ACTA VIA SERICA
Vol. 8, No. 1, June 2023: 1–30
doi: 10.22679/avs.2023.8.1.001
© Academia Via Serica, Keimyung University, 2023

Senneh Gelim: The Magnificent Living Carpet Tradition of Iranian Kurdish Women

Reyhane MIRABOOTALEBI

Traditional Kurdish weavings are among the world's most ancient living textile traditions. One of the largest regional ethnic and linguistic groups, Kurds have inhabited a significant part of Western Asia for millennia. Historically, Kurdish territories were crisscrossed by old and important trade routes, including the Silk Roads. This led to the formation of some of the most significant Kurdish artistic and cultural traditions, including textiles, which influenced and were influenced by those of other non-Kurdish ethnic groups from Caucasia to Central Asia and beyond. One example of Kurdish carpet traditions born in the eighteenth century at the cross-sections of Safavid (1501-1736) urban carpets workshops and centuries-old indigenous Kurdish tribal/rural weaves is *senneh gelim* or *sojaee*. A finely flatwoven carpet that was exchanged regionally and internationally as a diplomatic gift and a highly prized commodity. Although in decline, senneh gelims continue to be made by Kurdish women weavers in their original birthplace Sanandaj, the provincial capital of Iranian Kurdistan to date. This study adopts an inter-disciplinary approach to present an image of senneh gelim and women gelim weavers, tracing the developmental trajectories of the craft from the eighteenth century to the present time by drawing on extant art-historical and social scientific studies along with primary ethnographic data collected in Iranian Kurdistan (2018-2019). It investigates the craft tradition's historical origin, various aspects such as techniques, materials, aesthetics, functions, and meanings, and how these transformed over time. Additionally, the paper looks at the social contexts of production, focusing on women carpet weavers and how their socioeconomic and cultural situation has formed senneh

---

Reyhane MIRABOOTALEBI is a Textiles Conservator and Researcher (PhD) at Preservation Studies, the Department of Art Conservation, the University of Delaware, U.S.A.

carpet production in the past and present and the implications for long-term preservation.[1]

Keywords: senneh gelim/kilim, *sojaee*, traditional flatwoven carpets, Iranian Kurdish textile craft heritage, Near Eastern/Western Asia textiles, women carpet weavers.

Introduction

Despite the importance of living traditional textiles as rich and rare repositories of the practicing communities' cultural and artistic knowledge, the scholarly literature on them is scarce and limited. Studies of Western Asia's carpet traditions began in the nineteenth century and centered mainly on luxurious knotted pile rugs. By contrast, flatwoven carpets were considered by experts as "village" and "tribal" fabrics and thus as inferior in aesthetics and construction.[2] It was not until the 1960s and 1970s that they began to be regarded as worthy of scholarly attention. The increasing popularity of flatweaves as exotic Oriental objects and their appearance in private and public collections led to some pioneering studies. Among them, only a few studied weaves from Kurdish areas. In this regard, studies from the 1980s-2000s by Cathryn Cootner, William Eagleton, Robert D. Biggs, Murray Einland, John Wertime, Amedeo de Franchis, Anahid Akashe, Ora Schwartz, Wilfred Stanzers, Parviz Tanavoli, and James D. Burns are noteworthy. Only some of these works provide important surveys of Kurdish weaves based on fieldwork in Kurdish regions. For instance, the books: *An Introduction to Kurdish Rugs and Other Weavings* from 1983 by Eagleton[3] and *Lives, Rugs, Flatweaves of The Kurds in Khorasan* from 1993 by Stanzers[4] are based on the authors' field research in the Kurdish areas of Iraq and Iran. Furthermore, the (scant) extant studies are predominantly collection-based and focus on the craft itself, e.g., forms, techniques, materials, and aesthetics. A common theme of the existing literature is an absence of attention to the role of the weavers and their identities, treating them as nameless and faceless individuals who worked under elite patronage, or as remote agriculturalists who made crafts for daily use and are often pictured as living in pristine and romanticized reconstructed versions of pre-industrial rural or tribal settings.

To address the deficiencies in the existing literature and to establish an appropriate theoretical framework to study the craft traditions of living cultures, this study draws from several critical anthropological and archaeological texts that address crafting and crafters in pre-historic contexts. The significance and relevance of these studies lie in incorporating diverse aspects of social variability in their analysis of the social structure and social processes around craft production activities.[5] Building on Marx's basic theory that "economic relations are also social relations," these studies recognize craft production as social labor and thus as an effective medium to explore the construction and maintenance of social relations.[6] Understanding crafts as social objects means crafts and craft makers cannot be studied separately and in isolation from each other. Without attention to artisan identity, Costin argues, our reconstructions of production systems and explanations of their form and dynamics are destined to be unidimensional and unidirectional, lacking in key elements of social process and social behavior.[7]

---

[1] A preprint version of this paper is available: Reyhane Mirabootalebi, "Senneh Gelim and Gelim Weavers: An Interdisciplinary Study of the Contemporary Production of a Traditional Kurdish Carpet in Iranian Kurdistan," *SocArXiv*, July 22, 2021, doi:10.31235/osf.io/nv6xz.

[2] Parviz Tanavoli, *Persian Flatweaves: A Survey of Flatwoven Floor Covers and Hangings and Royal Masnads* (Woodbridge: Antique Collectors' Club, 2002).

[3] William Eagleton, *An Introduction to Kurdish Rugs and Other Weavings* (American ed. New York: Interlink Books, 1988)

[4] Wilfrid Stanzer, *Kordi: Leben, Knüpfen, Weben Der Kurden Khorasans Lives, Rugs, Flatweaves of the Kurds in Khorasan* (Wien: Adil Besim OHG im Eigenverlag, 1993).

In light of the above works, I have adopted a theoretical framework that recognizes traditional textile production as (female) weavers' social labor and the weavers' social identity as a significant factor in craft production. This work has sought to bring a new angle to the study of traditional Kurdish textiles by investigating the weavers' living and working experiences and by exploring the network of relationships between artisans and their kin, community, and other social actors involved in craft production through craft-making skills and activities.

Methodology

This research has adopted a multi-disciplinary approach combining art-historical studies and qualitative ethnographic research methods. The approach not only has enabled the study of the craft objects in form, materials, technology, and aesthetics but also, by investigating the socioeconomic, cultural, and spatial dynamics within the defined production settings, has allowed exploration of the working and living experiences of the weavers themselves. The bottom-up approach in qualitative ethnography has proven a useful and flexible method because the subjects—Kurdish weaves and women weavers—have been understudied and the most critical factors and parameters to examine were unknown. Open-ended qualitative primary data was collected using semi-structured and unstructured/casual interviews, conversations, observations, and audiovisual recordings. Interviews and conversations were either in Farsi and/or *Surani*, the dominant Kurdi dialect in Iranian Kurdistan, depending on the interviewees' preference. Although I was familiar with Surani, a Farsi-speaking person was always present whenever the interviews and conversations were conducted in Surani to ensure in-depth mutual understanding and discussion.

---

[5] See Elaine Zorn, *Weaving a Future: Tourism, Cloth, and Culture on an Andean Island* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2004); Cathy Lynne Costin et al., "Introduction: Craft and Social Identity." In *Craft and Social Identity*, e.d C. L. Costin, R.P. Wright (Arlington, Va.: American Anthropological Association, 1998); Patricia Wattenmaker, "Craft Production and Social Identity in Northwest Mesopotamia." In *Craft and Social Identity*, ed. C. L. Constin, R. P. Wright (Arlington, Va.: American Anthropological Association, 1998).

[6] Quoted in Cathy Lynne Costin et al., *Craft and Social Identity*.

[7] Cathy Lynne Costin et al.

The fieldwork for this work was carried out in Iranian and Iraqi Kurdistan from July 2018 to September 2019, following preliminary field research. The fieldwork consisted of twelve short- to- medium-length trips to Iranian Kurdistan.[8] As the nature of the study demanded, the participants consisted of various groups, including weavers, dealers, carpet shop keepers, dye masters and raw material processors and sellers, workshop managers, officials in heritage institutes, and local experts. In total, forty-eight carpet weavers from Iranian Kurdistan participated in this research, among whom were thirty senneh gelim weavers.[9]

In my fieldwork, I investigated the existing senneh production settings and defined them in different categories. In terms of senneh gelim itself, I looked at the products of each setting, the formal, physical, and aesthetic features, including the materials, techniques, sizes, patterns, and designs, and how these features vary across different groups. Comparative studies of the extant pieces in several collections and museums and contemporary productions provided essential insights into understanding the trajectory of the craft's functions, materials, forms, and designs in historical and contemporary contexts.

In terms of the social construct of the production settings, I looked at the interrelated networks of social relations that underpinned the organization of production. I asked: Who are the major social players in each system and how do their social identities play a role in the organization of production? In particular, I focused on the weavers and explored how their position within the socioeconomic and cultural context has shaped the contemporary production of senneh gelim and what implications all these have in the long-term preservation of this historic textile craft.

Positionality Statement

Born and having grown up in Iran in a working-class family, I am familiar with the country's broad historical, social, and cultural contexts that overarch all ethnic populations. As a non-Kurd, however, I had limited inside knowledge of Kurdish societies. A fascination with Kurdish culture, arts, and history formed in me during my college years in Tehran through newly acquainted Kurdish friends and intensified later on through becoming familiar with the works of Kurdish artists, musicians, and filmmakers. Like all Iranian women, I have experienced the state's gendered policies as a source of oppression of women of all cultural groups across the country. This helped me to have an understanding of the gender-based discrimination that exists in the communities that I was studying. However, I acknowledge that the pre-existing culture of patriarchy in Kurdish communities, along with the gender, religious, and ethnic discriminatory policies of the Islamic state, have deepened Kurdish women's entrapment in multiple layers of disadvantage.

