

# Concepts of Motifs in Culture: a Review of the Jewelry of Turkmen Women

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## Abstract

One way to understand the culture of the people is to recognize used concepts in arts and especially their artifacts. These concepts represent in appearances and motifs of these relics. Turkmen are tribes who have used several designs in decorating their arts and crafts. Turkmen women jewelry is considered as remarkable art of this tribe and it not only includes special visual properties but also drawings with broad concepts. The aim of this study is to recognize motifs and the used concepts in Turkmen women jewelry based on finding the roots of motifs in Turkmen culture. Accordingly, based on library data and descriptive – analytical and anthropological approaches, the research is going to answer this question that which concepts are existed in the used motifs of Turkmen women jewelry and to what extent it originates from the culture and beliefs of the people? The results of eighty remarkable samples of this art indicate that myths, beliefs, nature and environment of the people and the characteristics of Islamic art are among items which affect the concepts of these motifs as myths and beliefs of this tribe have played a considerable role in creating these motifs.

**Keywords:** Turkmen women jewelry, jewelry motifs, concepts of motifs, Turkmen culture.

## 1. Introduction

Human arts and handicrafts, besides their application which is the main principle of their essence, have provided a context to represent insights of a nation. The relics shaping and its used decorating forms a superstructure which indicates some concepts of the culture of the people who belong to that art. The existence of such a case in the majority of Turkmen folk art is clearly perceived. Turkmen women jewelry is the most significant component of the arts among a variety of ethnic groups' jewelries. The obvious differences between these relics and the others are in their size, motifs, potential concepts and variety of applications. The most important components to identify works of arts which also lead to recognize cultures are studying about the used motifs on them. Generally, it can be stated 3 main principles related to the emergence of motifs in the Turkmen art which each one has played an important role in Turkmen artists' work of

arts processes throughout history. There are myths and ancient legends of the people, biological nature and climate of Turkmen and the emergence of Islam and its impact on the culture and thoughts of Turkmen people which form the most important underlying principles in Turkmen folk arts. Accordingly, these kinds of ideology among Turkmen jeweler artists are also available and have created considerable effects on these relics' shaping and decorating. Studies of Turkmen jewelry have been referred to the general discussions so far and performed based on the form of application and usage. Few studies have been done about the conceptual aspect and especially used concepts in this art which remained dispersed and in the form of generalities. The aim of this study is to recognize motifs and the used concepts in Turkmen women jewelry based on finding the roots of motifs in Turkmen culture which were noted in discussions and researches related to Turkmen tribe culture and art. Moreover, in some cases, it has been also referred to resources which noted to symbol of some major motifs such as ram's horn motif. According to the desired goal, it can be adopted anthropological approach in the present study. As many theorists stated, information and analysis conducted by ethnographers have been placed in analysis field related to anthropology. Cultural anthropology, as a field of anthropology, deals with issues of culture and art and features in the studied range. So that, through data and ethnography (ethnographic) of Turkmen people, it is extracted approaches related to the arts and culture of the people. While, the following trend is implemented its cultural anthropology approach by focusing on ornaments of Turkmen women and in particular on the concepts of motifs patterns. Accordingly, based on library data and descriptive – analytical and anthropological approaches, the research is going to answer this question that which concepts are existed in the used motifs of Turkmen women jewelry and to what extent it originates from the culture and beliefs of the people? It should be noted that the selected subjects in this study include 80 pieces of the most prominent Iranian relics which are kept in Metropolitan Museum and also provided as book.

## 2. Turkmen Tribe

It is mentioned in many sources that “Ghuzz” or “Oghuz” are Turkmen. According to Vambery theory, it was dated back to the legendary era of “Oghuz Khan”. The emergence of Seljuk Empire in Asia Minor, the development and expansion of the Ottoman Empire, the political rule of the Mughals in India, Aq Qoyunlu and Qara-Quyunlu governance in the Caucasus and northwest of Iran has been developed by active participation of various Turkmen tribes [hasani ,2009:151-153].

