

# The Talking Kilims and Carpets of the Nomads in Iran

by Monika Savier





**About the Lost Relationship Between Nature and Man and What we Can Learn From the Nomadic Tribes of the Orient.**

We already know that Persian carpets can fly from the oriental fairy tales of “One Thousand and One Nights”. This mythical means of transport has fascinated many generations of readers and fired our imagination, even though we didn’t really want to believe in it. It is quite different with the talking carpets from Persia, or rather the talking kilims of the nomads (called Bedouins in the Arabic-speaking countries), which have actually been around for thousands of years and whose language sends messages in the form of tribal symbols on blankets, carpets or kilims. This symbolised information was the origin of nomads’ culture, it represented the life, the thinking and the feeling in a mystical, animalistic or religious way as a way of communications with the supernatural forces. For behind every natural event, whether life-threatening or beneficial, there had to be angry or good spirits or gods who were to be pacified or to whom one was indebted. The nomads tried out various ways of cultural representation to overcome the difficulties in life.





People can also convey symbolism through their tattoos, which can have an important function when it comes to warding off danger or promoting happiness. These two women from the Bedouin tribe of Anaze in eastern Syria have it written all over their faces that they are widows and no longer want to smile.

In the Arabian world, tattoos on women's faces were also a tried and tested means of asking the spirits and gods for good luck and averting misfortune, since they had no way of knowing scientifically about natural forces or misfortunes scientifically and to develop counter-strategies. The nomads lived in a faith-based society of small groups in which everyone knew everyone else and there were manageable rules of ethics, morals and survival needs. They did not have to compete in anonymous knowledge societies where life is very complicated and the social and cultural differences between people, and even more so between people and animals, are enormous.

The fascination of many Arab breeders for the culture and way of life of the Bedouins, nomads or other pastoral peoples, some of whom still existed in the tradition of "gatherers and hunters" and until a few decades ago lived entirely without producing CO2 and in harmony with their nature and wildlife, shows the longing of the population from industrialised areas of the world for the simplicity of life. Who would not like to roam (once) on foot according to the seasons with Arabian horses, camels, perhaps Salukis and falcons in search of food through the vastness of the steppes, the Badias, the deserts of the Orient?

Today we call the invention of sedentarisation and agriculture "mankind's greatest mistake" (J. Diamond). It was a dramatic turning point in human evolution

through the emergence of property, inequality, power and patriarchy. Animals were domesticated, diseases jumped to humans and from 4 million of the world's population 10 thousand years ago, we are now at almost 8 billion. (C. van Schaik). Nevertheless, this civilisational leap is celebrated as progress. Today, we see the result of this "success story" in the world-threatening climate change and for this reason as well as others, the romantic tales of nomadic life around the campfire take on a serious place in our consciousness.

"The nomadic way of life and economy keeps closest to the original long way of life of humans as gatherers and hunters. It can be assumed that ancient essential experiences from the beginnings of human history were most likely stored and preserved through ancient symbols in nomadic rugs and can be revealed if necessary. These kilims and carpets and the archetypes symbols they contain thus contain symbolic representations of elementary patterns of experience and behaviour. In this function, they are carriers of basic structures of human patterns of imagination and action and thus they correspond to the basic requirements of human existence. They are universal archetypal symbols that can serve as a bridge or at least as a source of inspiration to enable access to people's inner resources". (Hejazian p. 93)

In my search for new connections between historical









artefacts of Bedouin or nomadic culture and our cultural problems today, I met Dr. Razi Hejazian, an international expert on the symbolic language of the kilims and has conducted research in Iran, Anatolia, Central Asia and the Caucasus on the life of the nomads and their universal visual language Kilims and carpets. It was only on the basis of extensive excerpts from his fascinating book "Kilims and Carpets of Nomads and Peasants, Universal Images in the Service of Prudence, Connectedness and Aesthetics" that I was able to write this text for Desert Heritage Magazine.