---

[8] Sanandaj, Dehgolan, Qorveh, Sarvabad, Buridar, Kakuye-Sofla, and Oliya.

[9] I interviewed eight staff members from the Administration of Traditional Arts and Handicrafts and the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts from the Kurdistan office, two former staff members of the Iran Organization of Handicrafts, seven carpet workshop managers, seven carpet shop owners, two experts in local history and traditional Kurdish crafts, three raw materials seller, and one traditional dye master in the Sanandaj bazaar.

Traditional Kurdish Carpets: A Background

Flatwoven handwoven carpets (distinguished from knotted pile carpets) were central to carpet weaving history in the Middle East. Among all the ethnic groups known for their carpets, the Kurds have been one of the most prolific textile producers. Particularly, flatwoven carpets have composed a large proportion of traditional Kurdish textiles. A significant characteristic of traditional Kurdish flatweaves is their vast diversity, which should not be surprising since Kurds have historically lived in numerous autonomous and separate clan and tribal entities. Poor communication, caused by geographical isolation and a lack of proper roads, and tribal rivalries have minimized interactions among various Kurdish groups in remote regions, contributing to the formation of highly diverse artistic traditions and cultural practices. Yet, these weavings shared many elements in design motifs, construction, dimension and shape, and function that distinguished them from textiles of neighboring cultural and linguistic groups such as Turks, Arabs, Qashqai's, Shahsavans, and many more.

Urban versus Rural Flatweaves

The wide diversity of structural and visual features in traditional Kurdish flatweaves makes their categorization challenging. However, classification based on the context of production and use has proven helpful in exploring and understanding the formal, functional, and social context of the production of these important groups of textiles. Notably, in most existing studies, often led by rug experts and dealers from the West, Western Asian flatweaves have been mainly identified with the village and nomadic population's products.[10] However, this group of artifacts was a product of both urban and rural production centers. As most pre-industrial societies in the Middle East, up until the early twentieth century, were nomads, semi-nomads, and agrarian settled communities, the textiles of these groups naturally made up a larger proportion of weave products of the past.

In this regard, traditional Kurdish flatwoven carpets can be divided into three broad categories: tribal, rural, and urban or commissioned groups.[11] Rural and tribal flatweaves, up until the early decades of the twentieth century at least, were made primarily by agricultural communities who lived in remote areas isolated, to a great extent, from the urban centers and commercial influences. These items were products of available resources, life necessities, inter-generational knowledge, and artisans' individual creativity and aesthetics. The diversity of rural and tribal textiles in construction, shape, and size attests to functionality being at the heart of their creation. On the other hand, there existed an urban flatweave category that comprised a smaller proportion of traditional Kurdish flatweaves. Urban flatweaves, in pre-industrial Kurdish communities prior to the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, were often made under commission in urban workshops with higher-quality locally sourced and imported raw materials and designed purposefully to serve elite cosmopolitan households' needs. Indeed, most of the older Kurdish flatweave pieces that have survived and are being kept in public and private collections worldwide belong to the commissioned and urban categories. By contrast, not many old rural and tribal weaves have survived, despite having a much longer indigenous history, mainly because, as utilitarian items, they were put to hard use and perished.

---

[10] Irene Bierman, "Medieval Flat Weaves in Urban Middle East," in *Flat-Woven Textiles*, ed. Cathryn M. Cootner (Washington, D.C: The George Washington University Textile Museum, 1981), 22.

[11] See: James D. Burns, *Antique Rugs of Kurdistan: A Historical Legacy of Woven Art* (London: James D Burns, 2002); William Eagleton, *An Introduction to Kurdish Rugs and Other Weavings* (New York: Interlink Books, 1988); Anahid Akasheh, "Woven Skies, Woven Lands: Kurdish Textiles as an Expression of Social Structure," *Kurdish Times* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1986): 23. http://search.proquest.com/docview/216671858.

Against the above background, it is fair to say that the majority of the products from Kurdish looms were probably tribal and rural weaves. The flatweave carpets produced by the Kurdish communities in Iraq and Turkey—the former Ottoman Empire territories—fell into the tribal and village group (Figure 1). In contrast, the production of urban flatweaves was concentrated in a few urban centers, mostly located in Iranian territory. The best-known examples are gelims of Senneh, Bijar, and Sauj-Bulagh, which, as their names suggest, have come from the urban workshops of the cities of Sanandaj, Bijar or Garus, and Sauj-Bulagh in Iranian Kurdistan for centuries (Figure 2). Senneh gelim is the subject of this paper. The following sections will discuss the physical characteristics of the tradition, historical origin, and the contemporary social context of production as encountered during my field research in Iranian Kurdistan.

Senneh Gelims or Sojaee

Senne gelim or *sojaee*, as referred to locally, appears to have formed in the eighteenth century in the city of Sanandaj at the conjunction of the enormous Safavid (1501-1736) urban carpet industries and centuries-old local Kurdish tribal and rural weaving traditions. The weave structure in senneh gelims is slit-tapestry with an eccentric weft-faced technique made on a vertical loom similar in structure and warping method to Kurdish pile carpets. Wool (sheep's wool) has always been a predominant raw material of senneh gelim, used for both the foundation/warp (*chelleh*) and weft (*pood*) yarns. The slit-tapestry technique—combined with fine, thin woolen yarns—has enabled senneh gelim artisans to create highly complex and curvilinear design motifs and forms, giving the textile craft its characteristic fineness. The delicacy of the senneh gelim's structure is often demonstrated by carpet dealers in the Sanandaj bazaar by holding the piece against the light to show its superiority to the other thick, heavy types of gelims.

Historical Origin and Developmental Trajectory from the Late Eighteenth Century to Present

Little is known about the origin of this highly prized urban gelim and the developmental pathways that led to the stark difference between senneh and other flatweaves extensively made by predominantly rural and nomadic Kurdish groups in the region for centuries. Did sojaee originate from rural/tribal gelim weaving traditions and, at some point in its history, diverge from its humble origins and develop into a highly intricate and refined cosmopolitan item? Or, as Cecil Edwards has suggested about the refined pile carpets of Sanandaj, was senneh gelim, too, born out of a sophisticated urban demand during the eighteenth century?[12] Clearly, the production of such a delicate, complex textile could not have been created in a void without any pre-existing practice in these regions. Additionally, the similarities between the technique of weaving sojaee and indigenous weaving methods indicate senneh gelim's indigenous roots. Nonetheless, based on stylistic and iconographic analyses, the (scant) existing studies on historical and early examples have suggested that senneh gelim was developed in the eighteenth century as an urban weaving tradition.[13]

The masterful execution of the slit-tapestry technique, intricate designs, and top-quality local and imported materials (wool, silk, and cotton) evident in the early pieces rank senneh gelims with the fine Safavid silk gelims, which probably developed during the reign of Shah Abbas I (1588-1629) (Figure 3).[14] These fine Safavid silk gelims served as noble diplomatic and religious devotees' gifts (as wall hangings and tomb covers) to the Shi'i shrines in Karbala and Najaf.[15] Further, Tabriz, the Safavids' first political capital, was a significant center of textile production and trade and probably the birthplace of Safavid silk gelims.[16] Tabriz's geographical proximity to Sanandaj, Tanavoli suggests, might have triggered the development of Sanandaj's senneh gelim tradition.[17] Unlike Safavid textiles made in urban and royal workshops, presumably by master craftsmen, senneh gelim was a product of domestic workshops and made by women as a commission-based or commercial item, a significant aspect of the tradition that still stands at the present.

Senneh tradition was probably developed and thrived under the auspices of the Ardalans, a princely Kurdish dynasty (1169-1867) that ruled over a significant part of Kurdish regions under a central power for several centuries.[18] The Ardalans controlled trade routes in the southern part of the so-called Silk Road that passed through Kermanshah, another Iranian Province in the south of Kurdistan, historically and now populated by ethnic Kurds, and had a hand in the commerce of foodstuffs, fibers, and fabrics. They established the city of Sanandaj, or Senneh/Senne, as their seat in 1636, one of the earliest and most significant urban centers for the Kurds up until today. Being influenced by the arts of the Safavid and Qajar courts, the Ardalans followed in their footsteps, becoming patrons of arts and architecture in their regions. In all likelihood, the development of senneh gelim as a prestigious gelim for Kurdish nobilities and a refined urban commodity for trade could have occurred at the instigation of local Kurdish khans and nobles in the eighteenth century.

---

[12] Arthur Cecil Edwards, *The Persian Carpet: A Survey of Carpet-Weaving Industry in Persia*, (London and New York: Duckworth Overlook, 2016).

[13] See: Tanavoli, *Persian Flatweaves;* Burns, *Antique Rugs of Kurdistan*; Jenny Housego, *Tribal Rugs: An Introduction to the Weaving of the Tribes of Iran* (London: Scorpion Publications, 1991), 12; Carol Bier, *Woven from the Soul, Spun from the Heart: Textile Arts of Safavid and Qajar Iran, 16th-19th Centuries* (Washington, D.C.: The Geroge Washington University Textile Museum, 1987); Cathryn M. Cootner, *Flat-Woven Textiles* (Washington, D.C.: The George Washington University Textile Museum, 1981).

[14] Major institutions with significant senneh gelim collections include the George Washington University Textile Museum (US), the Metropolitan Museum of Art (US), the Victoria & Albert Museum (UK), and the Carpet Museum of Iran, Tehran.

[15] Tanavoli, *Persian Flatweaves,* 22-23.

[16] Tanavoli, 22-23.