Turkmenistan, Turkmen historic homeland, was the ancestral land of ethnic groups such as Parthians and Alans and in this respect; Turkmens have inherited the quite Iranian culture and civilization. Goklan, Yomut and Teke are three tribes residing in Iran. The greatest concentration of population of this tribe is Golestan Province [hasani, 2009:151].

Regarding the pre-Islamic religious beliefs of Turkmen, it has been worshipped “gook Tangry” namely the God of heaven which is considered as a kind of “shamanism”

[Aminollah, 1987: 69]. The Turkmen's ritual and religion which had been worshipped pre-Islam has affected their arts and handicrafts and the application of its concepts on the motifs of jewelries can be clearly seen. Presently, Iranian-Turkmen are Hanafi Sunni Muslims. Islam influence on the people was such that even it was said that the term "Turkmen" has been used after they become Muslim in the late 10th century [Canani , 2000:233]. Turkmen language is a branch of Turkish languages and among languages of Ural–Altaic, also Uralo-Altaic or Uraltaic [Aminollah, 1987: 243].

### 3. Turkmen jewelry history

The oldest and richest collection of artifacts is held at the Metropolitan Museum, which mostly dated back to the late 19 century. Written sources of the Turkmen people and their literary works partly reveals the time of using these relics. Donovan, in 1881, stated that "Turkmen women are always seen in full dress and jewelry and I rarely have seen them during the hard work" [Ala,1978: 12].

Logashova has also talked about the items of jewelry of them. In part it is stated that "Doghagomosh to prevent the evil eye and a roll to hold prayer are among chest jewelry" [Logashva, 1980:75].

Vambery has also description of these jewels as" necklace, earrings, nose rings and amulets pods which look like our bullet pods are hanged out like cross of honor, cross and medal both right and left sides" [Vambery, 1991:401].

In the myths of Turkmen tribe, there is a story in which not only the tribes of this nation but also how jewelry industry has been emerged among them is described [Kasraian& Arshi,1991:12]. Naz Mohammad Qope, Turkmen contemporary poet, also elegantly describes stories about Turkmen tribe wars and the role of women jewels in respect of using during war and peace (According to legend) [Qunjeq, 2004:98].

### 4. Features and characteristics of Turkmen jewelry

The most striking visual feature of these works of art is their big size and dimension for the user. It has been rarely seen in earlier periods and among the inhabitants of Iran. Combining and using all its variants have weighs about 6 to 8 kg. It has been mentioned that girls and young women hung too much jewels and ornaments as they walk hardly. Their weights reaches even 17 kg weight while marriage [Kalter , 1984: 96]. Nowadays, many Turkmen women, especially older ones, always use them as they are ready to go to the party [Mohammadi, 2009:94]. Such artifacts and jewels, in most cases, have been an integral part of ethnic groups clothing and in combination with it, represent the developed aspects of a nation's arts. This feature regarding Turkmen jewelry and clothing is clearly perceivable. Turkmen artists have amazingly considered an appropriate ornament for all parts of the body and in combination with women clothing in this tribe.

Turkmen women use a variety of ornaments specific to their age from childhood. Manufacturing of jewelries from childhood to old age in a tribe nation indicates the main

principle of that culture and states the importance of originality and beliefs in constructing and applying of this work of art.

The apparent similarity of these jewels to defensive tools causes that some noted to the aspects of their past usage in war and considered them as a kind of shield and helmet that women had used along men. Or, these were fighting men pieces of armor which have been transformed to the women ornaments and jewels in the time of peace [Mohammadi, 2009:94]. Moreover, it has also been said that women have redeemed these ornaments and jewels to free their husbands from prison or slavery [Kasraian & Arshi,1991: 25].

