Twentieth-Century Myth-Making: Persian Tribal Rugs
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The Western fascination with oriental carpets is apparently inexhaustible, nourished to a great extent by a mythology which revolves around the twin concept of 'origin' and 'authenticity' of the object. Aesthetic value is accordingly conferred by the identification of tribal and/or regional production, with 'the interpretation of genuineness and our desire for it' often relating to the supposed individuality of the piece, its function and the reading (i.e. symbolism) of its decorative composition and motif. Design, colour and structural considerations play only a minor role. This phenomenon has been recognized and examined by Brian Spooner in the context of Turcoman rug-collecting and recently reviewed by Pennina Barnett, with reference to retail marketing in the United Kingdom. This article explores whether there are parallels in modern studies of Persian 'tribal' carpets.

The notion of labelling carpets and rugs according to their provenance rather than, say, their technical structure, or by the main colour, design motif or basic pattern composition has a long history in the West. Inventories of the Tudor king, Henry VIII, in the mid-sixteenth century record some 400 carpets of 'Turkey making' in his possessions; it is assumed that these were of Anatolian production of the colouring and pattern composition now classified as 'Holbein' and 'Lotto', so called because the artists featured such rugs in their paintings. But whereas the emphasis of the pre-industrialized Western society focused on the exotic character, the design and colouring and the technical superiority of such oriental textiles (including velvets, silks and printed cottons), the interest from the second half of the nineteenth century has tended to centre on the element of handwork, the identification of a special function and the relationship of the piece to a 'primitive' society. In order to gauge aesthetic value it is deemed necessary to assign provenance, a regional and thus social identity. However, such provenancing in late nineteenth-century museum records and publications had little factual basis but reflected contemporary critical opinion that all 'quality' carpets and rugs (i.e. those with curvilinear design motifs, arranged on a concealed grid arrangement in the field) were Persian (and thus Aryan) in origin, while more 'barbaric' examples (i.e. with stylized motifs and visual grid) were the products of the Turkish Ottoman Empire and Turkic Central Asia: the use of geometric ornamentation prevails among the lower Turanian races, and floral ornamentation among the high Aryans . . . It is not meant that simple geometrical patterns . . . are unequivocal badges of race; all that is meant is that certain races have never yet advanced beyond them.

This extract by the renowned critic of Indian art and crafts, George Birdwood, prefaces one of the earliest studies on oriental carpets by Vincent Robinson. Throughout the whole text reference is made to 'tribal' carpet-making, but most of the...
twelve specimens illustrated would now be firmly
classified as ‘court’ manufacture. The history of
carpets and associated items (e.g. spindle bags,
saddle cloths, etc.). Such relatively small homo-
geneous, distinct social groupings with identifi-
able organizational structure have continued to
attract academics. Indeed interest in such groups
across the Middle East and Central Asia seems to
have increased in direct proportion to the steady
reduction in numbers of those involved in and
committed to migratory life.9 The Qashqa’i tribal
confederation of western Iran, for example, has
been the subject of several studies, including a
mass-media TV programme concerning its rugs
[1].10

The Wanderings of a Proud People

In her analysis of a 1990 Liberty’s carpet adver-
tisement, Barnett noted that an image of a Kalash-
nikov-toting Afghan was accompanied by the
caption explaining that the weave of the Afghan
carpet is available for purchase not only ‘evokes the
collective unconscious’ but also ‘mirrors a rough,
wild, solitary and heroic existence’.11 This notion
of freedom-loving individual battling against con-
straints imposed by government, society and a
sedentary life is barely concealed in ‘tribal’ carpet
literature, past and present. In the 1976 (selling)
exhibition catalogue Rugs of the Wandering Balu-
chi,12 several commentaries drew attention to the
reported ‘ferocity’ of these nomads; the very term
‘wandering’ implies an individual spontaneous
decision, without planning and direction. As
George O’Bannon wrote three years later:

The term [nomad] will often evoke images of camels,
deserts, and tents; of brave men on horseback, turbans
flying in the wind, riding out to raid . . . of a small
band of families . . . constantly on the move with
herds of sheep and goats in a hot, dry and inhospita-
ble environment. This is the least prevalent form of
nomadism and is rarely practised by rug weaving
groups.13

