows and performs the function of amulets. When walking, decorations make a melodious sound and, according to legend, drive away evil spirits who are always hovering near young women” (Soiunova et al. 2016: 294-329, 300). Every stage of the wedding ceremony requires traditional clothes and carpets. Wool carpets decorate the rooms for guests and for the bride. Carpets and *keçe*<sup>9</sup> together with jewelry and clothing are included in the bride’s dowry. Carpets and amulets like *alaja* and *dagdan* decorate the automobile that takes the bride and groom to the wedding venue and then to their evening event (Jumaev, Charyev 2016: 41). The bride is not alone in wearing traditional clothing and jewelry. Numerous guests do so as well. It is impossible to hold a marriage ceremony without artisanal masterpieces.

The cultural, social, and economic changes of the 20th century partially transformed Turkmen traditional costume, yet its elements—color, fabric, embroidered ornamentation, and cut—continue to indicate ethnic and local affiliation. Traditional rituals and practices, meanwhile, were more profoundly transformed. Today, some elements of the traditional costume are confined to museum exhibits, yet a Turkmen bride costume remains similar to those of the previous era and is still in high demand. Over time,

the bride costume has been slightly modified. Instead of red colors, the bridal outer cloak, or *çyrpy*, may be orange, yellow, rose, or blue; while the decorative needlework of the bridal trousseau became completely or partially machine-made. However, the main features have been retained, such as the embroidered motifs, the use of the traditional fabric *keteni* and a traditional cut.

In Soviet times, “national cultures” were promoted in each republic, including Turkmenistan (Edgar 2006: 2). Though the undesirable traditions connected to gender relations and marriage customs have been discouraged, traditional artisanry like carpet and silk-weaving were maintained which included providing a source of significant cash income (Edgar 2006: 221-256). However, the Soviet struggle against what they considered to be “harmful” tradition proved ineffective. This was due, first, because selective eradication could not be an effective *a priori* in the complex socio-cultural diversity of Turkmen society in which one tradition was linked to another. Second, the communist opposition against tradition feared that excessive zeal could “undermine the regime’s relationship with its ‘class allies’” (Edgar 2006: 222) in the Turkmen countryside. There was strong opposition to female liberation, especially among the poor, rural dwellers who were supposed to form the primary constituency of the Soviet state (Edgar 2006: 222). Throughout the Soviet era, Turkmen artisanal and costume traditions were undergoing almost insignificant changes. The following section will examine the development of some traditional artisanry during the Soviet period.

### Traditional Artisanry in the Turkmen Republic

**Carpets.** The Soviets supported carpet-making in Turkmenistan from the beginning. Carpets were among the principal export items from the Turkmen areas of Khiva and Bukhara in 1921. Financial support from Soviet banks was allocated to carpet-weaving (Karryev 1957: 221), and to train carpet-makers. The State Carpet fund “Goskoverfond” was established in 1934 (413). As Soviet textbooks claimed: “Under the beneficial influence of the culture of the Russian people, the folk arts and crafts are widely developed in Turkmenistan. Handicrafts and carpet-making are in full bloom” (Karryev 1957: 221). Examples of numerous pictorial carpets with images of Lenin, Stalin, and any other Soviet political figures and writers aimed to support this statement and to demonstrate a Turkmen carpet-making renaissance.

However, such statements must be treated with caution. First, the history of Turkmen carpet-making stretches back more than two thousand years, and even though Soviet newcomers influenced ar-

<sup>8</sup> These scholars include Georgii Karpov, Galina Vasilyeva, Sergei Polyakov, Iurii Bregel, Gennadii Markov, Anna Morozova, Annadurdy Orazov, Ata Jikiev, Chary Yazlyev, Orazberdy Amanteyev, Ajap Bairieva.

<sup>9</sup> *Keçe* – a felt rug.

tisanal skills in Turkmenistan, it is hard to consider the Soviet period as the “renaissance” for Turkmen carpet-making. The intention to develop the carpet industry (*Lunacharsky* 1968: 198) was due, among other things, to the fact that carpets served both Soviet propaganda and the Soviet regime’s legitimacy.<sup>10</sup> In fact, the measures that were taken for the development of carpet-weaving had, to some extent, a negative impact on the industry. As a lucrative export item, carpets were brought from the Turkmen territory to Russia, to Bukhara, and to Iran as far back as the late 19th century (*Obzor* 1913: 258-259, 278-279). Carpet-weaving was designated as one of the cornerstones of the region’s economy, according to the official pre-Soviet records (*Burdukov* 1913: 32).

