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THE LOST ART OF THE ANATOLIAN HEADDRESS

by

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Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,  
Thou foster child of silence and slow time.

-- John Keats, Ode on a Grecian Urn

Demure, rarely speaking, always keeping to the background, a young girl in a traditional Turkish village had few means of self-expression. Being illiterate, she could not describe her feelings on paper. If married, her low status in her husband's family did not permit her to speak freely until she had borne her first child.

How could a young woman express her emotions, then? In rural Anatolia up until the last few decades, woven handicrafts provided the main outlet -- carpets, kilims and headdresses. Connoisseurs of Turkish folk art have devoted a great deal of attention to the carpets and kilims made by village women, but they have yet to discover the artistic beauty of the headdresses.

Known in Turkish as baş süslemesi, "head decoration," the traditional headdress consisted of an embroidered scarf wrapped around a small fez and hung with gold or silver ornaments. The jewelry told a woman's economic status since it consisted of most of her movable wealth; the scarves, and particularly the embroidered edging, or oya, around them, revealed more personal information.

"Headdresses were speaking then in the villages," says Mrs. Nezihe Araz, 60, a Turkish journalist who collects them. If a woman wore a scarf with oya in the shape of dangling red peppers, for example, "it meant she was on bad terms with her husband," says Mrs. Araz. "The woman was saying, 'My mood is as bitter as red pepper, so don't approach me.'"

For the last 24 years, Mrs. Araz has collected headdresses from all parts of Anatolia. A writer for the daily Milliyet (Nationality) and host of a women's program on Turkish television, she has written innumerable articles on the subject. Not knowing of any other serious collectors, she believes her collection of 38 Anatolian headdresses is the largest in the world.

Certainly, nothing else like it exists in Turkey. Mrs.

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A headdress from Gaziantep in south-eastern Turkey showing the 'red pepper' oya which says the woman is on bad terms with her husband.  
(Photo by Chuck Wells)

Araz has been trying to convince the Ministry of Tourism and Culture to build a museum for her collection. Only in a museum will knowledge about the headdresses, as well as the actual pieces themselves, be preserved. "It's a dying art and I want it to live," she says. "After I pass away, all these things will die, so I keep writing articles hoping they will build a museum."

The headdresses have deep roots in Turkish culture. Mrs. Araz has seen them represented on Seljuk tombstones and tiles and she has even noticed links with ancient Hittite art in some headdresses from southeastern Turkey. But since economic changes began sweeping the Turkish countryside in the early 1950s, use of the headdresses has been decreasing, the quality of workmanship on the scarves has deteriorated tremendously, and knowledge of what the headdresses represent in the culture is being lost.

Despite wars and the periodic collapse of empires, rural life in Anatolia remained largely unchanged for millenia. Then in the early 1950s, mechanization brought cash cropping and destroyed the stable traditional life based on subsistence farming. Millions of people migrated to the cities. In 1927, more than 80

percent of Turkey's population was rural; today, the figure is 56 percent. Almost one-fourth of Turkey's 50 million people live in the urban sprawls of Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir. The people who remained on the farm became increasingly tied to the market economy and began to dress and act more like city people.

"Everything in the village has changed," says Mrs. Araz. "There is no more need for a woman to carry a bank on her head. The villagers want to put their money into tractors and land -- not into jewelry kept in cases."

Mrs. Araz first became interested in headdresses in 1960. On an assignment for Hayat (Life) magazine, she went to southeastern Turkey to write about the yürük, or nomadic, people. She accompanied the yürük on their annual spring trip to the yayla, or high plateau, where they pasture their sheep and goats.

One day, she was sitting with some yürük women watching some other yürük women pass by on a road. "The woman next to me would point someone out," remembers Mrs. Araz, "and say, 'Do you know if she's married, or how old she is, or how much wealth she has?'" Of course, my answer was no. They started giggling, so I asked them how they knew. They said they could tell by looking at the headdresses."

The Anatolian headdress, Mrs. Araz learned, contains a wealth of information about the wearer in at least two of its three components. The fez, a smaller version of the headgear worn by men in Ottoman times (and abolished by Ataturk in the early 1920s), simply keeps the woman's head warm and holds her scarf in place. The jewelry, however, is a clue to wealth and age. The more gold she displays, the richer the woman is; silver is less prestigious. Since an adolescent girl will wear only a simple scarf until she marries and receives jewelry for her trousseau, an abundance of ornaments suggests an older woman.