[17] Tanavoli, *Persian Flatweaves.*

Results of my research into public and private collections show senneh gelim continued to flourish under the Qajar Dynasty (1789-1925), suggested by exquisite collection pieces dating from the nineteenth to early-twentieth centuries (Figure 4).[19] Notably, the late-nineteenth to early-twentieth century marked a significant period in the history of handmade carpets in Iranian territories. By the 1880s, American and European rug merchants (e.g., Ziegler and Company) began to identify traditional weaving centers in Iran and establish commercial rug workshops across the country to cater to the growing demand for so-called Persian rugs in Western markets.[20] This marked the decline of the old production system of urban pile handmade carpet workshops—that is, those which were patronage-based and (limited) commercial—and the beginning of modern capitalist mass production. By the end of the nineteenth century, the Persian pile carpet was a major commercial industry centered in urban and rural workshops and factories. Commercial pile carpet workshops emerged in Kurdistan as early as the 1880s.[21] However, senneh gelim production appeared to have evaded the wave of modern capitalist commercialization of the Iranian carpet industry at the time, probably because flatweaves were not as highly regarded as pile carpets. Nonetheless, the existence of antique senneh gelim pieces dating to this period suggests that, unlike many other indigenous handmade textiles that disappeared as a consequence of the flood of imported industrially made foreign products, senneh weaving was maintained as a cottage industry until its revival around the 1960s and 1970s due to rising demand for the so-called ethnic and tribal carpets emerging in the West.[22]

---

[18] See: Sheerin Ardalan, *Khāndān-i Kurd-i Ardalān Dar Talāqī-i Impirātūrīʹhā-Yi Īrān Va ʻUthmānī* (Tihrān: Nashr-i Tārīkh-i Īrān, 2008). Burns, *Antique Rugs of Kurdistan*; Tanavoli, *Persian Flatweaves*, 22-23.

[19] The collections with significant senneh pieces are the George Washington University Textile Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Victoria & Albert Museum, UK, and the Carpet Museum of Iran, Tehran, Iran.

[20] See: Cailah Jackson, "Persian Carpets and the South Kensington Museum: Design, Scholarship and Collecting in Late Nineteenth-Century Britain," *Journal of Design History* 30, no. 3 (2017): 265-281. doi:10.1093/jdh/epw029; Annette Ittig, "CARPETS xi. Qajar Period," *Encyclopædia Iranica*, IV/8, available online at https://iranicaonline.org/articles/carpets-xi (accessed June 07, 2021); Annette Ittig, "Ziegler's Sultanabad Carpet Enterprise," *Iranian Studies* 25, no. 1-2 (1992): 103-135. https://delcat.on.worldcat.org/oclc/5546753367; Leonard Michael Helfgott, *Ties that Bind: A Social History of the Iranian Carpet* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994).

[21] Helfgott, *Ties that Bind: A Social History of the Iranian Carpet.*

[22] For more details regarding the introduction of the capitalist economy to Iran in the late-nineteenth century and

My research shows that the (second) Pahlavi government (1941-1979) appears to have formulated some policies or programs around this time to help revive traditional crafts by reinvigorating them as a sector of the economy.[23] Notably, the rapid changes to social, political, and cultural landscapes that occurred in this period in Iran due to state-sponsored modernization policies led to the emergence of public nostalgia for old traditions and cultural materials; hence a market developed for traditional artifacts such as senneh gelim, which were re-branded as ethnic, traditional crafts to appeal to modern-day consumers. According to senior weavers in Sanandaj,[24] concentrated/communal senneh gelim workshops were active training and production centers in Sanandaj in the late 1970s and the 1980s and were set up in many neighborhoods across the city, attracting women and girls from urban working-class families with the prospect of a domestic career and an independent and relatively reasonable income. These institutes continued to be active for some years after the Iranian Revolution of 1979 but gradually disappeared. With the decline of the short-lived communal workshops, weaving senneh gelim once again returned to its former mode of production, that is, primarily in domestic settings.

Contemporary Senneh Gelim and Gelim Weavers

The findings of my fieldwork show that despite going through cycles of rise and fall over three centuries, today, senneh gelim continues as a cottage industry and commercial craft of Kurdish women in the city of Sanandaj and some remote regions and rural villages in Iranian Kurdistan province (Figures 5-7). Senne gelim evidently has a long history in the city of Sanandaj and is commonly known to have been the center of the craft's production. Several older quarters of the city, at least since the late-nineteenth century, were known for their production and for senneh artisans.[25] Women in the *Qatar-Chian* neighborhood, for instance, were particularly renowned carpet weavers in the past because the adult males in this neighborhood were commonly muleteers in charge of transportation (the name of the neighborhood refers to "muleteers").[26] Often, men had to leave their families behind for long periods to transport products between regions and towns by mule. In the absence of their husbands, the women of these households spent their spare time weaving senneh gelims and pile rugs for the market. However, during my fieldwork, I came across several remote villages across Kurdistan province in the districts of Dehgolan, Kamyaran, and Marivan that are

---

its consequences for the pre-existing market systems see: J. Foran, *Fragile Resistance: Social Transformation in Iran from 1500 to the Revolution* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993); Helfgott, *Ties that Bind.*

[23] Reyhane Mirabootalebi, "Kurdish Flatweaves and Weavers: Cultural Interweaving and Un-ravelling," Ph.D. diss., (University of Delaware, 2021).

[24] Mirabootalebi, "Kurdish Flatweaves and Weavers."

[25] These neighborhoods are Qatar-Chian, Agheh-Zaman, Qala-Cholan, Tazeh-Abad, Chaar-Bagh, Peer-Mohammad-Mahale, and Mahale-Farah.

[26] Shampa Mazumdar and Sanjoy Mazumdar, "Rethinking Public and Private Space: Religion and Women in Muslim Society," *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research* 18 (2001): 302-324.

currently known for their senneh gelim production.[27] The present geographical dispersion of weaving centers raises questions about whether Sanandaj was indeed the historical birthplace of senneh gelim as generally agreed upon, and if so, when, and how this geographical spread of production centers into remote provinces occurred.

Whatever the case, comparing modern rural and urban looms' products, as explained in the following section, demonstrates significant differences in construction, materials, design patterns, and color palettes (Figures 8-9). Senneh gelims made by rural (independent) artisans have a coarser construction due to the widespread use among village artisans of lower-grade wool yarns (industrially processed, dyed with synthetic dyes) known as *khaame-ye-mashini* or *khaame-ye-san'ati*. [28] Notably, all contemporary weavers in urban and rural milieus buy their yarns from the local/regional markets. This choice seems to have been based on the lower cost compared to finer and higher quality wool ranges referred to as *kork* (still industrially processed, dyed with natural dyestuffs) used commonly among urban (independent) artisans. Village senneh gelims also show less diversity in patterns and design elements. Interestingly, rural weavers tend to simplify the traditional patterns' highly complex and busy design motifs so that the intricate, curvilinear motifs of traditional senneh patterns, such as the Herati motifs, are simplified into more geometric, abstract versions. The same contrast can be observed in the selection of colors and color proportions in village products versus urban weaves (Figures 10-12). The prominent colors in village gelims are often blue, red, and white, compared with a broader range and subtler colors in urban senneh gelims that, according to producers, demonstrate a more careful choice of colors designed to appeal to cosmopolitan consumers.

But perhaps most notably, senneh gelims—despite being produced by many rural women—do not appear today in the village artisans' households for everyday use, suggesting that senneh gelim production may not have been part of the indigenous traditions in rural Kurdistan. Recognizing that a significant characteristic of any indigenous craft in its originating context is that it is made for functional, decorative, and/or ritual purposes, it is clear that Kurdish women in rural areas do not make senneh gelim for their households for these uses, nor do they include it in their daughters' trousseau or present it as a gift to newlywed family members and relatives. For them, senneh gelims exist only to sell, whereas in urban (independent) artisans' homes, regardless of the household's economic circumstances, senneh gelims are often used as household items—for instance, as a *pā-dari* or doormat, a *roo-poshti* or cushion cover, or a floor cover. It is also common among independent urban artisans to put aside the best of their works to be included in an unmarried daughter's trousseau. Finally, most rural artisans noted that their mothers and grandmothers made pile carpets or other indigenous textiles, such as *mowj*,[29] *barr*,[30] and *jajim*,[31] and only a few younger artisans said that earlier female generations in their families were senneh weavers.

---

[27] Some of villages with active senneh weavers are Kheir-Abād, Sreinjyāneh, Moochesh, Bāshmagh, Godmirān-Olia and Godmirān-Sofla, Mard-Abād, Nabi-Abād, Mobārak-Abād, Kakuye-Sofla, Kakuye-Olia, and Buridar.

[28] Cheaper varieties, refered to as khaame-e-mashini or khaame-e-san'ati, meaning machine-made and industrial wool respectively, include wool called pashm-e-dabaaqi, which is sourced from slaughterhouses and obtained from the sheep's dead skin using chemicals, instead of shearing. As a result of chemical processes, the wool yarn is rough.

The results of further field research by the author (2018-2019) showed that the spread of senneh weaving in remote regions of Kurdistan was mainly instigated by several public organizations during the 1980s, which attempted to provide weaving training programs to promote commercial carpet production among women to eliminate widespread rural poverty.[32] These government-sponsored programs targeted several remote and impoverished Kurdish villages near the Iran-Iraq borders, where populations were caught up, on the one hand, in the Iran-Iraq war and the fights between Kurdish insurgents and the Iranian government on the other. Funded by the government's budget and allocated to the reconstruction of war-affected areas, the plan continued in the targeted villages for several years after the war ended in 1988. Many questions about these projects (and other government-based and otherwise-funded weaving projects in the second half of the twentieth century) remain unanswered. Nonetheless, these programs certainly had a crucial role in determining the craft's development in recent history and its continuation up to the present. Many rural villages, such as Buridar, near the border of Iran and Iraq, with no history of senneh gelim tradition prior to the 1980s, have become active production centers for several decades now, and some village women have been able to use weaving as a means of meager but independent income. Even a regional weaving style of Herati design has emerged. For example, Haj-Yahya, a gelim seller in the Sanandaj bazaar, said he could identify gelims made by Buridar weavers' hands whenever he saw one.[33] Clearly, senneh gelims—as a source of economic return—today have value in the eyes of rural Kurdish women as they have long had for urban women.

