Turkmenistan: Plebiscite of a Nation of Artisans

Snezhana Atanova is a PhD candidate at INALCO. Her thesis focuses on nationalism and cultural heritage in Central Asia. She recently finished an IFEAC fellowship devoted to national identity in everyday life in Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan. She was awarded a Carnegie fellowship in 2017, in which she explored national identity through the nation-branding initiatives of Russia and Central Asian countries. She earned a Master’s in International Communication from the University of Strasbourg in 2012 and a Master’s from the National Institute of Oriental Languages and Civilizations (INALCO) in 2015.

The Altyn Asyr bazaar, located in Turkmenistan’s capital, Ashgabat, attracts thousands of visitors every week. Local residents and foreign tourists rush to explore the richness of the country’s largest market. National crafts, from embroidery and carpetstojewelryand clothing, constitute a significant proportion of the bazaar’s diversity. By exploring the links between the demand for and consumption of handicrafts within the Ashgabat bazaar, this paper aims to understand to what extent handicrafts influence Turkmen economics and society and express “banal nationalism.”

The term “banal nationalism,” coined by Michael Billig in 1995, refers to daily representations of the nation that build a shared sense of belonging to one national community. As Billig states, “the term banal nationalism is introduced to cover ideological habits which enable established nations of the West to be reproduced.” Some signs of nationhood are not recognized as such by the population because they are “so familiar, so continual.”

In Turkmenistan, national crafts seem to be the main reminders of national belonging. The majority of Turkmen women wear long dresses with embroidery and traditional jewelry; every apartment or house has wool...
carpets and felt mats (koshma), as well as amulets. Carpets, embroidery, dresses, and jewelry make individuals the bearers and creators of national narratives and “flag” the Turkmen nation. The majority of publications on post-Soviet Central Asia focus on states’ narratives as created and disseminated by official authorities and academics. Based on a historical or even mythological past, these ideological narratives are devoted to raising national awareness and to legitimizing and consolidating state power. A limited number of papers explore the role of handicrafts in unofficial narratives in Central Asia, analyze crafts as a source of identity and livelihood, discuss the role of textile heritage in nation-building and cultural identity, or examine artisanal products within the context of the new market environment. Although there are academic papers on Turkmen handicrafts themselves, no research is devoted to handicrafts as a source of national identity. This paper aims to fill the gap by focusing on handicrafts as presented through the space of the Turkmen market and traditional rituals and practices.

This research is based on visits to the Altyn Asyr bazaar in Ashgabat in August 2013, October 2017, and April-May 2018. I apply a combination of qualitative methods to analyze Turkmen handicrafts and social practices in Ashgabat—these include interviews and conversations with bazaar sellers and customers (both Turkmen citizens and international visitors) and participant observations within and beyond the bazaar. I interviewed fifty bazaar sellers/customers and thirty international visitors, as well as acquired over fifty handcrafted products. I collected statistical data on socioeconomic indicators from the State Statistics Committee of Turkmenistan, as well as data on international tourism from the World Bank and IndexMundi.

By analyzing interactions between Turkmen artisans and consumers, as well as international guests, this paper explores how the high demand for handicrafts is driven by traditional rituals and practices, how handicrafts represent a livelihood and daily consumption practice, and how handicrafts linked to traditional rituals give room to everyday narratives of Turkmen identity.

Beyond the Bazaar: Long Traditions in Turkmenistan

I borrow Eric Hobsbawm’s definition of traditions as “a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature.” Among the first mentions of Turkmen traditions, dating back to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, are the pictures and reports of Russian and Western travelers. Turkmen and Soviet scholars also devoted detailed studies to everyday customs and traditions.

Soviet ethnographer Anna Morozova remarked, for instance, on the simplicity, tunic-like silhouette, and preference for red-brown colors in Turkmen clothing of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The main components of women’s costume were a dress (koynek), pants (balak), and coats (kurte and çabyt). Traditional dress is an essential part of everyday and festive wardrobes alike; it is worn at work and at home. Collars and necklines are decorated with ýaka, a V-shaped embroidery that begins at the neckline and extends to the waist. Yaka can be large or narrow, with handmade or machine-made embroidery. Dress cuffs may also be decorated with embroidery. While staple dresses are worn at home, velvet, panne velvet, satin, and silk are preferable for special festive occasions. For special occasions, ýaka are always handmade, while machine-made embroidery may decorate casual dresses.

