

# Azerbaijani Ritual Shadda Carpets as Guarder of the People's Oral Heritage

By  
Roya Taghiyeva  
Doctor of Arts  
Director of Azerbaijani Carpet State Museum  
Baku, Azerbaijan  
tagiyeva\_r@rambler.ru

Paper presented for the conference "Can Oral History Make Objects Speak?",  
Nafplion, Greece. October 18-21, 2005.

During a history of any people, there has developed the field of art in which its rich spiritual world is reflected. Such art embodies typical features of a nation's character, intellect, world out-looking, aesthetics and philosophy. For Azerbaijani people, this kind of art is carpet making the origin of which goes back the very ancient times.

Figuratively, any place where an Azerbaijani spread his carpet became his home. He used it to cover and decorate his home inside and outside. Carpets served him as furniture. He hung them on walls and spread on the floor. He used it as a bag on his road. He made of them both clothing and horsecloth. He protected his horse with the carpet when it was cold and hot. As a matter of fact, Azerbaijani was born and buried on the carpet. At the same time, colourfully patterned carpets were intended to feast his eyes.

According to archaeological findings, as early about 2000 B.C. the population of Azerbaijan could make various household items from carpet fabric distinguished with their high technological and artistic dignity. In the 5 century B.C, Xenophont described customs of using carpets in everyday life by Azerbaijani people. Herodot



mentioned the ability of Azerbaijanis to make a wide range of colours from plant dyes.

From the 6<sup>th</sup> century A.D, many historic and literary works give us wide and valuable information about the medieval Azerbaijani carpet. Such writers as the Albanian historian of the 7<sup>th</sup> century Moses Kagankatvatsi, the Arabian historians of the 9<sup>th</sup> – 10<sup>th</sup> centuries Masudi, Cabari, Al-Mukaddasi, Ibn-Khaukal, Al-Istahri praised the great variety, quality, special beauty of the Azerbaijani carpet.

The great popularity of the Azerbaijani carpet in the world is demonstrated with their descriptions in Oriental miniatures of the 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> centuries and canvas of the western painters of the Renaissance. The world, mood and content of these carpets are deeply lyrical. They reflect the firsthand sense of life experienced and depicted in patterns. The delicate spirit of the people, their customs, beliefs and faiths are embodied in these carpets. During centuries, the carpet was his real necessity of his artistic and spiritual world. For ages, the world has been reflected on carpets with colourful and unique ornaments, direct and hidden patterns, revealing themselves only to the initiated person.

Today, this initiation leads us to the world of abstract carpet contexts everlasting in time and unlimited in the people's wisdom. These compositions were intended to convey the conception of Universe. The purpose was to concentrate cosmic powers and magic protection.

The composition had to convey a complete image in which relations between both different parts of a field ornament and relations between the field and the border were intended to reveal the whole symbolism. As a result, the conception of Universal Unity was reflected in the traditional carpet and was expressed in its design as a whole. Thus, the carpet is the representation of Universe in a miniature.



According to beliefs of Azerbaijanis, one can keep in touch with the Heaven being in harmony with Universe. In this case, one gets favourable altitude. These images laid the foundation of many beliefs of Azerbaijani people and were connected with sacral, esoteric and magic aspects of rituals in which carpets played the important role.

Carpets with sacral patterns were woven for different events, such as weddings, birthdays, and funerals. The field patterns with religious-magic meaning and the border motives with protective powers were conceived for a single purpose. The purpose was to have numerous posterity, fortune, welfare, peace in the family, protection against evil powers, which existed in the surrounding world. The aim was realized by magic practice. Most prominently are sacral motives in Azerbaijani pileless carpets, particularly the shadda weaving.

