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THE PROBLEM OF TRADITIONAL FELT AND CARPET WEAVING AMONG KAZAKH WOMEN (19-early 20th centuries)

Drawing on specialized scholarly literature, this article examines the traditional women's household crafts of the Kazakhs during the 19th – early 20th centuries, with a particular focus on felt and carpet production. These crafts represent a historical formed system of women's activities, characterised by a stable internal structure, established technologies and tools, effective mechanisms for the intergenerational transmission of knowledge and skills, and remarkable capacity to adapt to changing socio- culture conditions. Despite significant historical, natural, climatic, and environmental challenges, as well as periods of institutional pressure and the loss of practices throughout the 20th century, both craft have retained their cultural relevance to the present day.

The article demonstrates that contemporary examples frequently diverge from their historical prototypes: the function of products, artistic canons, sources of raw materials, and technological methods have all undergone change, resulting in partial loss of authenticity and functionality. In this context, the systematic scholarly study of traditional wool products, their typologies, and the finest historical examples from the 19th to early 20th century is of particular importance for historical and ethnological research.

Keywords: traditions, Kazakhs, women's household crafts, felt and carpet products.

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Қазақ әйелдерінің дәстүрлі киіз өндірісі мен кілем тоқу мәселесі (XVIII-XX ғасырдың басы)

Арнайы әдебиеттер негізінде мақалада XIX – XX ғасырдың басындағы қазақтардың әйелдердің дәстүрлі үй қолөнері, әсіресе киіз және кілем өндірісі қарастырылады. Олар әйелдердің тарихи қалыптасқан жүйесін көрсетеді, тұрақты ішкі құрылымы, технологиялары мен құралдары, ұрпақтар арасында білім мен дағдыларды алмастыру механизмдері, сондай-ақ өзгеріп жатқан әлеуметтік-мәдени жағдайларға бейімделу қабілеті жоғары. Қиындықтарға қарамастан Тарихи, табиғи, климаттық және экологиялық қиындықтар, сондай-ақ XX ғасырдағы институционалдық қысым мен тәжірибелердің жоғалуы кезеңдері осы екі әйелдің қолөнері бүгінгі күнге дейін өзектілігін сақтап келеді.

Қазіргі үлгілер тарихи прототиптерден жиі өзгеше екені көрсетіледі: өнімдердің функциялары, көркемдік канондар, шикізат көздері мен технологиялық әдістер өзгеріп, бұл шынайылық пен функционалдылықтың ішінара жоғалуына әкеледі. Осы жағдайда дәстүрлі жүн өнімдерін, олардың типологияларын және XIX – XX ғасырдың басындағы ең үздік үлгілерін зерттеу тарихи және экологиялық зерттеулерде ерекше маңызға те болады.

Түйін сөздер: дәстүрлер, қазақтар, әйелдердің үй қолөнері, киіз және кілем өнімдері.

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Проблема традиционного войлочного и коврового ткачества казахских женщин (XVIII – начало XX века)

В статье на основе специальной литературы исследуется традиционные женские домашние промыслы казахов XIX – начала XX вв., в особенности войлочное и ковровое производство. Они представляют собой исторически сформировавшуюся систему видов женской деятельности с устойчивой внутренней структурой, технологиями и инструментарием, действующими механиз-

мами передачи знаний и навыков между поколениями, а также высокой способностью к адаптации к меняющимся социокультурным условиям. Несмотря на сложные исторические, природно-климатические и экологические вызовы, а также периоды институционального давления и утраты практик в XX в., эти две женские промысла сохранили востребованность и в наши дни.

Показаны, что современные образцы нередко отличаются от исторических прототипов: меняются функции изделий, художественные каноны, источники сырья и технологические приемы, что ведет к частичной утрате аутентичности и функциональности. В этих условиях научное изучение традиционных изделий из шерсти, их типологии и лучших образцов XIX – начала XX вв. приобретает особую значимость в историко – этнологических исследованиях.

Ключевые слова: традиции, казахи, женские, домашние промысла, войлочные и ковровые изделия.

Introduction

Relevance of the topic. Traditional culture, accumulated over generations, functions as a stable mechanism of continuity and a link between the heritage of the past and contemporary practices. Within the sphere of material culture, one of the most illustrative phenomena is the traditional domestic crafts of Kazakh women in the 19th – early 20th centuries, particularly felt making and carpet production. These crafts represent a historically developed system of activities that features a stable internal structure, established technologies and tools, effective mechanisms for transmitting knowledge and skills between generations, and a strong capacity to adapt to changing sociocultural conditions.