The Turkmen bridal costume always includes a red dress and a red çabyt; the kurte can be any of a range of colors, such as rose, green, or yellow. “A wedding dress is always decorated with embroidery and jewelry, sewn on the chest in several rows and performing the function of amulets. When walking, decorations make a melodious sound and, according to legend, drive away evil spirits who are always hovering near young women.” The several layers of clothes the bride wears also aim to shield her from evil forces. The wedding costume includes a gupba—a dome-shaped silver headdress. The change of headgear after the wedding symbolizes “the girl’s promotion into the next highest age- and social group.” The bride also wears other silver jewelry, including bilezik (armbands) and guljaka (an ornamental disc that is used as “a button to close the front neck part of the dress”). The tradition of wearing silver jewelry for wedding ceremonies, festive events, and as part of everyday attire has been noted since co-
Colonial times. Every stage of the wedding ceremony requires traditional clothes heavily decorated with embroidery and jewelry.

Carpets and talismans also form part of the wedding ceremony, and even of the traditional costume. Wool carpets decorate the room where the bride-dressing is held. Carpets and koshma (felt rugs), together with jewelry and clothing, are included in the bride’s dowry. Carpets and amulets like aladja and dagdan decorate the car that takes the bride and groom to the wedding venue and then to their evening event. The amulets aim to protect the bride and the groom from bewitchment and evil forces. Nor is the bride alone in wearing traditional clothes and jewelry; numerous guests do so, too. It seems to be impossible to hold a marriage ceremony without artisanal masterpieces.

The cultural, social, and economic changes of the twentieth century partially transformed Turkmen traditional costume, yet its elements—color, fabric, embroidered ornamentation, and cut—continue to indicate ethnic and local affiliation. Traditional rituals and practices, meanwhile, were more profoundly transformed. Over time, the “magical functions of the wedding costume have weakened or disappeared.” Today, some elements of the traditional costume are confined to museum exhibits, yet the bridal costume remains similar to those of previous epochs and remains in high demand. Over time, the elements have been slightly modified, but the main features have been retained, such as embroidered motifs and the use of the traditional fabric keteni.

In the Bazaar: Handicrafts and Consumption

It takes 25-35 minutes to get to Turkmenistan’s main bazaar, Altyn Asyr, from the city center. The bazaar is located in the northern part of Ashgabat, in the Choganli district. The market complex was built in 2011 on the former site of the chaotic but charismatic Tolkuchka bazaar.

The vast territory of the bazaar is divided into specialized trade zones, each of which focuses on certain types of products. In the center is a zone intended for food products. Around it are zones devoted to household goods, building materials and furniture, textiles and footwear, electronics and household appliances, haberdashery and perfumes, jewelry and carpet products, etc. All in all, Altyn Asyr has over 2,000 stalls, divided into five sections: A, B, Ç, E, and D. National handicrafts are presented in section Ç. Carpets, koshma (felt mats), and tapestries are sold between section A and section D. Additionally, one can find some handicrafts in other sections. In total, between 40-60 percent of the bazaar’s offerings are handicrafts or can be considered part of the traditional life of Turkmen: embroidery, national clothes, headdresses, scarves, jewelry, carpets and koshma, amulets, and so on.

The bazaar is very popular in Ashgabat and throughout the country, attracting people from all social groups. The marketplace operates on Wednesdays, Thursdays, Saturdays, and Sundays, with the busiest days being the weekend days and festive days, when many
kiosks with handicrafts are added. In the spring and summer, one can meet women-artisans who offer their embroideries and tapestries from the grass outside the bazaar.

Jewelry

There are very few remaining examples of Turkmen jewelry from previous epochs. This can be explained by the fact that Turkmen women gave about 7,392 kilograms (16,297 lbs) of silver and gold to the Defense Fund during the Second World War. This amounted to about 80 percent of all precious metals collected throughout the Soviet Union.17

