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Color Shards and Carpets: Context in Dagestan

Lorraine Ross

Dagestan—The name itself means land of mountains, and people even in the lowlands usually maintained their links with their auls or regions. The second year I was there, this was even more true as many Russians and other non-Caucasus peoples had left the area as there were various heated political battles with serious ramifications for living peacefully there. I was doing my field research amongst the Tabasaran, one of the 38 officially recognized ethnic groups in Dagestan. Having descended to Makhachkala, which is nestled between the mountains and the Caspian Sea I felt the heat and humidity of the lowlands. Makhachkala was always like the home base when either coming or going to Moscow.

Most of my time in Makhachkala was spent at the Institute of History Archeology and Ethnography and this day was no exception. I was using the archives there to find information on Dagestan weaving to supplement the first hand information I obtained from the mountain people themselves. During that time I was staying with a family of Komyk origins, another of the officially recognized groups in the Caucasus region. Farida, one of my key links with the Institute, accompanied me home chatting as we slowly covered the few blocks within about twenty minutes.

We entered our enclosure which met the edge of the sidewalk and hid within it a veritable oasis from the heat and dust of the public road. Here grapes weighed the vines strung upwards over the walls and small round fruits related to plums were so plentiful as to provide a constant supply of quenching juice. We stopped to put on inside slippers before entering the house itself. Usually a drink was quick at hand as well as fresh fruit from the well planned garden.

This day my hostess was planning to roll up the interior carpet which covered the large living area except for a small exposed lane of polished wood on either length of the room. "They give off such heat" she explained as she waved her hand in front of her face. They have to be removed from the room for summer. She continued on about how exhausting it would be with the wool carpets. "You do not have a carpet culture," she told me, "You don't know how much problem it is with them. She lamented at being unable to get moth balls this year, as they had been unavailable in the market. Her deep whispery voice made her seem out of breath as her somewhat hunchbacked frame moved to the end of the room. All three of us would roll together the huge carpets putting the splendid overall red color away for the summer. As we rolled the carpet up, trying to keep it as even and tight as possible. I considered her statement, "You do not have a carpet culture."

Having just returned from the mountains where carpets like these were being made by hand knot by knot, I realized the relativity of her statement.

In the mountains there is also a "carpet culture" and yet they would not be rolling up their carpets, putting them away in moth balls for the summer. There would be very different steps to taking care of their carpets. It was amazing to think that a day's bus ride from the mountains would suddenly put these carpets in a different situation even though I was still amongst one of the Caucasus ethnic groups. Carpets had originally been used to defend the homes from cold, once having been even laid on earthen floors but now thanks to progressive times on plaster covered stone or on wood. Having once slept in summer in a mountain abode bearing an earthen roof, I understand the necessity of having carpets to adorn the floors and walls. They fulfill an aesthetic as well as practical necessity and their treatment is quite different.

I remember my first entrance to one of the small villages. I was being shown around the village and as we clambered up to a rooftop, a dull constant flapping sound caused me to turn about to discern what might be making such a noise. There on another roof top somewhat farther up the mountain I could see a carpet laid out on a rope with an elderly figure steadily beating it with a stick. It was a method of cleaning. I was to learn later that if carpets need a more thorough cleaning, they might get hauled down to an icy river, laid out on the rocks and then saturated with water and rubbed with what the locals considered poor quality Soviet washing powder. Then the rug may be left for a day to hang in the sun.

An item put in a different context loses some of its original quality while gaining others. In Makhachkala amongst the Komyk with whom I stayed there was a real emphasis on the carpet staying extremely clean and neat. At the same time in the Tabasaran family with whom I spent much time in the mountains, carpets were part of the everyday goings on within a family, even to receiving accidents from the many small children. In both situations the carpets are a mark of belonging to the Caucasus culture, but there is a slight shift in what is emphasized.

We easily forget that everything must be always considered in context in our desire to categorize and explain the places and objects which cross our path. I have only to gaze upon the small piece of broken peacock blue ceramic tile which now lay among the assortment of objects crowding out my desk. One sunny morning in Derbent as I had set out for the market, it had been most fortuitous to cross along the back of a multi-family building whereupon I discovered an area of broken tile strewn out in the dust. Picking a piece up, I had noted how it was that same exquisite blue which was found on many exterior door and window frames, interior shelving or often found on the bottom half of interior spaces. The color at once reflected the bluest summer mountain sky and the bluish green of the Caspian Sea. Thinking I had somehow captured this color in all its splendor, I saved it.

