

Kyrgyz Textiles in the Yurt – Then and Now

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Abstract: Kyrgyzstan belongs to those countries situated along the historic Silk Road. The Kyrgyz were traditionally herders and lived off the meat and wool that they traded for spices, silk from China, cotton from India and other goods. Today many Kyrgyz live in the valleys of the Tianshan range, but when spring comes they still drive their animals into the alpine pastures where they erect their yurts for the summer. Their herds and the high-quality wool of sheep, goat and yaks have a value that makes it possible for Kyrgyz families to retain a semi-nomadic lifestyle.

Traditional Kyrgyz textiles are undergoing changes as reflected in the life of modern Kyrgyzstan. The yurt and its furnishings have long demonstrated the movement of fabric along the Silk Road. This paper identifies some significant trends in the yurt especially regarding furnishing; shirdaks (felt carpets), chiy (grass mats), ala-kiyiz (felt rugs), tumar (talisman), kurak (patchwork) and töshök (mattresses).

Keywords: Textiles – Kyrgyzstan, Kyrgyzstan – arts and crafts

Özet: Kırgızistan, tarihî İpek Yolu üzerinde yer alan ülkelerden biridir. Kırgızlar geleneksel olarak hayvan yetiřtiricileriydiler ve elde ettikleri et ile yünü Çin ile ipek ve baharat, Hindistan ile pamuk ve bazı başka ürünler karşılığında takas etmekteydiler. Bugün çok sayıda Kırgız Tanrı Dağları yakınındaki vadilerde yaşamakta, ancak bahar geldiğinde hayvanlarını yaz için yurtlarını diktikleri yaylalara sürmektedirler. Sığırları, koyunlarının yüksek kalitedeki yünleri, keçileri ve yakları, Kırgız ailelerinin yarı göçebe bir hayat tarzını benimsemelerine olanak sağlayacak bir değere sahiptir.

Geleneksel Kırgız dokuması, modern Kırgızistan'daki hayatı yansıtan bir deęişim geçirmektedir. Yurtlar ve yurtların içindeki döşemeler, kumaşın İpek Yolundaki uzun süreli hareketini kanıtlamaktadır. Bu makale yurtlardaki, özellikle de döşeme konusunda öne çıkan, shirdak (keçe halı), chiy (çimen hasır),

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ala-kiyiz (keçe kilim), tumar (muska), kurak (kırk yama) ve töshök (şilte) gibi bazı kullanımları tanımlayacaktır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Göçebelik, yurt, Kırgız dokuması, döşeme

Located in Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan belongs to those countries of the historic Silk Road. The mountainous, landlocked country covers an area of ca 200,000 square kilometers, has approximately 5,5 million residents and is located in the Tianshan mountain range. The capital is Bishkek. Traditionally the Kyrgyz were herders who lived off the meat and wool that they traded for silk from China, cotton from India, spices and other goods. As nomads they traditionally belong to clans. They live during the winter in the valleys. When spring comes they drive their animals into the alpine pastures of the mountains where they put up their yurts for the summer. The high-quality wool of sheep, goat and yaks makes it possible for Kyrgyz families to continue living as nomads.

Traditional textiles of Kyrgyzstan

The colors used in traditional Kyrgyz textiles: carpets, embroidery, reedwork, woven bands... are saturated and cheerful. Strong, contrasting colors are popular, particularly warmer shades like red and brown where the influence of natural dyes can still be detected. Traditional ornaments, usually symmetric and often mirrored, have their origin in the Bronze Age, but were gradually expanded on and adapted. Design elements were gleaned from the flora and fauna in the surroundings of these nomadic people. A prevailing Kyrgyz motif is the curl (*kochkor*), a stylized ram's horn. Sinuous lines with rhythmically placed curls are called *kyal* meaning dream or fantasy.

