

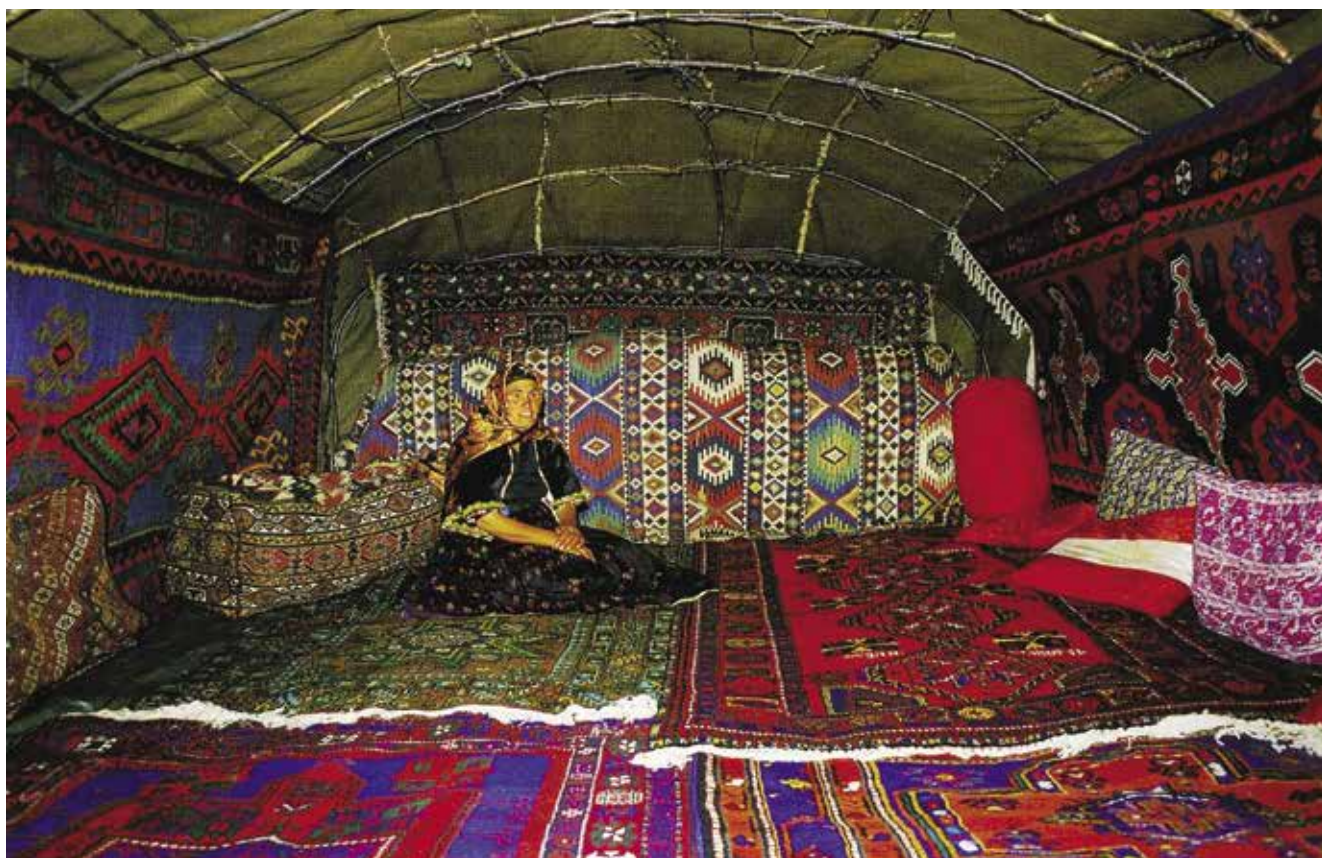
# TRACING THE LOOPS...

**T**he cultural history of world nations includes forms of art that continue to be clearly manifested in their rich moral values, the wisdom of the people and elements of the national identity. Carpet-weaving is one of such crafts. The beautiful compositions upon the peculiar carpet patterns created by our grandmothers, who expressed the worldview and philosophical thoughts of our ancestors with aesthetic taste and methods, have been reflecting our inherited national traditions since time immemorial.