The illustrations of Henri Couliboeuf de Blocqueville are one of the most important sources we have about nineteenth-century Turkmen jewelry.18 However, the earliest description of Turkmen women’s jewelry was provided by the German explorer Samuel Gottlieb Gmelin in the eighteenth century.19 Edmund O’Donovan, Henri Moser, Samuil Dudin, Grigoriy Karelin, and de Blocqueville all described the impressive silver ornaments that covered women’s clothing from head to waist, front and back, and acknowledged the presence of expert jewelers among the Turkmen people.20 Armin Vambery, meanwhile, noted the melodious sound produced by this jewelry.21 These historians assessed the degree of Turkish, Persian, Mongolian, and Islamic influence on Turkmen ornaments and jewelry, concluding that they were clearly distinct from those of their neighbors. The earliest accounts, dating from the mid-nineteenth century, describe “a well-developed tradition, using a single medium, silver (gilded or plain); a single stone, the carnelian; arabesque design; and coinage.”22 Centuries later, Turkmen silver ornaments remain essentially unchanged. The wide range of jewelry displayed at the bazaar includes bilezik (bracelets), gulyaka (collar-clasp), tênecir (earrings), asyk (pendant), dagdan (neck jewelry, amulet), and tumar (pectorar jewelry, amulet). Only women’s jewelry is available at the bazaar; silver items for men and jeweled trappings for horses can be seen in museum exhibitions.

Jewelry represents about 20 percent of all handicrafts available at the bazaar. A significant share of these items are made by the silversmiths of Ashgabat and Mary, or by the jewelry plant Turkmenaltyyn, located in Turkmenabad, which produces jewelry for the state jewelry stores. Besides silver, gold, and non-precious ornaments produced in Turkmenistan, one can also find relatively ancient objects imported from Afghanistan, where a sizable Turkmen community is located. Turkmen silver ornaments are among the most requested handicrafts, despite their high price. However, jewelry purchases are made with a much lower frequency than purchases of embroidery or carpets.

Carpets

Artifacts indicate that carpet-weaving has taken place on the territory of present-day Turkmenistan since the Bronze Age.23 In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, carpets acquired an “individual-tribal character”24 that makes it possible to differentiate between the carpets of the five main Turkmen tribes, if not more specific. The ornaments of the Turkmen tribes date back to the totem symbols of the Oguz tribes.25 The Oguz tamgas26 were described by Makhmud Kashgari in Divanu Lugat-it-Turk (1077 AD). Such ornaments—guls27 co-exist with motifs characteristic
of the material culture of the region. Five carpet *guls*, each corresponding to a tribe—Teke, Yomut, Salor, Chovdur, or Ersary—are represented on the national flag of Turkmenistan.28

Each carpet has a small geometric pattern along the border, while the center is filled with medallion *guls*. According to the Russian specialist Elena Tsareva, “the range of carpet products produced by the Turkmen [...] is more than 30 types,”29 and the existing varieties are constantly supplemented with new ones.30 Besides the traditional tapestries, carpet-weaving techniques are used to produce novelties like clutch purses, handbags, cushion covers, and cell phone cases, all of which are available at the bazaar. One might say that globalization has transformed the carpet industry: carpet makers are producing products that meet the needs created by globalization. Carpets and tapestries represent about one-third of the handicrafts for sale in the bazaar.

**Embroidery and Clothes**

Embroidered *yaka* are the most requested of the handicrafts presented in Altyn Asyr. Women buy them to decorate their traditional dresses or modernized versions of traditional dresses. In the first half of the twentieth century, embroidery was confined to the neckline or cuffs of a dress. Today, by contrast, the entirety of a woman’s attire may be lavishly decorated with embroidery. Usually, garments are embroidered in sections and then made into a dress.31 Thus, there are three options for embroidered purchases: “*yaka* only,” “*yaka* and cuffs,” and “*yaka*, cuffs, and additional sections.” With the advent and broader usage of embroidery sewing machines, embroidery is divided into two principal groups: handmade and machine-made. Handmade embroidery is a minimum of 10 times more expensive than machine-made embroidery.

Different Turkmen tribes prefer different embroidery stitches, which makes it possible to identify the origin of a particular piece of embroidery.32 The embroidery’s motifs, which echo the designs on carpets, also help to determine its origin. The favored colors for embroidery and carpets alike are yellow, white, red, and green, which symbolize the four elements of fire, earth, air, and water. The most elegant motifs decorate a woman’s *kurte*, the coat that is part of the costume of a bride or married women. The traditional ornament used on a *kurte* is called the “tree of life”: stylized embroidered tulips are reflected by silver ornaments. Embroidery may also decorate handmade *bokche* (small bags), wallets, *balak* (pants), and *tahya* (skullcaps). In general, this category represents about one-third of handicrafts in the bazaar.33
Amulets

Amulets and talismans, intended to ward off evil spirits and the evil eye, are displayed in houses and apartments. Usually, triangular or round amulets are suspended on the wall above the front door to a house/apartment. They may be accompanied by yuzerlik, a plant that is said to have the magical property of keeping evil spirits away and helps increase one’s number of offspring and reinforce prosperity. Today, yuzerlik is sold in small shopping kiosks in villages and sophisticated boutiques in the cities alike. Stores protected with amulets and yuzerlik can also be found in the bazaar.