Complex changes introduced to carpet weaving from Tsarist times contributed to the increase in carpet manufacturing during the Soviet era in which 8,200 square meters were produced in 1913, 5,400 square meters between 1924-1925, 20,400 square meters in 1940, 24,100 square meters in 1950, 50,300 square meters in 1960, 63,000 square meters in 1970, 803,000 square meters in 1980, 680,000 square meters in 1981 and 685,000 square meters in 1982 (*Atamedov et al.* 1984: 194).

Despite the fact that there is no statistical data concerning the number of carpets produced in private households, the figures above make us believe that the number of carpets increased all over Turkmenistan. This increase was linked to several factors including the industrial development and infrastructure transformations in the region. In the second half of the 19th century, aniline and then alizarine dyes were invented which helped to dye carpet yarns faster. The synthetic dyes reached Turkmenistan thanks to the Trans-Caspian railway, rebuilt in 1880. In 1925, the first wool treatment plant was established in Mary which helped to prepare wool and eliminate time wasted on wool treatment. As the Central Statistical Office of the Turkmen Soviet Socialist Republic reported, the specialized fabric in Mary provided dyed wool for carpet fabrics beginning in the 1930s (*Turkmenistan* 1967: 45). The huge irrigation construction of the Karakum Canal solved the problem of water shortages in Turkmenistan.<sup>11</sup> Thanks to the increase of irrigated land, flocks of sheep and wool production increased. Typically, only women from one family were involved in carpet-making under supervision of the most experienced craftswoman. Collective work at the carpet factories with participation of many carpet-weavers allowed carpets to be produced in a

shorter amount of time. Also, as some of those interviewed told me, and as early Soviet books on carpet production stated, Turkmen artisans manufactured carpets only during the winter in pre-Soviet times (*Sobolev* 1931: 9-10). However, during the Soviet era carpets were produced all year round in the carpet factories. The carpet factories were united under the umbrella of the company “Turkmenkover” in 1963 and in 1967 “Turkmenkover” consolidated ten carpet factories all over Turkmenistan.<sup>12</sup> Establishment of the industrial association “Turkmenkover” with its mechanical loom carpet production did not stop the home based production of carpets. Moreover, improvements to the living conditions of Turkmen families also allowed for year round carpet making.

In addition to positive aspects, industrial development had negative impacts as well. The development of irrigation was mainly an incentive for the expansion of areas under cotton cultivation. The cotton industry proved to be more productive, which affected handmade carpet production. As an early Soviet text states:

The best carpets in Central Asia and on the world market were considered old carpets made by Turkmen *Saryks* from Pende [...] Unfortunately, these carpets are almost gone now. Since the 1890s, when cotton-growing started to develop and gave great benefits to the population without much labor, carpet production in Pende almost stopped (*Sobolev* 1931: 24).

Other negative consequences of technological progress included unstable “fugitive” aniline dyes. Their use had an impact on carpet quality. Fortunately, more resistant alizarine dyes were later used. Now, carpet makers are returning to natural dyes. Soviet modernization brought about the emergence of machine carpets in the 1970s and 1980s (*Tayliev, Berner-Zarudin* 1975: 134). In 2016, the modern carpet industrial complex, Abadan Haly, was opened in Ashgabat. As official sources report, the factory produces machine-made rugs in large quantities and successfully exports them.<sup>13</sup>

Further detail concerning machine-made rugs is unnecessary for this article since they have little to do with traditional Turkmen carpetmaking. Ma-

<sup>12</sup> In 1929 “Turkmenkoversoiuz was established,” the Carpet Union of the Turkmen Soviet Republic, which was transformed in the industrial association “Turkmenkover” in 1963. In 1970 “Turkmenkover” included 12 carpet-making enterprises. In 2001, “Turkmenkover” became the state run industrial association “Turkmenhaly.”

<sup>13</sup> Prezident Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov priniial uchastie v otkrytii krupnogo kovrovogo kompleksa [President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov Attends the Opening of a Large Carpet Complex.] Accessed June 15, 2016. <http://www.turkmenistan.gov.tm/?id=10396>

<sup>10</sup> This is particularly in light of those carpets with portraits of Soviet symbols and portraits of Soviet leaders.