Carpet-making in Azerbaijan dates back to an ancient period of history (Neolithic age) and has turned

into one of the important attributes of our life in different times, incorporating specific features of the national customs and traditions. Children's taking their first steps upon carpets, laying people to rest in carpets, speaking affectionately about carpets and carpet-making art when it comes to any form of creative art, and the correlation between the national ideas and aspirations of humanity with the "Flying Carpets" indicates the significant role that this craft plays in the life of the nation. The symbols and embroidery of Azerbaijani carpets are closely interwoven with virtually all forms of ancient, medieval and contemporary Azerbaijani architecture, as well as

*Carpets and carpet products in the households of peasants engaged in cattle breeding. Contemporary photo*





*Carpets also served as a cover for the dwellings of herders.  
Contemporary photo*



painting and decorative-applied art. However, just like other types of our tangible and moral wealth, the carpets, which reflect our history, have literary meaning and content and are exhibited in museums around the world, are sometimes presented as samples of other nations due to the bias in the attitude toward them. (8). Carpets have a special essence and meaning in the way of life, everyday domestic affairs and moral and intellectual mindset of our nation. In the past, all Azerbaijanis had beautiful carpet samples in their homes and this tradition has been preserved to this day. Azerbaijani girls join their mothers and grandmothers since an early age to weave their dowry carpets. Their dreams about future love, new homes they would have and their babies taking first steps on those carpets were reflected in those loops and patterns. The carpet weaving process, in itself, was a peculiar ritual of its kind...

A person's wealth was measured by the possession of carpets, and when someone spoke about wealth, he or she would say "that a person has so many carpets". This was considered to be an indicator of not just financial well-being, but also cultural and moral values, proximity to a person's ancestral roots and love for his or her



*Carpets in the home of a farmer. Contemporary photo.  
Open-air ethnographic museum in Gala outside Baku*





*Carpets in the interior of a central hall in the mansion of oil tycoon H.Z. Tagiyev. Photo of early 20<sup>th</sup> century*

nation. It would be hard to cite a craft other than carpet-weaving that would have such a profound impact on the life, culture, aesthetic sentiments and moral values of the Azerbaijani people. As a rule, the carpets that were passed from one generation to another testified to the history of the nation and fulfilled the mission of furthering the genetic legacy. Girls and grandchildren had a particular feeling when they touched a carpet pattern created by their mothers and grandmothers many decades later. Every carpet had its own purpose, including ones that were woven on a daily basis, carpets laid on the floor for visitors, rugs hanging on the wall, inherited rugs stored as valuable keepsakes, etc.

Herodotus, Claudius Elian, Xenophon and other ancient historians of the world wrote about the development of carpet-weaving in Azerbaijan. The carpet-weaving craft developed in Azerbaijan to a greater extent during the Sassanid period (3-7<sup>th</sup> centuries) and delicate carpets were made from silk, golden and silver threads. Albanian historian Musa Kalankatly (7<sup>th</sup> century) cited the silk fabrics and colorful carpets woven in Azerbaijan.

A close look at the overall composition, combined with the harmony of colors, reveals certain features of a carpet. Each of the encoded patterns provides information about a relevant period in history by delivering its particular meaning and opens up the unrevealed pages of the past. Each of the symbolic patterns reflected upon a carpet has its own origin and significance. The ancient elements found on carpet patterns, in particular, people's spiritual unity with the flora, are inherent only to the Turkic nations. (2)

The Turkic people, who were affiliated with different groups and tribes, were committed to their general religious and philosophical ideas. In particular, the history of the creation of the world and mankind and relevant images were enriched by the vegetation of their habitat. (7)

According to researches, many carpets preserve their hidden secrets today. Therefore, identifying the elements of carpet patterns and revealing their meaning is of great importance, and their philosophical comprehension bolsters the significance of carpets.

The continuity of centuries-long traditions reflected



*“Zili” carpet type. Baku, 19<sup>th</sup> century*







upon Azerbaijani carpets and the diversity of the realities of life are inseparably inter-connected. The patterns of carpets varied, depending on the region the rugs originated from and the local climate. Carpets reflecting the traditions affiliated with a certain region were woven using the methods linked with the local flora and faith. Weavers apparently expressed the innermost philosophical notions cherished in their memories for millennia by intuitively transferring them onto carpet patterns through relevant symbols.

Having taken a close look at the Azerbaijani carpets, one may conclude that the carpet samples originating from Baku and Absheron are different from rugs attributed to other groups in terms of their abundance and

