

*Weaving the Traditions for the Future: Building a Sustainable Support Framework
for Iranian Traditional Hand-Woven Textile Arts*

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Abstract

Iran has been notably applauded for its luxurious handwoven textile art of the Persian carpets which has been a tremendous part of Iranian art, heritage and export. However, little attention has been paid to other kinds of Iranian handwoven textile traditions such as Kaarbafi, Daraibafi and Shaarbafi to name a few both domestically and internationally, which have been inherited from generation to generation and are now seriously facing the danger of extinction due to the modernization and economic and political reasons. In this presentation, I will illustrate my project in progress of providing a sustainable support framework for artisans of these textile traditions in danger by raising a financial support through charity exhibitions in order to maintain the traditions for the future. In particular, I will report the process of the charity exhibition and sales that I held in Tokyo in the summer of 2014 and discuss issues that arose from the exhibition. I argue that it is significantly necessary to develop a sustainable support framework by respecting the knowledge and skills of the artisans and giving market values to their textile products in order to save their weaving traditions. This presentation will resonate with one of the conference themes, “Power”, in that it describes how an individual has power to bring differences to help dying traditions and their artisans.

Keywords: Iranian weaving arts, charity exhibition, sustainable support

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Introduction

Located in the middle of the ancient Silk Road, Iran, formerly known as Persia, whose history began thousands of years ago, historically acted as a strategically important center in cross-continental trade, commerce and cultural exchange where the East met the West for centuries. Persia manifested its cultural excellence even in its early establishment including the first Persian Empire of the Achaemenid dynasty and the following dynasties. Textiles almost always dedicated to their cultural and artistic prosperity. In fact, even today Iran is a place full of precious textiles.

When it comes to Persian or Iranian textiles, what first comes to your mind? I suppose it is solely quality Persian carpets. Iran has received international acknowledgement as a major producer of luxurious handwoven carpets. Both humble and luxurious pieces adorn the walls and floors of nomad tents, urban and rural homes, mosques and palaces, and can be found everywhere – from the remotest corner of Iran to the world's most prestigious museums (Cheng & Munakata, 2015, p.5). According to Nassiri (2010), among some early European researchers, the well-known Russian archaeologist Sergei Rudenko noted that the world's oldest pile carpet woven in the 5th century BC was excavated in Pazyryk in the Altai Mountains in Siberia and may be related to the Achaemenid dynasty although Rudenko's claim is an issue of debate. Nassiri also said that in the Safavid period (1499-1722) the arts including carpet weaving reached their highest level, and Persian carpets started flowing towards the European markets. Even today, carpets are one of the articles dominating the country's export along with natural resources such as oil, gas and agricultural products as Lorentz (2007) described. However, other kinds of handwoven textiles are actually found in Iran although they may be more simple and ordinary, produced in a smaller quantity and scale, and given less recognition both domestically and internationally compared to renowned Persian rugs. Yet, they also reflect the country's rich textile culture and history.

In this paper, I would like to report about my project in progress of supporting traditional Iranian handwoven textile arts putting aside Persian rugs. First, I will introduce three particular types of Iranian handwoven textiles. Second, I will describe the problems that these textiles have been facing. Then, I will explain how I have been supporting these textiles through fund-raising activities. Finally, I will touch upon further tasks and future implications that my project has raised. This report is significant as it introduces the precious Iranian handwoven textiles that have not been shed light on and gives you an overview of a rare project to build a support framework for these Iranian textiles.

Not Just Carpets

I have been living in Tehran, Iran for more than two years, and I have never become bored with the handwoven textile variety that the country offers besides luxurious rugs. From among the range of the traditional Iranian handwoven textiles I have encountered, I would like to introduce the following three types: Kaarbafi, Daraibafi and Shaarbafi. Kaarbafi is a plain cotton weave usually comes in a single or a few colors with occasional stripes. Kaarbafi can be found in different parts of Iran, but what is common is that this tradition has been taken over by women from generation to generation for years. Kaar means “work” and bafi means “weaving”.

The name originates in the fact that weaving has been essential part of women's daily housework routine. This fabric has been used in the home as covers, bedspreads, wipe cloths and so on (See Figure 1).

Daraibafi is ikat weaving as the Persian word of darai means "ikat" (See Figure 2). Ikat is a Malay-Indonesian word that is widely used to refer to the ikat pattern, the cloth, and the process of making it (Meller, 2013, p.55). In this process, the warp threads are first marked with designs, these markings are wrapped with covers that will resist the dye so that designs are pre-decided before the weaving process starts. This techniques is known and practiced in many other countries, but in Iran it is performed only by men in the city of Yazd, on the edge of the desert (Cheng & Munakata, 2015, p.7).

Shaabafi is woven in the city of Kashan. Shaar means "very fine hair" so that fabrics in this category are woven with very fine cotton or silk to ensure a shiny, smooth texture. Shaarbafi is a plain weave or twill that comes in different colors and often with stripes. This weaving tradition has been taken over by male artisans (See Figure 3).



