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Research paper

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THREAD, SCRAPS AND FABRIC IN THE TRADITIONAL RITUAL CULTURE OF DAGISTANIS

Abstract. The article focuses on identifying the role of specific elements within the “objectified” culture in the mythopoetic worldview and ritualistic practices of the Dagestani peoples. It aims to explore commonplace items like thread, scraps, and fabric, which, while being familiar in our tangible world, possess not only utilitarian functions but also distinct semiotic qualities. These items have the capacity to forge particular social connections, attributable to their utilization in the ritual culture prevalent among the majority of the Dagestani peoples. Given the contemporary impact of globalization, which often results in the erosion of historical knowledge and ideas, there is a compelling justification for documenting the material and spiritual landscape of our ancestors. This study draws on an examination of specialized literature and field data amassed by the author over numerous years of ethnographic expeditions in Dagestan. The approach involves comprehending the internal structure of developmental patterns within general and specialized scientific knowledge systems, with a particular emphasis on the role of everyday items in socially significant events. The author concludes that the central concept defining the semantic essence of thread, and its derivatives such as fabric, scraps, embroidery designs, carpets, and rugs, revolves around the interconnectedness of ideas with the destiny of life and the social bonds established through the use of thread. This connection signifies continuity and ritual connotations. Notably, thread serves as a medium through which temporal and spatial gaps are bridged, linking life with death, individuals with society, and establishing or disrupting social and mythological “dialogues.” The core of this semantic significance lies in the process of producing woven objects through weaving, where countless threads are interwoven to form a unified whole. This method, in turn, holds the potential to connect the cosmic principle with human life, as well as the world of people with the otherworldly realms, beliefs deeply ingrained in the past.

Keywords: Dagestan; material culture; thread; cloth; scraps; wedding and funerary rituals; gift exchange; semiotic and semantic load.

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НИТЬ, ЛОСКУТ, ТКАНЬ В ТРАДИЦИОННОЙ ОБРЯДОВОЙ КУЛЬТУРЕ НАРОДОВ ДАГЕСТАНА

Аннотация. Статья посвящена определению места в мифопоэтической картине мира и обрядовой культуре народов Дагестана отдельных предметов «опредмеченной» культуры. Предполагается рассмотреть такие привычные в нашем материальном мире обычную нить, ткань, лоскут ткани, не только как предметы, обладающие утилитарными свойствами, но и определенными семиотическими свойствами, свойством создавать определенные социальные связи, в силу их применения в обрядовой культуре большинства народов Дагестана. Учитывая то, что современные глобализационные процессы, происходящие в обществе, ведут к потере многих знаний и представлений, существовавших в прошлом, представляется вполне оправданной и актуальной фиксация картины материального и духовного мира предков. Исследование было проведено на основе анализа специальной литературы и полевого материала, собранного автором в течение многолетних этнографических экспедиций в Дагестане, методом осмысления внутренней структуры закономерностей развития систем и явлений общего и специального научного познания, роли обыденных предметов в общественно значимых событиях. В результате исследования автор приходит к выводу, что первостепенной идеей семантической сущности в характеристике нити, и всего, что делается из нити – ткани и лоскута, узора вышивки, ковра, паласа и т.д., является связь представлений с жизненной судьбой, социальные связи, создающиеся посредством применения нити: соединение, преемственность; обрядовая коннотация. Именно с ее помощью устранялись разрывы во времени и пространстве, связывались жизнь и смерть, человек и общество, устанавливались (или разрывались) социальный и мифологический «диалоги». Думается, что ядром данной семантической нагрузки является способ изготовления тканного предмета путем переплетения, соединения в одно целое бесчисленного множества нитей, которые, в свою очередь, также могли связывать воедино космическое начало и жизнь человека, мир людей и мир потусторонний, в который люди всегда в прошлом верили.

Ключевые слова: Дагестан; материальная культура; нить; лоскут; ткань; свадебная и похоронная обрядность; дарообмен, семиотическая и семантическая нагрузка.

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A thread, a scrap of cloth, and fabric represent elements of material culture, specifically associated with clothing, constituting integral parts of what is termed objectified culture. Over the last few decades, a trend has emerged in domestic science to not only categorize objects of material culture based on their utilitarian functions [1, p. 4–16] but also to emphasize the profound aspects of their functionality, signification, and informational load (“language”) within traditional everyday contexts such as rituals, etiquette, and mythology [2]. Consequently, there is a growing imperative to investigate the comprehensive mythopoetic worldview of a particular community, intimately intertwined with individual elements of objectified culture and their roles in family and public rituals. It is widely acknowledged that in the past, among nearly all global societies, including the peoples of Dagestan, each cultural element carried a more extensive utilitarian and notably semantic and semiotic load than observed in modern society [3].