---

[29] *Mowj* is a type of fabric made on a horizontal pit-treadle loom in Iranian Kurdistan. The pieces are long and narrow, with a width measuring between 60cm to 80cm. Usually, a larger square piece is made by sewing the narrow pieces along the length. Mowj is made primarily with wool yarns and used as a bed wrapping, blanket, or throw in traditional village households.

[30] *Barr* in Iraqi and Iranian Kurdistan, is used to refer to floor coverings or carpets made with various flat weaving methods ranging from slit-tapestry to simple or compound weft-wrapping techniques. In Iranian Kurdistan, the word barr still is used by senior or former village artisans to refer to the rough and heavy village and tribal flatweaves that are no longer actively produced in these regions. When the word "gelim" is used singularly in Iranian Kurdistan, it refers to the coarse and utilitarian village or tribal flatwoven plain-weave carpets. By contrast, the terms "senneh gelim" or "bijar gelim" are used exclusively to refer to the refined tapestry-woven flatweaves produced in the cities of Sanandaj and Bijar.

[31] *Jajim* is a traditional warp-faced flatweave textile, narrow and long, made on a horizontal treadle loom known as a dare-e-jula, using a warp-faced technique.

[32] Some of these organizations are Jahad Construction Organization and the regional branch of the Traditional Handicraft Organization (THO). The THO is the predecessor organization of the Administration of Traditional Arts and Handicrafts (ATAH). It formerly oversaw the administration of traditional handicrafts in Iran. Currently, the ATAH is the government body responsible for the promotion and preservation of traditional handicrafts in Iran.

[33] Haj-Yahya, interview by the author, Sanandaj bazaar, Kurdistan, Iran, January 2019.

Senneh Gelim Production Settings in Contemporary Kurdistan

Based on the findings of this research, contemporary senneh gelim workshops in Kurdistan can be placed in distinct categories based on the physical and social geography of the production settings (urban/rural) and whether the means of production are owned by individual artisans or by private investors/loom owners (independent/dependent). *Independent urban* artisans were women from the lower middle to lower urban classes concentrated mainly in the inner-city areas of Sanandaj. They have the means of production—a loom, weaving equipment, and adequate capital to purchase the next project's required materials. By contrast, women in *dependent rural* and *urban* workshops worked as contracted weavers or wage laborers for private employers/loom owners and did not have the financial means to set up their own work. Moreover, dependent weavers are mainly concentrated in impoverished urban areas in the city's outskirts (e.g., Naysar and Forje) and in several rural villages in the city's periphery (e.g., Haji-Abad and Baba-riz). The third category consists of *independent rural* workshops scattered throughout some remote Kurdish villages across the province. As in independent urban workshops, independent women weavers have weaving skills, economic means, and equipment required for commercial weavings. Still, both urban and rural women—and those working independently or for others—experience similar gendered, class-based, and ethnic forms of exploitation and oppression, a topic I now turn to.

Senneh Gelim: A Reflection of Political, Social, Ethnic, Religious, and Gender Experiences of Kurdish Women Weavers in Iran

An analysis of the social contexts of senneh production in contemporary Kurdistan shows that women artisans' roles in the production and trade of their craft are being formed in accord with the long-lasting patriarchal gendered division of labor and modern capitalist production relations in Iranian Kurdistan.[34] As in the traditional senneh production system, contemporary women weavers in all categories defined in this research are at the center of production as senneh makers, responsible for the actual labor. However, most women are not directly engaged in commercial transactions of their craft in the carpet bazaar, unless accompanied by a male companion. This is also the case for women loom owners and entrepreneurs. Notably, in contemporary Kurdistan, traditional gendered social norms and customs remain strong. The family's male members are responsible for managing the household's affairs with the outside world. Fathers, husbands, sons, or a close male relative (in the case of independent artisans) and workshop managers (in the case of dependent artisans) serve as intermediaries. They arrange for women's work, provide the loom, purchase yarns, and finally deal with the market to price and commodify the women's labor as an end product.

---

[34] Mirabootalebi, "Kurdish Flatweaves and Weavers."

Additionally, the contemporary carpet market remains at the center of all economic and social activities pertaining to handmade carpet production, such as the trade of raw materials and finished products in internal and export markets. It functions through vast and interrelated networks of local, regional, and national agents comprising private loom owners, carpet shopkeepers, and petty-to-large dealers and merchants scattered throughout regional towns and larger cities. Not surprisingly, like the traditional carpet bazaar, the contemporary market is strictly managed and controlled by men and dominated by the ideology and practices of a highly conservative culture. While women weavers play a crucial role in weaving the carpets, for the most part, their role ends when their carpets are cut off the looms. The carpet bazaar remains a "no-go zone" for women to engage in controlling and managing their finished products' trade. Consequently, the distribution of financial gain is disproportionate, as craftswomen, although at the center of production, are situated at the bottom of the hierarchy of beneficiaries and receive the lowest share of the financial gains. Petty dealers, shopkeepers, capitalist loom owners/entrepreneurs (mostly local), and intermediary and big carpet merchants (mostly non-local), all predominantly men, are situated above the weavers' position and reap the benefits accordingly.

Moreover, senneh gelim is predominantly the commercial craft of Kurdish women from the lower socioeconomic strata of urban and rural Kurdish populations with no access to official and regulated job markets outside the domestic sphere. This is manifested most obviously within dependent urban workshops concentrated in marginalized urban areas in Kurdistan, such as Naysar, where uprooted rural immigrants and the urban poor and underclasses make up the majority of the population. It should be noted here that the Kurdish regions have been among Iran's most socioeconomically underdeveloped provinces in recent history.[35] While it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the social and political history of the Iranian Kurdish societies, suffice it to say that the introduction of Iran into the world's economy and the modern nation-building project that began during the Pahlavi dynasty in the early twentieth century resulted in the demise of self-governing Kurdish principalities and the destruction of their independent political, social, and economic systems.[36] Kurdish communities that for centuries had a certain level of independence from the central state while on the periphery of the country became politically, socially, and economically integrated into and dependent on the state. However, the modern Iranian nation-state—both the Pahlavi regime and the Islamic Republic—has failed to adopt an inclusive and pluralistic approach in its public policies toward sociopolitical and economic developments across these disparate regions. The Kurdish regions were neglected under the secular Pahlavi regime because of the state's Persian-centric public policies. They continue to suffer as ethnic Sunnis under the Islamic Republic and its Shi'i supremacist discourse.[37] The Kurds see the continuing state-based ethnic and religious discriminatory policies toward them as deliberate acts of the state, intended to weaken Kurdish independence and nationalist movements. This has been evident in the low level of socioeconomic development in Kurdistan. The region is marked by widespread poverty, a high employment rate, a high rate of illiteracy, particularly among the female population, and a low standard of living.[38]

---

[35] See: A. Vali, *Kurds and the State in Iran: The Making of Kurdish Identity*, (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011); Farideh Koohi-Kamali, *The Political Development of the Kurds in Iran: Pastoral Nationalism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); M. V. Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh, and State: The Social and Political Structures of Kurdistan*, (London: Zed Books, 1992); A. Ghassemlou, *Kurdistan and the Kurds*, (Prague: Czechoslovak Acad. of Sciences u.a., 1965).

[36] Vali, *Kurds and the State in Iran*; Koohi-Kamali, *The Political Development of the Kurds in Iran*; Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh, and State*; Ghassemlou, *Kurdistan and the Kurds*.

One of the major consequences of rural underdevelopment in Kurdistan is the influx of rural immigrants from impoverished Kurdish villages to Kurdish urban regions since the 1960s.[39] Poverty is widespread among newly urbanized immigrant households due to the unemployment or underemployment of male heads of families. Women of these households often find themselves in a desperate search for income, while traditional cultural values, such as strictly demarcated feminine/masculine roles and codes of behavior and gender segregation, act as a double-edged sword against them. Not only do they face resistance from the male members of their families to their working outside the home, but also these values act as internalized impediments to seeking non-domestic jobs. Additionally, factors such as limited literacy, lack of official (Farsi) language skills, and lack of skills and education for official jobs, resulting from socioeconomic underdevelopment of the Kurdish regions, bar women of lower social classes from entering the already weak job market in Sanandaj. Under these circumstances, weaving gelim and rug as a contracted laborer provides a plausible work option: They offer a gender-segregated and culturally "appropriate" form of gendered work that requires no capital, performed in the private space of the home or communal carpet workshops set up in large numbers in the city's marginalized neighborhoods by private loom owners and entrepreneurs and are thus less likely to face resistance from male family members. However, unlike formal jobs, these occupations are unregulated, meaning the wage rates are meager (much lower than the legal minimum wage rate set by the Iranian Employment and Labour law for unskilled workers).[40] Women weavers report that the timing of payment has been irregular and frequently delayed. They also lack any benefits (social, unemployment, and health insurance). In effect, with inadequate public policies to protect contracted weavers' rights and a lack of resources to oversee their operations, dependent workshops run by profit-oriented entrepreneurs have become potential sites for exploiting contracted female weavers.

Golchin, a thirty-eight-year-old weaver, and the mother of four children, aged from one to sixteen years old worked as a dependent senneh weaver at home. The first time I met

---

[37] Ehsan Abdoh-Tabrizi and Afshin Shahi, "The Shi'i State and the Socioeconomic Challenges of the Sunni Communities in Iran," in *Sites of Pluralism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

[38] Koohi-Kamali, *The Political Development of the Kurds in Iran.*

[39] Koohi-Kamali, *The Political Development of the Kurds in Iran.*

[40] An average carpet weaver received between ten to thirty cents per hour (1,153 to 3,205 T). This amount was astonishingly lower than the legal minimum wage rate per hour of sixty-three cents (6,898 T) set by the Iranian Employment and Labor law of 2019 for (unskilled) workers. See: "بخشنامه حداقل دستمزد سال 1398», Ministry of Cooperatives Labors and Social Welfares, accessed 02 December 2019, https://www.mcls.gov.ir/icm_content/media/image/2019/04/270204_orig.pdf.

