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A Patchwork History of Textile Use in Southeastern Turkey: Examination of a Rare Set of Kurdish Work Clothing

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In the Cornell Costume and Textile Collection there are two sets of garments, a man's and woman's ensemble. They were most unusual examples of ethnic dress, in that while collections typically receive only special occasion clothing, these garments resembled what I'd seen worn daily by villagers and nomads all over Turkey in my first times there in 1959 and the early sixties—clothing cut in the usual forms, but made of simple fabrics patched and repatched, a history of the life of the wearer. The donor record for these garments provided the name of the donor (Mrs. Lawrence H., *Frances C.*, MacDaniels) who identified them as Kurdish, collected at a refugee station in Mardin in 1919. There was no further information. (Figure 1.)



Figure 1. Man's and Woman's Ensembles collected in Mardin in 1919, Cornell Costume and Textile Collection.

There are more than three dozen different textiles in them. The woman's ensemble is assembled from a variety of textiles, some clearly recycled, and also extensively patched and repaired with other textiles. Interpreting all of these textile samples could illuminate textile use in this region a century ago, but to do this was a serious challenge given the limited information regarding textile use in Anatolia. In 1992 I began a survey of what survived of vernacular textile production and trade in Turkey, particularly in

Anatolia. This past year I finally made it to the last region of Turkey that I had never visited, the Southeast corner, along the borders with Iran, Iraq and Syria, the region where these garments most likely originated. These textiles are evidence of an extensive network of production and trade in this region, which is the terminus of the collection of trade routes known as the Silk Road.¹

Historical Context

But beyond the textiles, these garments are also evidence of a historic tragedy that played itself out in this region a century ago. The events of the period from 1912 to 1923 marked the final disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, an event feared and anticipated throughout the nineteenth century, The Ottoman Empire had been dubbed “the Sick Man of Europe.” Great Britain, France, Germany, and Russia, jockeyed to be in the most strategic position when the great collapse would occur². But there was great fear of the chaos that might result—and this collapse did indeed have disastrous results.