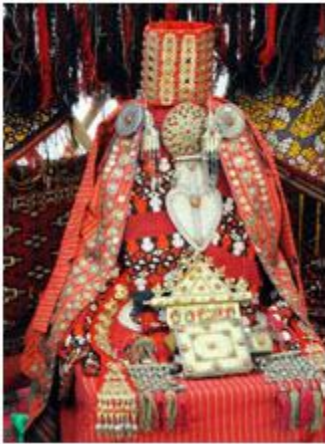


Figure 1. an image of the used jewels of Turkmen women [Ala, 1978]



Figures 2 and 3: Turkmen jewels and their application in different age [Mohammadi, 2009:105, 123]



Figures 2 and 3: Turkmen jewels and their application in different age [Mohammadi, 2009:105, 123]



Figure 4: the ornament of flower collar [Gary , 2009]



Figure 5: Qorsaghche ornament [Gary , 2009]

Some people think that such ornaments are prayer and protective spells. It may be truth due to Turkmen beliefs on metals and their ability to exorcise spells [Kasraian & Arshi, 1991:25]. Some of them are hanged out as armband and mascot in turquoise color of the child's shoulder or helmet [Izadinia, 2003:22]. Tezri also discusses about poor Turkmen women who have difficult living but are immersed in the colorful ornaments

head to toe [Tarzi, 2008:457]. Using this kind of jewels and ornaments may strengthen their beliefs to these handmade.



Figure 6: body accessories to keep prayer



Figure7: A scroll to keep mascot and pray [Diba ,2011:171]

The main ingredient of Turkmen accessories and ornaments is silver. Primarily, in Turkmen jewelry art, gold is rarely used. In these relics, gold appears to prevail but the main used metal is silver and sometimes only a coating of gold is used.

Another feature of these works is that a variety of semi-precious stones is widely used in accessories and ornaments [Tarzi, 2008:448- 449]. Katler states that “they have considered a feature for each stone and to use their existing powers, they frequently use jeweled items on accessories and ornaments. It seems that red agate or “blood stone” is against bleeding, ulceration and abortion. Blue turquoise protects human against the evil eye which always related to blue eyes in areas that are rare” [Kalter ,1984:130]. The use of red in the culture and arts of Turkmen is of high importance and is the most used color in all works of arts in this tribe [Ghazilor,2015].

Size, movement, sound and color include the most important visual characteristics and appearance of these accessories. Large size and weight of 6 to 8 kg, the motion of accessory and decorative tassels while using and also visual motion of eye while these accessories motion, sound produced due to tassels and finally colors such as gold, silver, red, blue and so on are the most important elements and visual indicators that form the noble art of Turkmen nation [Ala ,1978:42].

##### 5. Review the concepts of jewelry designs of Turkmen women

As noted earlier, myths, surrounding environment and the emergence of Islam were three factors which plays an important role in Turkmen art. Legends and stories are human-born and signs, symptoms and symbol are made. In another word, beliefs and impressions sit on the mind and the essence of culture, art and beliefs of Turkmen people revives as motifs in art. All Turkmen folk art has a direct relationship with the surrounding nature and environment and the nature is the origin of the Turkmen art

generation among people [Khatminia, 2008]. However, the advent of Islam had also great impact on art motifs as; arabesque motifs are the most significant of these jewelries. Demonstrating concepts of Turkmen jewelry motifs is nothing but study the relationship between the natural and the current symbols among this nation and also research related to the surrounding environment and their beliefs.

The most important feature of the Turkmen jewelry is balance, symmetry and repetition of motifs which is manifested in all works of art. These motifs have been applied so simple and outlined which can be divided to several groups:

- **Animal motifs** which mostly include ram's horn, wolf, birds, fish, snakes and camel motifs. The motif of ram's horn has the most usage in most Turkmen handicrafts.
- **Herbal motifs** which include several leaves flower (6, 8 and 12 leaves and so on) which are in circles and bush-like
- **Human motifs** which have been used as abstract figures.
- **Celestial motifs** which include the sun, moon and stars.
- **Geometric motifs** which have been used as circle,
- **Arabesque or Eslimi motifs** that have been used in most jewels.

## 6. **Animal motifs**

### 7. **Ram Horn**

Among the numerous totemic beliefs which was common among the Oguz (the ancestors of the Turkmens), the number of animals have a special place. At the head of these animals sheep and wolf (Gökböri) were more considered than others. This is, in fact, a reflection of different desert and nomadic tribes [Matofi , 2004:2018].

Niazjan considers ram horn as the symbol of nomadic living, fertility and power [Bodaghi, 1992:17]. To gain the blessings of the ram, Turkmens focused on it by appealing to their imagination to depict various forms of manifestation in their lives [Matofi, 2004:1932].