P.G. Bogatyrev stands at the forefront of the contemporary exploration of the symbolic functions of objects. His work posits that any given item inherently serves multiple functions, encompassing both utilitarian and symbolic roles, such as aesthetic or magical functions, and even the function of indicating class or regional affiliations [4, p. 363]. Bogatyrev contends, *“Independent magical power is not always attributed to an object because it is used in motivated magical action; rather, it’s the other way around: first, the object is endowed with an independent supernatural power...”* [4, p. 201].

In line with this perspective, this article seeks to examine commonplace items like threads, fabric, and cloth scraps that are ubiquitous in our material world. These objects are recognized for their utilitarian properties and, as revealed, possess distinct semiotic qualities. They exhibit the capacity to establish specific social connections due to their utilization in the ritual culture prevalent among the majority of Dagestani peoples.

In the ritual and mythological traditions of numerous cultures, the symbolism of a thread emerges as a powerful metaphor for life, fate, and time, juxtaposed with the notions of roads, paths, and connections. It is postulated that every individual possesses a unique destiny, yet the threads of life are woven long before a person’s birth, with the length of the life thread subject to the control of Higher beings. These concepts may resonate with modern society, partly owing to the influence of Homer, who expounded on the ancient Greek goddesses of fate, the Moirai, who spun the threads of fate: the first, known as “the allotter,” determined fate even before an individual’s birth and was often depicted as an elderly woman with a measure or scales; the second sister – “the spinner” of human life; the third, “the inevitable,” steadily brought the future closer, equipped with the book of life and scissors. It was the third sister who, capriciously, cut the thread of human life with scissors, thus determining its conclusion.

In the traditional worldview of the Dagestani peoples, similar ideas found expression. The very materials used for crafting threads – wool, hemp, and even nettle – originating from plants and resembling hair, were believed to possess inherent growth and were considered vessels of life force. It is no coincidence that the Avars believed that the thread of life could break three times within an individual’s lifetime. However, if fortunate, a person might have the opportunity to prolong their life journey twice, marked by the occurrence of two knots. If, through sheer luck, the individual managed to tie a knot on the thread for the third time, it was believed they would live beyond a century. Evidently, this is why someone reaching a

hundred years was referred to as “The One Who Left Three Knots Behind.” Consequently, the spun thread, within the realm of mythopoetic associations, was symbolically perceived as the thread of life. This semantic attribution was significantly influenced by qualitative characteristics such as length, continuity, and the inherent possibility of entanglement and breakage.

The metaphorical association of the thread with the concept of a prolonged life is discernible, in our view, across various beliefs, signs, and rituals. According to the beliefs of the Dagestani peoples, it is considered inauspicious to sew anything onto oneself; however, if unavoidable, one must hold a piece of the same thread in their mouth during the act, or else their life may be shortened; receiving a needle and thread with a knot already tied at the end is cautioned against, as it is believed that this could subtract one knot from the potential for an extended life. In the context of a loved one, the implication is that a chance meeting in the afterlife might be forfeited. Furthermore, there exists a notion that the person who ties a knot will take away a good deed from another, and this act will need to be reconciled in the afterlife, as expressed in the Avar phrase “*darazha kIibikula*” – to halve a good deed.

A similar symbolic association of thread with concepts of life and death can be traced within funeral rituals. It is deemed inauspicious to tie knots on the threads used for sewing a funeral shirt, worn before the body is wrapped in a shroud for the final journey. Additionally, when sewing, it is imperative to work from left to right, as opposed to right to left, as per popular beliefs. Sewing in the wrong direction is thought to attract the spirit of death to the one dressing the body, potentially leading to illness, weight loss, or even death. Superstition dictates that after washing, the underwear of a deceased person should be dried by hanging it on the right side. Conversely, the clothes of a living person should be hung with the wrong side facing outwards, ensuring that the seams, made of thread, are visible. Notably, if a washed item is hung without turning it inside out, it is often remarked, “Are you are oblivious of drying a dead person’s clothes!?”

The engagement of beings from the otherworld in the spinning of thread, wherein the thread of fate rests in their hands (paralleling the Greek Moirai), is evident in the involvement of the spindle and the thread wound upon it. In a parallel to human life, the thread initially extends, twists, and winds around the spindle’s axis, traversing the adversities of life, the twists of fate, and the entire lifespan of a mortal. The tools for spinning thread, particularly the spindle, which symbolizes the stretching, twisting, and winding of the thread much like human life, are believed, according to folk traditions, to carry a certain magical significance. They inherently correlate with the essence of life and its inevitable finitude.

In this context, it is important to recall the widely known fairy tale of the sleeping beauty, who falls into a deep slumber, almost succumbing to death, after being pricked by a spindle [5, p. 32]. At the end of every spindle, a spindle whorl was traditionally affixed, often adorned with various amulets – a clear manifestation of the sacred reverence accorded to the spindle. In the mythopoetic perception of the world, researchers suggest that “*the rotation of the spindle symbolizes the movement of the universe, and spinning and weaving represent the feminine principle governing human destiny. It also serves as the veil through which the world is illuminated in an illusory light*” [6, p. 34].