Golchin was in her rented house, a typical small, illegally built dwelling in Naysar, one of the poorest neighborhoods in Sanandaj's periphery. Golchin was working on a large gelim (four by six meters) commissioned by a private loom owner intended for the Russian market; "It has taken over two years now, and the gelim still is not complete,"[41] her manager informed me beforehand, adding that the weaver had recently given birth (Figure 13). I was amazed to see a loom of such a large scale in such a small house. The loom, over four meters in width and with huge thick metal poles, looked heavy and covered a whole wall in the living room. The only other space for a family of six was a small windowless bedroom and a tiny open kitchen next to it. Golchin was a Kurd from a village in Marivan. She was married at sixteen and had moved to Naysar three years before. Uneducated as a child, she later went to school as an adult and completed the third grade. She spoke Kurdi and her Farsi was poor. Golchin learned to weave in her native village from her sister and women in their neighborhoods at the age of ten. Soon after, she began to weave senneh gelim for the market. Her father was the girls' agent, buying raw materials and selling the finished work in the Sanandaj bazaar.

Now, working at home was preferable to Golchin, as a woman who had to remain at home to take care of a one-year-old toddler and three other school-aged children. Besides, her husband was opposed to her working outside the home. Golchin's husband was a construction laborer and often unemployed in the colder season. Financial necessity was the reason that made her accept the job while she was pregnant, despite knowing the difficulties, including the hazardous and messy nature of working on such a large loom at home; "I thought this gelim would be a way to pay for the extra expenses the newborn baby would bring."[42] She added that she and her husband had long waited to have a son after three girls. Golchin hoped that her three daughters would finish school and enter university to have "real" careers and become independent women. Her statement contradicted the long-lasting tradition of marrying daughters early—as soon as they appeared to be mature physically and emotionally—which was still widespread among contemporary Kurdish families of lower socioeconomic backgrounds. She added that she would do anything to help her daughters if they chose to continue their studies.

The loom in Golchin's house (for a gelim sized four by six meters) was not only exceptionally large for the space it occupied but it was also unusual for producing a senneh gelim. Rugs of such massive size, either pile carpets or gelims, are often commissioned works and intended for international markets. Gelim weaving, unlike pile carpet weaving, is an individual work; it is difficult to maintain uniformity of texture, weave, and repeated design elements throughout the entire gelim when more than one artisan (or more than one hand) is working on the same loom. Also, difficulties associated with working on large looms, such as rolling the completed section as work progresses, make weaving a large gelim difficult for a solo weaver. Most importantly, however, gelim weavers, particularly in the dependent workshops, often offer their service in expectation of immediate rewards. Large pieces are not viable commissions unless the weaver gets paid regularly and as the work progresses. Yet, as the case of Golchin demonstrates, this could be problematic. She was partially prepaid forty percent of the total payment of US$182 (2,000,000T) and expected to receive the rest as the work progressed. It is worth noting that her wage would be less than a few percent of the price her gelim would fetch in the international market. Golchin managed to complete eighty-five percent of the gelim over two years while giving birth, having a newborn baby to take care of, and looking after three other school-aged children. She was impatiently waiting to be paid for the remaining sixty percent of her wage, but progress was slow, and she would not get paid until the work was complete. Hoping to push her to finish, the manager constantly refused her request to provide any part of the remaining payment until the work was complete. This became a source of frustration and stress for Golchin, who needed her wage to be paid regularly to spend on daily necessities. Regrettably, this was a common experience among many dependent weavers who worked for private entrepreneurs.

---

[41] Golchin, interview by the author, Naysar, Iranian Kurdistan, December 18, 2018.

[42] Golchin, interviews by the author, Naysar, Iranian Kurdistan, December 18 and January 30, 2018.

Fateme was another dependent artisan, a thirty-three-year-old mother of three who worked at home for a loom owner. Originally from a village in Dehgolan, Fateme made pile carpets for the market along with her mother and sister until she married at the age of fourteen. She learned gelim weaving from a neighbor after her marriage. Fateme was working at the time on a pair of senneh sized 1.5 by 2.20 meters, called curtain-size or *parde-yee* in the traditional sizing system. She was commissioned by her manager to finish the work for US$50 (550,000T) for a pair of gelims. "It will take up to three months for me to finish it," she said, meaning she would earn around US$16.5 (183,000T) per month or between US$0.13 to $0.21 (1,410 to 2,350T) per hour, working for five to six hours per day. "The money is very little, but it helps with some extra expenses for the kids," she added with a smile. Fateme's eldest daughter was engaged to be married soon. The girl's appearance suggested she was not older than fifteen, but her mother said she was seventeen. She had finished grade nine in high school but quit after becoming engaged. Fateme wished her daughter learned gelim weaving skills, "in case one day she would need to have a source of income," Fateme said but the daughter did not seem interested. Her nineteen-year-old fianc, an unskilled laborer in Sanandaj, also did not finish high school. They were preparing for the wedding in the upcoming summer, she enthusiastically told me.

The Decline in Senneh Production: Contemporary Senneh Production Workshops, An Empowering Tool, or Exploitation of Cheap Weaving Labour?

Senneh production has become a progressively less viable livelihood for local weavers partly due to a sharp decline in domestic and export markets caused by the international sanctions against Iran beginning in 2018 that have targeted the country's economy, including the carpet industry. Fatemeh, a senior independent urban carpet artisan from Sanandaj and a prolific weaver for over five decades, recalled a time in the 1980s when weaving sojaee could be a more viable means of income for urban independent women weavers. Encouraged by her mother, she learned carpet weaving at the age of seven from a woman in the neighborhood, a divorcee who supported her family by carpet weaving. Despite growing up in a lower-middle-class household, like the majority of girls in Kurdistan at the time, she did not attend school because her father was against girls' education. Yet, the family encouraged her to make pile carpets for the market, starting from the age of eight. She proudly recounted how her trousseau was entirely paid with the money she had earned from weaving.

However, it became extremely difficult for local weavers to produce when market demands were falling and the cost of raw materials continued to grow due to rising inflation while, at the same time, their earnings remained extremely low. In this financial crisis and for production to stay profitable, some workshop managers and traders, in their struggle for survival, have felt compelled to exploit the weavers, while others take advantage of the availability of cheap labor and their workers' vulnerable position. I met independent senneh artisans in inner Sanandaj's urban areas, the historical birthplace of senneh gelim, for whom senneh weaving had been a viable means of income but now found it a less and less feasible livelihood. This led many independent weavers, like Fatemeh, with other family income sources to stop altogether. However, the production persisted in marginalized urban areas in the city's peripheries, mainly within the dependent workshops. Here, as discussed previously, weavers had few other livelihood options, acceded to worsening working conditions and wage rates, and continued to produce.

Despite its potential, senneh gelim production in all the existing settings has not been a means of empowering women weavers and has hardly led to any significant, constructive changes in their financial and social well-being and the old patterns of early marriage and under-education of young girls in weavers' families in both urban and village milieus persist. In the fifteen households I visited in 2018 and 2019 where there were adolescent girls, four girls around the age of sixteen or younger had already dropped out of school and were married or were to be married soon, just like their mothers and other women of past generations in their families and neighborhoods had been before them. The statistical population presented here is small but the figure (twenty-six percent) is not far removed from the national statistics for early marriage in Iran, estimated to be around twenty percent.[43] Without a doubt, early marriage, which in Iran is sanctioned by custom and religious laws and institutionalized in the country's legal system, deprives women of their right to education and ensures that they will remain economically dependent for the rest of their lives.[44] Unequivocally, weaving carpets under systematically exploitative conditions as such only perpetuates the cycle of poverty and the socioeconomic, gendered, and cultural discrimination Kurdish women carpet weavers experience.

---

[43] According to official statistics, thirty-four percent of girls married (nationwide) in 2017 were nineteen or younger, while three percent were age ten or younger (217), 5.8 percent were between ten and fourteen (35,333), and twenty-eight percent were between fifteen and nineteen (17,0926). Unfortunately, due to the method of age classification of the statistics, it is difficult to obtain an accurate estimate of girls' marriages under eighteen, which is the international minimum legal age of marriage, for comparative analyses. However, some sources have stated that the real number is around twenty percent or higher. See: Statistical Center of Iran, *Statistical Yearbook of 2017* (Tehran: Office of the Head of Public Relations and International Cooperation, Statistical Center of Iran, 2018), 195-196, https://irandataportal.syr.edu/wp-content/uploads/Statistical-Yearbook-2016-2017-1395-%E2%80%93-Persian-.pdf (last viewed September 02, 2021); "آمار کودک‌همسری در ایران چقدر است؟," Factnameh, October 2, 2019, https://factnameh.com/fact-checks/2019-02-08-child-marriage.html.

Conclusion

This research presents a sketch of the senneh gelim weaving tradition and its historical and current trajectories. Rooted in the rich and ancient tribal and rural Kurdish textile traditions, senneh gelim was developed as an urban textile in the late eighteenth century under local Kurdish nobilities' patronage, becoming the finest flatweave carpet ever to have come out of Kurdish looms. In the face of modern capitalist carpet production, beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century in Iran, senneh gelim, unlike many pre-modern Kurdish handcrafts, neither perished nor was substantially transformed. However, its continuation over the second half of the twentieth century was largely instigated by some public institutions and their protective measures that attempted to revitalize traditional craft by reinvigorating it as an economic activity. It seems that the transformation of senneh gelim's social function and meanings from a signifier of status and wealth in the past to an ethnic commodity in modern times was instrumental in its survival.