<sup>11</sup> The first line of the Karakum Canal was rebuilt in 1959 and the fourth and final line was completed in 1988.

chine-made rugs are made of synthetic fibers using only chemical colors and their designs are not limited to traditional ones, but rather vary from floral to abstract patterns. Machine-made rugs are not identified as Turkmen,<sup>14</sup> and they do not consolidate the members of Turkmen community. In this process, Turkmen male shepherds do not herd nor shear their sheep. Turkmen women artisans do not process raw sheep wool into yarn and do not transform yarn into precious carpets.

### Embroidery

Both handmade and machine-made needlework contain traditional motifs, decorate traditional gowns, and serve as one of the main identifiers of the Turkmen community. As Soviet ethnographer Galina Vasilyeva reported, *mashinchi* – an artisan who used a sewing machine for manufacturing traditional dresses – existed by the early 1950s.<sup>15</sup> Vasilyeva does not report on machine embroidery, and according to the sources and available photographs, machine-made embroidery began to spread widely starting in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>16</sup> Those interviewed for this article also said that the Podolsk sewing machine, imported from Russia, was in use at the time to make a simple stitching pattern known as a *gaýma*. There were two brands of sewing machines identified by Turkmen ar-

chart shows the rate of increase in the number of sewing machines from 1970 until 1989.

According to the chart, by 1980, every household had at least one sewing machine; however, no information was could be obtained concerning the availability of sewing machines before 1970. Sewing machines provided for the proliferation of machine-made and mixed (the combination of hand and machine) embroidery. Thus, depending on the needlework technique there are three types of embroidery: handmade, machine-made, and mixed. All of them include patterns and designs considered as Turkmen, and they could be identified as Yomut, Teke, Saryk, Salor or Chovdur just like the *göl* designs on Turkmen carpets. Embroidery decorates not only dresses, but also all elements of a Turkmen traditional gown. However, it is interesting to explore the evolution of the needlework by way of example. Specifically, this is the embroidered collar, or *yaka*, which decorates a woman's traditional dress. We will start with a photograph made by the Russian traveler and photographer Semen Prokudin-Gorskiy, who visited Turkmen lands in the early 1900s.

Fig. 2 presents a family from the Teke tribe in traditional Turkmen gowns. In the enlarged fragment of the photograph shown in Fig. 3, one can see that the women's dresses are decorated with a narrow strip of

### Availability of cultural and household goods of the long-term use for the population<sup>18</sup> For 100 households

Sewing machines	1970	1980	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989
	83	100	105	105	105	105	105

tisans and sellers as known as Podolsk – the PMZ and the Chaïka. Both machines were manufactured at the Podolsk Mechanical Plant in Russia.<sup>17</sup> The following

<sup>14</sup> According to the author's field material (AFM) in Ashgabat, Mary and Balkanabat, 2017-2018.

<sup>15</sup> Galina Vasilyeva. Field diary No.1, 1951. Central Asian ethnographic expedition of West Turkmen detachment, in: Archive of the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology of the Russian Academy of Sciences. F. 15, Op. 3. D. 520.

<sup>16</sup> According to the author's field material (AFM) collected in Ashgabat, May 2018.

<sup>17</sup> The Podolsk Mechanical Plant was the successor of the manufacturing company Singer, whose plant was established in Podolsk in 1900. In 1918, the Singer plant was nationalized by Soviet authorities. In 1924, the PMZ model of sewing machines (whose abbreviation stood for Podol'skii mehanicheskiï zavod [Podolsk Mechanical Factory] were manufactured at the Soviet plant in Podolsk. Since the 1960s, the factory has been producing the Chaïka sewing machine, which compared to the PMZ was more technically advanced.

<sup>18</sup> The chart, in part, is borrowed from the Statistical Yearbook The National Economy of the Turkmen SSR in 1989 (Ashgabat, 1990): 64.

embroidered collar (*yaka*). All dresses are made of *keten* or a homespun silk containing various shades of red, crimson, and purple with yellow strips. The similar fabric and cut suggest that all the women's gowns have the same narrow embroidered *yaka*. We will see later how the *yaka* became wider and longer.

Fig. 4 presents a Turkmen married woman. Besides traditional silver ornaments, her dress is decorated with a narrow *yaka*. Fig. 5 is that of a young girl in traditional clothing with an embroidered *yaka*. Her *yaka* is made with mostly white cotton threads due to the lack of colored silk threads. It is similar to the one from the previous photograph. Fig. 6 shows a young girl from the Mary region. She wears a *keten* dress with a large lavishly embroidered *yaka*. Embroidery is handmade on both the *yaka* and the headgear, or *tahya*. These photographs are important sources, as they inform us that Turkmen traditional gowns were still in everyday use during the Soviet period.

