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A Comparative Study on the Origin and Variety of Motifs in Shahsavan Salt Bags and Caucasian Textiles

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Abstract

Shahsavan tribes of Iran and the Caucasus region have had considerable and often inevitable intercourse and associations during the history due to their common borders and special geographical locations. The result of this has been manifested in different forms of intermingled factors and elements, specifically the textiles of tribes and ethnic groups. The interactions of the mentioned realm, i.e. textile industry, have best been appeared in patterns, motifs, colors and compositions and weaving of the hand-woven textiles among which Shahsavan "salt bags" (NAMAkdĀN) are a case in point. According to the facts and the importance of this subject, we can propose some questions as follows: What influences have the field of weaving had in these two regions as a result of their interactions and historical background? What are the motifs and their classifications in these two regions and which ones share common patterns? And which ones abound? Having been done in analytical and comparative method, the present research has examined the field of weaving in Shahsavan tribe with emphasis on its salt bags together with other Caucasian textiles (salt bags, etc.). The objectives of the research have been the study of the influences and interactions between the two regions and the recognition of patterns and motifs on their textiles. Finally, we can infer that the certain location of Iran and its common borders with the Caucasus besides tribal distribution of groups in northern and southern areas could be considered the reasons for cultural influences in the mentioned regions. The dominant motifs to be noticed here are dragons (S shape), diamonds and stars, crab-like and cross motifs as well as negative and positive spaces.

Keywords: Shahsavan, Caucasus, Salt bag, Textile, Motif.

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1. Introduction

Salt is one of the most important foods among human kind. This material has been recognized as valuable material in some parts of the history. This material plays an important consumption and cultural role within the nomad's tribes. As it stated above, the nomads carry this material within the handmade bags called "salt bag". This material is easy to access for urban people rather than rural one, so the nomads are forced to carry this material with the considerable volume. Almost all the nomads of Iran except Turkmen use salt bag. The salt bags of the nomads have varieties of characteristics such as dimensions, design, pattern, color and even tissue. It is necessary to determine, recognize and classify these exclusive products in order to know all the cultural aspects of these tribes and nomads. Meanwhile, the Shabsavan nomads have a powerful history in different fields such as knitting, salt bags of nomads, and even shepherd salt bags. The number of Shabsavan salt bags is less than the number of saddlebags and Mafrash⁴. Generally, it is possible to divide the Shabsavan salt bags into two parts based on their structures: twist weave salt bags and flatweave salt bags with additional weft. The surface of each two groups is relatively small and even average. Based on their design and style, the salt bags of Shabsavan must be divided into two groups: salt bags of MugĀn (Ardebil zone) and salt bags of Hashtrud, Miyaneh (east Azerbaijan zone) and Saveh (Tehran zone) (Tanavoli, 1991:47). Among the Shabsavan people of Caucasus which are related to the Shabsavan tribe, there are some salt bags the same as each other. These handmade have more in commune with the Shabsavan tribe salt bags. The problem of the current paper is related to this subject. The question here is that what are the similarities and differences between Shabsavan salt bags of Iran and salt bags of Caucasus?

2. Shabsavan tribe and Caucasus region: historical background and cultural communications

The Shabsavan nomads are situated in the north part of Iran which is defined as Aras River and MugĀn plain and even around Varamin and Qom. Of course, the amount of vastness of these nomads in Iran is not the same in each part and it is dependent on the geographical and climate conditions. The congestion of these nomads in MugĀn plain and Sabalan regions is less than Hashtrud, Saveh, Varamin and Khamsa (Zanjan zone). Based on the history of Shabsavan nomads, their origin is related to the order of Shah Abbas in the eleventh century. The wars of Iran and Russia in the 19th century led to loss some of the regions of Iran and even Shabsavan, thus most of these tribes migrated to the southern regions like Varamin, Hashtrud, Bijar, Khamsa, Saveh, Tehran, and Qazvin. In fact, Shabsavan is a kind of society with numerous Oghuz Turks, but still, there are a lot of Kurd, Georgians and Tajiks (Tanavoli, 1991: 17-18). Some of them are deployed among the Bakhtiari tribes, and a group of them were deployed in Khamsa regions and others were deployed in Khorasan and then in Kashmir of Far East (Tapper, 1997:235). It should be mentioned that the most part of Shabsavan people is living in those northern regions which have common boundaries with the historical region of Caucasus. There are still some cultural elements remained in each of these two regions (Figure 1).