Amulets are worn mainly by woman and children. Divided into three main categories (ala-ja, do-ga, and dagdan), they are made from colored braid and wool, sometimes by adding the wood of the sacred tree dagdan (literally, “made from mountain,” a reference to both its hardness and the fact that the tree is found in mountainous areas). Its hardness means that evil spirits cannot dwell in dagdan amulets. Dagdan are widespread in Turkmenistan and are worn under clothes.

The second category of amulets is do-ga. Today, do-ga are made from cloth or wool and have a handwritten prayer enclosed in them. The third category, alaja, is a colored braid. The most popular color combination is white and black, representing the confrontation between the forces of good and evil. Another explanation is the confrontation between strong-willed actions and those led by the heart, analogous to the masculine and feminine sides of character. Another type of alaja is a braid with three or four colors. All in all, amulets represent about 5 percent of bazaar handicrafts.

Plebiscite of the Turkmen Nation of Artisans

At the end of the nineteenth century, the French intellectual Ernest Renan (1823–1892) stated, “The existence of a nation is a daily plebiscite, like the existence of an individual is a perpetual affirmation of life.” According to him, a nation has two faces: the common heritage of memories and the current consent to live in a community and continue to assert an undivided heritage.

A century after Renan, Michael Billig explored the idea of daily representation of a nation. His conclusions intersected with Renan’s approach: both insist on the idea that citizens express a “daily plebiscite” by indicating, flagging, appreciating, remembering, and sharing the nation.

Continuity of Knowledge

For centuries, the Turkmen people have valorized their common heritage by producing and consuming handcrafted products. Altyn Asyr is one of the public places where one can watch how Turkmens express their daily consent to live together. Producers and consumers of handicrafts from all over Turkmenistan meet at the bazaar. Among the country’s regions (velayat)—Akhal, Balkan, Mary, Dashoguz and Lebap—Akhal and Balkan are the most represented among sellers. Akhal artisans or members of their families dominate almost all handcrafted products, while Balkan and Mary artisans are mostly present in the carpet section.

The interviews I conducted at...
the bazaar highlight the everyday plebiscite nature of crafts in Turkmenistan. Djahan is a typical representative of bazaar attendees, particularly of sellers-producers. She lives in Akhal velayat and is about 28 years old. Three times a week, she comes to the bazaar to offer yaka embroidered by herself and by women in her family. Djahan’s assortment includes handmade and machine-made embroidery. When I bought a yaka of green, blue, red, and white, Djahan told me about the motifs used in embroidery. Her words demonstrate that to wear a Turkmen dress is to continue a tradition—the same motifs, colors, and stitches remain popular:

I know the motifs that were used by my mother and grandmother. I also insert traditional Turkmen motifs into my embroidery, mostly for handmade items. The motif goçak protects against evil; you can see it on the tandoor. Floral or geometric ornaments also have protective force.

Djahan added that the yaka ornaments could be used to embroider tahýa or kurte. She went into great detail, showing a genuine knowledge of the ornaments. Other bazaar sellers and their clients provided equally in-depth descriptions of embroidery ornaments and Turkmen women’s dress.

Ogultaç lives in Balkan velayat. In her fifties, she is an artisan who makes carpets. Carpet-making is a family tradition: she learned it from her mother and grandmother, and today she makes carpets with her daughters, though the youngest, Khat-

idja, does embroidery. With her friends, who are also carpet-makers, Ogultaç comes to Altyn Asyr on Saturdays. To illustrate her family’s long tradition of carpet-weaving, Ogultaç showed me a wide variety of carpets and tapestries, from the biggest halý to the smallest clutch bag.

I have a large collection of carpets made in previous years by my grandmother and mother. They were very skillful and taught me many things. I did my first carpet with my mother. When my daughters grew up, I passed my skills on to them. My daughters will transfer this knowledge to my granddaughters. Turkmen women will always make them.