Those who breed asile or straight Egyptians from the countries of origin have probably often thought about the cultural context in which Arabian horses originated and how the Bedouin or nomadic tribes

lived in harmony with nature and their animals. The nomads themselves saw themselves as part of this nature and their respect of the forces of nature, their living in harmony with their animals and the barren nature, also stemmed from necessity in the context of the daily toils of survival. After reading Hejazian's exciting book I realised the connection to the history of our horses. And the fact that Kelims can talk made me curious. I am one of the Arabian breeders who have researched with great interest where these horses come from and who made them what they partly still are today, intelligent, beautiful, functional and sensitive animals from the vastness of the deserts and steppes, part of a culture of people who raised and used them in partnership. Arabian horses, along with camels and perhaps goats and sheep, characterise the nomadic Bedouin culture, whose saddle blankets





and saddle bags, tents, carpets represent their living environment in artistic form and symbolic language. The pictorial language of the (illiterate) nomads, to process their messages in kilims, is undoubtedly an art. "They did not distinguish between beautiful or applied art. They did not have an art that was fundamentally detached from practical purposes. In the Western world, this approach to life, which knew no boundaries between beauty and practicality, between work and rest, is increasingly seen as enviable and desirable." (Hejazian p.118)

Life in the steppes and deserts was characterised by many risks. Nomads, or Bedouins, had a clear division of labour, which had both pragmatic and

religious origins. The men worked as shepherds and moved with horses, camels, sheep or goats through the vastness of their boundless environment. The women organised life in the tents, they gave birth and cared for the children, looked after the food, wove the textiles for the winter or summer tents, wove the kilims and with the help of the girls they also worked on carpets and kilims, the sale of which had to cover the living costs of the tribe to a large extent. But not only did the women do this, as we can see from the talking kilims, they also mastered knowledge, for it was they who passed on the art of symbolism.

"It is precisely in the creation of ever new variations that the strength of those nomadic women who made





carpets and kilims lies. Their works mainly followed the respective iconographic themes and rules which made them interpretable and comprehensible to the members of society.” (Hejazian p. 103)

But this book is not only about the authentic kilims and carpets of the oriental nomads as symbol bearers. It is also about nomadic coexistence with nature and the respect and will to preserve that the nomads have for nature.

“These kilims are significant at the same time in view of the aspect that the nomadic way of life and economy keeps closest to the original long way of

life of humans as gatherers and hunters. Humans have spent about 99 percent of their history (from hunting and gathering nomads of Homo erectus about 500,000 BC to their sedentarisation and domestication of plants and animals about 5000 years BC) as gatherers and hunters. Given this fact, his intellect, interests, passions and the basis of his social life are all indebted to the hunter-gatherers of prehistory. It can be assumed that the symbols and signs in the nomadic rugs contain, at least in part, ancient essential experiences from the long-lasting beginnings of human history”(Hejazian p.12).

The respect and attention of these people for their





animals of every kind with whom they live is sadly history in our industrialised world today, yet it is impressive and understandable.

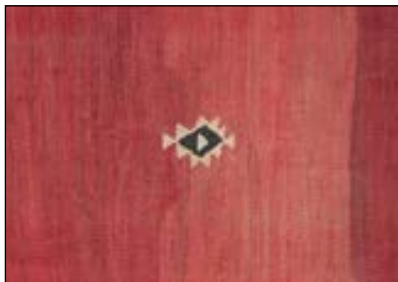
Hejazian writes: "In the 1990s, I visited the remnants of some Shahsawan nomads in northwestern Iran a few times. The first thing that always struck me during such encounters was the simplicity of daily life and the contentment of the people. After my arrival at a family's home, the grandmother was given the task of killing a chicken for dinner with the guest (with me). I observed how the old lady first separated the chosen chicken from the rest of the chickens and then practically held the whole flock of chickens in such a

distance that the animal and the flock of chickens no longer made eye contact with each other. This, the host told me in response to my curious question about this practice, was to prevent the animals from being frightened by the killing of a conspecific. In the second step, she offered the animal she wanted to kill a drink of water so that it and its soul would not suffer thirst. The animal, it is believed, will then move on and tell others about how well it was treated to the end of its life. Then she held a mirror to the chicken's face so that the animal would not feel lonely and afraid. The animal's feelings of fear and fright can even make its meat inedible, I was told. In the end, while killing the animal, she turned its head towards the south,

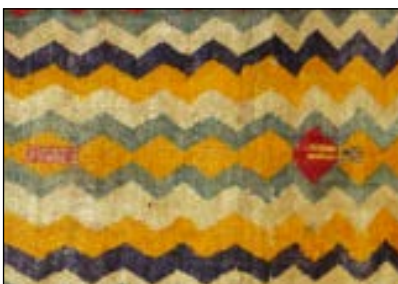




Fields, grids and net patterns have a defensive function against potential dangers during the night, especially in sleeping mats and ponds. The evil is supposed to get caught in the grid or net.



Especially the diamond and the four-part diamond symbolise the magic eye against the evil eye, because most misfortunes, failures and illnesses were attributed to the evil eye.