While returning to the United States from Russia, I reached into my pocket and absent-mindedly running my fingers over the smooth surface of the shard, I fondly remembered Dagestan, with all its beauty and problems. Pulling it out, I was suddenly dismayed and somewhat shocked. It had transformed. The color no longer reflected its surroundings, both natural and created as it did in its original context. It had become swallowed up by a cacophony of color so that it

seemed to be a somewhat dull blue and perfectly ordinary in its existence. Still, I kept it as a small piece of something greater which I had felt in Dagestan.

The experiences caused me to consider carefully the way carpets and carpet cultures can be viewed. Carpets had classifications and particular weaves which could be charted and analyzed but like the tiny ceramic shard I held before me it was the context which breathed life into their threads. Only a relatively short distance away from the original location something could adopt new meaning and concerns while dropping others. The differences between the mountains and the lowlands cultures, though both can be said to be carpet cultures highlighted these differences.

My journeys and travels continued to elaborate on the significance of the carpet for Tabasaran identity, and in a more general sense Caucus identity. A key part of the task was always to be aware of the back and forth communication whether explicit or implicit between people and object. . Such communication reveals, a contextual understanding of the culture which made these objects.

Within the Tabasaran mountain regions I found myself focusing on three families. I was participant and researcher, learning the rules of society sometimes by inadvertently trespassing the unwritten laws and at other times learning the processes of Tabasaran life through conversations, sharing work and simply living. I was keenly reminded that I was not only the *observer* but the *observed*. Early in my journey the first time, I found that I was as much of an attraction and oddity to them as I had found their ways of life, which are almost a century behind in western technology. For many, I was the first North American they had ever seen in their lives and so we shared a mutual curiosity towards each other. One day, for example, sitting amongst a group of women, I heard the comment that people in Canada must have thin short hair, like mine. It was a situation which highlighted to me that I was the *observed* as well as the *observer*. They were trying to unfortunately generalize from one person-- an error which I hoped to avoid when putting together what I had learned about the importance of weaving within Tabasaran culture. I also hoped that I would manage to do the right behaviors to leave the people with a good impression not only of myself but of North American peoples.

In many respects, what I was doing is represented by a Mobius strip. Years ago, when I was first introduced to the Mobius strip, I had marveled over the simple concept that following one edge of the strip brought one all the way around to the other side of the same strip and then back to the starting point. One point was inextricably connected to the whole and led one to the other side, which is another point of viewing. I was not alone in my fascination. Years later I found Catherine Bateson, express a similar interest in the Mobius strip (1994). The Mobius strip was a metaphor for learning to understand a people. For me, it was a metaphor to explain my journey and my study of women's weaving amongst the Tabasaran in Dagestan, Russia. The weaving is a part of the Mobius strip-- a part of the larger culture. My way of looking allowed insight into the culture and in turn the other parts of the strip,-- other aspects of the culture,-- were to reveal aspects of the importance of weaving within the culture.

Another way of looking at this is to bisect the Mobius strip. This leaves two parts of the original object linked together, much as one would see in the magic of two rings intersecting each other. These two parts can never be the original object but they are always inextricably linked. I then could never claim to have the entire whole of the Tabasaran culture, but I did record part of one of the magic rings which intersects another and which, when originally together emblematically represented Tabasaran culture.

Several factors operated in conjunction with each other to keep women's weaving very emblematic of Tabasaran culture. Under Islamic influence, women had always remained more isolated in their villages since they had maintained the homes while men traded goods or took care of livestock in the lowlands during the winter. Since women did not come into contact with neighboring groups, each village eventually had very original design features so that it was possible for the Caucasus people to identify the wearer of a particular woven shoe design or cloth style as originating from a specific village. (Wixman, 1980). Potential assimilation of groups, and hence designs, was further inhibited by constant rivalry over pasture lands owned by clans, leading to division among the Tabasaran as well as between the Tabasaran and other Caucasus peoples. Woven goods, along with other artistic products, were used as commodities in trade centers. If a particular village design became popular, it was less likely to change rapidly because it heightened the group's identity and, in this way, also served to resist assimilation by other neighboring groups.

Belief, tradition, and cultural understanding are brought together when we view Tabasaran aesthetic creations. Made alive through the artist who has submitted to the artistic call, learned the cultural traditions and understood intuitively the connections between living and image, between all the materials which give the work life, the aesthetic whole surpasses any one of its singular components. It potentially links other humans within the community who receive the work and recognize their own lives, their own cultural histories.

Would someone have recognized the origin of that shard I held, which in its small form highlighted some prevalent traits of Dagestan architecture and Dagestan presence? Perhaps, and if they could, I felt sure that they too would bear links with Caucous community, identity and cultural history. Their story and experience of carpets would be unique to the context which they had experienced for both carpets and shards originate from specific locations. My shard, grown cold in its contextual removal, would once again be imbued with the warp and weft of Caucous culture.

References

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