V. KRYUKOVA. Interpretation of Täjik Wedding Embroidery

INTERPRETATION OF TÄJIK WEDDING EMBROIDERY: RITUAL, IMAGE, TEXT

Since antiquity, fabrics and items made out of them have not just been used for utilitarian purposes, but also to express important ideas, filling the spiritual world of society. Fabrics are like a text, and the interweaving of threads and elements of the ornament were and remain a vivid story of the organisation of the universe and mankind’s place in it. The ritual meaning of the fabric itself is that it has been seen as a sacrificial offering, acting, among other items and products, as an additional, and also a substitute (instead of a human) sacrifice. Fabrics and clothes were so highly valued by the ancient Iranian followers of Zoroastrianism that one of the books of the Sacred Avesta, the priestly code of Vizavist, prohibited leaving even the most insignificant piece of material on the body of a dead person. Until the Muslim conquest, Zoroastrians gave their corpses naked to be devoured by predators. To indicate the smallest amount of something in the Avestan language, the expression was used “as much as a [spinning] worker would throw away”, showing the extremely careful treatment of thread and fabric.

Millennia later this attitude remains the same in Central Asia. Pieces of fabric which the groom presents to his bride are a pledge of a successful fulfillment of the marriage ceremony — the skilful hands of master weavers turn these pieces of fabric into ritual wedding clothes in the course of a day, which confirms the beginning of a new life together for the young couple. Furthermore, in the bride’s house the woman herself, her mother and other female relatives prepare a set of items for the wedding: a sheet for the bed of the newly-weds (rōyo, rūyo, jayū, jayūh), a bolinpōs covering for the head of the bed, a rug to perform the jayūmanor prayer, a large silsani wall-hanging, and sometimes a long and narrow zardevor with the depiction of an arcade and a covering for a child’s cradle. The wedding bed itself is made up of all the mattresses and clothes of the bride, on which the rōyo sheet is laid, and the bolinpōs is placed on the pillows. In some regions, a large silsani is placed on the blanket which covers the couple. After the wedding rituals are complete, the embroidery is hung on the walls for a time (with the exception of the zardevor, which was initially hung on the wall under the ceiling), and then removed [1].

While at one time only white thread of plain weave was previously used for the warp of embroidery, since the second half of the 19th century any monochrome cotton fabric has been considered suitable, even black. The multi-coloured twisted silk threads are usually prepared by the women themselves. Most interesting is the pattern of the items, which is handed down the centuries from generation to generation, if not the knowledge of it — for the understanding of symbols is lost with time — then at any rate, a sort of specimen from which a constant reproduction of the bases of traditional culture takes place. It is a kind of “puzzle” which can only be deciphered by ancient pictures and texts. Among the wedding items, the brightest examples are probably the patterns put on the bolinpōs covering for the head of the bed.

The wedding covering of Samarkand work on the head of the bed (fig. 1), with concentric rosettes sewn on it, inserted in squares, is a kind of “mandala”, which represents the organisation of the universe. If one examines this drawing from the centre to the edges, then first three floral rosettes appear, put one on top of the other like the three sections of the universe (the world of gods, the earth and the space inhabited by the people between them). The world axis is at the same time the world tree (this is shown by the image of the flower) and the sacrificial altar where the first sacrifice was made (the smallest flower with five petals is a stylised depiction of a splayed human figure [2]). The first sacrifice “launched” the cyclical movement of the universe. The idea of this movement is conveyed by the ring which encompasses the rosettes, with the multi-coloured arrow-shaped elements pointing anti-clockwise. The ring, in its turn, is framed by another two circles with uneven edges, in the larger of which one can see a stylised round dance of serpent-tailed goddesses — women with snake’s tails instead of legs. The depiction of these beings among the Greeks and the Scythians was from ancient times connected with cults of fertility.

The three floral rosettes of the design, surrounding by three rings of the ornament inserted in three squares are placed one on top of the other. Thus, the number three, which is sacred for many peoples, is repeated three times. The squares themselves, undoubtedly, are an indi-
cation of the four corners of the world where people live. On the middle square is a depiction of a running wave, a picture which promises life-giving moisture, fertility and fruitfulness.