Ogultaç showed me relatively old carpets, dating back to the 1980s, and more recent ones. Like my previous interlocutor, she knew motifs and could distinguish carpets with teke, beshir, and yomud gul ornamentation. She demonstrated a knowledge of the history of carpet production and highlighted the importance of continuity in carpet-making.

Maral lives in Ashgabat. A thirty-year-old accountant, she comes to the bazaar only once a week, on Saturdays. She offers silver jewelry made by her husband, a silversmith. She pointed out the items made by her husband and by his father.

My husband is a hereditary silversmith from Mary region. He makes traditional or modern jewelry. If you would like to order something, you could call him or meet with him and explain exactly what you want. He has great experience with making preordered pieces.

While women artisans dominate the fields of embroidery and carpets, silver jewelry is mostly the domain of men. Maral herself does not make any silver ornaments, though she does design them. I later spoke to her husband, Begenç, who told me more about Turkmen jewelry. My conversations with Maral and Begenç demonstrated the heredity of silver jewelry production.

The talismans produced by my next interlocutor serve as a good example of widespread demand in Turkmen society. Mamadjan is about 65 years old. She is from Akhal velayat and comes to the bazaar twice a week. Very energetic and charismatic, she makes alaja amulets for her relatives and for the bazaar’s clients. She has alaja for every occasion, from wearing as a wardrobe detail to decorating the interior of a home. She also offers dagdan and doğa, but their producers are from Dashoguz. During our conversation, Mamadjan shared stories about the meaning of Turkmen talismans:

Alaja protects against evil forces. The most powerful are the combination of white and black threads. I recommend that you take an alaja with dagdan to wear on your wrist. This will help you, as you travel a lot and meet many people. I am also wearing an alaja in my clothes.

These conversations with sellers and artisans demonstrate the continuity of handicrafts and traditional practices, and sellers’ respect for both. They also show the transmission of knowledge on traditional practices and handicrafts from the older generation.
to the younger generation, and the widespread demand for and use of handicrafts in daily life.

**Everyday Items**

In Turkmenistan, the average monthly wages in 2013, 2016, and 2017 were 1,047, 1,381, and 1,509 manat, respectively, equating US$299, $395, and $431 at the official rate.45 The report on retail prices for products and services prepared by the State Statistics Committee of Turkmenistan states that a çөrek flatbread costs 1 manat, a dozen eggs 3 manat, a kilogram of fish 11 manat, a kilogram of sausage about 13 manat, and a kilogram of soft cheese 15 manat.46 Prices for handicrafts range from 25-30 manat for a machine-made yaka to 250-550 for a handmade one. The most expensive carpets, those with a high knot density, range from 800 to 1,500 manat. Those with low or average density cost only 100-300 manat. A carpet clutch or small women’s bag costs between 150 and 450 manat. A handcrafted talisman alaja, therefore, costs about the same as a çөrek, while an embroidered yaka costs a little more than soft cheese. The prices of handcrafted products are thus affordable for Turkmens.

**Sellers and Buyers**

As mentioned above, far more handicrafts are displayed on weekend days and during holidays. The bazaar attracts more potential buyers on these days, which prompts more artisans to also come. Many of these “weekend artisans” have a professional background that is not related to their bazaar activities: five days per week they work as accountants or clerks, but once or twice per week they come to Altyn Asyr with their handicrafts. These non-professional sellers also offer products made by their relatives. During working hours at the bazaar, they sometimes leave their stalls to purchase items offered by other sellers. Those who offer embroidery purchase carpets or dagdan with yuzerlik, and vice versa. Yet even when a seller is also a buyer, he or she remains above all an artisan.

Women constitute the majority of artisans and sellers in the bazaar, producing almost all handicrafts except jewelry. But it would be wrong to say that men are excluded from artisanal practices. They are engaged in herding flocks of sheep and camels, whose wool is necessary to produce carpets, tapestries, and felt rugs. Men also make silver ornaments and wooden handicrafts.

I talked to some Turkmens who visited the bazaar to purchase handcrafted items. Batyr and Djer en are a married couple. Both are working professionals. While Batyr was choosing a carpet, Djer en explained:

I can embroider yaka for myself, but I don’t have much time. I came to the bazaar to buy a ready-made yaka. We will also purchase a carpet, as we just moved to a new apartment.

My interviewees—Mamadjan, Ogultaç, Djahan, Maral, Begenc, Djer en, and Batyr—are typical representatives of the bazaar public. They wear clothes embroidered by themselves or by their compatriots; their houses and apartments are decorated by carpets they made themselves or bought at the Altyn Asyr bazaar. On a daily basis, they produce and they consume; they sell and buy local handcrafted products. This commercial activity supports and revives their traditions, serving as an everyday plebiscite of the nation.