⁴ Mafrash is a knitted handicraft that is usually woven by tribes. It is woven like cube boxes and luggage and is used to transport quilts and mattresses, or accessories for life during nomadic travel (retrieved from online Dehkhoda Persian Dictionary. <https://www.vajehyab.com/>)



Figure1. Map of the great territory and dispersion of Shahseven tribes in Iran (Opie, 1992:248)

The Caucasus region with the natural situation and appropriate geographical position has been the resort of different tribes which were looking for the freedom and independence. According to the statements of experts, there have been fewer regions on the earth with this turbulence. The evidence of these statements is related to the invasion and colonialism of Greeks, Romance, Huns, Scythians, Byzantine, and Residents of the Caspian region, Arabs, Tatars, Russians, Iranians and Turks (Figure 2).



Figure2. Map of Caucasus region (Opie, 1992:282)

Based on the historical sources, the Iranian dominated on the current Armenia in 521. They were the rulers of this country almost one century. In the seventh century, the Arab attackers have deployed in this region. After that, the Islamic religion was confirmed with those people except the regions related to Armenia and Georgia. In the eleventh and thirteen century, Seljuq and Mongols attacked to this region. The presence of Timur in the late 14th century is another event of Caucasus region. The history of the region indicates that there was an interaction between Iran and Turkey in the early sixteenth century. Meanwhile, after the presence of Russia, the cultural and political aspects became explicit (Kaffel, 1998:12-16). The history of Caucasus gathered too many different cultures with varieties of traces. The most famous of these nomads are as follows: Kurd, Armenian, Azeri, Georgina, and Taleshi. The mentioned nomads have occupied all the parts of eastern Caucasus and most of them were Muslim. The most part of this territory is located in the northern boundaries of Iran the cultural interactions of these two regions is still debatable in different filed such as weaving zone. Shahsavan nomads are the most famous residents of this part.

3. Recognition of different motifs and their classifications in the weaves of Shahsavan nomads and Caucasus region

Shahsavan the same as other nomads have varieties of products in the field of weaving. We can classify them into separate groups. These weaves are including a vast range of tablecloth, curtain, and saddlebag, other hand-woven things, and salt bag with different motifs and designs. Based on the statements of

experts the carpets have the most frequencies in the Shabsavan weaves. These carpets are used for keeping the clothes, blanket, and kilim. Shabsavan nomads are expert people with famous products such as bag, small woven cradles with flat weave, Sumak and Varni method (Middleton, 1996:82). However, the motifs and designs are classifiable as the following: simple decorations around the geometric medallion, vertical taped designs, and other geometrical patterns. The mentioned designs are used in the Kilim and Jajim with slotted weaving and drapery rug method. Most of the Shabsavan Kilims are created with the additional warp called Sumak (Sahabi & Good Wright, 1998: 7-75, Mahmoodi & Shayestehfar, 2008:29). Simple geometrical motifs such as sun, birds, stars and animals and also inducing a sense of movement through the interaction of positive and negative space are other characteristics of these handmades (Mahmoudi & Shayestehfar, 2008:29). The common motifs in the Shabsavan weaves are generally quite varied and they are classified in the comprehensive classification as follows: Stellar shapes (star-like diamond, crusader, shaggy and scorpion), dragon motif (S shape), plant and flower and animal motifs (goat, rooster, peacock and hawk) (ibid, pp 29-30). These visual elements achieved independent identity during too many years. Knitting art has an important role in the culture of Caucasus region as well as its important position among Shabsavan people. The Caucasian carpets are made by their Women and the kilims are well known because of their special designs and geometrical compositions. The most important regions of weaving in Caucasian are as the following: Azerbaijan, Quba, Shirvan, Dagestan, Armenia, Georgia, Telesh, Cossack and Ganja, Cuba, Garabagh (Hall & Vivoska, 1988:216-230, Middleton, 1996:52-64). The motifs which were used in their weaves have too many similarities with Shabsavan people because of cultural and historical background.