Figure 1: Kaarbafi



Figure 2: Daraibafi



Figure 3: Shaarbafi

My first encounter with these beautiful Iranian handwoven textiles was at Tehran's Baagh Muze (Garden Museum) in the late spring of 2013. I visited the textile exhibition there run by the Tehran-based organization named the International Institute of Jam-e Miras-e Jahan (JMJI). Jam-e miras-e jahan means world heritage so that JMJI's main tasks are running workshops on Iranian culture, heritage and traditions for children and preserving traditional Iranian textile arts including Kaarbafi, Daraibafi and Shaarbafi along with other kinds besides Persian rugs. JMJI's textiles at their Baagh Muze exhibition amazed me with their versatile beauty, simplicity and practicality, and the warmth that the artisans had woven into them.

Dying Textile Arts

In contrast to their artistic representation and historical value, I was told at the exhibition that all of these handwoven textile arts have been facing a serious danger of dying out. I have observed the following reasons for their decline. First, as in most other countries, traditional handicrafts are given less attention and respect in Iran as machine-made fabrics are available and dominate the market these days. For example, textiles play an important role in Iranian women's daily fashion in accordance with the Islamic dress code. All women in Iran, no matter what their faith is, must wear a head scarf called "hejab" and a knee-length, long-sleeved jacket "manteau" to cover their hair and body especially when they are outside. Most of the hejab and manteaux sold at reasonable prices in every single bazar in Iran is machine-made and imported from China. In addition, one seller in the Tajrish bazar in the northern end of Tehran once told me that good-quality chador fabrics come from Japan. Chador is a tent-like full-body-length outer garment tossed over the women's head to wrap her whole body.

In addition to the dominance of machine-made or foreign textiles in the Iranian market, traditional weaving industry does not seem to be an attractive job option for younger generation people. Young people flee into bigger cities in search of better job or education opportunities. In fact, the Kaarbafi weavers I met in the town of Meybod on the outskirts of Yazd are women in their 60's and 70's. In Kashan, Shaarbafi weavers are always elderly men whose wrinkles tell how long and rich their career is. As for Daraibafi, the young weaver in his late 20's named Hameed Falahi told me that his family is the one and only Daraibafi producer in Iran. After having been working on the Daraibafi weaving art for more than 350 years, Hameed and his family are now in trouble of finding successors besides himself. Gillow (2010) pointed out that the practitioners of Iranian textiles today are few and that several textile crafts are in danger of disappearing due to the lack of skilled artisans.

Furthermore, the Iranian textile industry is also failing in gaining global recognition. Unfortunately, Iran does not have good opportunities to have ties with overseas as the country has been left in a difficult situation internationally. Since the West started imposing economic sanctions and limitations on political and diplomatic relationships on Iran in 2006, the flow of products and cultural exchange to and from the country has stagnated (Cheng & Munakata, 2015, p.15). Also, the information available in the media is also limited so it is very difficult for the Iranians to exchange information with abroad.

My Cause: Charity Activities

Because of the fact that Kaarbafi, Daraibafi and Shaarbafi have been facing the problem of disappearing due to the reasons described above, I felt an urge to preserve their rich history and tradition as I was greatly fascinated by these textiles. And I was quite confident that they should deserve more domestic and international recognition. Consequently, I came to the idea to initiate a cause to create a system that could provide adequate support to these textile arts. Then, I consulted JMJI for cooperation for they are an expert in the field.

As one of their major tasks is to preserve traditional Iranian weaving arts, JMJI launched their own textile brand called Sidaar in 2011 and has been actively working on preserving a variety of handwoven textiles since then – not only Kaarbafi, Daraibafi and Shaarbafi, but also Iranian silk brocade or sheep and camel wool fabrics as well. With the Sidaar brand, JMJI established a sustainable production cycle in which they work with weavers to create textile products adding modern, trendy design that appeals to more customers in Tehran. JMJI donates part of the profits to the weavers so that they will be able to achieve a stable income to keep weaving for Sidaar. Eventually, after some discussions, JMJI and I agreed that I would take charge of introducing Iranian handwoven textiles mainly outside Iran through fund-raising exhibitions. The reason why we decided on charity exhibitions was that I had resonated with JMJI's sustainable support cycle to work with weavers and to preserve their textile arts.

The Tokyo Exhibition

Now, I would like to give a summary of my first fund-raising exhibition of Iranian handwoven textiles that I held in Tokyo. It was held for two days in the summer of 2014. I chose a gallery located in one of the high-end areas in Tokyo called Jiyugaoka, where both residents and visitors are said to be highly conscious about leading a quality lifestyle with creative, original home decor and fashion items. A selection of textiles including Kaarbafi, Daraibafi and Shaarbafi mainly scarves along with some models of tablecloths and dishcloths was exhibited and available for purchase. A wide range of visitors from adults, students to passers-by showed up to see Iranian textiles except Persian rugs for the first time by examining the exhibit and audio-visual guide such as photos and video introducing the background of the textiles, artisans and history.