Felt is the non-woven textile par-excellence of Central Asia. It plays a central role in the life of the nomads of this region; the yurt wouldn't exist without it. Wool felt is fulled or pressed felt. The cleaned, combed, wadded and sometimes dyed wool from sheep, goats and yaks is solidified through fulling. In wet felting the combination of warm water, soap and agitation causes the tiny scales on the surface of the hairs to open. The scales latch onto each other in such a way that they cannot be pulled apart causing the woolen fibers to shrink considerably and resulting in felt.

Pressed felt is made from high quality wool fibers which are mechanically pressed using heat, moisture and pressure.

Traditional Kyrgyz housing — the yurt

The national dwelling of the nomadic Kyrgyz is the felt-covered yurt. This small round "house", has features derived from many centuries of Turkic tribal experience. Kyrgyz tribes, occupied with nomadic cattle-breeding, needed a structure that was quick to assemble and easy to transport; this being especially important when moving to new pastures in the summer. The Kyrgyz love their traditions and although they no longer live throughout the year in a yurt, many families spend time in the summer on the high plateau where they erect yurts; families in the city gather in yurts in their backyards during the summer.

The yurt frame consists of a wooden door frame, a two-leaf door, expandable walls (*kerege*), poles to support the roof and onto which the walls could be fastened as well as a wooden hoop (*tunduk*) where the pointed poles meet and that is responsible for the yurt's circular shape. The yurt frame is made of willow; only the hoop – the hole for allowing smoke to leave the yurt can be opened or closed according to the prevailing weather – is made of more solid wood i.e. birch or juniper. The frame is tied together with twisted ropes of sheep or yak wool, covered by panels of felt and stabilized with decorative woven straps (*bo'o*).

The entrance to the yurt traditionally faces east and is covered with felt or with a decorative *chiy* screen. Through the years not only the yurt but its interior has changed. A place of honor (*tor*) was opposite the entrance. The right side of the yurt was formerly considered the women's part (*epchi jak*). Here clothes, headdresses, jewelry, needlework and embroidered bags with household goods and pottery were kept. The space for food preparation was screened with an ornamented mat (*chygdak*). The left side of the yurt was reserved for men (*er jak*), where their hats and best clothes were hung. Harnesses were hung close to the yurt entrance. Today the oven is often no longer located in the middle of the yurt and the strict division of the men and women's sides no longer prevail.

The inside and outside of the yurt are richly decorated with multicolored tassels (*chachyk*) and patterned braid (*bo'o*). Inside the yurt one was always surrounded by colorful woven, sewn and embroidered covers, sacks, blankets, pillows..., traditionally made by the mistress herself. Grass mats (*chiy*) cover the ground within the yurt, they are covered with a layer of carpets (*ala-kiyiz*) that are then topped by other carpets (*shyrdak*). Narrow mattresses (*töshök*) are used for sitting and sleeping on. The more the carpets - the richer the family are.

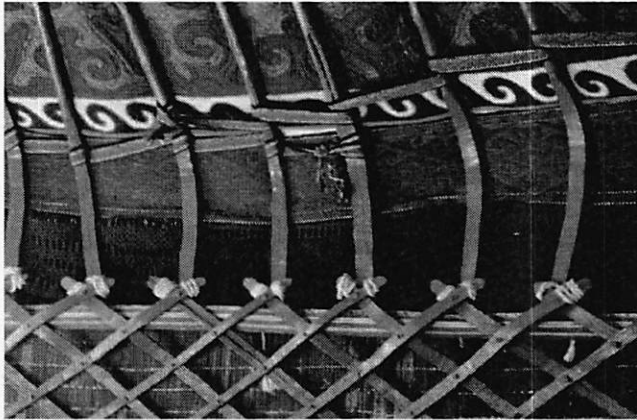


Fig. 1 - Inside of yurt - top to bottom: shyrdak, bo'o, chiy

Chiy

The word *chiy* is used in Kyrgyzstan to describe woven grass screens or mats as well as the needlegrass (*Achnatherum splendens*) which provides the reed-like raw material to make them. Chiy grows in the *jailoo*, the summer location of the yurts. Chiy mats are a unique Central Asian item of yurt furniture that have both a utilitarian and artistic value. They are indispensable as the base for making felt panels and are used in the yurt as the bottommost layer of insulation underneath carpets; today bubble plastic is often preferred. The use of bubble plastic has advantages; it insulates as well as providing protection from damp. In feltmaking it has a distinct advantage; a chiy mat can only be rolled from both ends – bubble plastic can be rolled in all directions, eliminating the need to disengage the unwieldy wool mass from the chiy mat multiple times to change direction.