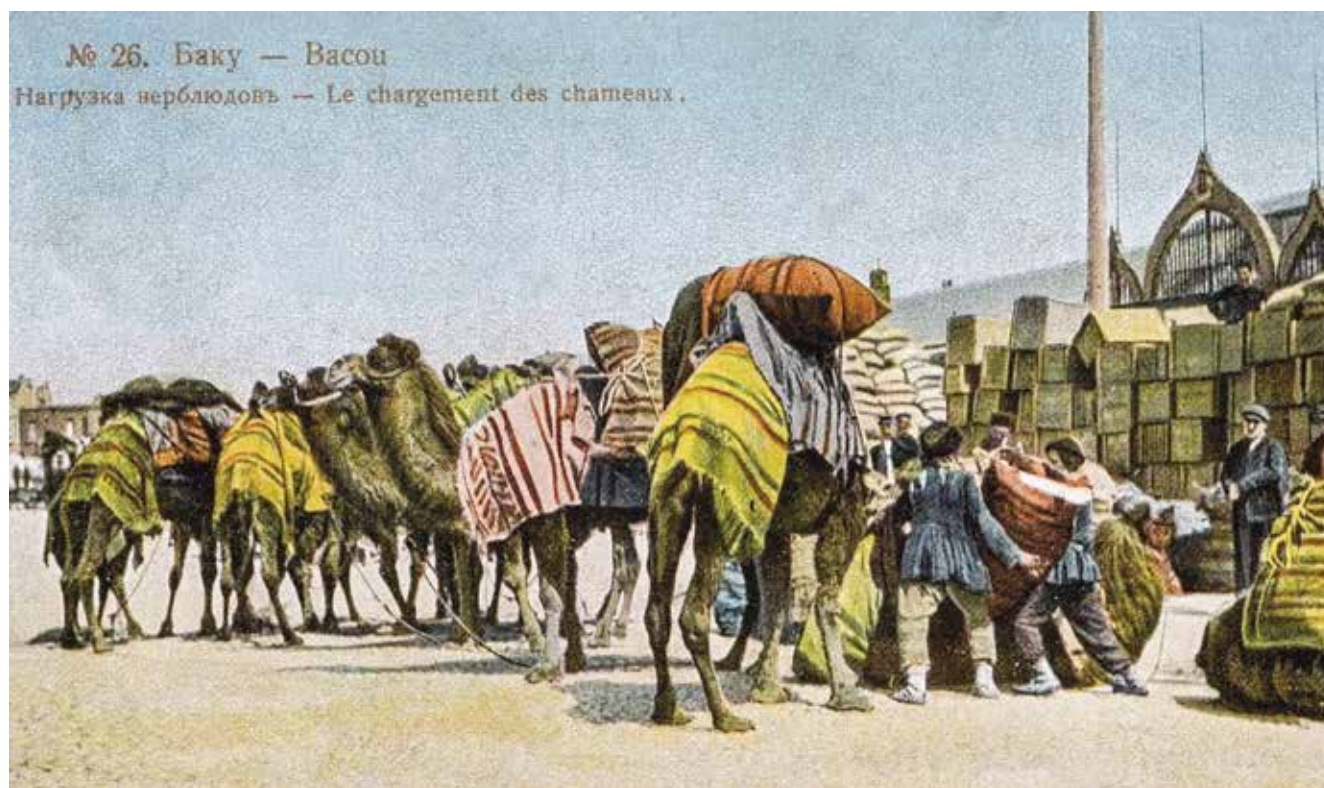
philosophical content, given that this territory has been a trade center throughout history, and goods from other states were delivered there for trading. The variety of these commodities, their national and psychological features were interconnected.

The peculiarity of the Absheron culture and people's admiration for it, the spread of fire worshipping there since the ancient times and a subsequent wide spread of Islamic culture to Baku and the surrounding settlements were manifested in carpet-making, along with other forms of art. The carpets woven in this territory predominantly contained the "Fire", "Flame", "Tripod" and "Buta" elements.

In addition to their link to archaic beliefs, the patterns



*Carpets as camel body-cloths. Postcard of early 20<sup>th</sup> century*



of Baku and Absheron carpets contained Islamic images. Information about Baku carpets is available in a number of historical sources. Arab historian Abu Ja'far al-Tabari noted in the first half of the 7th century (2nd Hijri, 642 A.D.) that "carpets of a wide variety and excellent quality are produced in north-eastern Azerbaijan".<sup>(1)</sup> This is once again confirmed by well-known carpet-making scholar L. Karimov. "In the past, soft carpets of high quality were produced behind the tower walls in the Icheri Sheher (Old City), the ancient part of Baku. A copy of this sample dating back to the 18th century is still stored at the Turkic and Islamic Arts Museum in Istanbul. (4)

The carpet-making tradition of Baku and the surrounding districts dates back to a very ancient period. The softer and tender texture of the Baku and Absheron carpets is due to the use of the wool of the "qala" və "bo-zakh" sheep as a raw material for weaving. This wool differs from other types by its brightness and tenderness. The intensity of the carpet colors is due to the use of saffron, liquorice, indigo and other plants, which are inherent to this territory, for dying. (1).

Each of the Baku carpets has its own title and composition. Most of these rugs are named after the village where they were woven. The Baku group of carpets includes "Khilabuta", "Khile-efshan", "Novkhani", "Surakhani", "Gala", "Baki", "Goradil", "Fatmayi", "Findigan", "Gadi", etc.