Yet, as the results of this research show, the contemporary senneh gelim has taken a different path from its historical predecessor. Over the last several decades, senneh gelim has entered a new developmental phase, as the city of Sanandaj has lost its centrality in the production of senneh, and senneh workshops have spread across the Kurdistan province in rural towns and villages. This has inevitably brought many changes in all aspects of the craft's construction, materials, aesthetics, and meanings. Village senneh gelim production in independent workshops has gradually incorporated materials and stylistic traits reflective of new rural production contexts. Historical senneh pieces have long been praised for the masterful execution of slit-tapestry technique and sophisticated designs, which were highly distinguished from the allegedly inferior village and nomadic flatweaves in the region. A reverse transition seems to have occurred, as the senneh gelim (within the independent rural setting) has returned to its humble rural origins, marking the closing of a circle.

Still, the future of this remarkable textile heritage is uncertain. Like most traditional handicraft industries, senneh gelim has been struggling in the internal and export market due to a combination of many internal and external factors, such as changing patterns of lifestyle, taste, and consumption, wide availability of cheaper imported goods, the global economy, and the region's geopolitics. However, the most inhibiting factor is inherent within the system—the vertically integrated social and economic relations of women weavers to the rest of the actors, all of whom are predominantly male. Coupled with other factors, this has limited the craft's potential to provide the weavers with a socially and economically sustainable livelihood, creating a systematic means of exploiting the most marginalized population groups. Indeed, the senneh gelim tradition in each of its production settings reflects contemporary Kurdish women weavers' experience of oppression and exploitation resulting from their social identity. This highlights the complex relationship between long-lasting patriarchy and economic materialism, indicating that, as in the past, the operational dynamics of the present-day Iranian handmade carpet production in general, and senneh gelim production, in particular, are organized based on inequality of gender, class, and ethnicity.

---

[44] The legal minimum age of marriage in Iran is thirteen for girls and fifteen for boys (as of July, 2021). There is a legal loophole under Article 1041 of the Iranian civil code that states girls younger than thirteen require the permission of their male guardian and the courts prior to any marriage taking place.

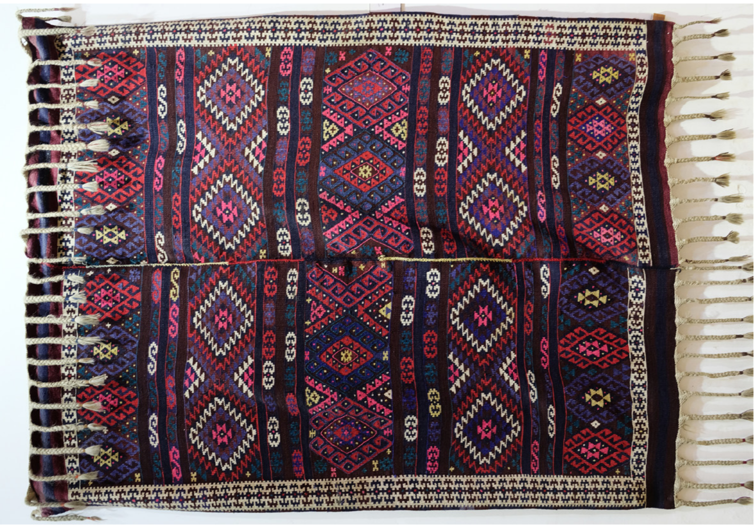

Figure 1. An example of a rural Kurdish flatweave locally known as *barr*, comprised of two pieces sewn together, made by *Herroti* tribe, Iraqi Kurdistan, dates to the mid-twentieth century. Courtesy of the Kurdish Textile Museum, Erbil. Photographed by the author, October 2018.

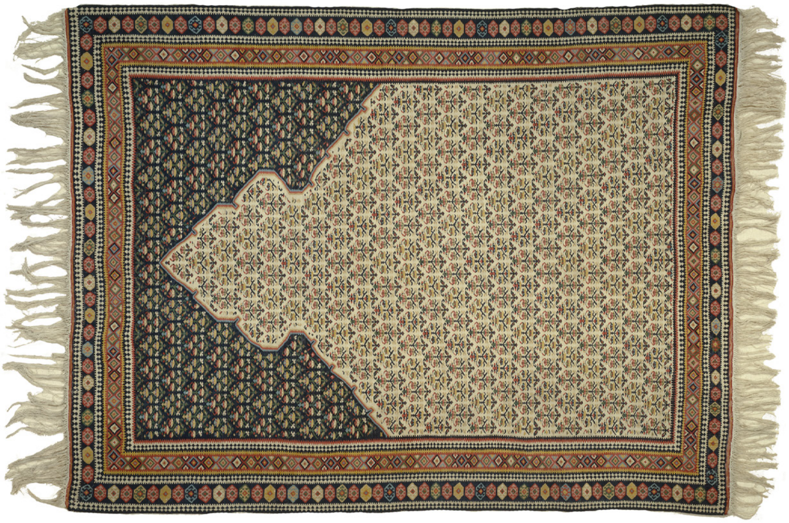

Figure 2. A senneh gelim, an example of urban Kurdish flatweave, dating from the mid-to-late nineteenth century, with a *mehrabi* layout and floral design pattern. A. Levi (1993) suggested the floral patterns were derived from the famous Safavid's Garden pile carpets.
Courtesy of the George Washington University Textile Museum, gift of Arthur D. Jenkins (ON: 1979.35.1).

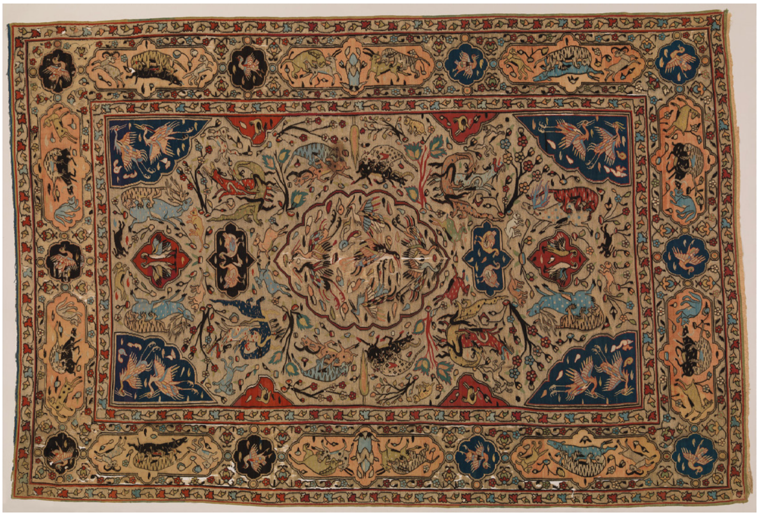

Figure 3. A Safavid silk tapestry dates from the late sixteenth to early seventeenth century, probably made in Kashan, Iran.
Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Arts, bequest of Isaac D. Fletcher, 1943 (Accession No.: 43.84).

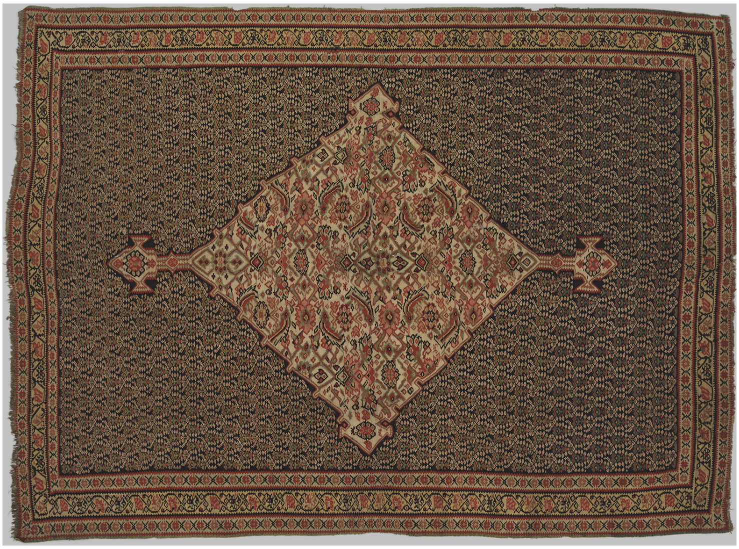

Figure 4. A senneh gelim, dates to the nineteenth century.
Courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum (Accession No.: 321-1896).

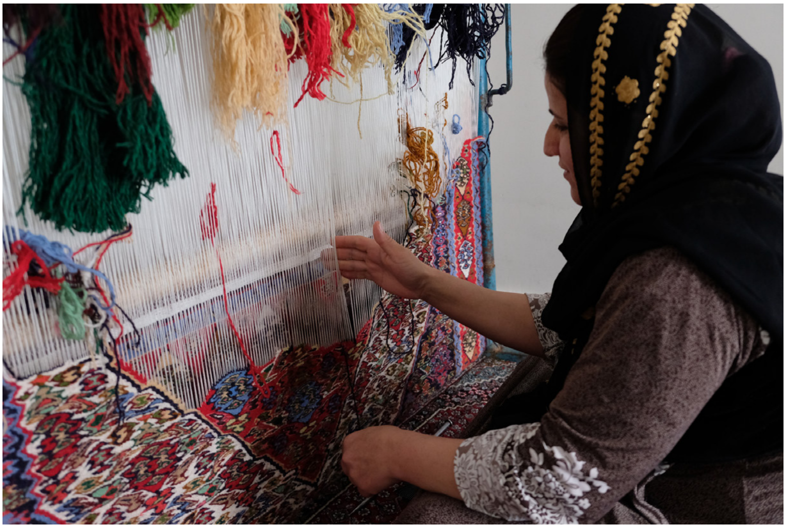

Figure 5. Mahin, an independent senneh weaver from the village of Buridar, Iranian Kurdistan. Photographed by the author. January 2019.