Figs. 7 and 8 present various *yaka* from the *Altyn Asyr* bazaar, both handmade and machine-made needlework. They include a medium width collar *yaka*, a

very large collar *yaka* and a large and long collar *yaka* which covers almost the entire dress.

The highly decorated pieces of embroidery were made with the help of a computerized embroidery machine. In approximately 2006, a Japanese brand called “Janome” entered the Turkmen market and revolutionized traditional embroidery in the country. Janome-made embroidery requires less time to make and, due to its quality, even competes with hand-made needlework. Hand-made needlework and Janome-made stitches look quite similar and fine at first glance. Janome and other similar sewing embroidery machines allow not only for a wide variety of shapes and designs, but also significantly speed up embroidery production and therefore multiply the quantity of needlework.

The photographs from the three different eras – the pre-revolutionary Imperial period, the Soviet period, and the post-independence period – illustrate the existence of traditional Turkmen dress of at least two centuries. The dress cut remains almost unchanged by retaining its length and long sleeves. The changes have affected the embroidered *yaka*, from the narrow strip at the beginning of the 20th century that evolved into a large embroidery piece which could cover almost the entire dress by the 21st century. In the next section, interviews are included from the bazaar’s public, including artisans, sellers, and customers. These narratives illuminate how artisanal and traditional practices shape the Turkmen “imagined community” and how technical advances help in disseminating these practices.

### The Turkmen “Imagined Community” through Knowledge, Practice, and Memory

In “imagined communities” individuals are connected by the knowledge, traditions, values, and memories they hold in common. Traditional artisanry such as carpet-weaving, embroidery, and silversmithing have been produced and purchased by Turkmen for centuries. *Altyn Asyr* is a public place where one may observe how members of the Turkmen ethnic community ascribe value to and share their common heritage.<sup>19</sup> Artisans and consumers of handicrafts from all over Turkmenistan meet at the bazaar. Among the country’s regions (*welayat*) which incorporate Ahal, Balkan, Mary, Dashoguz and Lebap) Ahal and Balkan are the most represented among sellers. Ahal artisans, or members of their families, dominate almost all handcrafted products; while Bal-

kan and Mary<sup>20</sup> artisans are mostly present in the carpet section.

The conversations and observations I conducted at the bazaar highlight the role of traditional handicrafts. Associated with them are key identifiers of a national community: knowledge, traditional practices, and shared memory.

I know the motifs that were used by my mother and grandmother. I also insert traditional Turkmen motifs into my embroidery, mostly for handmade items. The motif *goçak* protects against evil; you can see it on the tandoor.<sup>21</sup> Floral or geometric ornaments also have a protective force.

These words of Jahan,<sup>22</sup> who is an artisan offering her own embroidery, lives in Ahal *welayat* and is approximately 28 years old. Three times a week, Jahan comes to the bazaar to offer *yaka* she has embroidered along with the women in her family. Jahan’s assortment includes handmade and machine-made embroidery. When I bought a *yaka* of green, blue, red, and white, Jahan told me about the motifs used in the embroidery. Her words demonstrate that to wear a Turkmen dress is to continue a tradition since the same motifs, colors, and stitches remain popular. Jahan went into great detail showing a genuine knowledge of the designs. Other bazaar seller-artisans provided equally indepth descriptions of embroidery designs and Turkmen women’s dresses.

Ogultach lives in Balkan *welayat*. She is an artisan in her fifties who makes carpets. Carpet-making is a family tradition which she learned from her mother and grandmother and today she makes carpets with her daughters; although, her youngest, Khatija, does embroidery. Together with her artisan colleagues, who are also carpet-makers, Ogultach comes to *Altyn Asyr* on Saturdays. To illustrate her family’s long tradition of carpet-weaving, Ogultach showed me a wide variety of carpets and tapestries, from the biggest haly to the smallest handbag.

I have a large collection of carpets made in previous years by my grandmother and mother. They were very skillful and taught me many things. I did my first carpet with my mother. When my daughters grew up, I passed my skills on to them. My daughters will transfer this knowledge to my granddaughters. Turkmen need carpets and Turkmen women will always make them.

Ogultach showed me relatively old carpets dating back to the 1980s as well as more recent ones, all of

<sup>19</sup> Here the bazaar is equivalent to a museum, which allows for the “production and reproduction” of the Turkmen nation. See Calhoun 2016.