Certainly that was the imagery presented in the
Woven Gardens film, written and narrated by
David Attenborough. The reality of the Qashqa’i
migratory cycle has been starkly recorded by
Beck.14 Longer than some migration cycles, it is
far from endless or ‘wandering’, as suggested by
Attenborough,15 and careful planning is involved.
Five summer months are spent in the Zagros hills
in north-west Iran and then in October the
families make their month-long journey south to
winter pastures around Shiraz in Fars province,
until the grass gives out in March.

As will be explored below, settled village/
urban life has minimal interest to carpet commen-
tators, yet as early as 1953 it was known that 44%
of Persian rugs in south-west Iran were produced
in villages16 and presumably, with the increasing
number of nomadic families opting for sedentary
life, this percentage has grown. Instead the ‘noble’
life of the nomad is extolled. But not all tribal
groups: in his informative study of contemporary
Iranian carpet production in the early 1950s
Edwards calculated that the Khamseh confedera-
tion produced almost three times as much as the
Qashqa’i, yet the former has received sparse
attention. This has nothing to do with the techni-
cal and aesthetic quality of the weaving, but more
to do with public perception; as Allegrove wrote:

Over the last five years [i.e. 1973–8] Qashqa’i has
become the fashionable name for rugs and has often
replaced the old dealers’ term ‘Shiraz’ carpet. The
term ‘Khamseh’ in carpet nomenclature is still almost
a dirty word and very few pieces are attributed to
them.17

Exactly why Khamseh weaving is so considered
appears to date from Edwards’s 1953 study. His
appraisal was based not so much on design
aesthetics as on the tribe itself. The reader is told
that ‘The Qashqa’i are physically the most attrac-
tive’ of the tribes in the region, that they are

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devout but not fanatical Shi’i Muslims, monoga-
mous and with a reputation for honesty, and
house- (rather, tent-) proud:

It is an almost invariable rule in Persia that the clean-
est, the most orderly and the most prosperous weav-
ing tribe or village produces the best rugs... Thus
the Qashqa’i—who are the most advanced of the
tribes of Fars [south-west Iran]—are also the best wea-
ers of the province.18

The women take care in their rugs, preferring
‘clear and cheerful colours; for their rugs are
much less sombre than those of the Khamseh.’
The physical attributes of the Khamseh are not
described; it was enough to note that it was ‘an
artificial confederation’ with its sub-tribes speak-
ing various languages, whereas the Qashqa’i was
an ethnic, linguistic, cultural entity. The notion of
impurity is strengthened by comments that the
Khamseh were ‘bad cultivators’, living ‘in poverty
and squalor’, making carpets as ‘a purely com-
mercial operation’ unlike the Qashqa’i. Their
output is prodigious but ‘poor’, an assessment
apparently based not only on quantity, but also

1 A ‘Qashqa’i’ kilim rug with typical dia-
mond medallion composition, in both vege-
table and artificial dyes, purchased as a
‘Shirazi’ kilim in 1972 by the author. Similar
‘hooked’ ornaments and reciprocal trefoil
borders are also found in weavings classified
as Caucasian.
technique (use of single wefts rather than Qashqa’i double wefts; differences in knots, selvages, and colour ('rather dark in colour'). By the late 1970s, such technical distinctions were considered untenable but the supremacy of the Qashqa’i and their weaving remained unchallenged.

So we have the ‘forceful’ (WG) Qashqa’i woman ‘striding . . . aristocratically’ (WG), through the Shiraz bazaar, seemingly untouched by and uninvolved in the noise and hassle of urban life. Such women ‘rejoice in colour and delight in display’ (WG), with ‘little regard to the decorous conventions’ (WG) of their urban sisters wrapped in the all-enveloping, sombre-coloured chador cloak [2]. This non-conformity to urban convention is, it is implied, a measure of the ‘proud, independent’ (WG) spirit of these ‘mysterious and ferocious’ (WG) people, in contrast to the perceived image of drab, veiled and thus subservient urban women. The message is that such nomads owe nothing to the town; they remain untouched by corruption which in the Western mind was and is an inevitable consequence of industrialized society and the capitalist system.