It should be noted that this role is abundantly perceived in all different Turkmen arts. Even some of the tombstones also have ram horn shape or inspired from it. The image or statue of a ram on headstone was a sign of courage of dead or their sheep handling jobs [Anasori, 1981:129]. Cooper note ram as a symbol of virility, male power generator and protective force and it is a common symbol in many cultures and civilizations and related to fertility [Cooper ,2007:282].

Hall states that “horn among different ethnic groups was a symbol of power and energy esp. horns of bulls and rams” [Vambery, 1991:75]. Ram's horn in most species of Turkmen jewelry has been used (Table 1).

- ***Wolf***

A number of allied tribes of Turkmen and Oghuzes had installed golden wolf head on a stick flags as Totem of this tribe was wolf. In the legends of “Oghuz Name”<sup>1</sup>, Gökböri (gray wolf) and “Buz Kurt” (heaven wolf) have supported Oghuz Khan during wars [Matofi, 2004:2018]. During several stories, wolf manifests as a girl which is a code for sun, animal for the God of heaven and sun and in another place a sacred animal along with the sun [Bayat,2011: 96-98]. The image of the wolf head can be seen in the Turkmen ornament namely “Bokav” (Table 1).

- ***Bird***

Turkmen considered bird as a symbol of ascension [Khatminia,2008] and in women accessories; the role of bird has naturally been presented as abstract and outlined. Turkmen have had a special interest in birds of prey and admired their power and glory so that they selected them as a symbol of their tribe and nation [Khatminia,2008]. Katler states that “two-headed birds (eagle) in the third millennium BC in the Middle East was the symbol of king and these motifs have played important role in spells of Turkestan people” [Kalter ,1984: 134]. Hall also knows birds and esp. hawk as anq?n of Turk tribes [Hall,2004:60].

The majority of myths about the origin of shamans refers to direct intervention of God or his representative “the eagle” namely “Sun Bird”. In this respect, there is legendary quoted by Eliade which is related to the “first Shamans” or “Shamans occupation” which is created by God representative (eagle) [Eliade, 2009:133-135].

In the mythology of Central Asia, birds sitting on space tree branches represent the spirits of human beings. Moreover, bird sitting on rattan is the common symbol in shamanistic assemblies [Eliade, 2009:697]. This role clearly is seen in jewels of these people (Table 1).

- ***Fish***

The symbol is seen as abstract in different forms at the end of most jewels as pendants. Eliade and Kalter have also stated that “The role of water and the code of fish are symbols of fertility and pregnancy [Eliade, 1993:190]. And this symbol is a symbol of male fertility and masculine” [Kalter, 1984: 134].

Cooper also knows fish as a symbol of fertility, evolution, revitalization and associated with all the concepts of mother goddess as creator and lunar goddess [Cooper ,2007:342-343] (Table 1).

- ***Snake***

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<sup>1</sup> It is “Dada Ghurt” book which includes 12 collected stories of Turkmen oral narratives which was written in the sixteenth century AD [Koprily , 2006:62-63].

In Turkmen jewelry, winding wires, s-shaped forms and natural image of snake indicate the frequent use of this animal which may be derived from nature and ancient myths of this nation.

Varner states about the role of snake in universal myths as “perhaps any creature except snake has been widely discussed in universal myths. Even, in the mythology of the areas where there are no snakes, it has been appeared”. [Warner, 2007:533] In religious beliefs and myths of all communities, snake is almost associated with renewed youth, immortality, longevity and wisdom because it molts and related to gender [Warner, 2007:527].

Pregnant and pregnancy and fertility features of this creature are of requirements of its “Lunar” fate. According to Mircea Eliade, some people believe that moon in snake shape sleep with their wives and the girls [Dobokor, 2008:55]. Anasori introduces snake as the symbol of water and fertility in motifs [Anasori, 1981:126] (Fig 1).

- ***Camel***

Camel, as a symbol of endurance and tolerance, is sacred among Turkmen. As far as, they use it in the most important rituals of their joy. Camels have helped to go through the hard ways and routes and brought them good and blessings and somehow it is respectful for them [Khatminia, 2008]. Niazjan states that “the advent of Islam and abomination of showing animal images have made Turkmen mother to be abstract and the motif of baby camel footsteps has been replaced by camel itself [Bodaghi ,1992:17].