Pileless shadda carpet coverings was woven in many variations under different folk names. Such as “Shal-shadda”, “Shadda-Kilim” or “Kerdeklik kirmizi kilim”, “Shadda-Djedjim”, “Chille shaddasi”, “Shaddali chadir” or “Bey chadiri”, “Nemer perdesi”, “Shadvard”, “Baladja palas”, “Dama-dama shadda”, “Develi shadda”. They were woven of woollen, cotton or silk yarn. The main types of shadda were plain, chequered or pictorial. Their principal characteristic was the pure abstraction represented with coloured sections. Basic colours of the carpet were both red and blue. This bright scheme was intended to make people happy. The word of “shadda” is believed to derive from “shad” which means “joyful”, “merry”.

Carpets “Shadda” have deep symbolic and mainly metaphysic meanings. In their patterns they reflected the conception of reuniting and reviving the initial essence of life. This leading idea probably shaped the initial form of the carpet. At first, the carpet was woven in narrow coloured parts dominating in red and then it was



sewed together. The most interesting is that the carpets also demonstrate motives relating to celestial bodies, cosmic phenomena with an appeal to Heaven as if they came from Universe and then back.

Before speaking of the symbolism and ritual purpose of shadda, I would like to inform you about its types.

“Shadda-kilim” or “Gardaklik gyrgyzy kilim” was a red patterned carpet-curtain used in a red field at wedding ceremonies, traditions of which went back the very ancient times. The carpet curtain separated the room place prepared for newly-weds. The carpet was woven at the bride’s home and was an item of her dowry. In Azerbaijani popular epos “Dada Gorgud” of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the carpet was described as an item used at wedding ceremonies.

“Shal-shadda” was a plain carpet fabric woven of sheep, camel, and sometimes goat’s fine wool. It was dyed mainly in red, but could be also white, black, green, and blue.

“Shadda-jejim” was a striped weaving consisted of two or more parts. It was patterned in plant, animal, and geometric motives. The jejim played a special role at Novruz Bayram, the popular Azerbaijani Holiday of the Spring. This festivity was reflected in patterns and colours of the carpet: the sunlight represented symbolically in reys - stripes in the red background.

“Dama-dama shadda” means a chequered shadda. Pattern of the carpet consisted of squares. “Dama-dama shadda” dominated in red was



intended to make a tent for a bridegroom. The black and white on was hung above the bed of Sufis.

“Chilla shadda”. “Chilla shadda” was patterned in red and blue squares dominated in red. The meaning “Chilla” was connected with suffering, misfortunes, difficulties and hardship. These carpets were especially woven to prevent terrible events.

They were believed to prevent the surrounding world from evil powers. This ritual of weaving was called “chilla-kasma”, that meant the final getting rid of the burden. Chilla shadda was especially popular with girls and young women. On the eve of

Novruz, they came round and spread the red carpet on the floor, after that they sat on it, told their fortunes. Afterwards, the carpet was left in the open air for a week in order that, the carpet could get the special energy and power from the sky, the moon and stars and they were believed to fulfil their wishes.

“Develi shadda” demonstrated motives of camel caravans. The composition consisted mainly of three bands. The dominating band was red and flanked with the black and blue bands. Sometimes the shadda was woven in the plain field. Initially, camel caravans were represented in the border, and main patterns of the field were motives of celestial bodies.

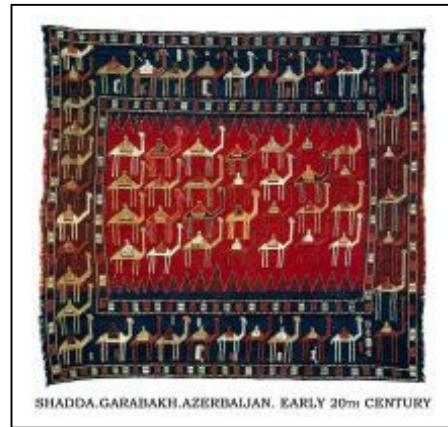
I would like to point out that the above mentioned types of shadda are only a small part of variety of the carpet. They are the most popular examples of the carpet which can help me to highlight the issue of my paper.