In this paper, such traditional women's domestic crafts are understood as: 1) a form of specialized folk culture and artistic production activity aimed at creating the two aforementioned items of utilitarian and decorative purpose; 2) a practice based primarily on individual or cooperative manual labour; 3) an activity characterized by local rootedness and historical continuity, both at the level of Kazakhstan as a whole and within specific regions; 4) a creative work of craftswomen ensures the reproduction of technologies, the transmission of skills, and the adaptation of products to a changing sociocultural context.

Despite complex historical, natural – climatic, and environmental challenges, as well as periods of institutional pressure and the erosion of practices in the 20th century, these two women's crafts have retained their relevance to the present day. However, contemporary examples often differ from their historical prototypes: the functions of the objects, artistic canons, sources of raw materials, and technological techniques have all changed, leading to a partial loss of authenticity and functionality, which raises about how these changes affect are cultural significance and value of the crafts today. Under these conditions, the scholarly study of traditional

artefacts, their typologies examples of the 19th – early 20th centuries takes on particular significance. It enable the the substantiation of strengthening ethnocultural and regional identity, and creates a resource base for their development.

Thus, a turn to traditional women's domestic crafts, particularly felt-making and carpet weaving of the 18th to early 20th centuries, is relevant both form the reconstruction os material heritage and the mechanisms of its transmission and for the development of practice – orientated recommendations for the preservation and advancement of craft traditions in contemporary society.

The aim of the study is to examine the formation and development of traditional Kazakh women's felt and carpet from the 19th – early 20th centuries, taking into account both nationwide and regional characteristics. This aim is achieved by **addressing the following objectives:** identifying the factors a preconditions that significantly influenced the formation of these two traditional Kazakh crafts; analysing the principal types of these handicrafts across Kazakhstan and its regions; and examining the processes of change affecting these folk crafts in the early 20th century.

The **degree of study of the problem.** The initial stage in the formations of sources on this topic dates back to the Middle Ages and is reflected in the writings of Western European, Arab, Italian, Persian, Kazakh, English, Ottoman, and other authors of the 13th – 16th centuries. In particular, this refers to the early accounts of Guillaume de Rubrouck, Ibn Battuta, Giosafat Barбора, Ambrogio Contanrini, Fazlallah Khunji, Isfahani, Anthony Jenkinson, and Seyfi Chelebi. For the 17th century, significant information is contained in the in the work of Kadyrgali Zhalayir and N.G. Spafari Milescu.

More detailed materials on these Kazakhs household and handicraft indusrties date to the first third of the 18th century, when, in the context of the incorporation of the Kazakh steppe into the orbit of the Russian Empire, the First Academy

Expedition (1733 – 1743) was organized. This expedition was aimed at a geographical – ethnographic survey of the newly annexed territories, including Siberia and the Kazakh steppe (Masanov, 1966: 51–55). In the following decades, the source base on this topic was significantly expanded through the works of participants in subsequent academic journeys, including I.I. Lepekhin, P.S. Pallas, I.G. Falk, and N.P. Rychkov. A notable contribution was also made by I.G. Andreev, the author of Description of the Middle Horde of the Kyrgyz – Kaisaks.

The body of 19th – century studies present similarly diverse information on traditional crafts. Among them are the works of G.I. Spassyky, A.I. Levshin, S.B. Bronevsky, Ya.K. Gaverdovsky, N.N. Kharuzin, A.K. Gaines, and others.

Sustantial material is also contained in the volumes. “The Kyrgyz Region” and “The Turkestan Region” of the collective publication “Russia: A complete Geographical Description of Our Fatherland”.

During the Soviet period, various aspects of this topic were addressed in the works of Kazakhstan scholars, primarily ethnographers of the Institute of History, Archeology and Ethnography of the Academy of Sciences named after Ch.Valikhanov. Among the key studies are the works of E.A. Masanov (1960), M.S.Mukanov (1979, 1980), A.kh. argulan (1986, 1987,1994), Kh.A. Argynbaev (1987), and others.

A significant contribution was also made by the subsequent generation of ethnographers from the same institute, whose studies, carried out in the form of candidate’s and doctoral dissertation at the intersection of the late Soviet and and post – Soviet periods, were devoted to the regional specificities of these traditional crafts in Kazakhstan. Particular attention should be paid to the works of Sh.Zh. Tokhtabayeva (2008,2017). Research on traditional women’s crafts, such as carpet weaving and fekl – making, developed along similar lines. These studies were conducted both by domestic scholars, including B.E. Asanova of the Fashion Academy “Symbat” (2004), N. Shaigozova, and S.P. Kulsarieva (2023); and by foreign researchers, including T.Parlak (Turkey) (2002) and B. Kamalashuly (Mongolia) (2006) , among others.

