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Songs Woven in the Warp and Weft of Persian Rugs

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Abstract

Naghsh khani is the old tradition of reading/singing the rug patterns during the creation of hand-made carpets in Iran. This tradition has been transmitted orally for generations. In the past, the majority of *naghshkhans* were men, as Sharia law prohibited women from singing or talking in presence of strange men. After the revolution of 1979, however, due to an economic decline, women took over the workshops and started to sing freely. Recently, *naghshkhani*, has become the center of interest for many researchers in Iran since it is being abolished. Despite researchers' "legitimate aim" to preserve *naghshkhani*, this tradition has been changed. Therefore, I think the process of change in *naghshkhani*, and weavers' labor require more attention than preservation. Instead of *naghshkhani*, I focus on the sound origin, women weavers, who change the atmosphere of their workplace by singing. In order to do so, I examine social, economic, and cultural changes that transformed the soundscape of carpet workshops by drawing on my interviews from my unusual fieldwork in two Kashan handmade carpet workshops. The major questions that this paper answers are: why are these women workers singing and what do they sing about? This study seeks to highlight the neglected female weavers' hard efforts and to represent the value of these hand-craft artisans as the comb is not their only tool — their voice is also weaved in the warp and weft of Persian rug. This paper also contributes to the study of labor's songs and the field of ethnomusicology in Iran.

Key Words:

Naghshkhani, Carpet, Women, Iran, Labor

After three hours of driving from Tehran to Kashan and an additional two hours of searching for the carpet workshops in the 118-degree summer heat of Kashan, Nasim finally found one workshop that welcomed her inside. This was the third workshop that she had found. The first two workshops she visited did not let her inside because she did not have a research permit. Accordingly, she had to negotiate her access with the supervisor, Mrs. Moosavi, who

asked her, “Why do you want to record our voices? “It’s for research,” Nasim replied. “That’s alright then, you can come in, but please don’t share our videos on social media.” Since all the workers were women and they were not wearing a *hijab* because of the heat, her male driver did not get permission to go inside. Nasim asked Mrs. Moosavi to do *naghshkhani*, but she did not know how to do it.

Naghshkhani is the task of reading rug patterns for weavers in hand-made carpet workshops in Iran. *Naghsh* in Persian means pattern, or map and *khan* means reciting, reading, or singing. *Naghshkhan* is the person who loudly reads or recites the carpet map for the weavers in order to make the process of weaving faster and easier. For instance, the *naghshkhan* would loudly say to workers: two red nodes next to three blue ones on the second row, and forth column. *Naghshkhans* are often supervisors or owners of the workshop. This tradition has been passed orally to each generation.

Recently, *naghshkhani*, has become the center of interest for many researchers such as ethnomusicologists in Iran. In the name of preserving “our intangible cultural heritage”, a few Iranian ethnomusicologists are working with national and international cultural organizations to record and document the *naghshkhani* tradition. Part of this project also includes singing styles and the music-making in carpet workshops.

Despite these ethnomusicologists’ “legitimate aim” to preserve *naghshkhani*, this tradition has changed over time and will continue to do so. Therefore, I think that the process of change in *naghshkhani*, weavers, and their labor require more attention than just preservation. In this paper the role of the researcher is extended as an attentive listener, rather than a cultural heritage preserver, or sample recorder. Instead of *naghshkhani*, I focus on the sound origin, women weavers, who change the atmosphere of their workplace by singing. In order to do so, I

examine social, economic, and cultural changes that transformed the soundscape of carpet workshops. The major questions that this paper answers are: why are these women workers singing and what do they sing about?

Weavers needed *naghshkhani* in the old days to facilitate their work, but through the course of time with the social change, industrialization, and economic change in carpet workshops, *naghshkhani* lost its function for them. Thus, there was no need to teach the next generation of workers this task. This resulted in the gradual abolishment of *naghshkhani*.

The person who inhabits the roles of owner and *naghshkhan* must be schooled. Before the 1980s, most weavers, including adults and children, were not able to read, thus *naghshkhan* became an essential role in the workshop to read carpet maps for them. Hence, weavers were able to focus on weaving, which allowed them to weave faster. In addition, *naghshkhani* minimized the human errors in weaving the exact rug patterns. Today, *naghshkhani* plays a different role; it attracts cultural tourists and researchers to the workshops.