Zigzag lines or wavy lines on the kilim signify flowing water or symbolise the blessing of thunderstorms and lightning.

namely Kaaba (direction of prayer), as the ritual prescribes. This example illustrates that in the animal relations of the nomads, the active part ultimately does not necessarily lie with the people, but predominantly with the animals. These rituals testify to a perpetual dialogue between all living things, which formed the basis of these people's habits of belief and behaviour. With this ritual, it seemed to me that one honoured the animal that one had to kill at the same time. The faith of the nomads demanded a reciprocal relationship between the people and their living environment. The feeling of domination is thereby reduced to a minimum through the awareness of dependence. This illustrates and underlines the importance of the nomads' and their society's striving for balance with the surrounding nature. This idea also played an important role for nomads and agrarian societies that had partly settled down and formed the core of numerous mythological and ceremonial practices. Corresponding rituals were developed that were less about people exercising power over nature than about living together with it. The artefacts and images and symbols they contained played a key

role in demonstrating and maintaining this balance. In nomadic and peasant societies, this gave rise to narratives in which one's interconnectedness and even dependence on the natural environment was respectfully acknowledged. As a result, these societies were able to develop behaviours that expressed how sparingly the whole community used nature. The need to find harmony and balance with nature through symbolic linkage is one of the specific conditions of human existence. It is primarily about man's fundamental desire for relatedness or the feeling of being embraced in nature. He tries to counteract the insecurity and disengagement that come with his existence by relating to and being bound by nature. The unity with nature or the bond and integration with nature used to be largely established and supported by mythologies and religions. These have gradually fallen away through processes of rationalisation and secularisation and their effect has been greatly diminished. As a result, the transcendental and spiritual paths for fulfilling the integrative existential basic needs of people in their search for meaning, orientation and identity in nature have become obsolete



for some and considerably more difficult for some. The disruption or removal of the relationship, bond and rootedness of human beings to nature leads to disintegration processes that have increased in intensity in the course of industrialisation. More and more technologies are being pushed between humans and nature, making a direct relationship and connection difficult, if not impossible. Ultimately, our interaction with nature today is shaped by the consumer-centred market economy. "We're consuming ourselves to death, and it's not even amusing us." The Washington Worldwatch Institute came to this conclusion in its report back in 2004: "The spread of Western lifestyles threatens not only ecosystems, but also the development opportunities of poor countries." This study considered consumption to be the criminally neglected environmental issue. The success of today's growth economy owes much to a form of economy that has been able to be so uniquely successful because no one has thought about the fact that its basis for success is not unlimited. All products are the results of material transformation - everything comes from mines, forests, waters and soil. But no visions

or utopias have been thought up to sustain this form of economy without ruining the natural conditions for it all. Instead, the growing eco, climate and sustainability issues have led more to chronic discontent among people, which itself has driven hyper-consumption." (Hejazian p.45).

Horse lovers and horse breeders today are always trying to counter this distance through positive connection with their animals. But even today's animal husbandry, which is not subordinated to the food industry, is struggling with animal husbandry that meets the animals' natural needs. It is too late for a "back to nature", nature itself no longer exists in its original form and we humans also live in other realities. Nevertheless, the story of the nomads is a key to understanding how we can still encounter nature with respect today and of what an inspiring language and artistic approach this story of the nomads tells.

"In so-called scriptless cultures, like the nomadic ones, the realms of jewellery and ornamentation on the one hand and signs and symbolism on the other merged fluidly. Thus, on the one hand, the patterns tell both of the cosmological



The large rhombus means a well or pond. The sprinkles (rag) mostly on the monochrome kilims stand for the request for rain.



The wolf is worshipped by the Shawsawan nomads as a guardian spirit, just as strong animals such as lions, leopards and tigers serve as symbols to ward off danger.



Wolf teeth motif on the tent door in north-west Iran.





world explanations valid for the nomads and of their individual life stories and events. At the same time, nomads also played a no less important role in producing something beautiful for themselves and their families. The carpet or kilim was a means of language, a medium of expression and at the same time a work of jewellery. In Europe, its status in the Orient as a medium of expression and language corresponds not only to that of panel painting but also to that of the written work. Thus, a nomadic carpet or kilim was a pictorial work, a written work

and a decorative work at the same time. The nomadic producers of textiles covered many of their daily needs - from clothing to housing - by weaving and knotting the wool of their animals. At the same time, textiles, especially carpets and kilims, were the most important - if not the only - forms and media of their artistic and cultic creation. Material, form, pattern and colour were appropriately symbolic. They acquired their own abstract language of signs, through which their artistic work could develop in genuine independence. Nomad's symbolic visual language also developed