Chiy screens were originally used for the yurt's inner door (*eshik chiy*). The decorative grass screens lining the inner circular wall of the yurt (*chyrmagan kanat chiy*) provide insulation and ventilation. Many of these mats – woven exclusively by women – have complex overall patterns created out of colorful wool. The stylized patterns are not purely decorative, they were thought to provide protection again evil spirits.

Preparation and decoration of chiy screens

–The grass stems are harvested in the late summer, dried for one to two weeks, cleaned, peeled and cut into uniform lengths.

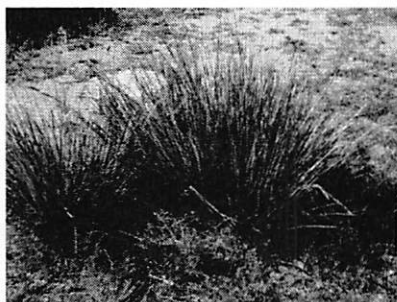


Fig. 2 - Chiy - needlegrass
(*Achnatherum splendens*)

–To insure that the chiy mat will be uniform, the stems are laid in alternate directions.

–The grass stems are marked according to an overall design and decorated with loose, dyed wool. A stem is held between the thumb and fingers and like spinning, the fibers are teased out and wound around the stem.

–After the stem is completed it is returned to its original position in the scheme. These preparations are very time consuming and a chiy can easily take 2 to 3 months to finish.

The construction of a chiy mat or screen

–A simple loom, with a chest-high horizontal bar, provides a comfortable working height.

–Fist-sized, oblong stones are tied onto each end of ca 4 meter length of warp cord (usually of handspun sheep's wool) and fastened so they cannot unravel. These warp cords are placed at regular intervals about 10 cm apart in grooves, on the horizontal bar with one stone in front of the bar and the other behind it.

–A grass stem is placed on the horizontal bar and on the top of the warp cords. It is "woven" by taking the two stones fastened on the end of a warp cord and exchanging them from the front to back and back to the

front. This process continues across the width of the grass stem, with the cords always crossing in the same direction; the next grass stem is dealt with in the same way.

–Chiy weaving is slow and labor intensive. Patterns created through this method can be very simple, or extremely complex. When the weaving is finished, the warp cords are knotted, the edges evenly cut and a strip of fabric is sewn over them.

The warp threads run vertically during weaving, but when chiy are used as screens they are set on their sides so that the warp appears to be horizontal.



Fig. 3 - Chiy loom

Bo'o (woven straps)

We usually associate the nomadic textile traditions of Central Asia with felt used in covering the floor and yurt, however, the nomadic peoples of Central Asia also had a rich weaving heritage. Before the introduction of industrially woven fabrics, weaving among all these nomadic groups was carried out by hand at home. Many household items for use in the family yurt were woven from wool from locally reared sheep, goats and yaks. Kyrgyz weaving was used for yurt straps (*bo'o*), in

woven grass-screens (*chiy*) and pile carpets. It was also used for items of clothing, especially camel hair coats. Given that Kyrgyz people were largely nomadic until the 1930s, their weaving was done on equipment which was both easy to set up and dismantle.

Kyrgyz yurt architecture needs a diversity of straps (*bo'o*). The Kyrgyz frame-trellised yurt is held together by a woven strap which extends around its girth and is attached on each side of the door frame. The strength of this particular strap should NOT be underestimated; it alone prevents the frame from spreading under the weight of its roof poles, leading to collapse. Smaller straps, each with their own designation, attach the poles together, link the roof poles to the walls, tie the felt covers to the tent and act as pole spacers.