4. Shabsavan salt bags

4.1. Salt bag and its application

The Iranian nomads work in the field of woven products as well as carpet weaving and valuable rugs as a mat. Some of these local products are classified in the special category based on their applications. Sometimes, the lack of plant tissues and appropriate wood for the basket weaving and other products cause nomads to use some bags with the applications of transportations and storage. In fact, the amount of salary and the position of nomad family is determined based on the quality and quantity of these bags in order to place clothes, beds, and hunting equipment. The importance of these weaves determines their identity based on their quality and motifs of compositions (Harvey, 1996:89). One of the most important products of these weaves is the wooden salt bag (figure3), which has the special structure. Generally, salt bag is a handmade derived from three methods: simple, Rendi and Gendi with 30*40 cm dimensions. The nomads use this product in order to keep and transport the worn or coarse salt. Its shape is the same as a bottle (Hosseini, Behnoud, Baratali, 2008:85).



Figure3. Shabsavan salt bag, MugĀn, early 14 century, 53*39cm, (Tanavoli: 126)

Experts related the weave of these nomads' containers to the following nomads: Afshar, Bakhtiary, Shahsavan, Baloch and Lurs (Aston, 2012:355). However, other nomads such as Khamsa, Varamin, and Qashqai people have also this kind of product. Almost all the nomads of Iran except Turkmens have wooden salt bag (Tanavoli, 1991:46). In fact, the salt bags are different in the following two aspects: motifs and their appearance. Some of them have borders and enclosed surface within themselves (figure5), others do not have any border and they are designed with vertical taped (figure4). Nomadic tribes and nomads use salt for the home consumption like other people. Beside this application, they need salt in order to feed their animals as a vital aspect. In addition, they need salt in order to storage some foods such as meat and yogurt for the winter (Tanavoli, 2001:29). Salt bags are used in order to keep some materials such as beans as well as carrying the salt. The opening position of the salt bag is like a pipe which is able to prevent from pouring the salt in the salt bag (Wertime, 1998:17).

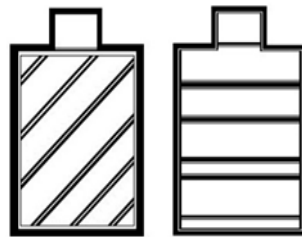


Figure4. The design of salt bags without any border and vertical taped

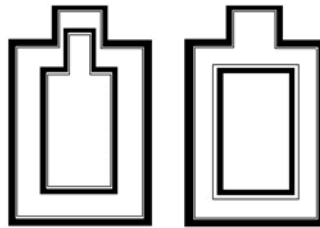


Figure5. The design of salt bags with border and enclosed surface

4.2. General features of salt bag

As we mentioned before, the dimensions of salt bags are 60*40cm (Aston, 2012:355). Of course, there are bigger and smaller samples of salt bags. Based on the observation of their appearance, we conclude that the size of the salt bag is related to the prayer rugs of nomads. The design of these prayer rugs is in accordance with the body of a human. It means that one background is related to the body and the gorge is related to the head that a person makes prostration (Tanavoli, 1991:150). This kind of similarity and visual resemblance makes a relationship between the shape of salt bag and prayer rug and indicate the visual resemblance of these woven pieces with the human's body (Figure 6, Figure 7, Figure 8).



Figure6. Baloch prayer 19th century



Figure7. Baloch prayer rug, Northeast of Iran, quarter end of 19th century 97*140 cm.
(www.persiancarpetguide.com)



Figure8. Baloch prayer rug, west Afghanistan, Around 19th century, 97*140 cm (ibid)

4.3 Exclusive features with Shahsavan and Caucasian (commons)

Among the remained salt bags of Shahsavan and Caucasian weaves since the past decays, some applications of these products have been more than other applications. As it stated in the recent studies of handmade in different regions, using the designs of dragons, crabs' patterns, cruciate, diamond shapes and positive and negative space (figures 9 to 19), and even the motifs of Memling have had the most importance rather than other motifs. The Shahsavan products of people who have been lived in the southern regions like Hashtrud, Bijar, Khamsa, Qazvin, and Saveh were influenced by other groups of people such as Kurds, Lurs and Afshar. Therefore, their weaves had too many varieties comparing with Shahsavan people who were living in the north both in composition and weave.