The presence of this "mandala" in the home is not just a symbol or allegory. It is a real confirmation of people's attachment, in this case the newly-weds, to the existing world, an image which potentiates the reproduction of this world. It is no coincidence that the use of this covering during the marriage ritual is closely linked with ideas of sacrifice and rebirth. The bride herself acts as this victim, as the basis of the reproduction. This is shown, along with the act of coitus, by her habitual weeping, her dress which is blood-red or white, like a mourning dress, and the custom observed in some areas of sacrificing a "substitute" lamb at her feet by the threshold to the groom's house[3], the bride being led around the fire and many other details — including putting the brown cap covering on the bride's head before the marriage is concluded.

An example of how resonant modern rituals are with their ancient prototypes may be shown by the lines of a Tájik song sung during the shaving of the groom's head or when wrapping a turban on his head. This short ritual song was preserved for probably millennia, joining a recollection of the organisation of the space inhabited, which began the existence and flourishing of the world, and a wedding ritual, which is the reproduction of an ancient sacrifice.

Two outstanding ethnographers of the 20th century — M. S. Andreev (recording made in the Khuj Valayy) [4] and N. A. Khislakov (recording made in Yarkhkul) drew attention to the words of this song, although they did not comment on them. The latter offered what I believe to be the more precise translation:

Soni mo amin ast, podolni mo amin ast. 
Xis omadak yo, wielonmo mo amin ast. Podol salonamat, woh siyommo mo amin ast. 
Moro, moro, sarob kard ki moro. 
Dor otabl xez kahab kahab moro. 
Dor otabl xez kahab xahg il kagol. 
Mo sang bodom, to ah kard moro.

This is our shih, this is our paishu. 
Welcome, friend, this is our guest. 
Be of good health, paishu, this is our third month. 
You exhausted us. 
In hot fire you burned us. 
In hot fire meat is never burned, We were stone, you turned us to water [5].

It is clear that this deals with the cooking of the sacrificial food, which must be cooked over a fire, and not boiled. This is the way that sacrificial meat had to be cooked according to ancient Vedic and Zoroastrian rules, and also in celebrating the Jewish Passover. The usual Iranian tradition of calling the groom the shih and paishu (the same for the Russian kious — "prince"), which has been noted many times by researchers, makes it possible to associate him not just with a ruler, but with a god. Indeed, if the bride in her wedding dress acts as the sacrifice, then the god who receives this sacrifice is the groom [6]. The main action which is prescribed to the groom-god by the marriage song, besides cooking meat in the hot fire, is the transformation of stone into water — a well-known image in various mythologies. In this case, the closest ancient equivalent is the Vedic hymn of Indra, which almost literally coincides with the Tájik lines. They involve the description of the great deed of Indra, which the sacred texts present in two versions — the myth of the killing of the dragon Vritra, which blocked the water, and the freeing of cows hidden in the cave of Vala [7]. These two stories, which pay tribute to Indra as the organiser of the inhabited world, have been told many times by Vedic authors, and it is perhaps sufficient to give a few expressive examples:

1-32 1. I will declare the manly deeds of Indra, the first that he achieved, the Thunder-wielder.

He slew the Dragon, then enclosed the waters, and cleaved the channels of the mountain torrents. 
2. He slew the Dragon lying on the mountain: his heavenly bolt of thunder [lit. "food cudgel"] Tristar fashioned. 
Like lowering kine in rapid flow descending the waters glistened downward to the ocean.

Indra, was thy hero deed, Daicer, thy first and ancient work, worthy to be told forth in heaven, 
What time thou sentest down life with a God's own power, 
freeing the floods. 
All that is godless may be conquer with his might, and, 
Lord of Hundred Powers, find for us strength and food [8].

We see that in both the Tájik song and the Vedic hymn, the same line is present: stone (cliff)—water—cow (victim). It is interesting that the short Tájik text also preserves the idea of the special role of the sacrificial fire, which does not destroy the victim, but only burns him [9]. The Vedic lines, in their turn, help to localise the event, on the one hand, on the altar, and at the same time, on the summit of the mountain from which water flows down to the world ocean. The altar is Indra himself, who becomes the "cross-bar" between the heavenly and earthly sphere, making it possible to the middle world of people to exist [10]. At the same time, the Indra-altar can also be seen as a phallic column. This last thing, in its turn, is duplicated by the wojó, the "food cudgel" of the warrior god, with which he kills the dragon and smashes cliffs. Essentially, these well-known Vedic images also find their confirmation in the Tájik ritual. M. S. Andreev describes a custom which existed in the Tájiks of the Khuj Valley. The virginity of the bride was not particularly important there, but if after the first act of coitus between the couple it did not find confirmation, the mother of the bride was refuse "payment for milk". If the parents of the bride insisted, they were given a round loaf of bread with a hole in the middle [11]. Besides the obvious meaning of this act, it also shows that the bride was supposed to be a sacrifice, in this case completely associated with bread (bread sacrifice), the round shape of which once more sends us to the depiction of the world. The hole in the bread shows...
that the sacrifice was made in vain, and was used before its ritual hour.