widely among the nomads because there was no written language. For this reason, their visual language is called the “script of the scriptless”. The function of acting as the script of the scriptless has given these works a physical and content-related density and an immense symbolic radiance. The art of the nomads can also be considered one of the oldest surviving forms of artistic creation of mankind.... In the course of time, the nomads developed a predominantly abstract formal language to represent their habitats and living conditions, which were dominated by nature. This enabled them to transfer their neediness, joy, fears, desires, life, death, the cosmos and the supernatural, but also their real world such as their economic well-being, into their carpets and kilims. Various criteria can be used to categorise the symbols.







Thus, symbolism can refer to different contents, which can also overlap, such as: Material content, nature impressions and dangers, chronicles (power, family, marriage, birth, death) or immaterial content such as sacred, metaphysical, spiritual themes. Here is an example: As always in my travels to nomadic regions in the Orient, I curiously asked the owner, who was a woman of about 70 years of age, about the age, the origin and especially about the pattern of this kilim.

I wanted to find out what was depicted on this kilim, what meaning the characters woven and embroidered on it might have? She began to tell me in detail that although the kilim was made and used as a “sofreh” (bread towel), it is primarily a carrier of important messages. The light background represents the desert and the barren landscape that is omnipresent here in this region. In her descriptions, the harsh living conditions associated with the barren landscape were



palpable. In the kilim, she continued, the patterns are “amulets” and show snake motifs as a deadly danger in the desert, but at the same time they are lightning symbols and represent the blessing of water. Snakes transform into lightning and into rain, which is then sent down from heaven to earth. In this function, the nomads took this kilim every year to a sacred place near their summer quarters (Emamzade Magsud) to use it once as a base for the offerings and then to consecrate it. The main purpose of this ceremony was to intercede for the rain and the flourishing of nature, on which the survival of all their animals and thus their existence depended. Thus, with the help of the snake and lightning motif, the storm that would bring salvation was conjured up. According to the descriptions, the kilim served both practical and cultic purposes in daily use. The symbolic imagery of this kilim with the “snake-lightning motif” or “snake-rain motif” obviously involves magical or animistic practices. It consists of a worship of natural phenomena (lightning) and the animal (snake), to which the nomads attributed active souls that they

wanted to influence through the symbolism in their cult rugs. The symbols functioned as mediators between humans and nature. This produced “a liberating experience of the unrestricted possibility of a relationship between man and the environment”. But it did not stop at this act of relating and connecting to nature. The decisive moment in this cultural process is also the act of substitution or metaphorisation, so that the poisonous snake is transformed into the life-affirming rain. Here, it is clearly the connection between the death-bringing snake and the blessing rain that matters. The symbolic transformation created the prudence space and enabled the taming of danger and violence.” (Hejazian p.10)

For the nomads, belief in magic and its powers was the basis for improving their situation, averting disaster and, in the best case, fulfilling wishes. Their close connection to nature, especially to their animals, made it possible to experience a subjective taming of danger through magic in everyday life. We humans are also herd animals, and the family is only one of the many ways in which people can experience cohesion and group membership through the combination of activities, knowledge and beliefs. Here, too, the culture of symbolism and commonalities plays a major role. Cult, style, symbols and identification help us to resolve and harmonise differences and we also believe in the almost magical power in groups. What is urgently needed in today’s industrialised society, however, is to re-establish the lost link between nature, environment and people. A look at the lost world of the nomads could be helpful.



Dr. Razi Hejazian studied art history and anthropology and completed both with a doctorate. He is a professor at the University of Tabriz, Iran and has taught at the Humboldt University in Berlin on the nomadic culture of the tribes in Iran and on the symbolic language of the kilims. He has conducted research in Iran, Anatolia, Central Asia and the Caucasus on the life of the nomads and their universal visual language and culture. He has a kilim and carpet gallery in Berlin, a place that has a unique atmosphere due to the original kilims of the nomads. See [www.hejazian.de](http://www.hejazian.de) - Contact: [info@hejazian.de](mailto:info@hejazian.de)

#### Bibliography

Jared Diamond, “The Worst Mistake in the History of the Human Race”. *Discover Magazine* 1987

Razi Hejazian, “Kilims and Carpets of Nomads and Peasants, Universal Images in the Service of Connectedness, Prudence and Aesthetics”, Berlin 2019

Carel van Scheik & Kai Michel, “The Good Book of Human Nature”, New York 2016