<sup>20</sup> There are also jewelers from Mary who offers their silver ornaments on the bazaar.

<sup>21</sup> A tandoor (Turkm. *tamdyr*) refers to a cylindrical clay oven used in cooking and baking in Turkmenistan and Central Asia more broadly.

<sup>22</sup> Names of the artisans and customers interviewed are changed.





Fig. 2. S. M. Prokudin-Gorsky. A Teke man with his family. Near Bairam-Ali. Early 1900.  
(Source: prokudin-gorskiy.ru)

which are handmade. Like my previous interlocutor, she knew motifs and could distinguish carpets with Teke, Beshir, and Yomud *göl* designs. My talk with Ogultach provides a summary of the conversations I had with Turkmen carpet-makers at the bazaar. All of them produce handmade carpets only; they offer their own carpets or carpets made by their relatives; some of them worked or they are still working for the State enterprises; and all of them demonstrate a knowledge of the history of carpet production and highlight the importance of continuity in carpet-making.

My next interviews focused on the technological changes in the production of handicrafts. The interviews shed light on the appearance of sewing embroidery machines in Turkmenistan and on their use in producing traditional embroidery. Maral lives in the village Bagir, located 18 km northwest of Ashgabat. She is a skilled embroiderer and brings her needlework to the bazaar with her. This included a white *çyrpy*, a traditionally stylized embroidered jacket, and embroidered galoshes for a bride, along with a

few *ýaka*. Maral explained to me that the *ýaka* were all handmade, the embroidery covering the galoshes were machine-made, and the other items were a combination of handmade and machine-made needlework. While Maral made handmade embroidery, her daughter Tavus produced needlework with an embroidery machine. The existence of embroidery practices within a family and the fact that these practices are splitting into handmade and machine-made styles, demonstrates both the transfer of handicraft knowledge from the older to the younger generation and the technological shift within a family from the same artisanal tradition.

I know many Turkmen designs, my mother taught me embroidery. My daughter Tavus helps me a lot with needlework, she uses a Japanese computerized machine “Janome.” With this machine she can produce one *ýaka* per day, while handmade stitches take several days. I prefer handmade stitches, it is too late for me to learn new things. Sometimes I use an ordinary sewing machine, a *Chaika*, for simple kinds of work, like stitching *kurte* or *koynek*.



Fig. 3. A fragment from the previous photo

As artisan-embroiderers informed me, machine-made needlework has been developing since the late 1960s in Turkmenistan.<sup>23</sup> At that time, the Russian sewing machine PMZ appeared, whereas computerized machines like Janome have been in use in Turkmenistan since 2006.<sup>24</sup> The latest data from the federal customs service of the Russian Federation states that the cost of sewing embroidery machines exported from Russia to Turkmenistan in 2018 went up to \$8,890 USD, while it was \$6,238 USD in 2016.<sup>25</sup> However, the data does not include what brands were exactly exported from Russia to Turkmenistan. Therefore, it is difficult to say whether the Russian

sewing machines are exported or include Japanese models as well.

Sewing and embroidery machines facilitated production, dissemination, and, in some measure, popularization of traditional clothing with embroidery. In similar fashion, distribution and popularization is now linked to the emergence of smartphones. The latter, for example, allow people to take photos of the embroidery, share this photo within or beyond the national community, and allow for the reproduction of such embroidery later. In the section below, some interviews about the role of smartphones in disseminating traditional practices will be included.

### Everyday Handicrafts and Turkmen Customers

In Turkmenistan, the average monthly wage in 2013 was 1,047 manat (299 USD). By 2016 it had risen to 1,381 (395 USD) and the following year to 1,509

<sup>23</sup> However, I saw in museum collections and on the photos dated to the 1950s, embroidery partly made with sewing machines.

<sup>24</sup> According to the AFM, collected in Ashkhabad in May 2018.

