

IRS Traditional crafts







# AZERBAIJANI KALAGAYI-MAKING

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One of the important fields of traditional craftsmanship is Kalagayi-making. The precise history of kalagayi-making in Azerbaijan is not known. Scientists have put forward different ideas in this regard. Quoting Hudud al-Alam, Academician Abdulkarim Alizadeh notes that headscarves were produced in the city of Barzand, one of the main centers of weaving, in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. An anonymous 13<sup>th</sup> century source called Ajaib ad-Dunya mentions a special headscarf woven from gold thread among Tabriz handicrafts. 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch traveler Ian Struys also mentions a high-quality headscarf made from gold thread popular among the Shamakhi nobility. Famous Turkish traveler Evliya Celebi reports that men in Nakhchivan wore shirts made from batik and proves that printed decorations were highly developed in the weaving centers of Azerbaijan even before the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In other words, the kalagayi was produced in the distant past in almost all the traditional braid-making centers of Azerbaijan under the names of "chargat", "orpak" and so on.

Among decorative-applied products, the kalagayi has a special place for its decorative technique. The kalagayi craft, which improved and developed in terms of both technology and content, reached the highest

stage in its development in Azerbaijan in the 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries. A 1784 report by Georg Forster says that up to 400 tons of silk were sent from Shirvan to Astrakhan. Literature and steppe ethnographic materials prove that a considerable part of that silk fell to Basgal and the kalagayi occupied an important place in this regard. In that period, along with the cities of Ganja, Shusha and Sheki, Basgal was one of the largest silkworm-breeding centers of Azerbaijan. For centuries, this region produced a lot of samples of colored and patterned kalagayis by printing with the efforts of skilful connoisseurs of the kalagayi craft and masters. They also made a great contribution to the preservation of national patterns and their handover from generation to generation.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the traditional kalagayi-making centers of Azerbaijan changed their position for various political and socio-economic reasons, especially as a result of the fact that cheap industrial products imported from Russia began to oust homemade goods, and kalagayi-making gradually concentrated in two centers – Basgal and Ganja. It was in this period that Basgal took a leading position in kalagayi-making not only in Azerbaijan, but also in the whole of the South Caucasus. Ahead of World





War I, there were 900 braid-making workshops in Basgal, which produced 1.8 million kalagayis per year. Since the dye-houses of Basgal did not have the capacity to dye so many kalagayis, a great number of them were sent to Shamakhi, Ganja and Baku.

Kalagayi-making was a real folk craft in Basgal. Until the recent past, even people who did not have a weaving workshop in the village installed a machine tool in their homes and engaged in this art. Kalagayi masters sat at the machine tool till the evening. Researcher Tahir Jafarli notes that the harmonious sound of the tool – chak-chuk, chak-chuk, which resembled a song, could be heard from every house. Women wrapped silk around the machine tool at the bottom, children filled it with threads and men used all their limbs – hands, feet, backs, necks and even minds – as the kalagayi was being woven. In a word, the family resembled a single and perfect mechanism together with the machine tool. Everyone's bread and the family's wealth depended on the head of family who sat at the machine tool and worked from morning to evening or his son who could replace him.

Many generations in Basgal continued this business for centuries and handed it over to each other in the

course of time. Some representatives of those generations still live in Basgal. One of them is master Abbasali Talibov. Master Abbasali says: "... We have been engaged in this business for generations. I learnt it from my dad Alishah, he learnt it from his Talib and Talib from my grandfather Nagi." Happy to speak about subtleties of this inherited business, 53-year-old Abbasali almost sang the patterns of his kalagayi samples like a plaintive bayati: "... This is an eight-winged star – a rose, and between them, in the very middle, it is a khoncha, a khoncha on which sweets are carried for newlywed girls..."

The special and original composition, high quality, decorations and harmony of the kalagayi, which was an artistic product of Basgal masters, aroused a great interest in it in other countries as well. Beginning from the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Basgal masters started to present their different handicrafts at various international exhibitions held in Russia and Western Europe. At these exhibitions, Aliabbas Jabrayil oglu, Mashadi Habibullah Haji Abbas oglu, Hajibagir Mirza oglu, Haji Alakbar Haji Seyid oglu and others were given high awards for their products. At the world exhibition held in London in 1862, Basgal weaver Nasir Abdulaziz oglu was awarded a medal and special diploma of the





exhibition for a kalagayi and ganovuz. Representatives of the older generation in Basgal say that after returning from London, the kalagayi master shared his impressions: "... English women left no chance for people to look at the kalagayi. At the exhibition held at the fair, they bought everything in a moment. I was surprised. I should have taken more with me."