Although, the role and symbol of the camel in Turkmen hand woven is among essential and major motifs but it has been less used than accessories and jewels (Table 1).

- ***Herbal motifs***

- ***Tree***

Human considers the tree as an earth imagination, lost paradise and even the origin of human beings and symbol of immortality. In scattered and extensive mythology, the human race originated from tree [Warner, 2007:546].

The root of beliefs on tree in Turkmen culture can be found in past myths related to shaman ritual. In this respect, Eliade refers to the role tree in shaman ritual which directly related to the birth of Shaman. He also noted to the types and numbers of trees along with their applications in which the most important was Birch Tree (Dagdan) [Eliade, 2009:88-89].

As Eliade states, some shamans also use adverse tree; namely trees with roots in space. And as it is known, it is one of the oldest symbols of global tree [Eliade, 2009:272-273]. In the past paragraphs, it was discussed about cosmic tree and the two birds on it in beliefs and mythology of Central Asia which is related to the essence of Shaman rituals and last beliefs of Turkmen people. Varner states that “Cosmic Tree grows in a mountain that is the home of gods; its trunk comes from the mountain and its wide branch forms sky, stars and planets or keep it. The fact that branches keep stars has been considered by Orient jewelers to create an image of the golden trees in which jewels hanging on



branches [Warner, 2007:563-564]. Using the tree shapes in Turkmen accessories is considered in prominent samples of this art. Asiq (hanging) accessory is an adverse tree which is one of the main accessories among Turkmen women (Table 2).

- ***Flower***

Multi leaves flower as 5-9 leaves are seen in pendants and various pieces of jewelries. Generally, natural and abstract flowers and herbal motifs are frequently used in Turkmen art. Aidi Flower is a motif with 9 petals; those women who are barren and believe it as sacred flower sew the motif along their dress sleeve or collar to make them fertile. They believe that number 9 is blessed in Turkmen culture [Salehi, 2010:212]. It must be said that any design and motif in hand woven Turkmen arts is considered as flower. (Table 2)

- ***Herbal motifs***

In Turkmen jewelry, human role is imagined as abstract. “Adamlik” (means look like human) is an ornament of Turkmen women that its general form indicates the body of a woman. The present ornaments may have theological aspect and conservational application as a spell [Diba, 2011: 70]. Its apparent resemblance to a firm appearance of a human has suggested a human like nature of this too mind. Its strange and magical status may reinforce a concept of conservation (Table 3).

## **7.2. Celestial motifs**

- ***Sun, moon and star***

Basically, Turkmen women consider eight-pointed stars (the symbol of the sun) as a symbol of luck and fortune and jeweler frequently engraves this star on their jewels. Turkmen knows sun and moon as a symbol of light and bright to home. The motif that frequently is seen in jewels is a circle motif in which other circles have been repeated around it. Matofi has interpreted these motifs as sun and moon and surrounded decorative stones as shining stars. [Matofi, 2004:2348] (Table 4)

## **7.3. Geometric motif**

Less geometric patterns can be seen in the Turkmen jewelry, they often have been used as a general forms. The motifs of circle and triangle are sometimes seen in as small and tiny ones in jewels. Most used stones on jewels are as circle, oval, tear and almond forms. Hexagonal, rhomboid and triangle are shapes which have been used to prevent the evil eye. James hall states about rhomboid that “its concept is unknown; however, it likely means an “all in” eye and a spell to prevent the evil eye” [Hall, 2004:16]. Rings, necklaces and pendants which are the ornaments of pre-history humans are keeper and conservator rings and also cause to maintain mind and body [Cooper ,2007:95-97], (Table 5).