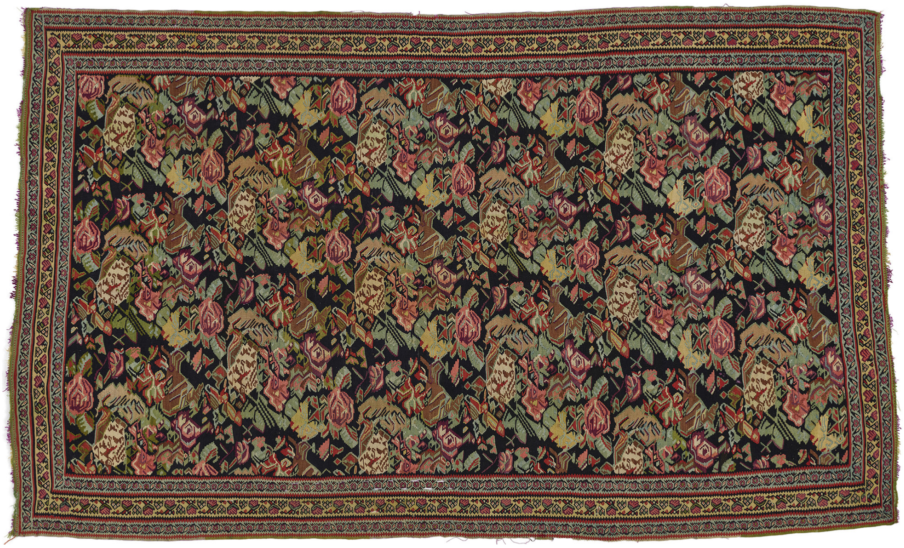

Figure 6. A senneh gelim with *vagireh* layout and a free-style floral pattern locally known as *kochke-kolo* or *rig-e-rokhane*, or Fath-Ali-shahi by some non-local experts. The pattern is inspired by imported French carpets designs.
Courtesy of the George Washington University Textile Museum, gift of Arthur D. Jenkins (ON: 1989.10.56).

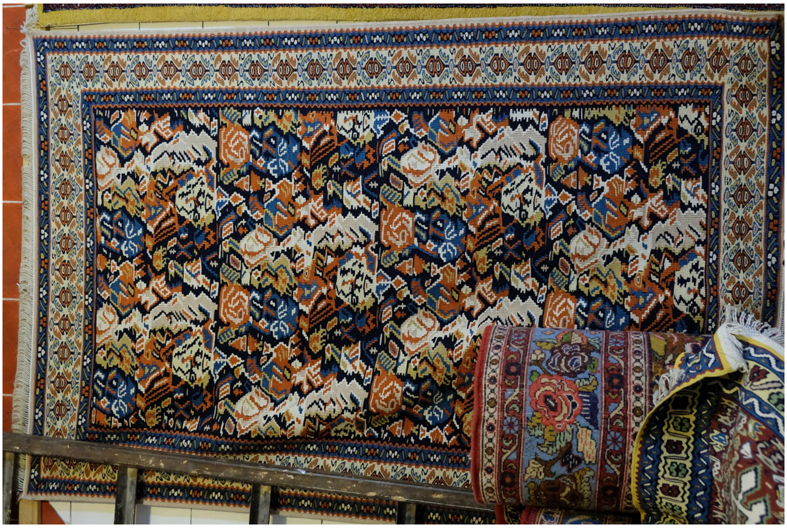

Figure 7. A contemporary-made senneh gelim with *kochke-kolo* or *rig-e-rokhane* on sale at the Sanandaj carpet bazaar (compare with Figure 6). Photographed by the author. September 2019.

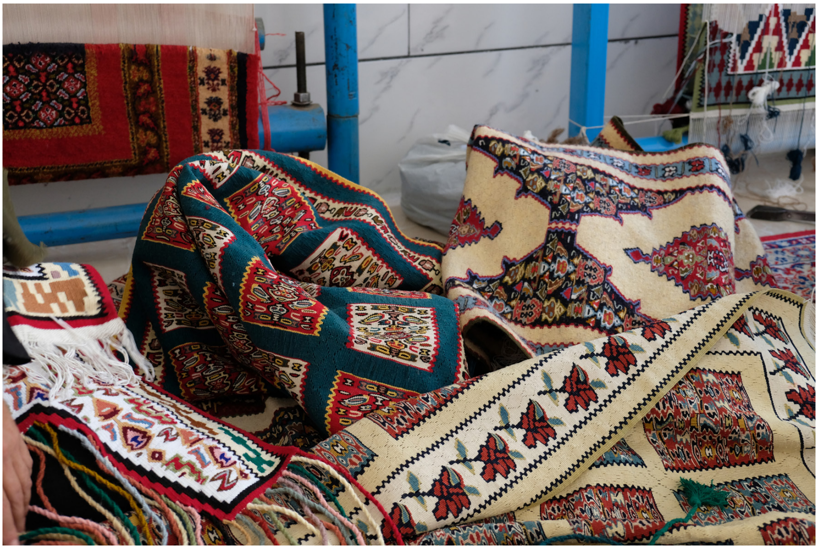

Figure 8. Senneh gelim products of dependent urban looms.

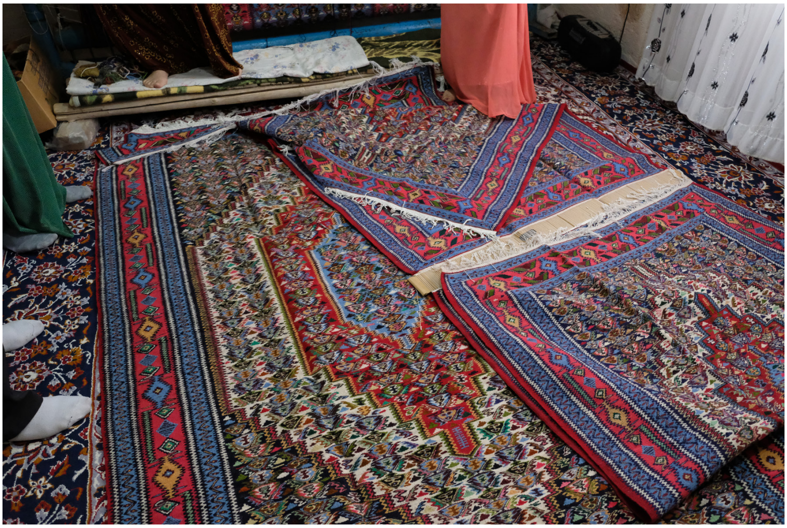

Figure 9. Senneh gelim products of independent rural looms.

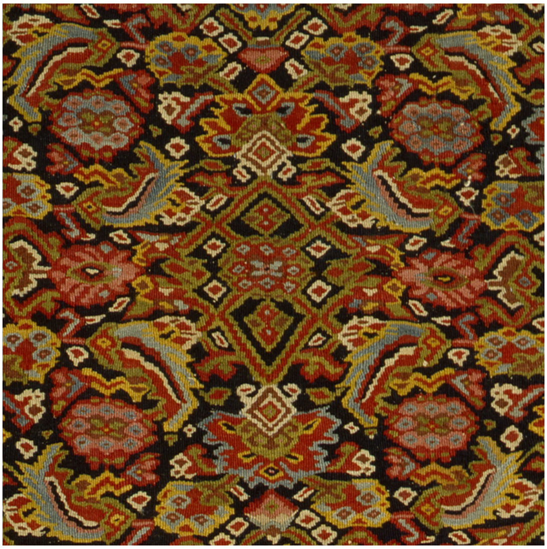

Figure 10. Details of the Herati design of an old senneh gelim which dates from the late-nineteenth to the early twentieth century.
Courtesy of the George Washington University Textile Museum, bequest of Arthur D. Jenkins (ON:1989.10.48).

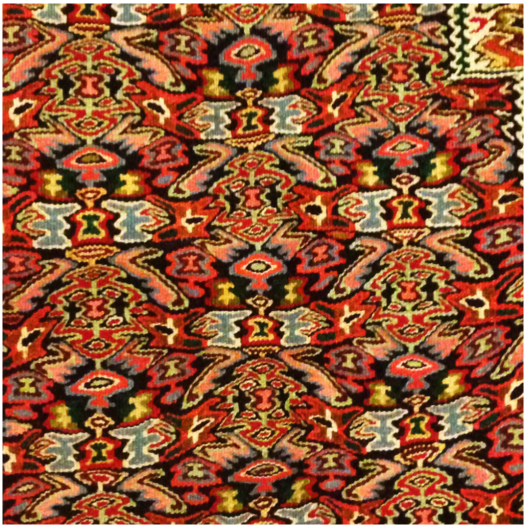

Figure 11. Details of the Herati design, produced in a contemporary independent urban workshop, woven by Shahnaz from Sanandaj, Kurdistan.
Photographed by the author, Sanandaj, December 2018.