The types of shadda I have mentioned are characterized with the red field which was

invariably kept during many centuries. The red as the basic colour of the field was believed to relate to the world of spirits and it was the source of the God’s protection. But this fact was not accident.



Magic of red is as much powerful as logical, predetermined, proved, essential and even tangible. Among different peoples red played a special role and was connected with protective magic. But Azerbaijanis regarded it to be not only sacral. They also believed that it absorbed the whole philosophy of life. It was like a law that enabled and promoted the existence of life. Red was philosophy of magic.



It didn't convey fear of the mysterious powers but joyful admiration and great belief in them. The colour comes from the heavens, cosmos; its rays are living, pure and free of evil powers.

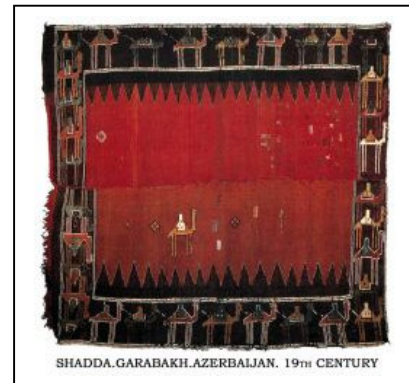
In Azerbaijani shadda carpets, red is, so to speak, especially realistic, it became main relationship of this colour with esotericism. It guides the human behaviour in different situations, and prompts ways to escape misfortunes.

Red was not only a symbol. It was used in traditional medicine as an especial energetic power. Red clothes and Shal-shadda were worn in illness. The colour drives away depression and neutralizes negative emotions. Red shadda curtains were hung in a room where a child being ill of measles was laid up. While the long cough, a red shirt was put on. On painful parts of the body, a red strip was also put on. Red was a symbol of new life, as well as childbirth, wedding and death.

Red followed a man in his birth. They tied up baby's umbilical cord with a red lace. Red colour also followed a man and after his death. People wrapped the deceased in the red shaddas. The colour was intended not only to guard the deceased against evil powers, but also restore him to everlasting life.

In chilla shadda, the colour was a symbol of uniting, joining and creating a family. In carpets, of course, red was combined with other sacral motives, such as diamond-shaped eye, crosses, swastikas, squares, checks, dragons, rectangles, zigzags etc. These motives were related to the cult which played an important role in ancient beliefs of Azerbaijanis. These motives representing the cult of celestial bodies tell us about purifying and fertilizing power of the Moon and stars. Besides carpets, this cult was also reflected in a bride's head and breast jewellery items. These items symbolized fertility as it was in "Develi shadda".

Symbolism of red was most strikingly was reflected in traditional wedding ceremony of Azerbaijan. It was a system of customs and rituals. They are kept up to present in some regions of Azerbaijan. Perhaps, there were more various customs related to this tradition in the ancient times, but during centuries the system had transformed into the present classical tradition. Most vividly and visually, without any changes, rituals related to wedding ceremonies have survived in carpets, namely red shadda. This tradition have been demonstrated in the educational programme “Traditional Wedding Ceremony” created by the Azerbaijani Carpet State Museum. I would like to present it to you visually.



The principal content of the programme includes an exhibition at the Museum grounds getting visitors to know with the main types of shadda, an interior - design of a wedding tent which reveals functional variety of the carpets added with some large - scale photos of a traditional bride. In these photos you can see main wedding rituals which in the bride takes an active part.

This educational entertaining programme through ritual games introduced to the young generation is the source of national tradition and of great success with them. Children were traditionally active participants in various folk festivities and customs. From their very young age, children became aware of the main spiritual values of the people’s traditions. The most popular festivity was a joyful, noisy and colourful wedding.

Azerbaijani wedding ceremony proceeded through twelve steps. Four ones are seeking in marriage, two are engagements, and others are weddings at the bride and bridegroom’s homes in which a great number of people participated.