<sup>25</sup> The data is derived from the official website of the Federal customs service of the Russian Federation, Customs foreign trade statistics. Accessed February 14, 2019. [http://stat.customs.ru/apex/f?p=201:5:688505995357525::NO::P5\\_REQUEST:NEW](http://stat.customs.ru/apex/f?p=201:5:688505995357525::NO::P5_REQUEST:NEW)



**Fig. 4. A Turkmen beauty, 1930s.**  
Photo of Maks Penson.  
(Source: @Maxime Penson 2005-2021)



**Fig. 5. Photo of Hojabibi Annaeva,**  
Balkanabat region, 1970s.  
(Source: Author's family archive)

(431 USD).<sup>26</sup> According to the report on retail prices for products and services prepared by the State Statistics Committee of Turkmenistan, a *çörek* flatbread costs 1 manat, a dozen eggs 3 manat, a kilogram of fish 11 manat, a kilogram of sausage about 13 manat, and a kilogram of soft cheese 15 manat.<sup>27</sup> Prices for handicrafts range from 25-30 manat for a machine-made *ýaka* to 250-550 for a handmade one. The most expensive handmade carpets, those with a high knot density, range from 800 to 1,500 manat. Those with low or average density cost only 100-300 manat. A woman's handbag made from carpet material costs between 150 and 450 manat. The prices of handcrafted products are, thus, affordable for Turkmen.

As mentioned above, far more handicrafts are displayed on the weekend and during holidays. The bazaar attracts more potential buyers on those days which prompts more artisans to also come. Many of

these “weekend artisans” have a professional background that is not related to their bazaar activities. Five days a week they work as accountants or clerks, but once or twice a week they come to the *Altyn Asyr* with their handicrafts. These non-professional sellers also offer products made by their relatives. During working hours at the bazaar, they sometimes leave their stalls to purchase items offered by other sellers. Those who sell embroidery may purchase a gown or other hand-crafted items, and vice versa. Women constitute the majority of artisans and sellers in the bazaar, producing almost all handicrafts except jewelry. But it would be wrong to say that men are excluded from artisanal practices. They are engaged in herding flocks of sheep and camels, whose wool is necessary to produce carpets, tapestries, and felt rugs. Men also make silver ornaments and wooden handicrafts.

I talked to some Turkmen who visited the bazaar to purchase handcrafted items. My interviewees, Batyr and Jeren, were a married couple. Both are working professionals. While Batyr was choosing a carpet, Jeren explained to me how handmade carpets preserve Turkmen traditions:

We are here to purchase a carpet, as we just moved into a new apartment. Of course, this will be a large, handmade

<sup>26</sup> According to the official exchange rate of the Central Bank of Turkmenistan. Accessed January 24, 2019. [http://www.cbt.tm/kurs/kurs\\_today\\_en.html](http://www.cbt.tm/kurs/kurs_today_en.html).

<sup>27</sup> State Statistics Committee of Turkmenistan, “2017-njy ýylyň noýabr aýy ü.in “Türkmenistan boýun.a bölek satuw söwdasynda harytlaryň we hyzmatlaryň ortaça bazar nyrlary barada maglumat.” Accessed January 24, 2019. [http://www.stat.gov.tm/netcat\\_files/70/125/h\\_ff40da074638fab702d2e6bf8ebd7df](http://www.stat.gov.tm/netcat_files/70/125/h_ff40da074638fab702d2e6bf8ebd7df).



**Fig. 6. A daughter of Oguljan Bekaraeva, late 1950-early 1960s. (Source: Archive of the IEA RAS. Field diaries of Galina Vasilyeva)**

Turkmen carpet. This is our tradition, to make carpets, to buy, and to give them as gifts for a special, important occasion. Also, I will purchase a *ýaka* for a new dress. I can embroider myself, but I don't have time for this now because of my work.

Two young girls, Shemshat and Gozel, came to the bazaar to buy some fabric and *ýaka* for new clothing. They were both wearing long dresses with embroidered collar-*ýaka*. As Gozel told me:

Our grandmothers and our mothers wore traditional dresses, and we do the same because this is our tradition. Turkmen dresses are elegant and utilitarian. Traditional dresses could be worn for any occasion – at work, at studies, or for a *toý* [special festive event]. We are looking for handmade *ýaka* to order the dresses for special events and machine-made *ýaka* for everyday dresses.

Meanwhile, Shemshat photographed some *ýaka* with her smartphone and sent them via the social media app, IMO.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>28</sup> IMO is the only available social media application in Turkmenistan. The existence of IMO and the presence of smartphones is a result of government policy and, in this context, are used to distribute artisanal production on the initiative of ordinary citizens.

I send them to my sister and to my seamstress. They will tell me if the *ýaka* suits the chosen fabric. They will also advise me as to an appropriate and trendy cut. Of course, this will be a long traditional dress, but I would like to complement it with some fashionable details.