Even recent political history of the Qashqa’i is conveyed in the Woven Gardens film in terms of ‘freedom fighter’, the ‘pure’ refusing to be corrupted by the village/urban ‘impure’. The hostility voiced by the rest of (Iranian) society is understood to be disapproval of the establishment (town-dwellers) towards those able to reject or disregard its regulations (nomads). Both publications linked to the programme carry a more reasoned argument, describing disagreements over property and communal ownership, state and individual responsibility in matters of national and local security, health and education, taxation and arms and drugs smuggling. Tension has increased particularly over grazing and water rights with official land redistribution programmes, especially those of the 1960s, which resulted in peasant farmers being assigned small

2 Members of the Qashqa’i tribal confederation, 1976. The men were forced to wear European rather than ‘traditional’ dress under the Dress Reform Laws of Reza Shah; the felt cap was introduced in the 1940s

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parcels of land barely large enough to sustain the family. So the protection of boundaries and water ownership has often meant the difference between life and starvation of the peasant family.23

A World Apart?

In fact the relationship between the nomadic people and the settled population has always been close, with the former adopting and adapting the urban and rural technologies as required. The commercial links between such pastoralist families and urban communities are many and varied. In the 1990s, as since the 1940s, the Shirazi bazaar supplies the Qashqa‘i male with his distinctive ‘traditional’ felt cap [2],24 made by fullers and hatters, and his womenfolk with their full, gathered skirts worn one on top of the other [3]. Not only are these clothes bought ready-made but tent and pack-animal items, too. This is no isolated occurrence; in Damascus and Aleppo, Syria for instance, there are small workshops off the main bazaar avenues weaving goat-hair loom widths for making up into the bedouin tent, while others make the tent tension-bands, saddles, etc.25

However, the separation and isolation of the nomads from their village and urban counterparts are given emphasis both in the literature and in the Attenborough film through the examination of examples of their individual artistic expression—in other words, carpets in the bazaar. Or to be more accurate, through the rejection of one for the other. Those identified as ‘town’ (WG) or village production are tossed aside in preference for the ‘tribal (encampment)’ (WG) rugs: quality is primarily assessed on grounds of its origin and ‘authenticity’, rather than on aesthetic criteria.

Identifying a Qashqa‘i Rug

Most carpet commentators admit that the distinction between tribal encampment, village and urban work is fraught with difficulties, let alone which tribe made what:

Edwards [c.1953] . . . records ‘daily wrangles in the Shiraz bazaar between experts as to whether a rug was woven by this tribe or village or that’.

In fact the situation is every bit as confused as he implies . . . The Bolvardi, for instance, are now settled . . . and only small numbers of them are to be found still among the Amuleh, Darrehshuri and Keshuli Bozorg of the Qashqa‘i. Their carpets, however, might be described as one of the most comprehensive vocabularies of the Qashqa‘i motifs ever assembled.

Understandably, village and, by implication, commercial production has borrowed heavily from tribal designs which, in any case, are difficult to define.26

For Attenborough, there is no real problem: the quality speaks for itself. But for him, it is a quality based on the relationship of the weaver to her work. The Qashqa‘i women select with ‘care and affection’ (WG) the wool direct from the flock, while the dye stuffs are ‘gathered from the mountains [during their wanderings]’ (WG); their availability in the bazaar and the sale of wool to merchants are not mentioned.27 Thus the personal selection, the proximity to ‘nature’ and locality of origin are seen as essential in both guaranteeing the provenance and authenticity of the woven carpet. It is these elements, it is implied, which directly contribute to the woman-weaver achieving individuality and authenticity in design and colouring in her work; it is the ‘natural’ origin of the dye colours which vouchsafe the tones ‘harmoniz[ing] miraculously one with the other’ (WG). The use of artificial dye-stuffs is dismissed as ‘modern’ (WG), although such colourants had been on sale and employed in carpet manufacture in 1970s Iran for over ninety years. The notion that they are ‘modern’, ‘manufactured’ (WG), and by inference non-authentic, a corrupting, polluting product of industrialization, is frequently found in carpet commentaries, as is the suggestion that production for sale corrupts the aesthetic. Emphasis is placed on the weaver producing each piece for a distinct special, personal reason:

Is it the quality of wholesome freshness, the unspoiled honesty of the ingredients and the individual care in
making something intended for personal use that appeals so much to us?\textsuperscript{28}

Every knot in the carpets is ‘individually tied’ (WG), and so the high density of knots to the square inch is understood by the viewer to illustrate the continued commitment of the maker. All these elements, it is suggested, not only ensure authenticity but also guarantee in some mysterious way an enhanced aesthetic quality to the finished rug. The tribal life itself also contributes to this guarantee:

much that passes for tribal weaving has been made by weavers no longer constrained by the traditions and demands of tribal life.\textsuperscript{29}

It is argued that, without such input, the visual impact would inevitably be less than harmonious.

3 The main fabric section of Shiraz bazaar, 1996. On sale (top, centre right) are ready-made skirts of the type worn by tribal women such as the Qashqa’i. Townswomen in chadors are in the foreground.
regardless of the pattern composition, colouring and actual making process.

The Guardian of Tradition

In carpet publications printed before the 1970s, the guardian of tradition, both of carpet technique and pattern, was the tribe itself. In the Attenborough film and concurrent and consequent publications, the women of the tribe are held as the guardians and the transmitters of 'authenticity'.

Noting that a young Qashqa’i girl child receives no formal instruction and thus retaining her mental virginity and integrity, Attenborough states that ‘slowly through her fingers [she, while weaving] will absorb the patterns which are her tribal birthright’ (WG), that is the patterns of her family within the Qashqa’i confederation—‘patterns which are so distinctive that they can belong to no other tribe’ (WG). It is these skills that are a bride’s ‘invisible gift—the skills of carpet knotting and the knowledge of her family’s traditional patterns’ (WG) to her new husband and his family. Yet while stressing this message of purer, more authentic (and so ‘better’) than those of a village or urban weaver, who may have received schooling or committed their patterns to paper, but who have anyway deserted the encampment:

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There for the Reading

Each tribe, we have been told, has its ‘own patterns’ (WG)—in the Attenborough film a comparison is made between Scottish tartan and clan—‘their own unique tribal possession, so that they can look at a rug and know not only which group but often which family produced it.’ Although, as noted above, commentators admit the difficulty distinguishing with any great accuracy the work of individual tribes, this desire to assign significance—be it heraldic,
cosmological, magical—to individual motifs is apparent throughout publications of Islamic ‘tribal’ carpet studies.  

Who is to unlock the door to all this symbolism? The weavers themselves cannot provide the key. Field studies have shown that makers within a precise grouping and location rarely assign common, clear symbolic meaning or a common name to a motif. As Spooner notes in connection with Turkomen rugs:

The original meanings of the decorative elements have been largely forgotten by the people who weave them (who probably anyway think about their work in terms that would not provide answers to Western queries about meaning) and must be reconstructed by Western specialists in order to rationalise their need for authenticity.

As early as 1908, carpet commentators felt the responsibility lay with themselves:

It often happens that detailed descriptions concerned with technical questions . . . completely fail to consider the historical and ethnographical aspects and give the carpets very nondescript names such as ‘a nomadic carpet from Central Asia’. If such negligence is allowed in the future, these witnesses of history will vanish and it will be impossible to use their designs to throw light on tribal history, or the interchanging influences of different cultures . . . it is possible that by studying very carefully all the known facts, with the aid of a second Champolion [destructor of the Rosetta stone], we may be able to establish the relationship between what we nowadays think to be ornament, and that which may well be hieroglyphics. Then, perhaps, we shall be able to read the patterns of a tent band like the Egyptologists read the inscriptions on monuments.