The scarf is the most expressive element of the headdress. The village women would purchase the fez and jewelry in shops, but make the scarves themselves. The older ones reveal exquisite workmanship; the women made them out of hand-spun cotton or silk, colored them with dyes extracted from leaves and roots, and used block printing to decorate them, flowers and apples being common designs. Before she married, a village girl would customarily weave for her trousseau at least 40 scarves and three kilims (one for the groom to use as a prayer rug; one for the baby's cradle; and the third for a casket).

The oya, or embroidered edging around the scarf, provided clues to domestic life. Flower motifs are the most common, roses indicating pregnancy, for example. But an oya of thorns told the world that the woman was on bad terms with her mother-in-law, the idea being that "the thorns resemble the tongue of a mother-in-law," says Mrs. Araz. "Mothers-in-law don't always say sweet things -- their words are like thorns." On the other hand, a certain type of green crenellated oya meant the woman was on good terms with her mother-in-law.

Colors could be significant in expressing emotion, although the meanings can vary from region to region. Generally, yellow means a loss of hope in love; black indicates severity (old women wear black); green is hope; pink or blue designate youth (but also love since a girl with a boyfriend will wear a pink or blue scarf instead of the usual white); white traditionally meant

purity, but in modern times has come to mean happiness as well; and purple (the royal purple) is another sign of wealth. "The heart of the wearer of white is full; the pocket of the wearer of purple is full," goes an old Anatolian saying.

A combination of colors told how many sons a woman had. Two colors meant two sons, three colors three sons, and so on.

The manner in which a woman wore her scarf was important. An unmarried woman is not supposed to show her hair, but a married woman can. A widow would wear a black scarf known as a karayazma (the black meant severity, not mourning -- black is not a mourning color in Islam). As long as she kept all her hair hidden, potential suitors were not supposed to approach her. But if she showed a bit of hair at the forehead, it meant she was available for remarriage.

In traditional village life, a woman would wear her headdress frequently until she had borne a child. Then she had too much work to do -- headdresses are anything but practical. Mrs. Araz believes the headdresses served an important purpose in a society where young women were illiterate and not encouraged to express their opinions or feelings. "A village woman was not supposed to talk in the family until she bore her first child, so the headdress was her only means of self-expression," she says.

To a certain extent, the "silence is golden" custom for young women is still prevalent in Turkish villages. "Until a woman has a child of her own, she's quiet and doesn't put herself forward," says Mubeccel Kiray, an anthropologist at Istanbul's Mamara University. "But the moment she becomes a mother, particularly the mother of a son, her status changes and she becomes very active with a lot to say. The moment she is a grandmother, the old woman of the house, she has more authority within the household than anyone else."

Relatively speaking though, "village women are freer now," says Mrs. Araz. They are certainly speaking and writing more. Mrs. Araz hosts a women's program on Turkish television and frequently receives letters from village women asking about contraception and "how to reach their beloved."

Mrs. Araz finds that today's village women only make very simple scarves in their homes. Women in Trabzon (Black Sea), Kutahya (west) and Mersin (southeast) continue to make embroidered scarves for commercial purposes but the quality is far inferior to that of former times. Replacing the hand-spun materials, natural dyes and block printing are printed Japanese textiles with banal designs. The oya is now done with nylon thread, which gives a cheap, glossy look, and is nowhere near as elaborate as it used to be.

As the modern work deteriorates, collectors are beginning to realize the value of the old work. Mrs. Araz finds that prices have been skyrocketing during the past decade. Where once you could buy an antique scarf in a bazaar for \$10, the going price today would be several hundred dollars. Village women who still have traditional headdresses have begun to realize their value, says Mrs. Araz.

Young village girls today prefer white wedding gowns over traditional marriage costumes which would have included headdresses. However, the traditional costumes are still worn at various ceremonies preceding the actual wedding, such as the kına gecesi (when the bride and her friends put henna on their palms) and

the taki (when the bride and groom receive financial contributions from their family and friends).

But on these occasions, when the old headdresses are carefully removed from the cases where they have been stored, only the old women remember what the colors and different types of oya are supposed to represent. "The young girls have no idea," says Mrs. Araz.

Even more than the decline in workmanship, which she sees as inevitable, Mrs. Araz finds the loss of knowledge about the headdresses worrisome. That is why she is so anxious to put her collection into a museum where the items can be studied by scholars. She believes the headdresses represent something deep in Turkish culture that may soon be lost.

"We got rid of our old values," says Mrs. Araz, referring to the changes since the 1920s. "I believe that instead of copying everything we see in the west, we should turn our eyes to the past and try to emulate what we had then. Turkey would be a better place."

With Mrs. Araz tirelessly campaigning to revive the lost art of the Anatolian headdress, there is hope that some of the old values may be recovered.