Another important article among marriage items is the rōyo sheet, on which a wide border in the form of an arc (or Cyrillic letter ‘II’) (plate 3) is sewn. The main area is free of embroidery. It is notable that in a similar way, and sometimes with a precise repetition of the ornament, the joymane prayer rug is sewn, with the difference that the arc on it has an arrow-shaped form, similar to a mehrob, a niche in the wall indicating the direction of prayer. After the wedding rituals are completed, the bedding items are placed in this niche in the wall of the house. This niche is hung, as a rule, with the rōyo sheet. If the bedding is not kept in the niche, then the front part consisting of blankets and sheets is sometimes covered by the prayer rug. According to a verbal report by Dr. Rahmat R. Rahimov in the submountain areas of Central Asia, if the house faces strictly north to south, the niche is accordingly made in the western wall of the house and preserves the name of mehrob (otherwise it is more commonly called the toq, tare). When the namaz is performed, the people pray in front of the mehrob where the bedding is contained. In the opposite, eastern wall of the room, directly opposite the mehrob, the fireplace is located, also in the form of an arrow-shaped arc. In the vivid expression of R. R. Rahimov, this fireplace, which is used for cooking, serves as a kind of ‘female altar’ in the Tājik home.

Undoubtedly, the depiction of the arc on the rōyo sheet, like the placing of the bedding in the mehrob, is no coincidence. Even the arc form, both in the embroidery on the wedding sheet and the prayer rug, and in the architectural detail, means a link primarily with temple architecture and an appeal to the sphere of the divine. It is not for nothing that Sāsānian Zoroastrian temples were called ʧahbarag ʧahbarag — ‘four arcs, vault’ (in Russian this word exists in two variants — clivertov (palace) and ʧerdak (atrium). The arcs are an indispen-
sable detail in Muslim cult architecture as well. How can one explain the attribution of bedding items to the world of prayer and the temple?

Help in solving this mystery may come from a custom among another Iranian people, the Yazidi Kurds, whose religious tradition has preserved archaic features which take us into the distant past. The fact is that the Yazidis use the fire houses of pirs and kays. The holy place and, according to Kh. Onarkhali, the ‘centre of direction of the cult’ for them is a high pile of bedding items, called a stër, which is kept next to the wall of a separate room, and covered by a light covering (it is raised in the evening, as it is believed that the protector of the house dwells here). Usually, sacred attributes of the Yazidis are put on the stër — a hair-shirt and clay ‘lumps’ [12]. The Yazidis say their prayers facing the stër. The word stër is probably cognate with the Avestan star- ‘spread out’ [13]. The Avestan starīn—‘place, bed’ is encountered several times in the Avestan Vīdēvat, and almost always next to barzistī—‘head of the bed, pillow’ (Vīdēvat 5.27, 5.59, 7.9) (cf. Tāj. bolinpā, where bolin is ‘head of the bed’, pillow: Ofr. *bolin > OP. *bulin > MP. bōlin > Tāj. bolin). The

Avestan starīn—‘smoothed out, spread out’ together with the Avestan gātar ‘place’ makes up the expression ‘spread out bed’ which in its turn is used in the Avesta to describe the heavenly beds of the gods. In the Avestan hymn dedicated to the goddess of fertility Azērdī Sūra Ašāhīla, spread-out beds with heads are mentioned which stand in the palaces of this goddess (Yašt 5.101—102) and in the hymn to the Goddess of happy fate Ašī, the happy life of righteous men favoured by this goddess is portrayed (Yašt 17.7—10). The second description of this is more reminiscent of a promise of heavenly bliss — researchers have on several occasions made suggestions that the lines of the Avestan hymn may have evoked the Muslim concept of heaven populated by beautiful hours:

5.101—102... In each chamber there stands a palace, well-founded, shining with a hundred windows, with a thousand columns, well-built, with ten thousand balconies, and mighty...

In each of those palaces there lies a well-laid, well-scented bed, covered with pillows.

17.7... well-scented where the beds are spread and full of all the other riches that may be wished for. Happy the man whom thou dost attend!

9. The man whom thou dost attend, O Ašī Vaygah! have beds that stand well-spread, well-adoored, well-made, provided with cushions and with feet inlaid with gold...