To persuade the observer that the commentator may hold the key, it is important to establish not only the credentials of the commentator, but also the relationship of the tribe concerned to society as a whole. This is often achieved by referring to recognised markers, such as well-known archaeological sites and Renaissance paintings. The inference to be drawn is that the commentator and observer are perhaps best attuned to recognize, recall and appreciate both the aesthetic quality of the rugs and the nuances of the motifs, as the maker has forgotten (thus implying former knowledge) such links. Hence in the Woven Gardens film, Renaissance paintings which include depictions of Anatolian carpets in the composition (e.g. Crivelli’s Annunciation, Holbein’s French Ambassadors at the English Court) are shown while Attenborough speculates whether such ‘tribal rugs may well be the first example of exotic art to be appreciated by the West’ (WG).

By juxtaposing the Qashqa’i on migration with the ruins of the Persepolis palace complex (destroyed by Alexander the Great in 330 BC), the rock-cut tombs of the Achaemenian emperors and the third to fifth century AD rock-reliefs recording the military victories of the Sasanian shahs over the Roman emperors, the tribe has been assigned aristocratic forebears. The implication is that unknowingly, they are the direct legitimate inheritors of former Iranian imperial greatness.

The motifs themselves are often presented as part of a greater Asiatic ancestry. Rather than exploring whether certain design compositions were transmitted from court atelier work, through to urban carpet production and possibly thence into tribal work, the idea of a common cultural origin is preferred. It is presented as an uninterrupted transmission of tradition, dating back to the famous Pazyryk carpet (c.fifth century BC, Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg) across the centuries and thousands of kilometres by the migrations of Turkic nomadic people from the Asiatic steppes. All such carpet patternings have their roots in the Turkic people of central Asia, stretching from Western Anatolia (the ‘Bergama star’ motif) into the Caucasus (the ‘hooked’ or ‘ram-horn’ outline), to the borders of China (the ‘Turkoman göl’).

The danger in presuming that all patterns and compositions are essentially inherited is succinctly revealed by Beck in her short description of Khanum (of the Qermezi clan) finishing a pile carpet:

the design of which she had adapted from a small bag she had borrowed years earlier from a Qashqa’i woman of another tribe [i.e. another clan]. She had used its designs for blanket containers and had created a variation of the pattern for her new carpet.

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Conclusion

In his analysis of an extract from F. R. Martin’s *A History of Oriental Carpets before 1800*, relating to Kirman carpets, Spooner has noted that [Martin’s] statement implies that authenticity is considered (1) to be a measure of quality; (2) to require special knowledge to recognize; (3) to reside not in the carpet itself but in the relationship between carpet and weaver; and (4) likely to become rarer as time goes by.

It is interesting to note how closely various tribal carpets publications and the *Woven Gardens* TV programme conform to this analysis. We have seen how aesthetic quality 1) has been presumed once the matter of authenticity is raised: a rug woven in the encampment is better than one produced by a village or town weaver; 2) was suggested by references to ancient history, classic works of European Renaissance art (Crivelli, Holbein) and the ignorance of the tribespeople concerning ‘reading’ of motifs; 3) was implicit, for instance, in the notion that a single weaver would automatically produce a more ‘authentic’ (and thus a ‘better’) rug than that woven by a team, and lastly we have seen that 4) the recording of

4 A village kilim-weaver in a workshop near Soganli, central Anatolia, 1991. The cartoon features well-known carpet motifs from the fifth century BC (Pazyryk ‘Turkic’ carpet) and thirteenth century AD (Seljuk ‘Turkic’ rugs) As the individual motifs are ‘authentic’ historically and ethnically speaking, is the rug to be considered as such or as a pastiche?
patterns and training programmes by the Tribal school, the use of 'modern dyes', etc. will inevitably mean a diminishment in authenticity.