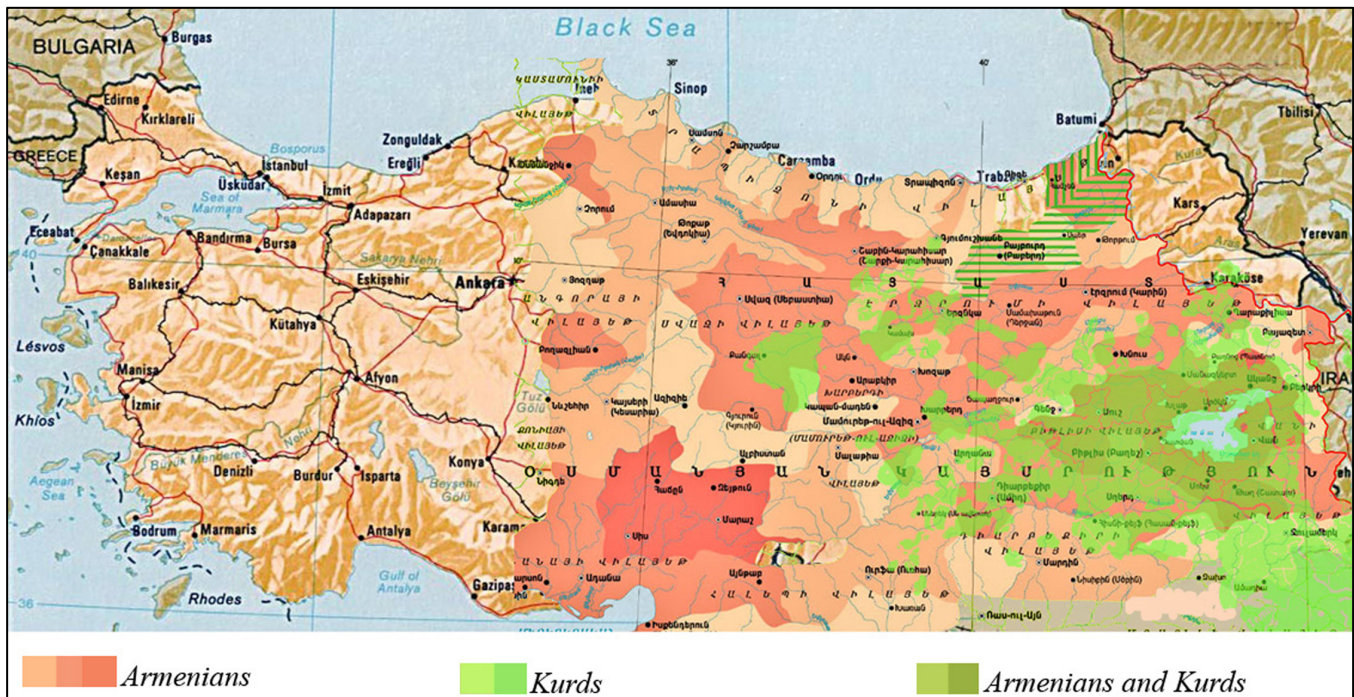


Figure 2. Map depicting distribution of Armenian and Kurdish populations in Anatolia, c.1900. Created by the author.

The events of this period are very complex. It is not possible to explain them all here. Suffice to say this: The Ottoman Empire was not structured around the concept of Nation. It was a polyglot structure in which separate ethnic and religious communities governed their own members in domestic matters, but without any geographic separation between groups. What would arise out of the destruction of the Ottoman Empire was the creation of nations with specific geographical locations and ethnic identities.

¹ Hansen, V. (2012). *The Silk Road: A New History*. New York, Oxford University Press.

² Fromkin, D. (1989). *A Peace to End All Peace: The Fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Rise of the Modern Middle East*. New York, Henry Holt and Co. pp 26-32.

Since all of the various ethnic populations-- Turkish, Kurdish, Armenian, Greek and Syrian- were intermingled, this reorganization was bound to be violent, and so it was. The map (Figure 2) shows the distribution of the major non-Turkish populations located in this region at the beginning of the twentieth century.³ This map makes it clear that these populations shared the same landscape, blended together like salt and pepper on a plate. Therefore this was not a mere border dispute, it was a struggle among neighbors. So at the time when the McDaniels sent these garments from Mardin this region was in turmoil, and millions died before there was any kind of resolution.

By 1923 a series of treaties partitioned the former Ottoman Empire into a set of new nations that had never before existed as independent entities within these modern borders, including Greece, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Egypt, and the Republic of Turkey.⁴ Caught in the middle of this struggle were the people who did not achieve territorial nationhood- the Armenians, Kurds, and Syriac Christians, all sharing the landscape of Southeastern Turkey and what is now northern Syria and Iraq. The Armenian and Syriac Christians were the major territorial losers, though the Muslim Kurds also were excluded from the treaties.

But what were the MacDaniels doing in this area in 1919? The answer was in the archives of the American Board of Missions in Istanbul, housed at the American Research Institute in Turkey. The American Board of Missions was in Turkey from in 1835, and by the early twentieth century had facilities all over the Empire.⁵ They founded a school and hospital in Mardin, among many other places. During World War I the American staff stayed there to protect their students and their families, though since the Ottomans were allied with Germany, foreigners were banned until after the Armistice in November 1918. An American shipload of aid was ready and waiting when Turkish ports were reopened in spring 1919. Dr. and Mrs. MacDaniels were listed among these refugee relief workers.⁶

The refugees who reached Mardin wearing these garments were likely Armenians, but could have been Syriac Christians. The clothing was identified by the McDaniels as Kurdish, an identification confirmed, mostly, by Kurdish sources. So why would these refugees be wearing Kurdish peasant clothing? Obviously as a disguise, but why not Turkish? Because in this region the dominant Muslim population was and is Kurdish. Kurdish informants in several locations have readily admitted that their grandparents participated in the massacre and dislocation of their Armenian and Syriac neighbors, believing that by supporting the Turkish republican army, they would gain autonomy within the new Turkish Republic.

³ The map shown here is compiled from several period maps dating to the late 19th and early 20th c. Although it is impossible to determine population distribution precisely, the overlay of Armenian and Kurdish claims does clearly represent the essential problem; that these populations were mingled in the same landscape in eastern Anatolia.