At the same time, Turkmen cultural heritage, such as handicrafts and ornaments, is broadly presented in official narratives. Carpet guls are represented on the national flag. The Day of the Carpet has been celebrated on the last Sunday in May every year since 1992. The State Carpet Museum in Ashgabat, which has hundreds of examples of Turkmen carpets, opened in 1993. Permanent exhibitions of Turkmen embroidery, jewelry, and garments are visible in state museums across the country. President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov writes books devoted to Turkmenistan’s tangible and intangible cultural heritage.47 The national narrative created and maintained by Turkmen citizen-artisans is therefore reflected in the country’s official narrative.

Billig’s analysis of the nature of banal nationalism in “the established nations of the West”48 demonstrated that their nationhood is continually reproduced through political discourses and cultural and media products. Taken together, they narrate the “endemic condition”49
of “state-guided” nationalism. In Turkmenistan, “people-guided” and “state-guided” narratives overlap over the meaning of handcrafts in everyday nationalism.

Self-Orientalism and Exoticism: International Visitors

International visitors also constitute a share of bazaar consumers. For them, handicrafts are not an everyday plebiscite of the nation, to which they do not belong, but rather an element of Orientalism.

The Orient has always constituted an intrinsic part of European (Western) civilization, serving as one of Europe’s “constituent Others.” Orientalism is defined as “a style of thought based upon ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and (most of the time) ‘the Occident.’” Following this logic, Self-Orientalism is defined as the decision by the “subjects” of Orientalism to highlight their own Otherness to speak to a Western imagination. This section, dedicated to foreign expatriates and tourists in the bazaar, seeks to understand which perception—Orientalism or Self-Orientalism—dominates interactions between domestic sellers-artisans and international visitors.

According to tourist agencies based in Turkmenistan, Altyn Asyr is a prime tourist attraction in the country. International tourists (whose post-independence number peaked at 1998 in 300,000 before falling to a nadir of 3,400 in 2000) visit bazaars in Ashgabat and in other cities, such as Mary and Turkmenabat. Bazaar visits are listed on sample travel itineraries and suggested by tourist guides. Ashgabat’s expatriate community also actively purchases Turkmen handicrafts at bazaars, commercial centers, and specialized shops.

Tourists and expats are attracted to bazaars to purchase souvenirs or presents for their relatives and families. Sellers indicate that tourists prefer to purchase small handcrafted items: mobile phone covers, clutch bags, and scarves. Expats are less interested in embroidered yaka, jewelry, or Turkmen traditional clothes. Bazaar sellers agree that locals are the principal consumers of handcrafts and their main source of revenue, but they appreciate foreign visitors’ interest in their handicrafts.

While foreign travelers’ need for small and non-expensive items could be explained by the limits of luggage space and time, expats have more opportunities to purchase handcrafted products. Many of them, having lived in the country for some period of time, demonstrate a genuine interest in Turkmen handicrafts. They make gowns from keteni with embroidered yaka, they wear Turkmen silver ornaments, and they decorate their apartments with Turkmen carpets or koshma.

Marie is a French expat who has lived in Ashgabat with her husband for a long time. Her days are very busy with her kids, but she likes to spend some of her precious free time at Altyn Asyr. She has acquired a number of embroidered pieces, tapestries, Turkmen keteni cloth, and scarves. Though Marie perceives Turkmen handicrafts to repre-
sent the culture of the Other, she does not interpret them as exotic. When she wears a Turkmen *asýk* pendant or a Turkmen scarf made of *keteni* at work on a daily basis, she demonstrates her respect for the host country’s culture. The Turkmen carpets and amulets that decorate her apartment can be interpreted in that same spirit: “Embroiderries and carpets are colorful and they are made with great taste. Handicrafts reflect Turkmen culture and they look very bright and modern. I’d love to decorate my apartment with Turkmen carpets,” she explained.

Her husband, Sebastien, was similarly positive about Turkmen handicrafts: “Turkmen women look very elegant and stylish in their traditional long dresses with embroidery. Today, it is rare to see such elegance on the streets of French cities.”