According to available information, spindle whorls were crafted from various materials,

including wood, stone, and bone. V.M. Kotovich, in reference to materials from excavations at the Verkhnegunibsky settlement, notes: “A large group of bone products is spindle whorls. They represent the sawed-off heads of the femurs of large and small cattle, with a through round hole drilled in the center for the spindle shaft” [7, p. 120–121]. These spindle whorls were widely prevalent in the sites of the 3rd–2nd millennium BC in the Caucasus, and similar artifacts are frequently discovered in Bronze Age sites of Dagestan. An example from the second half of the 2nd millennium BC is found in the catacombs near the village of Manas, where a wooden spindle with a whorl and heddles from a primitive loom were uncovered, used to secure warp threads [8]. With a high degree of confidence, it can be asserted that this element of ancient culture endured for thousands of years, remaining virtually unchanged in both form and functionality, until the late 19th to early 20th centuries.

The sacred reverence for the spindle is also embedded in the traditions of the peoples of Dagestan. Primarily, the spindle whorl, situated at the end of the spindle, frequently bore decorations in the form of solar signs, serving as amulets. Additionally, tree-like motifs were often incorporated into the ornamentation of many spindle whorls, symbolizing the conceptual idea of the world tree of life. Special attention was given to making the whorl aesthetically pleasing, striving for a perfect round shape reminiscent of the sun and the full moon. This precision was believed to influence the speed of thread pulling, its quality, and the uniformity of winding on the spindle. Threads of varying thicknesses were crafted depending on their intended use.

On the day designated for pulling and winding the thread on the spindle, the hostess, before commencing her work, would hold a gathering for her neighbors. This gesture aimed to seek their blessings for the creation of high-quality thread, free of thickening and knots, and to garner good fortune and swift filling of the spindle. In instances where the thread frequently broke during the pulling process or knots formed, suggesting interference by malevolent forces, it was believed that the devil was obstructing the work. In response, a piece of wool would be set ablaze to fumigate the room. The smoke was thought to expel the shaitan and dispel the evil eye, which was believed to be cast upon the spindle by one of the female neighbors.

The depiction of a spindle intricately links the motif of spinning with the concept of the world axis, symbolizing the thread as a path or road connecting different worlds. This axis is typically positioned at the center of the world, where the source of life is believed to reside. The whorl-spindle-thread complex, in a broader sense, represents a cosmic model that unifies both space and time. Mythological consciousness views the thread produced through the rotation of the spindle as a symbol of imperishable, continuous, and cyclical time, giving rise to various beliefs and ideas. Notably, scholars observe that the spindle, thread, and fabric woven from thread are attributes associated with the Great Mother Goddess in the myths of the peoples of Dagestan [9].

It was these attributes that were used to sew clothes for a person to protect themselves from bad weather. Thread played a significant role in embellishing garments through various embroidery techniques. The choice and presentation of the design achieved through threadwork held great importance. Ornamentation, embroidered with gold threads, silk, multicolored wool, and cotton threads, adorned a diverse array of items such as wedding clothes, children’s and women’s headdresses, women’s shoes, covers for children’s cradles,

pillows, saddles, pistol holsters, mats for water-bearing jugs, tobacco pouches, handbags, as well as table and wall coverings, and cushion covers [10, p. 106–140; 11; 12].

Items adorned with gold and silk threads held particular esteem [13, p. 51–52]. It was hard to pull a gold or silver thread through a layer of fabric, so instead of being threaded through a needle, it was placed on the fabric and secured with very small stitches along the front side of the embroidery. This technique is known as laid and couched stitch [14, p. 65]. While gold embroidery was predominantly practiced among the Zasulak Kumyks, Laks, and certain Avar villages, and gold threads were primarily imported, silk embroidery was more widespread. This was due to the use of not only imported silk but also locally produced silk. In the 19th century, various authors noted the practice of sericulture among the Kumyks. For instance, I.N. Berezin, in the mid-19th century, visited the village of Tarki and remarked, “*Some residents make silk at home and keep silkworms for this purpose*” [15, p. 69–70].

The prevalent embroidery motifs were primarily ornithomorphic – stylized birds such as partridges (known as *mokok* in Avar, *kaknu* in Lak, and *gush* in Kumyk). These motifs, colloquially referred to as the “oriental cucumber” among certain peoples, were associated with the ancient beliefs of the Dagestan peoples and the idea of procreation. Other common motifs included plants like flowers, leaves, trefoils, and branches, as well as geometric patterns such as circles, rosettes, labyrinths, and crosses, the latter carrying solar semantics [16, p. 147]. The embroidery often incorporated ligature in the Arabic inscription style.