⁴ Fromkin, D. (1989). *op.cit.*, pp. 18-20 and following maps;. 192-197.

⁵ Archives of the American Board of Missions, American Research Institute in Turkey, Istanbul.

⁶ Report of the American Committee for Relief in the Near East, 1920. Dr. McDaniels held a PhD from Cornell in botany (1917). In 1919 and 1920 he and his wife did relief work with Armenian refugees in Turkey through the American Committee for Relief in the Near East, following which he returned to Cornell to teach. See also Laurence MacDaniels papers, ca. 1915-1986, Cornell University Library.

The Garments

There are specific features of these ensembles that identify them as Kurdish. For the women's ensemble, three pieces have survived (Figure 3). The ensemble generally conforms to the nomadic vestimentary system of layered garments over the baggy trousers known as salvar. There are differences from a typical Turkish ensemble. The short chemise has an open front. The Turkish equivalent would typically have been closed, longer, and white. Turkish women wear an apron that is a flat rectangular panel. The Kurdish apron is gathered to a waistband and a bib. The Kurdish term for this apron is bervank.



Figure 3. The three Kurdish women's garments: Tunic (top left); apron (top right) and trousers (below). All garments are made of multiple fabrics and also heavily patched, particularly the trousers. Cornell Costume and textile Collection.

However, there are also some pieces missing. Other images of Kurdish dress from this period show that, as Muslims there would be a head covering, as well as a sash.⁷ These items have been added in Figure 1 for the woman, and a sash was added for the man, whose hat is part of the received ensemble. A turban wrap silk cloth was also added to the hat. However, since the style of head-coverings and sashes varied greatly in different regions, and we do not know precisely where our refugees were coming from, the specific headdress and sash that would have been worn with these garments can't be known for certain.

⁷ Allison, C. and Philip G. Kreyenbroek, Eds. (1996). *Kurdish Culture and Identity*. London, Zed Books, pp. 135-155; Yasin, A. (2011). *Tarih, Kultur ve Cizre [History, Culture and Cizre]*. Istanbul, Kent Isiklari, pp. 337-343; 351-379.

Also there should be an outer coat. Today these coats survive only in very dressy versions worn for special occasions, and the taste has gone to glittery fabrics, which usually come over the border from Aleppo, just forty miles south of the border (Figure 4). In the past such coats would have been simpler. One example in the author's collection from this general region is hand spun and hand woven in red and white wool stripes, with hand made black wool lace trim.



***Figure 4. Kurdish traditional dress still worn for special occasions in Van or Hakkari, 2012.
Photo by author.***

The textiles found in these garments exemplify the availability and production patterns of the period preceding World War I. The production of cotton textiles was important in Anatolia from at least the 17th century, when commercial cotton growing expanded.⁸ However, in the southeast, cotton growing was probably a much earlier practice, particularly from Iskenderun to Mersin, on the Cukurova Plain. By the nineteenth century cotton growing was widespread in the coastal was probably a much earlier practice, particularly from Iskenderun to Mersin, on the Cukurova Plain. By the nineteenth century cotton growing was widespread in the coastal regions of southern and western Turkey, and also inland in low-lying river valleys of the Southeast. But when cotton was raised for the market, there would also be home production of cotton thread and cloth for personal use wherever it was grown.

The nineteenth century organization of textile manufacturing was still a putting out system, even as the production tools became mechanized. This was a natural mode of production in a Muslim society that enabled the employment of women in the privacy of their homes that has been documented as far back

⁸ Inalcik, H. and D. Quataert (1994). *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire, 1300 -1914*. New York, Cambridge University Press, p.334; Tavernier, J. B. (1678). *The Six Voyages of Jean Baptiste Tavernier...Through Turkey into Persia, and the East Indies, Finished in the Year 1670*. London, Chapt XII, p. 230.

as the sixteenth century.⁹ For this reason, putting out systems continued into the last decade of the twentieth century in Turkey. Putting out systems were documented in the 1990s in Gaziantep, in the southeast, and also in Buldan, in the southwest, near Denizli.¹⁰ Weavers in Rize and Trabzon in the Northeast, Sanliurfa and Erüh in Siirt, in the Southeast report that 10 to 15 years ago there were still putting out systems active in their regions as well.