Western commentators typically perceive such makers as being duty-bound to preserve (as if carved in stone) and maintain the craft as a record of skill, technique and process in case it is lost. However, it is expected by Western commentators and critics that 'our' makers extend their creative horizons. Innovative ideas about process, technique and visual expression should be explored and established perceptions concerning such issues challenged. Not so for non-Western cultures. In order that there is no hesitation in recognizing the 'authenticity' of this tradition, the finished artefact should visually conform to the established convention rather than reflect any changes, major or minor, in that society and culture, which would perhaps confuse the issue. In the West repetition in shape, pattern-making, etc. is associated with industrialization, mass-production and automation, but in the context of non-industrial rural and tribal societies it is taken to mean the continued integrity of a historic tradition and indeed of an original symbolic meaning. Makers in a Western society employing non-European pattern motifs will be understood to be inspired by the ideas, philosophies and symbolisms of other cultures, but the non-European makers will be seen as betraying tradition and by providing education for their children, betraying their integrity.

Such 'traditional' societies are perceived as intrinsically static, so usefully functioning as bench-marks against which the progress of the West can be fully appreciated. At the same time they are considered weak enough to succumb to external contamination so their makers should continue to make the 'traditional' objects to uphold and safeguard that culture, content to serve society in this fashion. Such makers, it is assumed, will not aim for critical acclaim nor great financial reward, unlike the Western maker whose work should reflect contemporary concerns of our sophisticated, urban society, be they artistic, cultural, political, etc.

It is an unenviable position, to be governed by a perception of authenticity not of their making. As the following comment relating to the DOBAG carpet project in Anatolia shows, the weavers of 'authentic' carpets are being tied down by many different knots by their Western critics:

[how does one build] on the existing pool of designs in their present form without altering them, fossilising them or trying to turn the clock back . . . [and] resisting the temptation to 'improve' the designs in the light of a sophisticated knowledge of old carpets.49

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Notes
1 This article originates from an analysis of the TV film Woven Gardens, written and narrated by David Attenborough, and transmitted on BBC2 within the Tribal Eye series during the World of Islam Festival (UK), 1976.
3 Ibid.
7 The writer is presently researching into Western perceptions in the nineteenth century of the oriental carpet.
8 David Sylvester, 'On Western attitudes to Eastern carpets', Islamic Carpets from the Collection of Joseph V. McMullan, Arts Council exhibition catalogue, 1972, pp. 4-18, contains a useful summary of scholarly collecting.
9 John Foran, Fragile Resistance: Social Transformation in Iran from 1500 to the Revolution, Westview, 1993, p. 227 estimates that in Iran, in 1900, 20.9% of the population was urban, 25.1% tribal/nomad pastoralists and 54% the peasantry; in 1940 it was 22%, 6.9% and 71.7% respectively. A 1972 Iranian government report assessed that by 1972 about a third of the 141,000-strong Qashqa'i tribal confederation had opted for sedentary life in villages; in the 1950s the confederation had numbered 400,000 people. Whitworth Art Gallery, The Qashqa'i of Iran, exhibition catalogue, Manchester, 1976, p. 12; Lois Beck,

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For details see Beck, op. cit. and Whitworth Art Gallery, op. cit. The Whitworth touring exhibition and catalogue were organized in connection with the TV film Woven Gardens.

Barnett, op. cit., p. 20.

Published by David Black Oriental Carpets, 1976; see pp. 6,15, 22–3.


Beck, op. cit.

Quotation from a Woven Gardens TV transcript; all subsequent quotations from this source are followed by (WG).


Edwards, op. cit., p. 286.

Ibid., pp. 284–90.

The phrase ‘industrialized society’ has little relevance in the Iranian context; as late as 1977 (Foran, op. cit., p.333), about 70% of the workforce were in workshops employing less than ten people, and incidentally carpet manufacture represented 35% of the total ‘industrial’ output. Current figures are not available but the economic basis has not changed significantly since the establishment of the Islamic republic. By the term ‘capitalist system’ I am deliberately juxtaposing the ideal of a pre-industrial society whose economy is based on a bartering rather than monetary-banking system.

Beck, op. cit., p. 23, recalls that ‘all government agents . . . almost all non-Qashqa’i Iranians, were appalled and amazed that anyone would want to live with Qashqa’i nomads, whom they perceived as uncivilised, backward, and prone to violence and theft.’ It should be remembered that Attenborough and his team were presumably subject to certain reporting constraints given the highly restrictive character of the Pahlavi regime in the mid-1970s.