By the mid-nineteenth century, double-headed eagles began to be frequently embroidered on velvet using gold threads. It is important to note that, in this context, the double-headed eagle was not a symbol of Russian autocracy but rather a beautiful and convenient pattern for embroidery. In the culture of the western and southwestern ethnic groups of Dagestan, particularly the Ando-Didois and Avars, who were more geographically isolated and were the last to convert to Islam, more archaic features survived in embroidery designs. These included the predominance of large geometric shapes, solar signs, and protective symbols. In contrast, among the South Dagestan peoples, the influence of Middle Eastern culture, with which they had active contact, was evident; among the Nogais, there was an influence from the artistic traditions of nomadic Central Asian peoples, resulting in corresponding ornamental motifs.

The connection of the thread with concepts of life and death becomes evident in certain magical practices aimed at causing harm to human health or even life. Examples include tying knots from a red thread, accompanied by specific incantations, onto human figures made from pieces of tail fat (*kurdyuk*) or dolls crafted from degradable materials. According to the beliefs of certain Dagestan peoples, the act of tying three threads into knots while uttering specific wishes or curses, accompanied by prayers, while your feet are submerged in water, consequently burying the threads at a fork in the road, was believed to fulfill the wish.

The symbolism of the red thread, indicative of a connection with the spiritual (chthonic) world while simultaneously serving as a protective talisman, is notably associated with life cycle rituals [17, p. 12]. It's essential to highlight that color symbolism holds significant importance in Dagestan, representing an ancient and culturally significant phenomenon. Traditionally, mourning clothes among the majority of the peoples of Dagestan are black, as black is not only considered the color of sorrow and death but is also believed to appease the spirits of ancestors. However, there are exceptions, such as the Kumyks, who, in the distant

past, wore white mourning clothes, and the Lezgins, who do not observe mourning attire. Additionally, the southern Dargins did not associate mourning with the color black; they retained the clothes they were wearing at the time of a loved one's death until the garments naturally decay from wear.

In various rituals of the peoples of Dagestan, the color red was associated with the sun, fertility, vitality, and was believed to possess protecting qualities. Among the Avars of Ruguja (modern Gunibsky district), wedding envoys brought a large ram, the horns of which were adorned with red cloth, as a gift to the bride's parents. In the same village, red silk threads were distributed to neighboring children, according to the weight of the baby's hair, after the "first haircut" ritual. Among the Lezgins, the bride was wrapped in a red scarf, *dugur*, not only protecting her from the evil eye but also because red symbolized the innocence of the girl and the fire in the hearth [18, p. 246].

Among the mountain valley peoples of Dagestan, a practice to ward off the evil eye from a good harvest involved hanging stones with natural holes on fruit trees and grape bushes. These stones were suspended using ropes made of red threads, and red scraps were tied to the grape bushes as well.

During the "Yaran Suvar" festival, celebrated by the Lezgins to mark the beginning of spring, children, the elderly, and sick individuals had their wrists tied with red woolen thread to protect them from the potential harm of the spring sun. The intention was to prevent lethargy and drowsiness, with the belief expressed as "*So that Yar doesn't hit you!*" It was considered preferable for the thread to remain intact until it naturally broke, and no earlier than three days later.

Due to prevailing beliefs about the impurity of a corpse, touching the body of the deceased with bare hands was forbidden. In this regard, mittens were sewn from a piece of fabric taken from the shroud, and these mittens were used to wash the deceased. In return for their labor, those who performed this task received the clothing of the deceased. It was believed that failing to do so could result in the deceased's close ones frequently seeing them undressed in dreams, and during the Last Judgment, they would appear completely naked before Allah. The mittens were either buried or attached to a sink and taken to the place where grave goods were kept. According to popular beliefs, these mittens could later be used for healing purposes, particularly to cure childlessness, seen as a divine punishment and test for women.

After the ablution, the process of wrapping in the shroud would commence. The preferred material for the shroud was fabric made from plant fiber, with coarse cotton being considered the most suitable among the peoples of Dagestan. Cuts of fabric in the form of a future shroud were included as gifts for elderly people on various occasions. A piece of fabric, measuring 25 cubits and wrapped in three layers, served as part of the penalty for killing a guest among various societies.

In the adats (customary laws) of the Tindal Naibstvo of the Khvarshin society concerning the murder of a guest, it was stipulated that if a Khvarshin individual kills a person from another society within the territory of his society, the perpetrator must purchase and transfer to the heirs of the murdered man a shroud of three wrappers and a bull worth 10 rubles. Additionally, the perpetrator becomes a sworn enemy on a common basis [19, p. 127]. Similarly, in the adats of the Karata Naibstvo regarding the murder of a guest, it was

outlined that if a guest from another locality is killed within the Karata society, the killer, in addition to the diyat (blood money) established in the Naibstvo, is obligated to buy 25 cubits of cloth for the deceased person's shroud and a bull worth 12 rubles [19, p. 144].