Figure 5, left. Details from woman's garments, examples of striped textiles.

Figure 6, right. Checked textile examples. Cornell Costume and Textile Collection.

The Textiles

In the women's garments exhibit a variety of simple hand-woven cotton textiles in their basic construction as well as in a multitude of patches (Figure 3). Most of these are checks or stripes, usually blue and white. Most of these appear to be hand-woven using commercially spun cotton yarns. Following the industrial revolution, Europeans, particularly the British, saturated the Ottoman market with their cheap industrially spun thread. So by the end of the nineteenth century the commercial domestic Ottoman hand-spinning industry had collapsed.¹¹

These indigo dyed blue and white striped and checked textiles had long been the common cloth of ordinary Ottoman citizens (Figures 5 and 6). There are some very early examples of this cloth that have been preserved as relics of revered muslim saints, notably a seventeenth century coat belonging to Hacı Bayram, now preserved at the Ethnographic Museum in Ankara; and another attributed to the thirteenth

⁹ Peirce, L. P. (2003). *Morality tales: law and gender in the Ottoman court of Aintab*. Berkeley, University of California Press, pp. 34, 68, 247.

¹⁰ Jirousek, C. (2005). *Finding the Cloth for the Clothes: Patterns of Meaning in Traditional Cloth Production and Trade in Anatolia. The Fabric of Life: Cultural Transformations in Turkish Society*. R. Marchese. Binghamton, Global Academic Publishing, SUNY Binghamton, pp.168-171.

¹¹ Quataert D. and Keydar, Ç. (1994). *Manufacturing in the Ottoman Empire and Turkey, 1500 -1950*. Albany, State University of New York Press, pp.93-95.
Aintab (Gaziantep).

century Sufi poet and saint Celaleddin Rumi, in the Mevlana Museum in Konya. Most of the striped and check textiles are handspun. These coarser fabrics would have been locally made for home use in a subsistence economy. There are also homespun red fabrics both striped and solid, in which the dye is almost certainly madder. The madder plant is widely distributed throughout Anatolia, and so was widely used for household weaving. It was also particularly important as a commercial product. Certain regions became known for their red dyeing. The region around Aintab (Gaziantep) was famous for dyeing red cloth and also tanning and dyeing red Leather.¹²



Figure 7. Details showing print textiles from woman's garments. Hand-printed textile upper left. Cornell Costume and Textile Collection.

There is one piece of hand-woven and handspun cloth in the woman's tunic, that is block printed. The block printing of textiles came west from India, appearing first in Egypt by the thirteenth century. (Figure 7.) By the early eighteenth century the demand for these amazing decorated cotton textiles in Europe was being fulfilled not only by shiploads of cloth making its way around Africa, but also by overland caravans from the Red Sea and Persian Gulf, or across Iran. The textile merchants of Anatolia took note of this lucrative trade, and by the eighteenth century they were printing and painting textiles in Aleppo (just 40 miles south of what is now the Turkish border) and the Black Sea town of Tokat, where printing is done to this day.¹³ Some of this cloth was for domestic trade, as we can see from this garment, but it was also on offer to the western merchants who came to the great markets of Anatolia. The piece in this dress is rather crude, but the best of the Ottoman production could be very fine indeed.

Finally, there are industrially roller-printed cotton textiles. Since the mid nineteenth century the British had been flooding the Ottoman market with their cheap printed cottons, so cheap that in many areas they

¹² Peirce, op. cit. p. 67.

¹³ Curtin, P. D. (1984). *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 198-99;. Duman, Y. (1998). *Notables, Textiles and Copper in Ottoman Tokat 1750-1840*. Dissertation. Binghamton NY, State University of New York, History, pp. 116-117.

replaced traditional hand made cloth entirely, particularly in the western part of the country. Here in the isolated Southeast, however, chances are that this printed cloth would have been a relative rarity, preserved and reused here to repair a more ordinary garment. Based on analysis of 19th c. print technology and design, it is likely that the newest of these would have dated to the 1880s, but that two of the others could possibly date to before 1860.¹⁴