The *source base* for this study comprises a substantial body of published documentary and archival materials, as well as museum collections.

Among these , particular significance should be attributed to the collections and exhibits of the Na-

tional Central Museum of the Rebulic of Kazakhstan (Almaty), the National Museum of the Rebulic of Kazakhstan, as well as regional historical and local history museums.

Certainly, these collections are of interest due to their original assortments of felt and carpet product, classified according to the primary materials used and the methods of processing and production.

The *theoretical and methodological foundation* of the study is based on the key principles of interdisciplinary research on traditional arts and crafts applied art as objects of scholarly analysis, as presented in the works of V.F. Maksimovich, M.A. Nekrasova, A.Kh. Margulan, and others.

The methodological framework includes the principles of historical and the comparative – historical approach (periodization, synchronisation, and modeling), as well as general scientific, empirical, and theoretical methods, such as observation, comparison, measurement, and technological analysis of folk crafts and artisanal production.

An addition, structural – semantic and stylistic analyses were applied, including the study of composition, semantics, and ornament typology, as well as the classification and mapping of the distribution areas of the crafts under consideration.

Result and analysis

The formation of household crafts the production of traditional felt and carpet.

The development of these traditional household handicrafts was decisively influenced by several objective factors:

1)Natural and geographical diversity, characterized by variations in heat and moisture availability, determined the accessibility, composition, and quality of raw materials. These factors directly affected the quality, types, and quality os essential natural resources. This discussion also includes the influence of economic and cultural systems, namely the following:

- a) stock raising in its nomadic, semi – nomadic, and sedentary forms;
- b) agricultural – rained and irrigated;
- c)auxiliary economic activities, among others, such as handicrafts, trade, and livestock – related services.

Consideration of the above – mentioned factors played as significant role in the differentiated development of these traditional Kazakh household crafts, which have persisted into the 20s of the 21st century.

2) Socioeconomic factors. The proximity to or remoteness from the administrative and territorial centers of pre – revolutionary Kazakhstan determined access to markets and shaped the level of demand for everyday consumer goods. At the same time, until the early twentieth century, a predominantly subsistence economy prevailed in most regions. Traditional crafts were characterized by small – scale commodity production, which was primarily focused on processing animal, plant, and mineral raw materials. Their development depended on the financial capacities of the craftswomen themselves and their partons, as well as on established practices of credit provision and intermediary trade. Market infrastructure also played a significant role, particularly the network of fairs and trade , along with transport communications (horse – drawn, railway, and river routes), which facilitated the integration of these regions, districts, and volosts into commodity – money relations and stimulated certain branches of household crafts and artisanal production.

At the same time, until the early 20th century, traditional production in various regions of Kazakhstan largely remained within the framework of a household – based, small – scale commodity economy: more affluent artisans organized small cottage workshops employing both family and hired labour, while their output was consumed predominantly within the village , volost, or Uezd and only occasionally reached external markets. Their development, however, was uneven, as not all types of production evolved beyond the bounds of the subsistence economy, with some crafts remaining stagnant while others adapted and grew in response to changing market demands.

At the beginning of the 20th century, following the collapse of the Russian Empire and the establishment of Soviet power, the policy of dismantling the traditional economic and the model, accompanied by social experiments and shifts in economic conditions, became a decisive factor in the transformation and weakening of traditional crafts. Additional pressure arose from the development of factory – based industry, as well as from the increase in both voluntary and forced migration, which altered the ethnic composition of Kazakhstan’s population. The growing proportion of European settlers, predominantly Russian and Ukrainian, introduced new

economic and cultural practices, labour skills, and artisanal traditions, thereby accelerating structural changes in the sphere of household crafts.

During the period under consideration, the separation of craft production from subsistence farming did not encompass all sectors of household production. It was primarily associated with women’s domestic crafts, including wool, hair, felt products, carpet weaving, embroidery, wickerwork, and other similar activities, most of which were intended for household use.

Felt Products

The main range of goods consisted of felt and carpet products, which were of exceptional importance, as they played a defining role in everyday life. The raw materials for their production were obtained by local artisans from their own sheep, goats, horses, and camels; both spring and autumn wool were used, within a clear preference for sheep’s wool. From this material, various covering for the yurt were produced, along with a range of floor coverings, including tekemet and syrmaq (figures 1–2), bedding, items of clothing, covers for household objects, saddle cloths (pads placed under the saddle), and bags for domestic use and the transportation of agricultural products. A large proportion of these items is preserved in the collections of the National Central Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan. These products constituted the main goods sold at markets and fairs, both within the community and in exchange with representatives of neighbouring peoples.