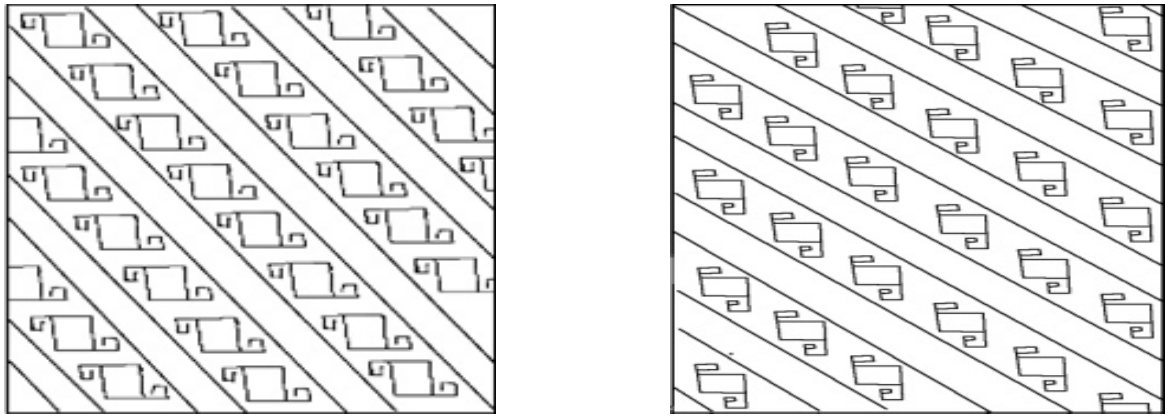


Figure9. Right: Shabsavan salt bag MugĀn, middle of 14th century, 53*38cm (Tanavoli, 1991:119), Left: Caucasus salt bag, Qare Baq, Quarter third 19th century, 51*46cm. Both with skewed compositions (Wertime, 1998:195)



Figure10. Shahseven and Caucasian sedllebag, late of 19th century, 150&60cm



Figure11. Caucasian carpet with the same design of figure10

The salt bag has been woven in all the regions which were the residential of Shabsavan people. However, the quantity of Shabsavan salt bags is very low comparing with their other products. The old Shabsavan salt bags were mostly flat weave with the low amount of pile weave. Tanavoli states that the Shabsavan salt bags are able to divide into two groups based on their compositions, motifs, and type of weave: MugĀn salt bags with twist weave and flat weave and even with different coloring. They are also flat weave and taped composition. Other group belongs to the salt bags of Hashtrud, Saveh and Miane (Tanavoli, 1991:47).



Figure12. Top picture, Shahseven saltbag, MugĀn, late Of 13th AD century, 42*36cm (Tanavoli, 1991:121), Right, bottom: Shabsavan saltbag, 19th century, 46*40 cm. Left: Caucasian rug, Qazaq, early decay of 20 century, all three designs have similarity in their design and motif



Figure13. Shabsavan salt bag with Sumac method and similar motifs with figure14 such as wolf trail or monster footprint



Figure14. Caucasian handmade with Sumac method, Qare Baq, 19th century, 50*40 cm



Figure15. An ancient Shabsavan salt bag with diamond shapes and crabs pattern, 1880, 43*33 cm



Figure16. Caucasus salt bag, Kars, second middle of 19th century, Qare Baq, south of Caucasus, 52*52cm (Wertime, 1998:213)

There are three woven pieces illustrated in figure17 from MugĀn regions which are derived from Wertim and Virginia collection. Another one is related to Caucasus region of Qare Baq. The patterns in these

pieces are diamond shapes which are repeated a lot within the crusades motif on the light background. These pieces show the similarities among these products.



Figure17 A. Caucasus pillow of Qare Baq or even a part of lateral side for being filled; 102*56cm (Werime, 1998:16)



Figure 17 B. Shahseven salt bag, MugĀn, late 13th century, 52*38cm, John and Wertime collection, Virginia, United States (Tanavoli, 1991:120)



Figure17 C. Shahseven saddlebag, MugĀn

Dragon motif is the most common motifs in Shahsavan weaves. It has varieties of application such as salt bag. There are three samples illustrated in figure 18 from the woven products of MugĀn, Shahsavan, and Caucasus. This motif is among with other motifs in the handmade and they are the index of their origin.