The choice of expensive fabrics for the shroud was discouraged, as Islam placed value on the modesty of the departure to the afterlife¹. For women, along with white cloth, green cloth was commonly used (with red allowed for young women). Traditionally, a man's shroud consisted of three layers, a practice attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, while a woman's shroud typically comprised five layers. One of these layers was considered a shirt for the afterlife, representing the last earthly garment, made from a lengthy and whole piece of fabric. The front of the shirt reached down to the toes, and at the back, it extended slightly below the waist. A hole was made in the cloth for the head, and for women, trousers were also sewn – the last trousers – along with stockings made from the same coarse cotton. The tips of the socks were cut to allow the big toes to touch the ground during burial. The headdress was also crafted from white cloth, and a narrow ribbon of green material was tied over the head, atop the headdress. Green colour was believed to symbolize paradise, surrounded by greenery and flowers. Green was often used as the top layer of both the shroud and the funeral shirt. Consequently, women had two more layers of shroud than men, although the number of layers could vary, ranging from 5-7 for men to 7-9 for women. However, proponents of “pure Islam” currently advocate for a limit of no more than three layers. The rationale behind wrapping a woman in a shroud with several more layers was explained by the belief that a deceased woman, especially one of fertile age, could potentially cause more harm to the living than a man. For this reason, the grave for a deceased woman was often dug a little deeper than that of a man. During the wrapping process, the deceased was enveloped in the shroud from head to toe, with several layers, and wadding was placed between these layers. According to the custom of mutual assistance, relatives who came with condolences brought a piece of cloth for the shroud. This cloth was used if needed, but the very first layer of the shroud had to be made from cloth prepared by the deceased or their family. The remaining layers of the shroud could be made from the cloth brought by relatives, with the degree of relationship determining how the deceased was wrapped. Once everything was prepared, a handful of earth and a mirror were placed on top of the body of the deceased.

In the funeral rituals of the peoples of Dagestan, textiles played a crucial role. The deceased was covered on top: men were typically covered with a burka or carpet, while women were wrapped in a rug, carpet, or, among some Avars, covered with a beautiful blanket or an old brocade or silk scarf. Following the funeral, it was customary among most peoples of Dagestan to return the “veil” of the deceased home, where it would remain in the most visible place for 40 days. In the past, this practice often involved hanging these items on a nail on the central pole of the house. In the village of Ruguja, there exists a tradition (though forbidden, it is still practiced) to send a gift through the deceased to a long-dead relative, especially if the relative was seen in a dream not fully dressed or wearing rags. Relatives might also engage in this practice if they believe that the deceased's shroud was not good enough. During years of manufacturing crisis, particularly during the Civil War when fabric

1. *Ragimova B.R.* Woman in traditional Dagestan society of the 19th – early 20th centuries (role and place in family and public life). Diss. Dr. of Hist. Sci.: 07.00.07. Web resource. Available at: <https://viewer.rsl.ru/ru/rsl01000337043>

was scarce, many deceased individuals were wrapped for their final journey in shrouds made from canvas sacks.

Women are generally prohibited from visiting cemeteries except on religious holidays. However, in certain villages of the Andalal society (modern Gunibsky district), it is a custom for women to go to the cemetery every Friday throughout the year. During these visits, women give alms, mostly sweets, to children specially coming there, following specific rules: the woman must perform ablution and place a seven-layer fabric lining in her pants. Otherwise, according to beliefs, all the “inhabitants of the cemetery” (*khubazul ummat*) would see her naked. As we see, the symbolism of fabric (or anything made from threads) as a path or road connecting different worlds. In the ritual of bidding farewell to the deceased and facilitating their journey to the other world (whether it be heaven or hell), the significance of fabric, and consequently the thread from which it is woven, becomes evident. Fabric, in this context, serves mediative functions within the funeral ritual.

However, the symbolic meaning of fabric should not be solely confined to its role in establishing contact with the other world. In the village of Kubachi, believed to have preserved some traditions of the “fire-worshipping Zoroastrians,” it is known that in ancient times, people were not buried but rather hung on trees until scavenger birds cleaned the bones of meat. Subsequently, relatives sewed bags and handbags from beautiful fabric scraps, reminiscent of modern shoppers. Intricate patterns were sewn on the front of these handbags using various scraps, including velvet, brocade, and silk. Naturally cleaned bones were collected in these bags and stored in special cellars. There were numerous such bags, and according to legend, it was customary to bury everyone in this manner. Interestingly, these handbags are now sold in the village of Kubachi as souvenirs. Buyers, however, are not aware of their original purpose. Recently, these same handbags have been incorporated into wedding rituals, serving as containers for gifts. This aligns with popular beliefs that life and death are akin to two sisters, inseparable, and their earthly existence is but a fleeting moment of a handshake.

It seems that cloth, in traditional culture, carries a broader spectrum of meanings and serves as a mediator in the fullest sense of the word. Fabric transcends being solely a symbol of the connection between the earthly and other worlds; it also symbolizes the unity among people. Through fabric, not only mythological but also social connections were established [2].