The Tokyo exhibition ended successfully receiving positive feedback to the Iranian textiles from the visitors. I conducted a visitor survey and asked the following questions:

- What was your impression about Iran before coming to the exhibition?
- Did your impression change in any ways after the exhibition?
- What do you think about the traditional Iranian handwoven textiles?

35 visitors answered the questions giving multiple answers and some of them left additional comment. Most of the respondents' initial impression toward Iran was quite negative. 10 said that Iran is a very far country which they had almost no information or impression about while 19 worried about the safety or economic and political instability of the country. However, 9 people named Iranian culture, history, traditions

or nature such as art, architecture, handicrafts, deserts and food culture. 3 of these people highly praised Persian carpets when it came to Iranian handicrafts. The visitors' overall post-exhibition views changed quite positively. 18 respondents answered that Iran is a surprisingly beautiful country. In addition, 6 people mentioned the country's rich, sophisticated culture and history. 14 felt ever closer to Iran as they learned about the country, handicrafts and culture in the exhibition. One person still did not deny his/her insecure feeling toward Iran.

As for the textiles, the respondents who left positive comment said that the textiles are beautiful yet practical for daily use with good colors, designs and texture. Other comments include that the textiles can be easily incorporated into today's Japanese fashion and home interior and that it was a good opportunity to learn about Iranian textiles except Persian carpets. Furthermore, some comments indicate that the charity and audio-visual presentation were especially meaningful in that visitors had an opportunity to learn about dying Iranian weaving arts and get familiarized with the artisans so that they shared my cause of preserving these arts. On the other hand, 9 people gave very encouraging but rather negative ideas. For instance, the textiles lacked a suitable variety of colors, sizes, designs and usage so that they would not match Japanese trends and tastes in fashion and home decor. Additionally, the textiles did not successfully appeal to male visitors.

How the Tokyo Profits Contributed

After the Tokyo exhibition, my biggest concern was how to donate the profits to the Iranian textile industry to use them at the fullest. JMJI helped me find a meaningful way to support the industry in the fall of 2014 while I was also preparing for another exhibition in Barcelona. My primary objective was not to simply give the money to artisans as a reward or income, but rather to focus on more fundamental issues such as training younger people as prospective weavers or improve the quality of the textiles so that the industry can keep moving forward in a sustainable cycle without the fear of getting completely disappeared.

After repeated discussions, finally in November of the same year, JMJI and I came to the agreement to donate the Tokyo profits to the Daraibafi weaver in Yazd, Hameed Falahi, who was in the process of opening a weaving center to train prospective weavers to weave for him in the future. He wants to save his family's tradition of Daraibafi from disappearing, and also to make job opportunities in his community. I found his personal yet social project interesting and contributed by installing three handlooms purchased by the Tokyo profits in his center. I visited Hameed's center in January 2015 to check upon the handlooms (See Figure 4).



Figure 4: Hameed Falahi and the handlooms donated to his training center

Having made a significant step forward in my project with the collaboration with Hameed, I still have more issues to define. For example, what kind of people is Hameed teaching in his center? How can trainees be motivated so that they will become weavers in the future? For whom or where will they be weaving after completing the course? Therefore, I am determined to continuously support Hameed along with JMJI, and I need to come up with a meaningful way of donating the Barcelona profits as well in order to contribute to his further success, which will eventually lead to preserving the dying textile art of Daraibafi.

Let me give you a brief summary of the Barcelona exhibition. In collaboration with Silvia Saladrigas Cheng and Teresa Rosa Aguayo, a textile documentation specialist at Center of Documentation and Museum of Textiles (CDMT) and a weaving teacher/artist respectively, I co-hosted my Barcelona exhibition in the Ramblas district in the city center on one weekend in December 2014. Silvia's passion for textiles and personal ties with Iranian textile artisan friends and Teresa's devotion to weaving greatly affected the success of the exhibition. A similar range of textiles to the Tokyo exhibition was presented and available for purchase along with audio-visual information of the textiles and weavers. Contrary to the Tokyo exhibition, although the visitors saw Iranian textiles for the first time, most of them were either textile experts, weavers or students leaning weaving.

Conclusion

To conclude this report of my project of giving a sustainable support framework for dying Iranian handwoven textile arts, I strongly insist that I need to encourage the most effective way in which artisans' traditional knowledge, skills and value are highly maintained. In addition, I need to primarily focus on supporting the sustainable development of the Iranian handwoven textile industry such as training in order to increase the number of weavers in the future. On the other hand, in my opinion, it is also important for the industry to have new visions to add commercial value to their traditional textile arts to create the income it needs to keep on going. For example, they should improve the quality of their products and cater to the needs, taste and trends of the wider international community as my Tokyo exhibition proved that Iranian handwoven textiles have a potential of being accepted internationally but they still lacks some elements to attract more interest. In any case, I am determined to gain international recognition for the amazing Iranian handwoven textile arts through fund-raising activities, and devote the profits to establish a sustainable development for the future of the Iranian handwoven textile industry.

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