Figure18. A piece of Caucasus rug, 87*81cm, Shahsavan saddlebag, 19th century, Sumac method (rugrabbit.com), Shahsavan saltbag, MugĀn, late 13th century, 30*50cm (Tanavoli, 1991:122)

5. The degree of authenticity of motifs and interactions

According to the derived works of Shahsavan region, we can conclude that the effect of the tradition of residents of the Anatolian Plateau and neighboring Kurds in the regions of Iran, Turkey and the Caucasus is so explicit and they had an important role in the history of weaves of these regions. Also, the effect of designs and traditional motifs in the southern regions is undeniable. The amount of visual resemblance within the two mentioned fields was the extent that all the sellers of these weaves have gathered most of these flat weaves were called Caucasus or south Caucasus (Middleton, 1996:82, Opie, 1992:252). The range of this classification is not in accordance with the written sources related to the handmade of two mentioned fields. We refer to two samples from Shahsavan tribe in order to investigate the problem of this study. Both of the handmade are the work of Shahsavan people and their usage is for keeping and transferring the salt. Figure 20 illustrates the repetition motif of diamond or cross decorations. Figure 20

indicates the taped designs with the exception of the size in each row. It means that there is a big row which is situated in the center of the salt bag and even the thin tapes on the bottom of the salt bag. The motif in this salt bag is the same with previous sample and is like a cross shape and even other related motifs. Based on the authenticity of the region that the relate weave occurred, the statements of two researchers are as the following: Tanavoli states in his book called “bread and salt”, states that it is related to Shabsavan MugĀn Region, meanwhile Wertime believes that this handmade salt bag is related to Caucasus region. Also, both of the researchers state that the salt bag belongs to the today’s of Iran which is shown in figure 20. The exception here is that Tanavoli states that it is related to east Azerbaijan and Wertime believes that it is related to Savalan of Ardebil region.

Images	Tanavoli; viewpoint in “bread and salt” book	Wertime’ viewpoint in “sumac bags of northeast of Iran” book
 <p data-bbox="296 909 411 943">figure19</p>	<p data-bbox="555 674 873 741">Identity: MugĀn region, Tanavoli, 1998</p>	<p data-bbox="1043 674 1310 741">Identity: Qare Bag Wartime, 1998: 122</p>
 <p data-bbox="296 1133 411 1167">figure20</p>	<p data-bbox="587 954 841 1021">Identity: Hashtrud Tanavoli, 1991:120</p>	<p data-bbox="1043 954 1310 1021">Identity: Savalan Wertiem, 1998: 188</p>

Hence, it is difficult to determine the difference between the origin of salt bag whether it is related to the Anatoli regions which are the neighbors of Iran or not. Despite the similarities, there, there is difficult to determine the authenticity of weave region but it does not create any problem for the main owner of these handmade. It is also necessary to investigate all the aspects of weave regions and their features in through the products of each region and even the experimental findings.

6. Conclusion

The geographical position of Iran and its neighboring with Caucasus region, common boundaries and nomads' divisions in both north and south regions, are the most important parameters that create cultural effects in these two regions. The salt bag is a kind of handmade with different weave methods which is common among varieties tribes. This good is not only for keeping the salt but also it is applied to the keeping rice, beans, flavored and grains even it is recognizable among the Iranian tribes. Shabsavan salt bags are divided into two groups: twist weave salt bag and flat weave with additional weft. The surface of each group is relatively small and medium. The number of Shabsavan salt bags is less than the other woven products. These handmade are able to divide into two groups based on their design, composition, and type of weave: the first one is the MugĀn salt bags which are twist weave and kilim weave with varieties of coloring. The back of these salt bags are kilim weave and have taped composition. Another class of the salt bags is derived from Miane, Hashtrud, and Saveh. Kilim salt bags are more in Saveh and Khamse rather than MugĀn. Shabsavan salt bags of the south region tribes have had more effective than other tribes such as Kurds, Lurs, and Afshars. Thus, their weaves have more varieties

comparing with those Shahsavan who are living in the north. However, the fields of effective for the Shahsavan regions and Caucasus nomads are able to investigate their history. Although the Caucasus weaves have more varieties rather than the Shahsavan products, even in their motifs and coloring, there are a lot of similarities in both kinds of products. Most of these similarities are as the following: dragon motifs in the shape of S, crabs and crusades patterns, positive and negative space, star shapes and diamonds with hook-shaped which induce the motion feeling to the human. The mentioned issues make it difficult to determine the authenticity of the weaves and investigating the weaves of both regions.

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