

Sharing the Mountain; Tabasaran Weaving Culture

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The village rains had swept right past the door of our enclosure moving ever downwards to still lower parts of the village. Then the steady breezes helped to half dry the earthen path upon which so many villagers trod. I live near the center of the village, or at least the center of the older part, for in two years since my last journey here the small village was growing considerably. Part of this is due to the war torn regions around the area, and often entire families are returning to the villages of their parents or relatives in a hope to be able to make a living for themselves and have peace for their family.

I had been the entire school year studying in Kazan, a day's ride east of Moscow on the train, and had tried to get letters through to the people I knew in Dagestan. I was concerned about the war between the Chechen and the Russians, which made travel routes to Dagestan difficult at best. Many people had tried to discourage me from taking the risky journey. It began first via train from Moscow to Makhachkala, the capital of Dagestan, then to Derbent and finally via bus and foot to the villages themselves. Now high in the mountain villages among my Tabasaran friends I felt much safer with the fearful journey behind me. War creates uncertainty and people were more skeptical of outsiders. I depended on the people I came to know two years ago to reassure others that my presence in the villages was with good intent.

I stay in a house where three families live together. All were related either through marriage or by blood to the head male. Today my friends, a neighbor and many children decide to take me for a walk to show me a particular place.

We leave our enclosure making our way upwards towards the well closest to our area. The path takes us through the ancient graveyard, where stones lean precariously at various angles. There the path divides: one leading slightly downwards and one which leads off to a newer part of the village. We first descend along the lower winding path often used by sheep and cattle returning home from the mountain pastures or oxen pulling cartloads of wood.

Then as we progress steeply upward, the area grows more wooded and the fog which we had seen coming to our valley drifts closer and thicker about us. Five year old T____ had held my hand almost the entire way as we climbed the mountainous area. N____ had carried her two and a half year old almost all the way on her back. Out of all the children, only one uttered protests of being tired. Everyone was urged on and X____, a boy of sixteen and the oldest male of the present group assumed the unchallenged role of guide for the whole procession. He is not working as shepherd today and takes pleasure in showing this area of the mountains. We passed several large piles of rock gathered together here and there. Later, these would be picked up, often with aid of oxen and a handmade cart and hauled to an area where someone wished to build a house, or perhaps add onto an existing structure.

Suddenly we come into an area where wild flowers of unimaginable variety fill the sheltered hollow we have reached. As we continue our climb, I am at times literally wading knee high in a giant bouquet of sorts. M____ points out to me that some of these flowers only bloom for two to three days. It is a fragile beauty and I think something like the fragility of their own lives in such a challenging place as the Caucasus mountains.

M____ sees my amazement at such a place, smiles quietly and tells me it is a carpet—A carpet of flowers. She looks at me intently to see my reaction and I suddenly make the connection. The older carpets are rich with flowered designs, and even many of the more modern ones carry a flowered pattern somewhere through the carpet. The flowers have grown here for hundreds of years and the attempted carpet standardization in earlier Soviet times did not give them their ideas. The Tabasaran had been in a sense bringing the outside inside to their homes making their living spaces a flood of restful colors as beautiful as they found in the soft cushioned dips here and there between the towering chain of mountains and the crevasses below.

We begin picking some of the flowers and move higher still out of the little sheltered valley almost to the very top of the first mountain. They discard as many flowers as they gather. The fog has moved in so thick that we are in a little world unseen by anyone.

Pictures are always an event. My friends make sure that all look fine. Two of them have even brought a change of skirt which they don to look more beautiful. They share a comb, and discuss how and where they should stand. Laughing and joking they break out into a song and wave their hands in a typical dance gesture of the Caucasus.

In the popular weaving culture the human figure does appear and the female is often in the form of a dancer, facing front, arms bent gently out away from the body. The male too can be shown as a dancer, unmistakably from the Caucasus as he sports the "papakh", a heavy lambskin cap for men. The figures may be generic humans or actually be a specific person. Carpets made for special occasions such as weddings often had a pair of dancers, and it was said that sometimes the dancers looked as the real people did. A myth in the area supports the idea that they can and occasionally do make portrait images in the carpets. They say that if you stay long enough in the village the master weavers can create a portrait of you in a carpet. They tell this myth with great pride, to emphasize the Tabasaranian reputation of being the most skilled weavers of the Caucasus. Nevertheless, one sometimes finds clear representational images of folks who have never set foot in these villages. Lenin still hangs from some walls, and a very popular Azerbaïdjanian singer has been produced on several occasions. They tell me she is much older now but still she is very popular. These pictorial images are always done on larger carpets and never on the small "padyshkas" or cushions the women create for stools. The portrait images demand a greater working area to capture the person's likeness.

The carpet then, can become a way of representing a person or occasion—but today the camera recorded whom they wished. It was a rare occasion for them to have their picture taken. Here the recorded image is of special occasion and they took pleasure in the process. After a couple of photos, X_____ takes my camera, and takes a few more photos, not feeling the necessity for squaring off the camera, and apparently undisturbed by the rolling fog about us.

The picked flowers are used for embellishments in the photos, and then for the most part discarded, a reminder here that everything is process, rather than considered for existing in some particular state. The flowers are part of the continuity of life and death. Similarly, there is enjoyment in the act of preparing for and taking the photograph, and a relative unconcern that there should be a photograph for each pose taken. In a parallel way, the nonchalant passage through the graveyard site hints that the line between life and death is not so defined. Carpets themselves, which may take a month of continuous labor are simply laid on the floor, and may receive many accidents from numerous small children. Things are useful as they are used but not entirely ends in themselves. Everyday life itself is a process.

The fog now is so thick that I hope X_____ or one of the others knows the best way down the mountain. We have made many turns and although I feel generally the right direction in which to go, the fog is so thick that I can see only a few feet ahead. We must descend. Somehow in the descent our group becomes divided, and we call out to the others as we realize we have lost their company in the thick underbrushed area, but receive no answer. It is only at the bottom we all meet again to cross the valley together and work our way up again to the village. Down below the weather is much warmer and without fog, although undoubtedly there will soon be rain again.

It is time to rest and to eat. Still there are always things which must be done. I help fulfill an incessant need the community has by readily taking up the kuvshen, the water jug, which is associated with the woman and occasionally seen on the carpets. My life has become interwoven with theirs and I learn more and more of how the Tabasaran weave their lives together. Tomorrow I am certain that on rising I will find N_____ at her upright loom busily working on a "padyshka". The process of weaving and the process of living will eventually result in still another Tabasaran carpet, and another cushion, which mark the rhythms of life in this Tabasaran village.