Olga has been working in Turkmenistan for a year. She came to Altyn Asyr with members of her family, who were visiting her for a few days. They were looking to purchase a *koshma* for their *dacha* in Russia. Olga had experience of living in other Central Asian countries, and her interpretation of handcrafted products blended a perception of their exoticness with an aesthetic appreciation and a utilitarian approach:

Turkmen felt rugs differ from Kyrgyz ones. I cannot say that one is better than the other, because both are unique. I really appreciate that their ornaments create a special atmosphere in my home and they fit perfectly in every interior, whether the furniture is modern or antique.

She also commented on the silver *asýk* that she wears:

I purchased the *asýk* during my first visit to the bazaar. I was charmed by its simple beauty and I know that it symbolizes a woman. Sometimes I wear the *asýk* to work with my office suit. And yes, by wearing it, I partly feel my connection to Turkmen history, art, and probably to the Turkmen people.

Foreign tourists interpret handmade items slightly differently. They perceive handcrafted products to be exotic and even magical. Julian, a tourist from Switzerland, explained:

Central Asian markets are places with a special atmosphere. Turkmen rugs, embroideries, and clothes are kind of like we saw in Uzbekistan, where I was a few days ago, but they are also different. I like the colorful dresses and scarves that I see everywhere here. The color combinations are striking. I don’t think I will purchase anything except a round amulet. This will decorate my home to remind me about my trip to Asia.

Hannah, a German traveler, commented:

I always dreamed of going to the region of mountains and steppes. What I see here, around me, is so exciting. People are so friendly and smiling. Women look beautiful in their oriental clothes. I bought embroidered phone cases for my daughters and camel miniatures for my friends. I believe they will be happy to get them, because the embroidered cases are unique and they stand out among all those ordinary phone cases.

These international visitors’ comments reflect two different but intersecting narratives. Many expats testify to their integration...
into Turkmen society through the active consumption of national handicrafts: they decorate their houses with carpets and felt rugs and wear silver jewelry and embroidered items. International tourists apparently interpret Turkmen handicrafts mostly as exotic and catchy souvenirs. However, except for a few small items, like mobile phone cases and camel miniatures, almost nothing within the bazaar is made specifically for international guests.54 From observations and conversations with sellers and buyers, it appears that the majority of Turkmen handicrafts, garments, embroidery, carpets, and jewelry are aimed at and bought by local residents.

International visitors thus consume products that are designed for locals. In the eyes of foreign travelers, the exoticism distinguishes and unites Turkmen artisanal items in the context of other souvenirs bought at bazaars in Central Asia or beyond. However, artisans are driven by the needs of Turkmen society, not by international requests. With minor exceptions, Turkmens do not cultivate their own exoticism to attract international tourists’ or expats’ attention. Artisanal products are made for domestic consumption.

Conclusion

The case of Turkmenistan is applicable to a greater or lesser degree to every country of Central Asia. Existing or reinvented traditions impact the contemporary lifestyles of Central Asian societies. Through traditional practices, which ensure the use and consumption of handicrafts, people-guided national narratives are expressed and constructed on a daily basis, enabling the Turkmen national identity to be seen as banal and obvious.

The plebiscite of the nation in Turkmenistan is realized through the role given to handicrafts in everyday life. Turkmen motifs are identified and known, traditional clothes are worn, and amulets are requested and used beyond and within the bazaar. Artisans and their masterpieces nurture and foster “people-guided” and “state-guided” national narratives. As long as the “tree of life” is an essential embroidery motif on a kurte and the kurte is an essential element of the marriage ceremony, handicrafts will exist and will continue to epitomize the everyday plebiscite of a Turkmen nation of artisans.

However, in recent years, Turkmen colorful ornaments and traditional clothes have begun to pop up in the collections of Indian and Pakistani designers. If Turkmenistan does not put appropriate preventative measures in place, Ashgabat could lose the “licensing” and “branding” of its crafts and motifs. The same is true of other Central Asian motifs, which are now widely used in haute couture or designers’ collections, often without any mention of any Central Asian country. In accordance with intellectual property law as well as respect for traditional knowledge and cultural heritage, I propose here a series of recommendations that would help to protect Turkmen craftsmanship, handicraft techniques, and motifs.

Policy Recommendations

Recommendations for the central government:

• Initiate a working group comprised of representatives of governmental institutions; the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) and UNESCO; the state carpet, fabric, and jewelry plants; the Turkmen State Academy of Arts; experts on Turkmen material culture; and international consultants to prepare comprehensive files on Turkmen traditional knowledge or cultural heritage, such as Turkmen craftsmanship, handicraft techniques, and motifs. The documents will be useful for classifying and registering Turkmen cultural heritage in the International Trademark System under WIPO or for inscribing it on the UNESCO Lists of Intangible Cultural Heritage.