Fig. 4 - Variety of straps (*bo'o*)

Ala-kiyiz

Carpets-making is a Kyrgyz handicraft that has been passed down from one generation to the next. *Ala-kiyiz* are the colorful felt rugs created by making patterns of loose wool heaped directly onto a felt background. Traditionally *ala-kiyiz* – like *shyrdak* – have a large central pattern surrounded by a narrow decorative border. The central pattern often demonstrated horn-like curls (*muyuz*). A wide variety of colors are used on

what is usually a dark gray or black background. Ala-kiyiz are not as sturdy as shyrdaks and in the yurt are often placed under them.

Making an ala-kiyiz carpet

–A chiy (needlegrass mat) is first covered by a thick layer of loose, carded wool - usually of one color - that form the backing of the rug and background for the designs.

–Strands of loose wool fibers in different colors are teased into patterns. The resulting mat of wool roving can be several inches thick. The loose wool is then covered with a cloth to prevent it from shifting and then sprinkled with hot water.

–The wool layer on the chiy is rolled up, placed in a linen sack, bound and then rolled back and forth with hands and elbows and even kicked, trodden on or even dragged by a horse ... until the wool fibers start melding.

–The felted mat is then removed from the chiy, it is rerolled and fullled with hands and elbows and if necessary with more soap and hot water.



Fig. 5 - Ala-kiyiz in the making.

–When the fulling process is complete, the wool rug is rinsed and left to dry.

This process results in a rug that is not as sturdy as a felt shyrdak nor exhibits the clearly delineated borders between colors. Experienced feltmakers have recently taken to "painting" watercolor pictures using this filigree technique.

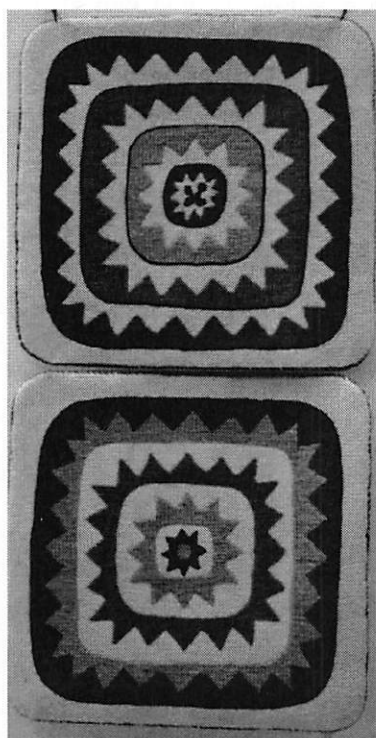


Fig. 6 - Shyrdak sample

Shyrdaks

The traditional handsewn carpets of felt inlay in Kyrgyzstan are called *shyrdak*. The unique positive/negative patterns are abstract images from the high plateau: flowers, ibex, birds as well as the sun, the moon and the jagged mountain ranges. The relationship of the abstract image to the background within a square is roughly equal – a special aspect of the shyrdak. Shyrdaks absorb noise and provide insulation thus contributing to a healthy indoor climate.

Creating a shyrdak

- Two felt squares of different colors are loosely basted one on top of another.
- A pattern outline is drawn in chalk on one corner of the top layer of felt.
- The felt square is folded once and its back struck to transfer the chalk outline to the other side. The second half of the pattern is transferred by refolding the square and repeating this process.
- A sharp knife is then used to cut vertically through the stacked felt squares along this outline.
- The basting thread is removed.
- The central motives and backgrounds - now in two colors – are switched and reassembled according to the principle of a puzzle and sewn together. This process is called felt inlay.
- For extra insulation the decorative felt squares are mounted on a felt backing, borders are added and all parts are sewn together.

–To complete the carpet the cut outlines will be covered with two parallel cords of plyed wool - *jeek*. These are sewn into place at the same time as they are quilted through the backing. The felt layers may be additionally strengthened with echo quilting.