These conversations illustrate that Gozel and Shemshat considered both types of *ýaka* embroidery as convenient for traditional clothing. Such an opinion is very common among other Turkmen women who are customers of the *Altyn Asyr* bazaar. The first mention of using smartphones and a social media app indicates the interactive process between producers and customers. When customers make photos of hand-crafted items and disseminate them among their own circle of friends, relatives, and craftsmen; this leads to artisanal reproduction of embroidered items from the Balkan region by artisans from the Ahal region and vice versa. Thus, social media and smartphones directly impact artisanal production and consumption. The interplay between social media and handicrafts diffuse artisanal practices and traditional clothing in Turkmenistan as well as contributes to the interplay between artisanal production and domestic demand all over the country. The following interview from Gulya, whom I met at the bazaar, argued in favor of this interplay. I met Gulya, as she was taking photos of *ýaka*. As she explained to me...

I do embroider *ýaka* for myself, and sometimes I would like to find something new. So, I see all the *ýaka* represented in the bazaar and I take photos of them. Of course, I will purchase one and with my photos I could later order some of them. I could show the photos to an artisan from a sewing atelier, and she could make me a similar *ýaka*.

A conversation with Bahar, an atelier owner, emphasizes the previous conversations:

I have worked Turkmen handicraft production for almost 40 years. My artisan colleagues produce a big variety of handicrafts and we have a large base of customers. Turkmen customers purchase traditional gowns, large carpets, and embroidered items. Foreign visitors prefer small souvenirs, occasionally small carpets. My loyal clients have my phone number, and they send me their requests any time via IMO. I have sent Turkmen handicrafts all over the world.

Like my previous interviewees, Bahar relied on smartphone photography and social media, specifically the IMO app, to exchange photos of embroidery and carpets. The exchange of photos helps in visualizing and remembering artisanal practices, in recreating the new handcrafted items, and in disseminating them both within and beyond Turkmenistan.



Fig. 7. Photographs of various ýaka from “Altyn Asyr.” (Source: Author’s photo, October 2017)

As Bahar mentioned, foreign visitors were also interested in Turkmen artisanry. I met western and Russian visitors in the bazaar. Those who worked and lived in Turkmenistan bought carpets and embroidery, foreign tourists preferred small souvenirs that could easily fit in their luggage. The bazaar demonstrates that the majority of Turkmen handicrafts – gowns, embroidery, and carpets are aimed at the local residents and bought by them. International visitors consider handicrafts as identifiers of the Turkmen national community and Turkmenistan. In the eyes of foreign travelers, sophisticated carpets, embroidery, and clothing serve as a means of branding the nation of Turkmenistan, which seems to have begun several centuries ago with the first woolen carpets taken out of the Turkmen region and brought to Russia and countries of the West.

#### Artisans vs. Consumers

My interviewees – Batyr and Jeren, Shemshat and Gozel, Ogultach, Bahar, Maral, and Jahan, are typical representatives of the public found at the bazaar. They

wear clothing embroidered themselves or by their compatriots; their houses and apartments are decorated by carpets made themselves or bought at the *Altyn Asyr* bazaar. On a daily basis, they produce and they purchase. They sell and buy local hand-crafted products. The conversations with artisans – carpet-makers and embroiderers, sellers and customers, emphasized the role of traditional handicrafts in an “imagined community.” This includes their artisanal knowledge and the transfer of traditional know-how from the older to younger generations as well as their shared memory about artisanal practices and the value of handicrafts in daily life. The community at the bazaar – artisans, sellers, and customers – identify carpets, embroidery and clothing as Turkmen. These artisanal items are manufactured by the actual merchants at the bazaar or by their compatriots. They have no doubt that handicrafts display the core elements of Turkmen culture and tradition.

Despite researchers noting the exceptional role of women in the production of carpets, embroideries, and clothing (*Edgar* 2006), men are also involved in artisanal practices. The wool for carpets and cloth-



Fig. 8. Photographs of various *ýaka* from “Altyn Asyr.” (Source: Author’s photo, May 2018)

ing fabrics comes from sheep and camels, which are grazed by men.<sup>29</sup> As a combined process that includes preparation of raw materials and production of the final product; carpet weaving is not an embodiment of gender inequality. Taken together, artisanry unites the Turkmen community as every member of this community participates to some extent in manufacturing and consuming artisanal products. A visit to the bazaar demonstrated that women together with men are engaged in the sale of carpets.

