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Workshops, masterpieces and creativity

Weaving language

In Kashmir, the mysterious language of Talim is used by weavers—as documented by the photographer Simone Haug—while in Iran, an oral tradition of pattern singing is being recorded by the musician Mehdi Aminian. Rachel Meek discusses their work



All photos: Simone Haug

There is no indication where it came from,' says Zubair Ahmad, the Director of the Indian Institute of Carpet Technology (IICT), Srinagar, Jammu and Kashmir, when asked about the history of Talim. The written and spoken language is used exclusively by Kashmir's 30,000–40,000 weavers. 'Every weaver in Kashmir knows Talim, no person can weave without knowing it,' he continues—suggesting 1341–1385 CE as the

period that it came to be used there and explaining that the same system of written Talim is used by both weavers of kani shawls and of silk rugs, which use the Persian (asymmetric) knot. The symbols of Talim denote the number of knots and their colours, and are intended to make it as simple as possible for weavers to follow a pattern. The rug design is first drawn with colour codes on graph paper by a designer known locally as a naqash. This design is

then translated into Talim. For designs that repeat, one weaver may read out the pattern so that the other weavers working on the same piece can weave the pattern without reading the script.

The Swiss photographer and ethnographer Simone Haug grew fascinated by Talim, and other ways in which designs are translated into rugs, while documenting carpet weaving in various countries including Nepal, Iran, Romania, Switzerland, India and Turkey. Her

1 Rug weavers in Kashmir referring to written Talim instructions

2 Handwritten Talim is becoming less frequently used since the introduction of software, but many rug designs are recorded in this way

3 Computer-generated Talim, the written language used exclusively by weavers in Kashmir, at the Indian Institute of Carpet Technology (IICT)

photographs instigated (and illustrate) this article. She says, 'I became interested in the very different processes and techniques of translation between the draft and the finished carpet. The scores and templates associated with these techniques all have an aesthetic or musical quality of their own, linked to knowledge and particular skills, which are being partially or completely replaced by software.'

In Kashmir, the software arrived in the early 2000s. 'It was the biggest breakthrough for weaving in Kashmir,' Ahmad says. Designs created on the software are automatically converted into Talim and printed for distribution to weavers. The IICT is currently working on the preservation of old carpet designs—mostly Persian in appearance, with local variations in colour and motifs—recorded only in handwritten Talim, by digitising the Talim script.

Equally enigmatic and more visually obscure, an Iranian oral weaving tradition is currently the subject of a PhD thesis by the Vienna-based Iranian musician Mehdi Aminian. He has named the practice 'pattern singing' or Naqsh-e Khani, but it is known by different names, such as 'map reading' or 'black singing', in different regions. Unlike Talim, Persian pattern singing has no written form, rather it is interpreted from drawn designs by the person who sings, or chants the instruction, becoming a duet when weavers working on the



same loom echo the verbal instruction in acknowledgement. The earliest written record of its existence comes from marginal notes in the diaries of foreign diplomats and tourists who overheard the sound in various cities circa 1900. In *Women of Persia*—a 1931 British Pathé silent film, shot at a nomadic encampment 'about 100 miles east of Shiraz'—subtitles read 'The chief woman sings out a song which tells the workers the pattern!' Aminian proposes that historically, pattern singing was used to weave most urban Persian carpets with symmetrical designs and that the lack of extant research is due to the conservative nature of weaving environments, which made them fairly inaccessible to foreign visitors. He suggests that the method emerged as a solution to the difficulty of duplicating drawn designs, which would often show one quarter of the overall rug.

4 Jacquard punchcards in use in Switzerland in 2017. The binary code of 19th-century punchcards inspired the design of early computers, underpinning modern technology



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Having conducted pilot studies in Iran in 2018-2019, he says: 'This is a widespread but highly endangered practice. When interviewed, people said that everybody in the village used to weave this way, but now it is very difficult to find people who are practising. This is the case in Kashan, Esfahan and the villages around there, Yazd and around Kerman. In cities that have a newer tradition of weaving like Arak, I could find no trace of it, even though they are making the same complex patterns.'

The vocabulary used varies from place to place and the music to which the instruction is set depends upon personal preference, musical ability of the individual weaver and community events.

The scores and templates have an aesthetic or musical quality of their own, linked to knowledge and particular skills

'Sometimes when listening to music or TV, the pattern singing would follow the same musical notes or when it was prayer time—the call to prayer has a certain musical mode—the pattern singing would follow that. It's a very unconscious process. It is very prestigious to have a good voice and to be the main instructor of the carpet weaving in a workshop comes with high social status,'

Aminian says. 'If the rug is being woven around the time of a funeral or a wedding, this contributes towards the mood of the singing. I'd ask, "did anything interesting happen during the weaving of this carpet?" and they'd say "my daughter got married" or "I lost a family member". I'd ask which part of the carpet they were weaving when this happened and they would point out a flower motif or a

section of border and say that whenever they see that part, it reminds them of that event.'

While there is no proven connection between Talim and Persian pattern singing, Aminian supposes that they might branch from a common origin. 'There are a lot of Parsis in Kashmir, it might have come from the ancient Persians who emigrated there, where it somehow developed into a written form.' Haug and Aminian are planning to collaborate on further research into the possible links between the two cultures.

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