• Conduct an international lobbying campaign with the help of WIPO experts and WIPO member states to classify and internationally register Turkmen traditional knowledge under the “Turkmen” brand under the International Trademark System of the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) in accordance with the conditions established by the Madrid Agreement concerning the International Registration of Marks (1891) and the Madrid Protocol (1989).

• Inscribe Turkmen cultural heritage on the UNESCO Lists of Intangible Cultural Heritage. This will ensure the recognition of Turkmen heritage as part of the cultural heritage of humanity and acknowledge the role of Turkmen
artisans in the production, maintenance, and safeguarding of this cultural heritage, which enriches global cultural diversity.

**Recommendations for international and local donor organizations:**

- Provide technical assistance in designing, developing, and implementing national intellectual property strategy related to Turkmen traditional knowledge.
- In cooperation with the EBRD, OSCE, and USAID, the Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs of Turkmenistan should develop a training in how to market and distribute Turkmen handicrafts to international audiences, as well as small grant programs for individual entrepreneurs to support small-scale handicrafts.
- In cooperation with the UNESCO Intangible Heritage Fund, the Turkmen State Commission for UNESCO should develop preventive programs and activities aimed at safeguarding Turkmen cultural heritage.

**Notes**

2. Ibid., 8.
3. Ibid., 8.
8. These scholars include Georgiy Karpov, Galina Vasilieva, Sergey Polyakov, Yuriy Bregel, Gennadiy Markov, Anna Morozova, Annadurdy Orazov, Ata Dijikiev, Tchary Yazliev, and Orazberdy Amantyev.
12. Ibid., 200.
16. Ibid., 200.
the Altyn Asyr bazaar, where they constituted 60 percent at weekends and during the holiday season, and 40 percent on other days.


19 Samuel Gottlieb Gmelin [1774-1848], cited by Diba, Turkmen Jewelry, 282.

20 Diba, Turkmen Jewelry, 17.

21 Armin Vambery, Travels in Central Asia (London, 1864).

22 Diba, Turkmen Jewelry, 23.

23 The word dagdan has the double meaning of “amulet” and “ash tree.”


26 A tamga is the emblem of a particular tribe, clan, or family.

27 Gul is a medallion-like design element typical of Turkmen traditional carpets.


29 Elena G. Tsareva, Iskusstvo kvozodeliia i kultur’noe nasledie Turkmenistana (Ashgabat and St. Petersburg: Kulturnoe nasledie Turkmenistana, 2000), 203.

30 These include the floor carpet (haly), the door curtain (ensi, kapounnuk, and dezlik), carpet bags for storing utensils, dishes and clothes (torda, tchowal, mafratch, and khordjoun), camel blanket (asmaldyk), prayer mat (namazlyk), burial mat (ayatlyk), yurt band (iolam, bou, and yup), cradle rug (salachak), and Quran case (bochtche).


32 Ibid.

33 I include in this category telpeks and men’s clothes.

34 The word dagdan has the double meaning of “amulet” and “ash tree.”

35 Schletzer and Schletzer, Old Silver Jewellery, 48.

36 Derived from Arabic, doma means “prayer call.”

37 Author’s field research (AFR) in Altyn Asyr bazaar, October 2017.


39 Ibid.

40 AFR, May 2018.


42 Ibid.

43 Tandoor (Turkm. tadyr) refers to a cylindrical clay oven used in cooking and baking in Turkmenistan and Central Asia more broadly.

44 There are a few women silversmiths in modern Turkmenistan. In earlier eras, Turkmen jewelry was produced exclusively by men.


47 Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov, Türkmen Medenieti (Ashgabat, 2015); Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov, Bakhshis are Heredts of National Happiness (Ashgabat, 2015).

48 Billig, Banal Nationalism, 6.

49 Ibid.


51 Ibid.


54 However, in the boutiques in Turkmen hotels like “Nisa,” “Grand Otel Turkmen,” and “Ak Altyn,” one can find a wide range of souvenirs made especially for foreign tourists. Among these souvenirs are embroidered boxes, miniatures of Turkmen women and men in national costume, and miniatures of camels and Turkmen horses.