A document related to the first congress of Caucasus craftsmen called in Tbilisi in 1902 contains the following interesting thoughts: "... Even though all masters (meaning kalagayi masters) were illiterate, they are ahead of their European colleagues in craftsmanship. The products they made astonish people with their artistic nature and beauty. Machines and other tools used in Europe are not available here. The products they made are a result of hard work and skilful hands."

Basgal residents maintained close trade relations with many countries of Europe and the East for centuries. They were known in Russia, Central Asia and even in India. Since there was a great demand for kalagayis in other places, Basgal craftsmen worked all year and exported their kalagayis to Ashgabat, Tashkent, Bukhara, Iran and other countries. In some countries and cities, even kalagayi workshops belonging to Basgal residents operated. For example, Basgal residents had a workshop

in the Uzbek city of Samarqand in the 1930s and produced elegant kalagayis there.

Basgal kalagayis had an original composition, symbolic meaning, decorative elements and colors. Along with the natural beauties of our country, these kalagayis show many peculiarities of everyday life, ceremonies and events related to our national-spiritual world and patterns and ornaments that represent various fields of folk art: Yeddi rang (ispiray), Heyrati, Bastanigar, Galinlik (with green edges and red middle), Nokhudlu, Mikhayi, Yashil-gara, Yemishani, Zeytuni, Agzamin-zanbagi, Agzamin-gizili, Gizili and other kalagayis are in fact a ballad, fairy tale and song. The names and patterns of each of these kalagayis rich in various zoomorphic, geometric and plant patterns, have their own philosophy, purpose and special place in everyday life. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century and in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, very famous printed pattern masters such as Haji Hamid Talib olgu, Karbalayi Abdulkhalig Ashraf oglu and weaver Aliabbas Jabrayil worked in Basgal.

According to a specialist from Basgal who spoke about the technological features of kalagayi production, it is possible to produce 25-30 kalagayis per day. The production process consists of a synthesis of many arts and professions that consistently follow each other. It includes such spheres as spinning, weaving, dyeing and ornamentation. These jobs were done by individual professional masters or one professional master at an enterprise, and they were popularly known as "ustakar".

What made the kalagayi famous was first of all its color symbols, and along with the quality of the dyeing substance, this depended on the creative fantasy of the dyer and his ability to select colors and make them coherent. In this sense, kalagayi dyeing is very different from other fields of traditional dyeing, including silk dyeing. These patterns have a history of hundreds of years and have survived by being handed down from generation to generation. However, in many cases, they are not copied as they are, some colors are updated, new decorations are added and thus, the new kalagayi changes its appearance. In many cases, masters themselves invent patterns and often keep it secret.

The process of decorating a kalagayi went through several stages. First, the kalagayi was boiled in a solution called "sirab" in order to ensure that it absorbs the dye. Although the kalagayi went through a long production process before arriving in a dye-house, the mucous sticky layer still remained on its surface, which prevented the product from fully absorbing the dye during the



dyeing process. For this reason, after the product was boiled in a solution (sirab) prepared in a big pot and cleared from the slimy layer, it was dried and was considered ready for the dyeing process.

The patterns on the kalagayi were split into the following groups: pictures that are printed on the edges of the kalagayi and create a margin; pictures printed in the corners and in the middle. Among these pictures and patterns, the buta has always had its own special place. By its form and structure, this ornament, which is widely used in Azerbaijani decorative applied art, including kalagayi-making, has types like "plain buta", "curved buta", "cogged (or toothed) buta", "curly buta", "hooked buta", "chestnut buta", "almond buta", "upright (or sharp-pointed) buta", "double buta", "tasseled" buta etc. Butas prepared in various regions of Azerbaijan are often called by the names of those regions: Mugan buta, Baku buta, Khila buta, Shirvan buta and so on. Moulds were usually made from forest pear wood, which was better than other wood by its quality and strength.