Figure 1
AR 22896. Tekemet Almaty region.
320x180 cm. NCM of the RK



Figure 2

AR 25557. Black and motley syrmaq. Zhambul region.
372x224 cm. NCM of the RK



Autumn sheep's wool was in greatest demand, as it was optimal for the production of felt (kiiz), carpets (kilem), decorative tapes (basqur), quilts (korpe), coarse woollen fabric, such as that made from camel wool (used for making "shekpen"), various types of outerwear, winter footwear (baipaq, pima), headwear, and covers for household items.

A master felt – maker (kiizshi), with the help of male and female assistants, typically produced felt through a series of technological operations completed within a single day. 1) beating the wool (zhun sabau); 2) laying the prepared fibre onto reed mats (shiyge saku); 3) rolling the mat with the spread wool into a tight bundle; 4) unrolling it first from one side and then from the other and sprinkling it with hot water to compact the fibers; 5) repeated and prolonged rolling of the tightly rope – bound bundle (kiiz qarpu) (Geins, 1897: 225–250; Masanov, 1960: 69–75; Mukanov, 1979: 37–42; Mukanov, 1990; Yskakkyzy, 2007; Tokhtabayeva, 2017).

A significant portion of the produced items was used in the traditional Kazakh portable dwelling, the yurt, whose structure consisted of a wooden frame entirely covered with felt sheets (kiiz), composed of seven parts. The same materials and techniques dominated the interior decoration: bedding, felt rugs with embedded ornaments (tekemet), and applique quilted felt carpets (syrmaq), distinguished by original ornamentation featuring geometric, zoomorphic, object – based, and vegetal motifs. The richness, colour palette, and density of such decorative items largely correlate with the social stratification and property differentiation of their owners.

Similar technological methods and features of felt – making, with certain local variations, were observed among peoples neighbouring the Kazakhs, in

whose traditional way of life nomadic stock raising played a significant role, namely, among the Kyrgyz (Beksultanova, 2025: 153–157), Turkmen (Pirkulieva, 1964: 25–33), Nogais (Kazakbayieva, 2006), and others (The Art of felt, 2013).

Traditional Carpet Weaving

One of the most in – demand and socially significant types of traditional applied art among the Kazakhs was carpet weaving, which became widespread and demonstrated clear regional differentiation: pileless carpets were found throughout Kazakhstan, whereas pile carpets were produced primarily in the southern and western regions. Carpet production was traditionally carried out entirely by women, reflecting both the gendered division of labour and institutionalised forms of the intergenerational transmission of craft skills.

The production of pileless carpets and related items, such as "alasha", "korzhyn", "bau", "basqur", and others, was in greatest demand. The richness of weaving techniques, compositional variety, and sophisticated use of colour distinguished these objects. Depending on their intended function, they were either hung on the poles of the yurt frame (kerege) or laid on the floor; for instance, the "alasha" served both as a wall hanging and as a floor covering. Frequently, the upper edge and sides of items designed for hanging on the "kerege" were adorned with openwork braided borders of multicolored threads, fringe, and colored tassels, which enhanced the decorative effect and structurally defined the compositional fields.

Particularly valued were flat – woven carpets of the "Arabs Kiley" type, whose compositional schemes, according to tradition and local attributions, trace back to patterns adopted from settlers of Arab origin (fig. 3). These carpets were often associated with young women, serving as symbols of family well – being. Their appeal was primarily determined by the vivid palette of vertically arranged stripes, decorated with "alabas" and "ormekshi" motifs, which lent a ceremonial and festive appearance to a stationary dwelling or yurt.

Traditional pile carpets, the production of which required collective labour and which were widely distributed in the southern regions of the Republic, also acquired similar cultural value (fig. 4). A significant number of these works have been preserved in the collections and exhibitions of the National central Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan (Kazakh Carpets, 2012; Alimbay, 2020: 55–71).