In wedding rituals, particularly through the use of fabric or woven objects like ropes, social connections are established. In the village of Rugudzha, a unique tradition existed in the past for individuals interested in marrying a girl to assess whether it was worth pursuing. A close relative of the prospective groom would approach the bride’s mother and request a special rope twisted from coarse woolen threads for the day, serving as a leash for a donkey. If the girl’s mother declined, it was clear that consideration is out of discussion. However, if she refused but explained the reason for doing so, further discussion and consideration were possible. If the rope was borrowed immediately, matchmakers were sent, marking the initial stage of betrothal. This stage, known by various names, essentially involved solidifying the agreement and negotiating the foundation for the future marriage. In the Lezgin village of Khryug, the initial (small) betrothal was referred to as *lechek*, signifying the act of putting on a headscarf to formalize the betrothal agreement. As a gift to seal the contract, a headscarf, often made from Ganja silk (*genzhe kelega*), a silver ring, and some form of clothing were

presented. The nature of the initial gifts varied from place to place. In certain villages, their size held significance, while in others, the gifts were symbolic, and was limited to a headpiece for a dress or a scarf. Nevertheless, these gifts consistently included, among other items: money, jewelry, and something crafted from fabric (a scarf, a piece of clothing, or a dress). Silk was esteemed as the most beautiful and precious thread, and garments made from silk fabric, along with a silk scarf adorned with silk embroidery, were considered the finest gifts for the bride.

Various fabric cuts, along with special ritual gifts, were also bestowed upon winners of different competitions during public and calendar festivities. In his account of horse racing at the First Furrow festival, G.F. Chursin provides an intriguing detail: the owner of the winning horse expresses gratitude to the boy-rider for the victory by presenting him with a dagger under silver, and pledges to clothe him in fabric attire [20, p. 51].

Within the social life of the peoples of Dagestan, fabric scraps serve as a means to forge social connections. Among the Dargins and some Avars, when young girls gathered to assist with household tasks such as shelling corn, making sausage for winter drying, and cleaning wool – activities requiring the involvement of a substantial number of people – the hostess of the gathering would give small fabric scraps to the girls. These fabric pieces were often distributed to girls who assisted at weddings and public events. The more fabric scraps a girl accumulated throughout the business year, the greater her reputation as a hardworking individual.

Many cultures held a special and sacred significance for fabric scraps. Among the Terekemen people, if children in a family died consecutively, one after another, then to “save life,” the next newborn would be dressed in a jacket made from fabric scraps collected from 40 houses [21, p. 180]. The Kumyks sewed a jacket (*tilenzhi teshlyuk*) from fabric scraps gathered in 7 or 9 different houses. They adorned the shoulder with small khurjuns (bags) and attached various amulets on the back. Copecks, pieces of sugar, bread, and nuts, symbolizing alms were placed in these khurjuns. The purpose of such a “beggar’s” sleeveless jacket, worn by a child for up to 40 days, sometimes up to 1 year, was to divert the attention of evil spirits away from the child [22, p. 281].

Among the peoples of southern Dagestan (Derbent Azerbaijanis, Kaitag Kumyks, etc.) a custom known as *katyl kara* was practiced to save the life of a child. In this tradition, a robe made of black fabric was sewn for the child, following Shiite mourning practices related to the death of Ali Hussein, the son of the fourth caliph, in the Battle of Karbala (680). The child would wear the jacket on the day of the funeral ceremony and the jacket was only removed after 40 days [22, p. 281]. Similar practices were found in other cultures as well [23, p. 100].

Throughout Dagestan, there was a notable emphasis on careful treatment of clothing, particularly fabric used for garments. Damaging someone else’s clothes was considered a serious offense, and severe fines were imposed for such actions. In the code of decisions and customs of the Tsekob society, there is a clause stating that “*if a person cuts someone else’s clothes, whether as a joke or intentionally, and this is confirmed under oath, the perpetrator would be required to provide three sheep as compensation. If the accused denies guilt, they are asked to take an oath of purification according to the customs of the village*” [19, p. 101].

The scarcity of fabric during the early 20th century in the mountains of Dagestan had a lasting impact on the local communities. According to the memories of the elderly, families and villages faced manufacturing shortages, compelling people to fashion clothing from canvas bags. Additionally, some families had to bury their deceased without a proper shroud, resorting to the practice of smearing the body with three layers of white clay. This act dates back to an ancient custom observed among certain peoples in highland Dagestan and Mountainous Chechnya, where uncircumcised women were traditionally smeared before being wrapped in a shroud.