Thus, the "Baki" carpet, which is stored and safeguarded at the Icheri Sheher historical museum's carpet and sewing department, could be cited as one of such samples.

Several "lake" and "well" embroidery items were lined up vertically in sequence in the intermediate section of a carpet. 4-5 "well" patterns were engraved in the central part of such carpets in the period up until the late 18th century. However, changes were made to the composition in the early 19th century after the rug was named "Baku". The "lake" and "well" embroidery, which signified several symbols of life, were placed all together in the same section. (4).

The link of such embroidery style to any particular faith is quite interesting. The fact that the "well" and "lake" cults occur in the same area is no coincidence. Relevant research reveals that the "well" cult is attributed to the Turks' belief system, and as a carrier of the "water" spirit, possesses symbols that are linked to the creative world. (6).

Since there were no mountains or hills in their habitats, they were trying to create artificial mountains and hills. The developments that occurred in those areas were described in the Book of Dede Gorgud (3).

The city of Baku and the surrounding settlements have been populated by Oghuz Turk (Azerbaijani) tribes throughout history. The city was built upon high "hills"



and "wells". The image of Baku was reflected in the 1403 piece of work by 15th century geographer Abdurashid Bakuvi titled *"Talkhis ʿal-Asar and Ajaib al-malik al-qāhhar"* (*Summary of "Monuments" and the wonders of a powerful ruler*), which was written in Arabic (6).

"The city of Baku rests on rocky hills consisting of built wells". This image has been preserved in the Old City, the ancient core of Baku, to this day. There are some "wells" with varying depths in the Old City dating back to very ancient times, and people express interesting and realistic opinions about them. These were used as water wells and basements and interestingly, they also served to perform certain ceremonies. For example, there used to be wells with different depths in the area of the Palace of Shirvanshahs, located on a high hill in the city, including the "Milk Well", which differed from the other wells and was considered a shrine. Researcher C. Leviatov wrote, "By the way, it is noteworthy that during the period prior to the revolution the Muslim population believed that one of the depicted dry wells, located outside a dome-shaped room or courthouse, had a wondrous power allowing the women who lost milk to regain it. It was called "the Milk Well". (6)

The above-mentioned facts allow us to conclude that the geographic layout of the ancient Baku was reflected upon the intermediate section of a carpet. Moreover, the fact that this section is of dark-blue color indicates that the city is located on the seashore. There is also a consistent pattern seen in the color palette of the carpets. Thus, several rhythmic repetitions of the colors and embroidery elements in the compositions increase the creative impact of these pieces and affect people's mood and health. Such carpets were used in everyday life and on special days.

Throughout history, people have been unable to withstand natural disasters, epidemics and phenomena with incomprehensible origin, which led to the emer-

gence of various popular beliefs as a rescue measure. Just like elsewhere, the population of Baku and Absheron has retained such beliefs since the ancient times.

The hexagonal and octagonal "lakes", which constitute the core of the creative structure of the Baku carpet, are attributed to the universe and spatial objects. The filling elements and lakes that complement the intermediate section of the carpet contain quadrangular "lizards" on the right-hand side, and "pearls" (or "shoulder-blades") on the left-hand side, with schematic signs with crooked and broken lines, and are carriers of the positive energy glorified through the creative language of archaic beliefs. Overall, this embroidery expresses a world of senses and sentiments relating to literature that is reflected in carpets. (4).

The embroidery decorating the border stripes of a Baku carpet is meant for protective purposes. The border stripes encompass the intermediate section and encircle it, serving as a protective boundary. Thus, the positive energy derived from the carpet increases one's good impression about any given household.

The protective stripe of a Baku carpet and its main lining is encircled by a boundary line consisting of a chain and four incisions.

The core of the main lining is comprised of a "shamdan" (candlelight) element, which is also called a "yagdan" or an oil lamp. These images produce an impression that in this period people tried to demonstrate their religious rites, customs and traditions using "lake", "shamdan" and "yağdan" elements. Carpet-makers even used to call these elements "ancient monuments". In addition, the carpet was decorated with elements around the main lining on both sides resembling incision boundaries. Old carpet-makers likened this to lightning (4).

Thus, we can confirm that the intermediate section and the main lines of Baku carpets mostly served for protective purposes in terms of semantic meaning.



*Traditional ornaments of Baku carpets*

These elements were slated for protecting people from the evil eye and evil spirits.

The above-mentioned information enables us to conclude that the genetic code of any nation is hidden in the secret world of its mythology, which makes it recognizable in the world.

The current level of the carpet-making craft in Azerbaijan and public interest in carpet-making indicates that the eternal carpet-weaving art of the Azerbaijani nation will further exist and develop as long as the people live on. Those who have embraced this sacred craft are worthy of high esteem and praise... ✨

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