The classic Kurdish men's costume features garments that are made of a special mohair fabric, known as sal sapik. The ensemble in Figure 1 does involve mohair fabric for the outer coat, but in a weft-faced weave. In this image traditional textiles from this region have been added for the missing sash and turban. Kurdish sources firmly identified this coat as characteristically Kurdish, although such a garment could have been worn by others in the region. However the shirt and trousers underneath are hand spun, hand-woven cotton, all white. Kurdish sources were unanimous in saying these garments were not Kurdish in cut or material. The hat is a somewhat conical shape of very coarse thick wool felt, locally made. Some historic images of Kurds do show hats of this type, although other headdresses were also worn. However, Syrians and Armenians are also shown with such hats. Also it appears that an inner jacket might also have been part of the complete traditional ensemble.

The handspun cotton inner garments may indicate a Syriac or Armenian origin for the refugees, as they suggest an origin in the cotton growing lowland valleys southeast of Mardin. Syriac Christian villages farmed these valleys; Kurds followed their flocks of sheep and mohair goats that provided the cloth for the entire traditional Kurdish men's costume. So perhaps the male refugee wore his own inner clothing but added a Kurdish outer coat and headdress as a disguise.

Garments hand-woven from mohair were widely produced and worn by both Kurdish and Armenian men throughout eastern Anatolia, a contemporary example of which is the man's ensemble in Figure 3. This cloth is still being produced today in isolated locations of Southeastern Turkey. Mohair weaving as not only important to traditional Kurdish dress, but also as a famous export known as camlet, avidly sought in the Middle Ages by European merchants.¹⁵ The secret of preparing a warp with the slippery mohair fiber was something that European weavers could not master. In 2012 it was confirmed that there are still active weavers in two locations; in Sirnak and in Siirt in the town of Eruh. The Kurdish weavers in Eruh stated that Armenians once organized this trade, working as weavers and managers of the putting out systems that also included Kurdish weavers. Confirmation of this assertion can be seen in an Armenian name inscribed on a well worn loom beater still in use in Eruh, and also in a group of Armenian men's costumes on exhibition in 2012 at the Armenian Museum and Library of America in Watertown, Massachusetts.¹⁶

The closure on the man's coat is plaited silk, the only silk in either of these ensembles, and certainly locally made.¹⁷ Silkworms were raised almost everywhere in the warmer parts of Turkey a century ago. In a comparative study between Turkish, Indian, and Chinese silk some years ago, it was established that

¹⁴ Greene, Susan. *Wearable Prints: 1760 -1860* Kent State University Press, forthcoming spring 2013.

¹⁵ Jirousek, C. (2009). *Rediscovering Camlet: Traditional mohair cloth weaving in Southeastern Turkey*. Proceedings of the Textile Society of America Biennial Symposium, Honolulu, Hawaii, DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

¹⁶ Armenian Library and Museum of America, Watertown MA, March 2012.

<http://www.alm ainc.org/>

¹⁷ Jirousek, C. (1998). "The End of the Silk Road: Implications of the Decline of Turkish Sericulture." *Textile History* 29 (2): 201-225.

Turkish silk irregular in diameter, and therefore less lustrous than eastern varieties of silk. Much of Turkish silk was used for domestic production, usually for warp, with finer imported silk used for weft in luxury textiles. There were also extensive putting out systems for production of the silk warp, cotton weft textiles known as *alaca* and *kutnu*, basic to traditional dress everywhere in the Ottoman Empire. So either homegrown silk or silk warp ends might have been available locally to make this closure.

These garments are unique because they are everyday work clothing, the sort of thing that rarely comes into the hands of collections. They are documents of traditional life, production and use of textiles in the late Ottoman Empire. These garments are also human documents of a time of great suffering and turmoil, the human end of the great transition from the age of Empires to the modern republican era.



Figure 8 abc (Left to Right) A Kurd of Cizre, 1873; Osman Hamdi Bey; Armenian dress of Harput (Elazið) 19th c. Armenian Library and Museum; Syriac Christian, c. 1918, Midyat Sûriyani Kùltûr Merkez. The Kurd and the Armenian are both from regions known for production of the mohair cloth known in the west as camlet, and also used for men's clothing. The Syriac is from the region south of Mardin and appears to be wearing cotton like the mens ensemble in Figure 1.

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