In workplaces where fabric was processed, trimmings and cuttings were inevitably left behind. These scraps were carefully collected, rolled into bundles, and secured with a matching fabric strip. The collected scraps often served practical purposes, such as providing armpit inserts for tunic-style dresses, forming the second layer of the back part of a dress, creating crotch inserts for women's pants, and mending clothing. Resourceful young girls would gather these fabric scraps to craft utilitarian items like tobacco pouches, small bags (known as *bukhcha* or *chonta*), which would later evolve into the Avar pocket with the same name. In certain peoples, such as the Tindals, Bagulals, and Khvarshins, maiden braid adornments (*nakosnik*) were crafted from fabric scraps, known as *chokhto*, *chukhturus* [24, p. 113]. Wearing a carefully patched dress or pants was not viewed as a disadvantage; rather, it was seen as a testament to female diligence and creativity. While efforts were made to match the patch with the original fabric, the ability to select fabric and create an artistic patch, even embellishing the clothing, was regarded as a commendable skill. The recent trend in needlework, known as patchwork, where pieces of fabric are sewn together to form a cohesive product with a unique color scheme and pattern, has always been relevant and popular in Dagestan. The tiniest fabric scraps were skillfully stitched together to form a unified cloth [25, p. 7]. Girls, with great imagination, created patchwork quilts for themselves, sometimes gathering for collective stitching sessions at the owner of the scraps. Interestingly, the tradition of collective stitching of patches was not exclusive to the peoples of Dagestan alone [26, p. 10]. Mosaic blankets, made from scraps of beautiful and expensive fabrics, were crafted for dowries. Craftswomen with imaginative skills could sew these blankets on order. Among the Azerbaijanis, including those of Dagestan, small patchwork carpets known as *gurams* were crafted from fabric scraps, often received as tokens of gratitude for participation and assistance in family celebrations.

The fabric scraps, received for their participation in family and social events, served as means of exchange. This practice allowed them to select scraps of the desired color or suitable pattern for their intended creations, such as patchwork quilts, pillows, or artistic mending.

Emphasis should be placed on the significance of fabric, which, based on its quality, properties, color, and decor, found universal applications. Until the 19th century, when subsistence production dominated the lifestyle of the peoples of Dagestan, locally produced fabrics played a crucial role in clothing manufacturing. Every woman was expected to possess skills in knitting, weaving, embroidering, and sewing items of both men's and women's clothing. Women were also responsible for manufacturing wool, silk, hemp, and cotton threads, which were then used to create fabrics [27, p. 104–105].

In Dagestan, homespun wool products held a distinct place, with clothmaking being an exclusively female occupation practiced across all of its regions. Notably, the three mountain

districts of Dagestan – Kazikumukh, Dargin, and Avar regions – were renowned for both the quantity and quality of the cloth they produced. Artisans reported that in every household within these districts, at least one woman engaged in clothmaking throughout the winter, spanning from mid-September to mid-April [28, p. 23]. Numerous authors have documented the practices of mountain women involved in clothmaking in Dagestan [29, p. 71; 30, p. 139; 31; 32, p. 22, 35; 33]. White cloth originating from the village of Karata gained significant demand well beyond the borders of Dagestan [34, p. 66].

In Dagestan, wool served a dual purpose, being employed not only in the production of cloth but also as a material for thread used in crafting carpets and rugs. Among carpet products, those originating from the Southern regions of Dagestan were considered of the best quality [13, p. 27]. The prevalent types of carpets included flatwoven carpets and double-sided rugs.

Carpets and rugs were integral elements of a Dagestan household, and a bride's dowry was expected to include at least two carpets – one for floor covering and another for adorning a wall in the room. The intricate craft of working with wool and thread was exclusive to women. The loom, where the unfinished carpet was suspended, held a special significance in the eyes of the people of Dagestan. It was believed to possess magical properties, and it served as a space where a frequently ill child or a woman in labor during a challenging childbirth was laid.

Silk was also produced in small quantities in the Kyura Khanate, Derbent, and on the Kumyk Lowland. The Kumyks' occupation of sericulture was noted by many authors of the 19th century. Scarves and belts were woven from silk threads. Silk fabrics were widely used for sewing clothes. “*In Chechnya and the Kumyk lowlands,*” wrote O. V. Marggraf, “*up to half of the population is engaged in sericulture... The main sales here are in the local markets of Khasavyurt and Grozny*” [29, p. 69–70].

Dagestan received supplies of various silks, gold and silver threads from traders dealing with Iran, Central Asia, India, and other regions [27, p. 105]. In Derbent, and especially in Azerbaijan, some expensive silk fabrics were known by poetic and humorous names such as *geje-gyunduz* (“night and day”), *gadzhi, mene bah gadzhi* (“look at me”), *shemsi gemer* (“sun and moon”), *gonshu gozyun chyhartan* (“neighbor-blinding”), *germe, yandyram* (“don't look, I'll burn”), *gaynana yandyran* (“burning or killing mother-in-law”), among others [35].