10. The man whom thou dost attend, O Ašī Vaygah! have their ladies that sit on their beds, waiting for them: they lie on the cushions, adorning themselves, ... with square bored ear-rings and a necklace of gold... “When will our lord come? when shall we enjoy in our bodies the joys of love?” [14]

It is notable how the marriage bed, where the depiction of the arc is associated with the temple building and heavenly gates, has proven to have such a durable correlation with the heavenly palaces, equipped with ‘spread-out beds’ and heads of beds. Even the Onurkhash, whose nomadic way of life rules out the use of furniture of a settled people, preserve the custom of keeping a ritual rather than everyday bed in the yurt (like a reminder of the “bed on legs” in the Avesta?), where bedding is placed. As for the palaces of the gods, such as the dwelling-places of the above-mentioned Azērdī Sūrah Ašāhīla, the Avestan hymns put them where the world tree grows, on the world mountain from where the life-giving spring flows.

Correlating areas on embroidery (here we can also mention the rugs with a similar subject which are well-known in the Muslim East) with monuments of Zoroastrian temple architecture, discovered on the territory of Central Asia, in Sogd, not only explains the depiction and confirms its antiquity, but makes it possible to determine the time that the tradition arose. The features of Sogd temple architecture were best rendered in the décor of Zoroastrian ossuaries. V. G. Sikunda correctly calls the latter “an imitation of a cult building, a model temple”, which, in its turn, is associated with a "model
of the dwelling of gods, or heaven", while the "idea of 'heaven', as of the building, found a reflection in an entire group of ossuaries with the depiction of people in arcades" [15]. As for the origin of the latter, specialists believe that their motif was borrowed from Roman art [16]. Besides the arcades themselves, with gods or without them, depictions of trees were made on the walls of ossuaries, which were planted by temples in a sign of remembrance of the world tree, the "tree of all seeds". Thus, in the ornamentation of Tâjk zardewn (fis. 2–3) wedding embroidery, which has an arcade composition, supplemented with a depiction of trees, flowers, and various fertility symbols, a direct citation of the images of ancient Zoroastian temple architecture can be seen. The ideas which were once the basis for temple construction continued their existence after the Muslim conquest of Central Asia, in the life of traditional ritual items. It is profoundly symbolic that zardewn embroidery, often many metres long, is hung on the upper part of walls — almost under the ceiling of the room where the married couple spend their first wedding night. The temple and at the same time heavily arcades show the unceasing localisation of the event at the first set of cots, the sacrifice made for the sake of multiplication of the world.

Thus, the circle is closed which unites three objects from the set of wedding items — the bolomdol covering of the head of the bed with a picture of the world tree — the axis of the world, depicted in its centre, a rûyo sheet with embroidery in the form of a gate of a temple or the gates of paradise and also the zardewn, which is decorated with the arcade of the heavenly dwelling of the gods.

N o t e s
2. Pointed out by E. G. Taseeva.
3. On this subject see A. Marjanova, "Svadebnoe trochnesto u tadzhikov Fuzbatda" ("The marriage ceremony among the Täjiks of Faydibuli)", Istoriya i etnografiya narodov Srednego Azii, p. 116.
4. M. S. Andreiev, Xodik doly (verkhov’ta Amu-Daryi) (Täjiks of the Khun Valleys (Upper Reaches of the Amu Darya)) (Stalinaebad, 1953), i. p. 141.
6. Compare the comment by Charles Malamoud on the ancient Indian marriage ritual, which he sees as a "sacrifice, where the person making the sacrifice is the bride's father, and the bride herself is the victim, while the future husband plays the role of a god". Sh. Malamoud (Ch. Malamoud), Lïşvekli sëre: Ritual i myth i derenal Jodi (Cuirer le Monde. Rite et pensée dans l’Inde ancienne) (Paris, 1989), transl. from French into Russian (Moscow, 2005), p. 88.
7. T. Ia. Elizarenkova points out that these myths are reconstructed "as a kind of duplicate which go back to one original cosmogonial proto-myth: the god-demiurge destroys the barrier which stops the cosmos from functioning normally" (T. Ia. Elizarenkova, "Mir idei zrevâ Râgvedy" ("World of the ideas of the Râgveda Aryans"), Râgveda. MarâTicks P—PIT, publication prepared by T. Ia. Elizarenkova (Moscow, 1999), p. 450).
8. Translated by R. T. H. Griffith (1896).

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