Foran, op. cit., p. 318ff., estimates that the 1960s land distribution resulted in 71% of the peasantry being assigned less than 10 ha. per family, and 1.4 million of the rural population made landless; in 1972, 38% (6.6 million) of the rural population in Iran were under-nourished, and 4% (700,000) were severely malnourished.

This ‘traditional’ cap was actually introduced in the 1940s (Whitworth Art Gallery, op. cit., p. 36).

Looms, ready-threaded, and design-cartoons are also available for rent in bazaars throughout Iran, as seen by the author in the 1970s and 1990s.

Joan Allegrove in Black Woven, op. cit., p. 19, emphasis added.

In the 1970s, the selling of wool and goat-hair to merchants formed important income for the Qashqa’i, who then bought low-quality, cheap Australian/New Zealand wool for their own use.

Jon Thompson, Carpet Magic, Barbican Art Gallery, 1983, p. 25; see also pp. 70, 97.

There were mobile tribal schools in the 1970s organized from Shiraz offering five years’ free education at primary level (Whitworth Art Gallery, op. cit., p. 17), but the illiteracy level remained very high among the nomadic and rural population (Foran, op. cit., p. 322).

Typically (though each tribal grouping in the Middle East has its own conventions), the bride would be married into a fellow lineage within the same sub-tribe; in the greater Qashqa’i confederation, the Qermezi sub-tribe, for example, numbered some 1000 people with five patri-lineages in the 1970s. In some clans, the bride and groom had to be separated by as many as seven removes.

The school was set up by Mohammad Bahman-Begi, sometime Director of Tribal Education, with a policy of reviving and teaching natural dye usage, ‘traditional Qashqa’i designs . . . and also to preserve techniques which might otherwise die out’ (Whitworth Art Gallery, op. cit., pp. 17–18). In the year 1975–6, some eighty girls were registered for a year’s training.


Thompson, op. cit., p. 6; see also p. 11.

The convention of a Scottish clan ‘possessing’ its own plaid is relatively modern, and can be traced no further back than the late eighteenth century.

David Attenborough’s foreword to Black Woven, op. cit., n.p. This idea is also found in Central Asian ‘tribal’ carpet studies. W. G. Moshkova, Göl auf turkmenischen Teppichen, Moscow, 1946 as perhaps the first to argue that the various kinds of flat octagonal göl motifs woven into Turkoman rugs were heraldic devices or crests of individual tribes, a theory upheld by Attenborough in the film.

See, for example, Parviz Tanovoli, Shahsavan: Iranian Rugs and Textiles, Rizzoli, 1985, pp. 45–62.

For example, Anthony Landreau et al., Flowers of the

39 Spooner, op. cit., p. 199.

40 A. A. Bogolyubov, Carpets of Central Asia, reprint of 1908–9 edn., edited by Jon Thompson, Crosby Press, 1973, p. 16. Attenborough in his film states: ‘if we were knowledgeable enough we would be able to read [these] carpets like a page of Qashqa’i history’ (WG).

41 There is no evidence to show that such sixteenth-century Anatolian rugs were ‘tribal’.

42 This is tentatively explored in Black Woven, op. cit., pp. 26–7: ‘designs and motifs in rugs are often found over a very large area, and are the result of fashion and taste as much as a common ancestry among some of the people that use them.’

43 Spooner, op. cit., p. 211.

44 Perhaps the scholar who stretched the notion of ‘uninterrupted transmission’ to its furthest limits was the archaeologist, James Mellaart (Andrea Marechal, ‘The riddle of Çatal Hüyük’, Hali, 7 (ii), no. 26, 1985, pp. 6–11). While accepting the ‘Turkishness’ of nineteenth- to twentieth-century Anatolian kilims, he argued that certain patternings were genuine echoes of those featured in the sixth millennium BC wall-paintings of Çatal Hüyük, central Anatolia. It is generally accepted that the ‘Turkification’ of Anatolia began in earnest after the 1071 Byzantine defeat at the Battle of Manzikert and the subsequent establishment of the Seljuk Turkish regime in Konya.

45 See note 32.