Any textiles, especially fabrics used for sewing clothes, in Dagestan, in addition to their direct purpose, were used to establish and strengthen social ties. In the mountainous regions of Dagestan, there was a saying that “*a future son-in-law and a working donkey are the same.*” According to custom, the groom's side was expected to be present on various holidays, such as *Uraza Bayram* (Feast of Fasting), *Kurban Bayram* (Feast of the Sacrifice), *Novruz*, *Yaran Suvar* (New Year's Holiday), and the festivity of the First Furrow (*Ots bai* among the Avars, *Ebeltsan* among the Tabasarans, etc.), bringing gifts and treats to the bride's house. Among these gifts, scarves or pieces of fabric were often presented. Through these offerings, the prospective groom established connections with his future relatives.

The official engagement, both in normative and social terms, not only formalized the choice of marriage in the eyes of the entire rural community and laid the material and economic foundation for the impending marriage but also initiated a series of socializing rituals. These

rituals signaled a change in the social status of the young individuals and facilitated their transition into different age and gender groups. This transition was manifested through mutual gift exchanges, a significant and integral part of establishing both economic and social relationships during various social and family events. Fabrics and items related to them, such as clothes, scarves, cuts, including scraps of expensive fabrics, along with bed linen, blankets, bedspreads, and carpets, were obligatory components of the bride's dowry in these gift exchanges.

Typically, guests attended weddings and brought gifts, with men offering money and women presenting cuts for clothes. The cuts remained with the bride's mother, and in the groom's house, they were kept by the mother-in-law. Following the wedding, some of these cuts were distributed to relatives who played an active role in organizing the event. A distinctive practice among the Kyura Lezgins involved the presentation of these gifted cuts. In many villages, children and teenagers carried these gifts from guests, such as pieces of fabric or scarves, attached to a pole known as *tIaratI*. Once a sufficient number of *tIaratIs* were collected, they were attached to the roof of the groom's house. In certain villages, people attached their *tIaratIs* at their house gate, and a group of groom's relatives and musicians, gathered them by walking around the village. At each house with a *tIaratI*, they would dance, and the homeowner would join. Afterward, they moved to the next house. All gathered *tIaratIs* were eventually affixed to the roof of the groom's house. While these scarves adorned the roof for a period, they were later collected, along with the attached cuts, and placed into a bag. These gifted items can be interpreted as symbolic representations of social life, illustrating a way of coexisting in society marked by perpetual duties and obligations.

Among nearly all the peoples of Dagestan, it was customary to exhibit the gifts given by the groom to the bride in front of their relatives. For instance, among the Lezgins, a unique practice involved one of the bride's close relatives secretly inserting a needle and thread into the clothes while sorting through them. As we were told, this ritual symbolized the wish for the young couple to have a long life, likening it to the length of a thread, and for their marital union to be as strong as a steel needle. This ritual underscores the thread's association with life and its longevity. In another tradition among the Avars of Dusrakh (modern Charodinsky district), the bride's gifts were placed on the shirt or *cherkeska* of the groom's father, typically made of homespun cloth, as it was believed to contribute to the birth of the first-born boy.

Until the late 20th century, one of the gifts brought by the groom's envoy to the bride on her wedding day was a large ram adorned with a red cloth, typically made of silk, tied to its horns. The envoy, sent after the bride, and the groom's friends were also tied with elegant and bright fabrics, forming knots that served as a clear symbol of creating mutual social relationships – be it familial or friendly. In the past, even the neck of the horse upon which the bride was mounted, to be transferred to the groom's house, was tied with a piece of cloth. Furthermore, a chest containing gifts for future relatives, such as scarves and trimmings, and in some societies, knitted socks, was sent from the bride's house along with her.

Thus, the core symbolic essence of a thread, connecting the social and mythological “dialogue” that linked life and death, individuals and society, and bridged gaps in time and space, was that it was a basis for fabric: *“the vertical perspective of the universe, connecting*

all levels of existence” [9, p. 329]. Fabric, scraps, embroidery designs, fabric clothing, bed linen, rugs, carpets and other items were all made from thread – the core of the semantic load on objects, by interweaving, combining into one whole the qualitative essence of things with certain symbols: gift exchange – a significant phenomenon, necessary for the establishment of not only economic, but also social relationships, a kind of “agreement” between different groups of people, both with relatives and with strangers; continuity of traditions in the ritual culture of the peoples of Dagestan (be it public or family ones).

The analysis of seemingly everyday objects, particularly the ancient hand-made products like thread and items associated with it (fabric, scraps, clothing, etc.), provides valuable insights into the formation of a specific worldview among the ancestors of the modern peoples of Dagestan. Given that these ideas likely have deep roots in a very ancient period of history, it becomes plausible to explore comparative materials from other peoples of the North and South Caucasus. Through such comparative analysis, one may uncover general patterns in the emergence of these ideas and gain a deeper understanding of the cultural and symbolic significance attributed to thread-related objects across different societies.

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