However, at the same time, it was technically impos-

sible to dye a kalagayi. Patterns were usually added from the edge of the kalagayi. The main patterns were placed along the edge and the middle part was usually kept plain. The first ornamentation was taken from the natural color of the kalagayi. A master carried out the operation by dipping the mould in oil and pressing it consistently on the edge of the kalagayi and without violating the symmetry. To this end, a sharp look, high skills and agility were required from the master. After the first ornamentation, that part of the kalagayi was tied into bunches, while the rest of it, i.e. the part that was not covered with an oil layer was placed on reeds. In the next operation, the edges of the kalagayi were placed in a bow and dyed. After absorbing the dye, the kalagayi was squeezed and hung to dry. After the dyeing operation, the kalagayi was placed in a pot with boiling water mixed with soap, was washed until the oil and dye mass were cleared and hung on a string to dry. The dried headscarf was split into sets of four, smoothed (ironed) and placed in a machine tool called "mangana" between two boards. The boards were tightened with screws from the sides.





After keeping the kalagayis in the wood mangana for two or three hours, one side of them was opened and hung from a string. After the moisture decreased, they were folded, placed over each other and put in the mangana for the second time. The kalagayi remained in this condition for one day to “remove its pleat”.

Flowerly buta kalagayis made by our artists from yellow, red and green fabrics complemented women's clothes as headgear since the Middle Ages and made our girls, brides and grandmothers look even smarter. It is no accident that in pieces of oral folklore in the 16<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries – in ballads, poems, bayatis and especially ashug poetry, a lot of interesting poetic thoughts have been reflected about the kalagayi, chalma and chargat.

Many ashug poems represent girls and brides with forelocks decorated with gold buttons, chests decorated with colorful beads, with ears decorated with crescent- and minaret-shaped earrings, with backs decorated with gold belts, with colorful patterned shirts on their bodies, flowerly buta kalagayis (chargats) with antimony on their eyes and eyebrows.

Basgal has the world's only kalagayi museum. The hall of fame operating at the Basgal silkworm-breeding

museum is decorated with pictures of people who brought honor and fame to Azerbaijan: Aliabbas Jabrayil oglu, Karbalayi Nasir Abdul Aziz oglu, Meshadi Habibullah Haji Abbas oglu, Hajibagir Mirza oglu, Haji Alakbar, Haji Seyid Mahammad oglu and others.

Tourists and foreign guests who visit Basgal show a great interest in the museum. Among the exhibits put on display here are numerous moulds which testify to fine kalagayi patterns, dye-house accessories, fine threads, dyes made from various plants, tasteful artistic embroideries, samples of decorations, parts of ancient tools for making blanket covers, ram horns and S-shaped decorations that were considered signs of wealth and courage, butas, spikes, flower and leaf pictures, geometric ornaments and finally, decorative kalagayi samples. Heyrati (or Herati), Basta-nigar, Galinlik, Gizili, Mikhayi, Nokhudu, Agzamin zanbagi, Agzamin gizili, Banovshayi, Yashil-gara and other kalagayis are the most valuable exhibits of this museum. It is no accident that anyone who comes to Azerbaijan – the ancient land of Shirvan today and has heard about the kalagayi masters of Basgal visits the museum and sees the wonders of this magic world for themselves. Along



with creating an inclination to arts in people, especially youth, those wonders also foster feelings for love for our ancient history, past and origin in them.

Thus, maintaining and developing kalagayi-making, which comes from the depth of centuries, and restoring the past fame of the Azerbaijani kalagayi is a sacred duty for both of us. The Basgal Silkworm-Breeding Center founded by the valuable intellectuals of our people Rana Ibrahimbayova and Jalil Ibrahimbayov can be regarded as one of the important steps in maintaining and reviving this art. The center is engaged not only in kalagayi production, but in teaching the secrets of the art to young and teenaged residents of Basgal under the leadership of experienced masters, and this allows us to look to the future with hope. In this sense, we would like to believe that in the near future, all conditions will be right for the development of kalagayi-making, which is the secret heritage of our ancestors, not just in Basgal, but also in each of the traditional centers of kalagayi-making. The work carried out by the independent Azerbaijani state and its leadership gives an incentive to this. For example, everyone rejoiced at good news reported by the media recently: at the 26 November

2014 meeting of the UNESCO Intergovernment Commission for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, Azerbaijani kalagayi-making was listed under the name of "Traditional art and symbolism of Kalagayi"! ♦

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