Figure 3

AR 2783. *Araby kilem*. First half of the 20th century. *Qostanay (Torgay) region*
195x365 cm. NCM of the RK



Figure 4

AR 15701. *Turki kilem*. Second half of the 20th century. *Turkistan (Shymkent) region*
220x410 cm. NCM of the RK



The primary technical means for producing traditional pileless (*taqyr kilem*) and pile (*tuktikilem*) carpets were weaving looms (*ormek*) of simple construction made from wooden poles. Various types were used: horizontal, vertical (for carpets), and narrow-patterned looms for making bands and ribbons. The repertoire of weaving techniques was extensive, including “*terme*”, “*kezhim teru*”, “*beskeste*”, “*taqyr*”, “*orama*”, “*bidai teru*”, “*baspa*”, and others providing a wide variety of textures and patterns. The ornamental decoration predominantly featured geometric, zoomorphic, cosmogonic, vegetal, object-based, and anthropomorphic motifs. The geometric component included squares, circles, triangles, diamonds, crosses, meanders, as well as zig-zag, linear, and stepped elements. The compositions of the pieces were characterised by pronounced symmetry, tonal and structural balance between the background and pattern, organised through a basic border (*qorgan*, *qorshau*), which formed a sup-

porting perimeter and delineated the internal fields (Kazakh Carpets, 1998; *The Art of Felt*, 2002; Mukanov, 1979).

At the same time, Kazakh carpets exhibit important elements of visual identification, the traditional depiction of clan *tamgas*, which served as markers of affiliation and social status (Felkerzam, 1914: 58). In this context, it is also important to note the establishment of a distinctive specification of carpets according to tribal affiliation: “*adai kilemi*” (*adai carpet*), “*kerey ulgi*” (*kerey pattern*), “*konyrat nusqa*” (*konyrat variant*), and others (Kasenova, 2018: 29), indicating the development of locally and regionally distinct schools with stable typological features.

Finally, this branch of traditional crafts displays a wide range of traits common to the peoples of Central Asia and Kazakhstan, similarities in technological techniques, compositional schemes, and ornamental repertoires. These convergent features have been documented both in pre-revolutionary studies by Russian authors (Bogolyubov, 1908; Semenov, 1911) and in the contemporary research corpus of scholars from the republics of the region (Satybaldieva, 2024; Carpets, 1983; Gul, 2019), providing evidence of intercultural interactions and the long-term circulation of artistic forms across the Eurasian steppe.

Conclusion

Thus, the material presented here allows for the following generalizations and conclusions. The analysis has shown that the status and development of traditional women’s domestic crafts were significantly influenced by natural – geographical and ethnic factors, as well as by the intensive colonization processes of the Russian Empire, alongside the effects of commodity production and market capitalist relations. These crafts existed within social groups that were only marginally involved in the defining economic and cultural practices of the Kazakh people, such as nomadic, semi-nomadic, and sedentary stock raising, as well as various forms of sedentary agricultural culture.

In the economic and cultural life of the Kazakhs during the 19th – early 20th centuries, nomadic and semi-nomadic stock raising played a predominant role, fostering the development of domestic crafts largely concentrated in the hands of women. Driven by the considerable demand for such goods within a subsistence economy, women actively engaged in the production of felt, woven carpets, and textiles.

All the Kazakh products examined, produced within the framework of domestic and family-based production, share many characteristics with similar items of the Turkic peoples of Central Asia, the South Caucasus, the Volga region, and the Altai. However, unlike the Kazakh examples, in these regions, particularly in Turkistan, the development of carpet production was considerably more advanced due to centuries of specialisation and the commodity oriented nature of production geared toward market exchange. Kazakh craftswomen primarily produced items intended for personal or household use.

Consequently, a distinctive feature of the relationships within domestic crafts was female initiative. Women occupied a central role in the production process, while collaboration among family workers showed only nascent signs of a transition toward commodity production. This transition began to emerge in the southern and southeastern regions of Kazakhstan.

By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, market demand for local products had increased, which, combined with the difficult material conditions of

the female artisans and their families, highlighted the need to expand production in several branches of women's domestic crafts. It became necessary to delegate secondary but labour-intensive operations to other individuals, which was most often characteristic of the male segment of master craftsmen, as this allowed female artisans to focus on more skilled tasks and improve their economic situation.

In the subsequent decades of the 20th century, under the consolidation of the Soviet totalitarian state and the implementation of cardinal state reforms, changes occurred that negatively affected the socio – economic life of the Kazakh population. These transformations led to the forced sedentarisation of the nomadic population, hindering the transmission of cultural traditions and altering their content, so that tradition ceased to be solely an ethnic experience and became part of the broader social heritage. As a result, much of the craft and artisanal production lost its authenticity, and the role of women in craft activities came under threat, as they were often excluded from traditional practices and faced increased pressure to conform to new state-imposed roles.

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