Carpets, embroidery, and traditional gowns offered at the *Altyn Asyr* bazaar demonstrate the widespread demand for and consumption of handicrafts. They are a mandatory part of everyday life and serve as identifiers for members of Turkmen society. They also show that sewing embroidery machines or new approaches to carpet-making stimulates an increase in production of traditional handicrafts. Through the combination of new technologies, smartphones, and

the social media app IMO; clothing items and carpets are distributed within the Turkmen national community and all over the world. Turkmen nationhood is “flagged”<sup>30</sup> by artisanal practices and traditional handicrafts within and beyond Turkmenistan. The interaction between artisan-sellers and artisan-customers supports and revives Turkmen artisanal practices and traditions. To paraphrase Michael Billig: In routine and everyday practices, especially those related to traditional artisanry and handicrafts, the idea of nationhood is regularly flagged. Through such flagging, the Turkmen nation is reproduced, with their citizenry being unmindfully reminded of their national identity.<sup>31</sup>

Billig’s conclusion departs from Anderson’s concept of “imagined community,” which suggests an

<sup>29</sup> I borrowed the term “flagged” from Billig 1995: 154.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid: “In routine practices and everyday discourses, especially those in the mass media, the idea of nationhood is regularly flagged. Even the daily weather forecast can do this. Through such flagging, established nations are reproduced as nations, with their citizenry being unmindfully reminded of their national identity.”

<sup>29</sup> It should also be noted that in jewelry production, traditionally only men are involved.

everyday identification of the individual with the ethnic community. Artisanal items are consumed by ordinary citizens and political elites. The latter employ Turkmen cultural heritage and handicrafts, such as carpets, in official narratives. Carpet göl are represented on the national flag. The Day of the Carpet has been celebrated on the last Sunday in May every year since 1992. The State Carpet Museum in Ashgabat, which has hundreds of examples of Turkmen carpets, opened in 1993. Permanent exhibitions of Turkmen artisanry include carpets, embroidery, jewelry, and garments are visible in state museums across the country. The traditional art of Turkmen carpet-making is included in the UNESCO list of intangible heritage by the efforts of the National Commission of Turkmenistan for UNESCO.<sup>32</sup> The very existence of the state bazaar *Altyn Asyr* would have been impossible without traditional Turkmen handicrafts created and consumed by ordinary citizens. The national narrative maintained by Turkmen citizen-artisans is, therefore, reflected in the country's official narrative.

### Conclusion: Artisanry and Plebiscite for the Turkmen Nation

This article focused on interviews of artisans and consumers of traditional handicrafts in Turkmenistan. The case is applicable, to a greater or lesser degree, to every Central Asian country with their former or reinvented artisanal traditions. I have argued against the approach that national narratives are determined by the State authorities only. By relying on field research related to Turkmen artisanal practices within and beyond the *Altyn Asyr* bazaar, I have presented an alternative picture of “people-guided” narratives that interact with “state-guided” narratives and feed an “imagined community.” People-guided and state-guided narratives overlap the meaning of artisanal practices and handicrafts in everyday life. Every individual who makes a Turkmen wool carpet or wears an embroidered *tahýa* or *ýaka* could imagine his/her countryman or countrywoman doing or appreciating the same. The main actors of people-guided narratives are the Turkmen artisans and their fellow citizen-customers. Artisanal practices and traditions, who make up an integral part of everyday life, imagine, reconstruct, and reinvent the Turkmen nation on both internal and external levels that include local Turkmen and foreign international audiences. Thus, they contribute to both nation building and nation branding.

<sup>32</sup> Traditional Turkmen Carpet Making Art in Turkmenistan. <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/traditional-turkmen-carpet-making-art-in-turkmenistan-01486>

Turkmen traditional artisanry has existed for centuries. Historical eras have influenced Turkmen carpets, gowns, and embroidery development; while technological progress has brought about certain changes in handicraft practices. Some of these changes were demonstrated in the examples of a traditional *ýaka* collar. This visual evidence demonstrates its transformations from handmade to machine-made embroidery and even the existence of both. Technological advances acquired during Soviet times influenced carpet weaving and other artisanal practices. This influence was not always positive. Modern technologies such as smartphones and social networks accompany the boom of traditional handicrafts and even stimulated artisanry in Turkmenistan.

Today, Turkmen artisanry is identified and known within and beyond Turkmenistan. Artisans and their masterpieces nurture and foster the Turkmen imagined community. As long as the “tree of life” is an essential embroidery motif on a *çyrpy* and the *çyrpy* is an essential element of the marriage ceremony, handicrafts will exist and will continue to epitomize the “daily plebiscite” (*Renan* 1882) for Turkmen artisanry and the Turkmen nation.

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