Iran's patriarchal kinship structure has stronger influence in rural areas and small cities, especially in the old days. Men had the advantage of education over women. Before the twenty-first century, only boys were sent to school and girls had to stay home, learning to be a housewife soon. Parents who used to send their daughters to the carpet workshops would demand that the workshop's supervisor not teach their daughters the task of *naghshkhani*. Consequently, men became workshop masters and took the role of *naghshkhan*. Women, instead, were put to work as weavers, which was harder and more exhausting.

In 1974, the first machine-operated carpet factory opened in Kashan. Soon, many handmade carpet workshops were substituted with machine-operated factories and carpets could be produced and distributed among millions of consumers.

After the Islamic revolution of 1979, the eight years' war between Iran and Iraq (1980–1988), and the rise of carpet industries in neighboring countries, traditional workshops faced economic decline in most cities in Iran. As a result, men left workshops for jobs with higher incomes. Women who were still financial providers for their household, however, continued to work in workshops.

The economic change in Iran's carpet industry, specifically after 1974, caused male weavers to leave workshops, and thus, female weavers adopted a new social status. This gender alteration released women from singing restrictions under Iran's constitutional laws and transformed the essence of workshops into a musical environment. Additionally, with the gradual decay of *naghshkhani*, women brought new styles of singing into their working environment through their voice. Our (Nasim and I) ethnographic research reveals that women carpet weavers found their workplace, without the presence of men, a free space to express themselves through singing— using music as a tool both to transform the monotonous work environment and to narrate their daily experiences.

The carpet workshops that Nasim visited are located in central Iran in less urbanized regions in Kashan province such as Kashan city, and Barzok. In summer 2019, Nasim volunteered to help with my ethnographic research in hand-made carpet workshops in Iran. To collect my ethnographic data, I opted for a variation of traditional ethnography. Due to the political crisis between Iran and the United States, I was/am not able to travel to Iran. Instead, as my research assistant, Nasim offered to gather videos and recordings for me. Through the internet as it is called, “our angel of salvation”¹ in Iran, she sent the files to me.

¹ Laudan Nooshin, “‘Our Angel of Salvation’: Toward an Understanding of Iranian Cyberspace as an Alternative Sphere of Musical Sociality,” *Ethnomusicology* 62, no. 3 (2018): 341–74.

I grew up in a family who highly valued handmade rugs; there was no place for machine-made carpets in our house. Carpets looked pretty to me, but I had no idea how rugs were made. I confess I did not know nor care how much suffering, both bodily and mental, it takes to create such a piece of art. I was a city girl who had no desire to be in the countryside until fall 2018.

In fall 2018, when I was applying for Ph.D. in ethnomusicology at UT Austin, I became interested in studying labor music in Iran because there is not enough research in this field. I only found one article about *naghshkhani*, and that was my starting point to explore the Persian carpet world. One of the major barriers on my way was traveling outside the U.S. and doing fieldwork. The current U.S. administration enacted a travel ban in February 2017, which prevents citizens of certain countries, including Iran, to travel to the United States. So, if I leave the U.S. I will not be able to receive an entry visa to the United States again. I was about to give up and go back to Iran, but my mother, Nasim, resisted. Resistance sometimes manifests itself into action. Nasim refused to comply with the travel ban, and her disagreement turned into physical action; she traveled to Kashan and conducted the fieldwork on my behalf.

Nasim's motherhood was her research permit to enter workshops. Once, when she asked a weaver to record her voice, Nasim received this in response: "It is OK to record my voice, you are helping your daughter in this way, and I am helping my daughter to save money for her dowry by weaving." Since mothers are good at storytelling, Nasim joined me in telling the story of women carpet weavers in Iran.

This is the story of the warp and weft, the loom, the Persian carpet, songs and of female weavers. This story is about Iranian women who resist. They resist because they have been denied, suppressed, and undermined for a long time. Their resistance sometimes manifests itself through sound. The women carpet weavers' resistance is embodied in their voices. These

workers spend hours behind the loom to create a piece of art. Yet, weaving is not their only art; their voice is also woven in the warp and weft of the Persian rug.