## **7.4. Arabesque (Eslimi) motif**

Arabesque motifs have been executed on most jewelry Turkmen and are considered as one of the prominent indicators of Turkmen jewels. According to many art experts view in the various sources, the term “arabesque” related to “Eslim” is another form of the term “Islam”. Arabesque or Eslimi are special abstract motifs and is derived from natural and herbal motifs which form in spiral circles. All arabesques or Eslimi curves have a way in and a way out (inside and outside direction) which is the essence of Eslimi and this direction is infinitive and is considered as a symbol of immortality. This type of decoration in the majority of Islamic art is clearly seen. Meanwhile, diversity of this type of motifs in Turkmen jewel represents an aspect of Islamic art effect on them (Table 6).

### **7.5. *Dagdan Motif (Birch)***























In some ornaments of Turkmen women in the interface between the ornaments and pendants, there is a motif which looks like Dagdan. Dagdan is a shape that Turkmen people carve from birch wood – a sacred tree among them- and hang it to the cradle of their children. In fact, it is believed that it is a protection against the evil eye and disease [Demidov, 2015]. This motif is also used in Turkmen carpet and is woven for this purpose (Table 7).

## **8. Conclusion**









Turkmen women jewelry is a body to represent the essence and culture of this tribe. According to the classification which has been done in the motifs of this relics, it can be said that animal motifs are the most used ones among them. Meanwhile, these motifs, in most cases, is directly related to thoughts, beliefs and in fact myths of this tribe. Among this, the motif of ram horn is the most used ones. Sometimes, motifs which aren't abstract and take the normal form may indicate surrounding environment of this tribe. These motifs can be seen in natural forms of bird with open wings, looped snake and multi leaves flowers. The motif of camel is also another sample which represents both concepts of natural and belief. As noted earlier, tree had also remarkable role in pre-Islam period and birch tree is already a sacred one (Dagdagan, Dagdan) among them. Ornaments which are formed in the shape of inverted tree can be perceived as concepts related to tree. In fact, Dagdan motif is perfectly derived from the same tree and is also associated with the sacredness.

In most ornaments which have been studied, Eslimi and arabesque motifs are seen in levels of jewelry whether large or small. The widespread existence of this motif in most samples can be partly related to the effects of Islamic art in which the most visible aspect of it is Eslimi motifs. Finally, it can be interpreted that the most effect in motifs and their concept is related to Turkmen thoughts and beliefs which usually refer to the past and the concepts of popular rituals and beliefs of pre-Islam among this tribe. In other words, the role of myths and beliefs of the people in motifs is clearly perceived. While, surrounding environment and Islamic art also affects in role-playing of Turkmen women jewels and ornaments in the later stages.

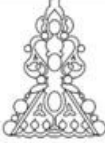



**Table 1: The use of animal motifs in Turkmen jewels and their concepts**

Motif	Sample 3	Sample 2	Sample 1	image	Motif concept
Ram horn					Symbol of power and related to fertility and birth
Wolf					An image of sun and reminder of ancestors
Bird					A symbol of the rise and glory
Fish					Fertility and rebirth
Snake					Immortality and wisdom
Camel	---	---			Patience and blessing





**Table 2: The use of herbal motifs in Turkmen jewels and their concepts**

Motif	Sample image	Sample 1	Sample 2	Sample 3	Motif concept
Tree					Related to the birth and origin of the human race
Flower					Referring to nature





**Table 3: The use of human motifs in Turkmen jewels and their concepts**

Motif	Sample 1	Sample 2	Sample 3	Sample	Motif concept
Human body					magical and protective aspects against spirits





**Table 4: The use of celestial motifs in Turkmen jewels and their concepts**

Motif	Image of a sample	Sample 1	Sample 2	Sample 3	Motif concept
Sun, moon and star					Symbol of light and fortune





**Table 5: The use of geometric motifs in Turkmen jewels and their concepts**

Motif	Image of sample	Sample 1	Sample 2	Sample 3	Motif concept
Geometric shapes					Preserver of evil eye

**Table 6: The use of arabesque or Eslimi motifs in Turkmen jewels and their concepts**

Motif	Sample image	Sample 1	Sample 2	Sample 3	Motif concept
Eslimi or arabesque					A symbol of immortality and nature

**Table 7: The use of human motifs in Turkmen jewels and their concepts**

Motif	Sample image	Sample 1	Sample 2	Sample 3	Motif concept
Dagdan					Prevent the evil eye

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