The Kyrgyz word *shyrdak* is related to quilting; *shyry* means seam and *shyrda* quilting. In Chaghatay *shirdagh* is a saddle blanket that also serves as seating when placed on the ground.

Tush kiyiz (embroidered wallhangings)

Tush kiyiz is an embroidered wallhanging, once hung in every yurt, which explains why they are found throughout most of nomadic Central Asia. Although these embroidered textiles once were amulets, this meaning was lost while still retaining ritual significance as well as the original rectangular form that is undecorated on the lower edge. *Tush kiyiz* were once made of felt, but since the end of the 19th century they were almost exclusively made of industrially woven fabrics like sateen or silk velvet.

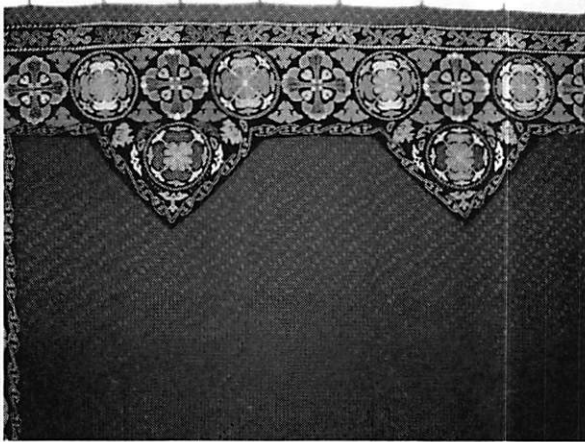


Fig. 7 - Tush kiyiz

Embroidered panels can be found on the right, left as well as the upper edge of a fabric rectangle where one or more indispensable triangular talisman (*tumar*) point downwards from the upper edge. *Tush kiyiz* made before the 1970s were almost always unique. Embroidery

stitches used include tambour, satin stitch, cross-stitch, double cross-stitch and couching. The motives are generally regional.

Tush kiyiz were usually made for newlyweds on the birth of a child; the ornamentation reflecting best wishes.

Tumar

Amulets or talisman are a common feature amongst the peoples of Central Asia, where they are known as *tumar*. They were thought to embody energy which could bring good luck, riches, or happiness but could also protect a person from influence of malicious spirits and most importantly to ward off the evil eye.

In Kyrgyzstan, there are different types of amulets that often took the form of a triangle, including simple ones made of fabric or felt. It is thought that the power of the amulet is magnified by what it contains. Inscriptions including spells and symbols, are considered a means of increasing their potency.

Kurak

Kurak is the widely-used name for patchwork popular among nomadic Central Asian tribal groups made from such diverse fabrics found along the Silk Road such as silk from China, brocade from France, or cotton from India, linen or wool fabric from Europe. It is a highly developed textile technique which made use of a variety of materials including felt, velvet and even leather. It is composed not only of recycled pieces of material made into something functional and aesthetically pleasing, it is also considered to possess powerful protective and auspicious properties. The intricate patterns composed of small scraps – especially triangles – were thought to confuse evil spirits and drive them away. Larger kuraks were suspended from the walls of the yurts and later hung in houses.

This kind of patchwork can also be found in tush-kiyiz, *töshök* (mattresses), *tekche* (suspended shelving), *ayak-kap* (bag for storing dishes), clothing, and other useful housekeeping items.

Töshök

These narrow mattresses were folded and stacked during the day opposite the entrance to the yurt in front of the place of honor (*tor*). Töshök, like almost all household items, were ingeniously decorated with ornaments of the region by the women of the family. A family sleeping on patchwork mattresses under patchwork hangings could feel protected from the Evil Eye.



Fig. 8 - Töshök

In conclusion, as daily life in modern Kyrgyzstan changes, the production of traditional Kyrgyz textiles suffers; water-resistant material such as bubble plastic and weather-resistant fabrics taking the place of heavier or more time-consuming textiles. It is also not surprising that younger generations are unconvinced by the efficacy of amulets and that traditional fabrics live on today because they are often produced for export.