Carpet weaving itself is a symbol of resistance and patience. In rural areas, families would require their daughters from an early age to learn carpet weaving. A weaver, Mrs. Hadadi, in Barzok told my mother her story of becoming a weaver. When she was six years old, she asked her mother to buy her a scarf that she saw on her cousin's head. Her mother refused to do so because she could not afford it. She told her daughter, "your cousin is a weaver, why don't you become a weaver, too, so you can buy yourself a scarf." Mrs. Hadadi became a weaver since then and now she is forty-six years old.

Before the carpet became commodified, women used to do the task at home. Sitting behind the loom and weaving for a long time require excessive labor. Thus, carpet weaving teaches young girls to be patient, prepares them for marriage, and shows them how to lead a life. A woman who brings a carpet made by her own hands as part of her dowry receives a lot of respect by her husband's family. Weaving a carpet was a measurement of a woman's tolerance and strength.

The loom as the main foundation of a carpet is the symbol of strength as well. Without a loom, it is impossible to have a rug. The loom is a rectangular frame, mostly made of wood in rural areas. It must be strong enough to hold all the other weaving tools such as yarn, in addition to the entire carpet. Building the loom, and winding warp and wefts are complicated tasks, so men mostly are in charge of them. It can take months to make a loom for larger carpets. Weavers spend a long time behind the loom, and they slowly become companions of the carpet.

There were no specific designing styles to create carpet maps. The weavers used their imaginations to create maps before the commodification of carpets. The loom was their diary

book and the yarn their sketching tool. This improvised designing style is still practiced among nomads. In small cities, though, once the carpet workshops were moved outside houses, and weaving turned into a career, the workshop owners started to design the maps. The weavers were not able to design and tell their own stories, instead it was the workshop master and carpet designers that dictated the patterns to weavers.

Carpet designs are specific to each city depending on colors, cultural and geographical context, and textiles. The carpet designer sketches patterns and colors on a graph paper to create a map. Generally, Kashan rugs' old designs include *Goldan* (the vase), *lachak' O toranj* (the corner and medallion), *mehrab* (the altar), and *shekaar* (the hunting). The most famous of all is *lachak' O toranj* surrounded by flowers, similar to a garden. This design represents Kashan as Iran's center of rose gardens. During the second half of May, the annual festival of *Mohammadi* roses and rosewater distillation attract many tourists to Kashan province.

Outside workshops, the colors and yarns are often made out of natural materials such as plants, flowers, and animals. Sheep's wool is the main resource to make the yarn. Depending on methods of spinning, size, and diameter of the yarn, the types of carpet may vary. Women select the best of wools for spinning and convert the wool into yarn form. The next step is to dye the yarn. Herbs and flower petals are primary materials to make colors. The Kashan rug owes its unique pink color to *Mohammadi* roses. These are the basic stages of creating a carpet. Colorful yarns enter into another world inside workshops.

In Kashan city, the supervisor, Mrs. Moosavi, was a young lady who had a master's degree in agricultural engineering. She said that carpet weaving is a tradition in her family, and she is doing it at her leisure time. She said, "Neither me, nor most workers have learned to do *naghshkhani*. Because nowadays, most workers are educated so they can read the map for

themselves.” In this workshop, there was only one worker, Mrs. Z who knew *naghshkhani*. Nasim was able to record a short video of her doing the task. The weaver was careful to not recite loudly in case any men outside the workshop hears her voice. As I stated before, women were not allowed to speak loudly when men were present in the workshops.

The same gendered prejudice against women still exists in some of the workshops. The result of Nasim’s ethnographic research in Barzok showed that because of both religious and family prejudice, *naghshkhani* never developed in there. One of Nasim’s interviewees reported that her husband does not let her work outside, hence, she has her own loom at home to work on. In another workshop in Barzok, the supervisor and owner, Mrs.K said, “we do not do *naghshkhani* here; men do not let their wives gather in the workshop.” In this workshop, the tapping of the comb on the loom was one of the sounds. “Tap, tap, tap,” this is the sound of the carpet weavers’ comb on their loom, who are striving day and night to turn the wheels of their families’ life by their wage or *dast-ranj* (suffering hand) in Persian. But if you sit by their loom, they will complain about the monthly salary of 1,000,000 *Tooman* equal to 70 USD without insurance. In this not so pleasant working environment, music and singing become an instrument for weavers to either forget or express their pains.