As Azerbaijani shadda has the ancient origin, an especial attention is paid to early forms of the tradition in the program, which formed main structure of the tradition and features of the wedding ceremony.

From the period of primitive society, marriage was admitted by all peoples as an important event both for an individual and a community as a whole. The creating of a family was needed to maintain the family name in the future. This important occasion had to be realized in such a way that nothing could prevent it to be destined. In that case, person helped himself getting accustomed to traditions. Here, we should

remark that these traditions, in this case reflected in using weaving items, carpets shadda in red had been experienced since early times and kept.

The system of customs including vestiges of ancient beliefs, first of all belief in magic red with protecting symbols, covers single items and actions demonstrated in the program. Visitors of the Museum can also make souvenirs for themselves under the direction the Museum's attendants in order that their wishes would be fulfilled and that was the main motto of the programme.

The main factor of the wedding at the Museum's exposition is attributes of various rituals as they reflected factual forms of its culture. All of them come alive and speak through performing traditional games at the Museum.



Wedding in the Museum, as well as the realistic one, is accompanied with feasts of plentiful meals and traditional entertainments, such as, a song contest, playing musical instruments, rope pulling, and traditional dramatized performances.

This fact is not accident; the carpet was the first step of making a family. Preparations to a wedding started with the putting of a loom. The main item in a dowry was a wedding shadda woven by a bride herself. When the loom was put at her home and the bride set to work, her mother would invite the mother of a bridegroom to bless the work. The future mother-in-law together with her relatives brought *khoncha*, trays of gifts and sweets covered with red shaddas. The trays were put on a loom and a bridegroom's mother blessed the future carpet.

Here you can see a joyful group of girls having tasted sweets tying symbolic knots on the warp of the future wedding shadda to wish a bride to be happy.

Everywhere you can see various sweets, sweet flat cakes, sweet tea, red eggs, mirrors with red bands, red carpets and weavings symbolizing happiness, wealth, peace in the family.

At the ceremony of a traditional wedding so called game as "Stealing a bridegroom" is very popular with children. In this game, all guests of the wedding



took part. Here the Museum, attendants with one group of players are concealing a bridegroom, but another group is ransoming him. The game is finished with celebrating a bridegroom, with dances and songs and he is tied round with a red band.

At the same time, another ceremony is taking place in the following room of the Museum. According to the ritual, a red dye of henna is used to make sacral patterns on hands and foots of a bride and her girlfriends. Red of henna was connected with magic of fire purification and protective magic. Henna is a red dye powder made of a plant.

A ceremony of dressing up a bride also is organized carefully. From the home of a bridegroom, a complete set of red wedding attire for a bride is brought. The red costume is intended to prevent a bride against the evil eye.

And finally, in the main room of the Museum, imitating a traditional wedding tent, the principal step of wedding ceremony is taking a place. Here you can see a bride accompanied with a traditional melody. The bridegroom's friend tied a red band around the waist of a bride to strengthen her magic protection. In front of newly-weds a mirror tied up with a red band and lighted candles, both related to protective and purifying magic, are carried. Magic of fertility and good wishes are also performed with a ritual of showering a bride and bridegroom with biscuits, dry fruits, nuts.



A newly-wed couple is led to the wedding tent, shadda kilim adorned with pile-less carpets spread on the floor and put on the walls. Gardaklik shadda kilim, large ritual carpet used as a wedding curtain, halves the room. The red carpet is intended to protect the newly-weds against the evil eye, disasters, and misfortunes, and guarantees to have numerous healthy children.

As we see, the magic of the carpet and magic of red were closely related to each other, and they served good and piece, happiness and prosperity. I would like to point out that if the ritual and esotericism were not useful and popular, then traditions would die out long ago. The programme me held at the Museum is an evidence of it. Once again the good and wise “Shadda” has brought joy, delight and excitement to children, devoting them to the mysteries of Universe.