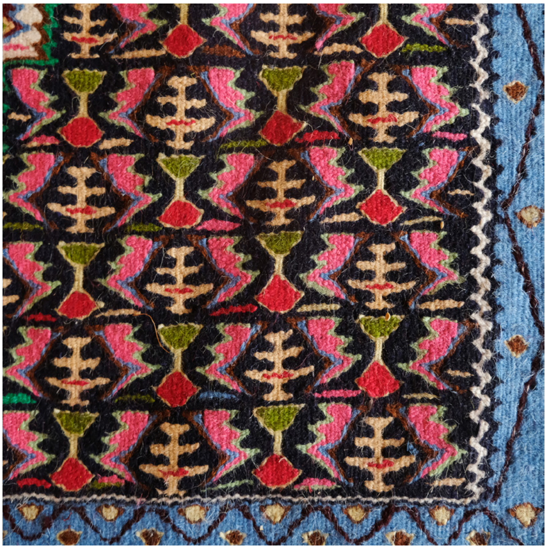

Figure 12. Details of the Herati design, a product of a contemporary **independent rural** workshop, show a simplified variation of the design, woven by Ameneh from the village of Kakuye-Sofla, Kurdistan. Photographed by the author, April. 2020

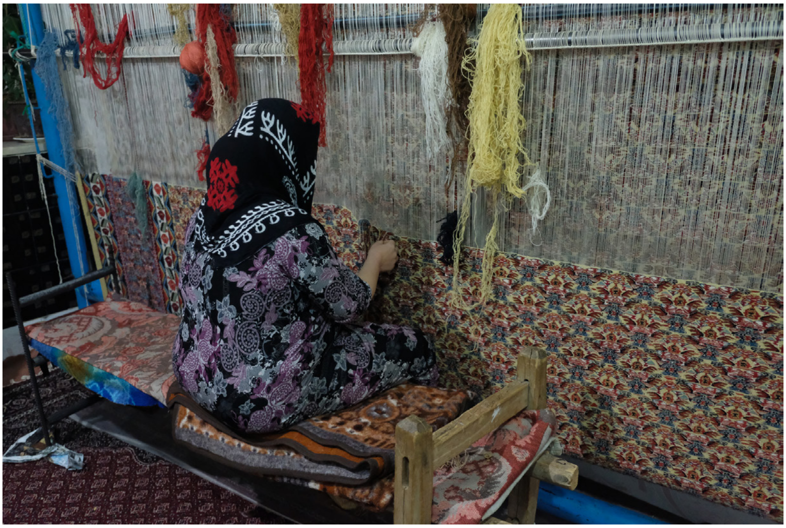

Figure 13. Golchin, a senneh gelim artisan, a dependent urban weaver was working at home in Naysar, Sanandaj. Photographed by the author. December 2018.

Bibliography

Abdoh-Tabrizi, Ehsan and Afshin Shahi. “The Shi’i State and the Socioeconomic Challenges of the Sunni Communities in Iran.” In *Sites of Pluralism*. Edited by Firhat Oruc. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190052713.003.0005.

Akasheh, Anahid. “Woven Skies, Woven Lands: Kurdish Textiles as an Expression of Social Structure.” In *Kurdish Times* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1986): 23-26. http://search.proquest.com/docview/216671858.

Ardalan, Sheerin. *Khāndān-i Kurd-i Ardalān Dar Talāqī-i Impirātūrī’hā-Yi Īrān Va ‘Uthmānī*. Tihrān: Nashr-i Tārīkh-i Īrān, 2008.

Bier, Carol. *Woven from the Soul, Spun from the Heart: Textile Arts of Safavid and Qajar Iran, Sixteenth-Nineteenth Centuries*. Washington, D.C.: The George Washington University Textile Museum, 1987.

Bierman, Irene. “Medieval Flat Weaves in Urban Middle East.” In *Flat-Woven Textiles,* edited by Cathryn M. Cootner. Washington, D.C: The George Washington University Textile Museum, 1981.

Biggs, Robert D., *Discoveries from Kurdish Looms*. Evanston, Ill.: Mary and Leigh Block Gallery, Northwestern University, 1983.

Bruinessen, M. V. *Agha, Shaikh, and State: The Social and Political Structures of Kurdistan*. London: Zed Books, 1992.

Burns, James D. *Antique Rugs of Kurdistan: A Historical Legacy of Woven Art*. London: James D Burns, 2002.

Cootner, Cathryn M., ed. *Flat-Woven Textiles*. Washington, D.C: The George Washington University Textile Museum, 1981.

Costin, Cathy Lynne, Rita P. Wright, Elizabeth M. Brumfiel, and American Anthropological Association. Meeting (94th: 1995: Washington, D.C.). *Craft and Social Identity*. Archeological Papers of the American Anthropological Association; no. 8. Arlington, Va.: American Anthropological Association, 1998. https://delcat.on.worldcat.org/oclc/40311568.

De Franchis, Amedeo. “Kurdish rugs from Northeastern Iran.” In *Discoveries from Kurdish Looms*. Edited by Robert D. Biggs. Evanston, Ill.: Mary and Leigh Block Gallery, Northwestern University, 1983.

Eagleton, William. *An Introduction to Kurdish Rugs and Other Weavings*. American Edition. New York: Interlink Books, 1988.

Edwards, Arthur Cecil. *The Persian Carpet: A Survey of Carpet-Weaving Industry in Persia*. London and New York: Duckworth Overlook, 2016.

Factnameh. “آمار کودک‌همسری در ایران چقدر است؟.” October 2, 2019. Accessed December 2020. https://factnameh.com/fact-checks/2019-02-08-child-marriage.html.

Foran, John. *Fragile Resistance: Social Transformation in Iran from 1500 to the Revolution*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1993. https://delcat.on.worldcat.org/oclc/26763865.

Giddens, Anthony. *Capitalism and Modern Social Theory: An Analysis of the Writings of Marx, Durkheim and Max Weber*. Cambridge [U.K.]: Cambridge University Press, 1971.

Ghassemlou, Abdul-Rahman. *Kurdistan and the Kurds*. Prague: Czechoslovak Acad. of Sciences u.a, 1965.

Ghassemlou, Abdul-Rahman and Gerard Chaliand, ed. *People without a Country: The Kurds and Kurdistan*. London: Zed Book, 1993. http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/summary/summary.w3p;query=Id:%22library/lcatalog/10051492%22.

Helfgott, Leonard Michael. *Ties that Bind: A Social History of the Iranian Carpet*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994.

Housego, Jenny. *Tribal Rugs: An Introduction to the Weaving of the Tribes of Iran*. London: Scorpion Publications, 1991.

Ittig, Annette. "Ziegler's Sultanabad Carpet Enterprise," *Iranian Studies* 25, no. 1-2 (1992): 103-135. https://delcat.on.worldcat.org/oclc/5546753367.

———. "CARPETS xi. Qajar Period," *Encyclopædia Iranica*, IV/8. Viewed December 2020 at https://iranicaonline.org/articles/carpets-xi .

Jackson, Cailah. "Persian Carpets and the South Kensington Museum: Design, Scholarship and Collecting in Late Nineteenth-Century Britain." *Journal of Design History* 30, no. 3 (2017): 265-281. doi:10.1093/jdh/epw029.

Levi, A. "Renewal & Innovation: Iconographic Influences on Kurdish Carpet Design." *Hali* 70 (Aug 1, 1993): 84.

Koohi-Kamali, Farideh. *The Political Development of the Kurds in Iran: Pastoral Nationalism*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

Mazumdar, Shampa and Sanjoy Mazumdar. "Rethinking Public and Private Space: Religion and Women in Muslim Society." *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research* 18 (2001): 302-324.

Ministry of Cooperatives Labors and Social Welfares. "1398 بخشنامه حداقل دستمزد سال." Accessed December 2, 2019. https://www.mcls.gov.ir/icm_content/media/image/2019/04/270204_orig.pdf

Mirabootalebi, Reyhane. "Kurdish Flatweaves and Weavers: Cultural Interweaving and Un-ravelling." Ph.D. diss., University of Delaware, 2021.

———. "Senneh Gelim and Gelim Weavers: An Interdisciplinary Study of the Contemporary Production of a Traditional Kurdish Carpet in Iranian Kurdistan." *SocArXiv*, July 22, 2021. doi:10.31235/osf.io/nv6xz.

Stanzer, Wilfred, *Kordi: Leben, Knüpfen, Weben Der Kurden Khorasans Lives, Rugs, Flatweaves of the Kurds in Khora-san* .Wien: Adil Besim OHG im Eigenverlag, 1993.

Statistical Center of Iran. *Statistical Yearbook of 2017*. Tehran: Office of the Head of Public Re lations and International Cooperation, Statistical Center of Iran, 2018. https://irandataportal.syr.edu/wp-content/uploads/Statistical-Yearbook-2016-2017-1395-%E2%80%93-Persian-.pdf (last viewed September 02, 2021).

Schwartz, Ora, 1991. "Jewish Weaving in Kurdistan." *Kurdish Times* (summer 1991, 4, 1/2), 86-97.

Tanavoli, Parviz. *Persian Flatweaves: A Survey of Flatwoven Floor Covers and Hangings and Royal Masnads*. Woodbridge: Antique Collectors' Club, 2002.

Vali, Abbas. *Kurds and the State in Iran: The Making of Kurdish Identity*. London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011.

Wattenmaker, Patricia. "Craft Production and Social Identity in Northwest Mesopotamia." Archeological Papers of the American Anthropological Association 8 (1): 47–55, 1998. https://doi.org/10.1525/ap3a.1998.8.1.47.

Wertime. John T. "The principal types and woven structures of Kurdish weavings in Northeastern Iran." In *Discov-eries from Kurdish Looms*. Edited by Robert D. Biggs. Evanston, Ill.: Mary and Leigh Block Gallery, Northwestern University, 1983.

Zorn, Elayne. *Weaving a Future: Tourism, Cloth, and Culture on an Andean Island*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press 2004.

Acknowledgement

I would like to acknowledge the late Prof. Vicki Cassman, my first doctoral supervisor, and my advisors Prof. Patricia Sloane-White, Prof. Margaret Stetz, and Prof. Rudolph Matthee from the University of Delaware and Sumru Belger Krody from the George Washington University Textile Museum for sharing their invaluable knowledge and expertise with me and guiding me throughout my research.

Funding

I gratefully acknowledge the financial support I received from the University of Delaware to undertake this research, including the Dissertation Fellowship Award (2020-2021), Preservation Studies Program Fellowship (2016-2020), Louise Roselle Research Travel Awards (2019), and College of Arts and Sciences Competitive Graduate Student Travel Grants (2018).

Submitted August 3, 2022, Revised January 31, 2023, Accepted April 4, 2023