Mrs. K, continued, “I love music, I often play music for workers in the workshop, mostly traditional music. I often sing as well when I am alone.” Nasim asked her to sing but she received this in response, “If my husband knows that I sung for you, he will scold me.” Despite all difficulties to find a weaver who was willing to sing for Nasim, she was able to record a few videos for me.

This change in the sonic space of the women’s workshops is produced through the processes that Tim Rice discusses in his studies of Bulgarian wedding songs in his 1994 book

May It Fill Your Soul. Rice argues that “both ethnomusicological and Marxist theory predicted that when culture or the economic base changes, then music will change.”² As previously stated, the decline of traditional workshops’ importance in the Iranian economy and the resulting social shift in the workshop have impacted the musical environment of the workshops.

To analyze the changes in the soundscape of carpet workshops, I divided the weavers’ songs into two different categories based on Norm Cohen’s definitions of “Descriptive work songs.”³ The first category of work songs is about the work process. The text in these songs evokes the hardship and hazards of the labor. Laborers sing these songs either during work or leisure hours. One of the weavers sung, “I weave the dense Kashi carpet, even if my fingers bleed, I weave, I weave.”⁴ She inserted this text into a pre-existent lullaby melody.

The second category according to Cohen are “songs were not necessarily composed by the workers themselves, nor sung exclusively by them; they were sometimes sung by professional performers.”⁵ In Kashan workshop, when Nasim asked one of the workers to sing, the worker said, “today, I had an argument with my husband, I am sad, and when I am sad, I usually sing this song.” This song is a famous tune by *Googoosh*, the queen of Persian pop music, who currently lives in exile. This is a tune called, *ghalibaf* (the weaver)⁶, from the movie *ghesas* (retribution), made in 1971. In this movie, *Googoosh* appears in a scene behind the loom, and sings:

² Timothy Rice, *May It Fill Your Soul: Experiencing Bulgarian Music* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 229.

³ Norm Cohen, “Work songs,” *Grove Music Online*, January 31, 2014; <https://www-oxfordmusiconline-com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-1002258732>, accessed February 15, 2020.

⁴ Roots Revival, “The Woven Sounds—Zahra Jahani & Mehdi Aminian—A Spontaneous duet,” YouTube, July 25, 2018, video, 2:48, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mc5wSEKZ>.

⁵ Norm Cohen, “Work songs.”

⁶ Googooshiha, “Googoosh, Ghalibaf (Ghesas Film),” YouTube, August 28, 2010, video, 2:30, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VYTgfcVwXKg>.

I put a green and knit a blue one on it
red, yellow and brown I'm knitting a Pear bush

I'm knitting Kerman Carpet with the strings of my soul
for my kind lover to lay it under his feet

its pattern is my life pattern
and its color is same as the color of my heavenly love

oh God when will my lover come back from his journey
when will this bitter waiting end?

when will the light of his eyes illuminate me again?
when will this pattern of my heart (that I knitted) be laid under his feet?

The first part of the lyrics is *naghshkhani*, which initiated in Kerman, yet it did not travel further north to Kashan workshops.

Many of these women expressed their emotion through singing. Most of the time, when they have a complain about their life such as their husband, the intensity of work, or a monetary issue music become a tool for them to calm themselves and get through the day. The musical change in carpet workshops in Iran was the change from being silent to become a voice and sing.

As the role of women workers in the carpet workshops was not highlighted enough in the works of other Iranian researchers, I changed the direction of my paper to focus on women weavers. I wanted to know how the change in their social status led to the use of music as another tool to create art. Music could not find a place in the carpet workshops without women weaver's toil. These women took over the tradition of carpet weaving and still kept the workshops atmosphere alive with their singing, and presence. Yet, they have never received enough income or the *halal* money for their suffering hands. No surprise that with the current dead economy of Iran, mostly due to the U.S sanctions, most of the carpet weavers do not count on their wages as a source of income. Most weavers admitted that it is hard to rely only on their weaving wage.

Since there has not been much research done about the sonic environment of the carpet workshops in Iran, I join other researchers to make ethnographic contributions to the fields of gender studies, and ethnomusicology in Iran. I hope this paper along with Nasim's efforts will be a voice for Iranian women, especially Iranian female workers who, no matter what they do, whether a carpet weaver, a music student, or a professional singer living in exile, are still suppressed by the government and need support to achieve their human rights in Iran.

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