

The Nature of Abstract Motifs in Ghashghaie Hand-woven Objects

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Abstract

One of the key questions concerning nomadic hand-woven objects in Iran deals with designs and motifs used in them; with the nature of the motifs and the techniques applied to create them. Generally, the intended designs and motifs used in nomadic Persian hand-woven objects are broken (abstract) in shape and as simple as possible. In addition, they are often woven quite subjectively or intuitively; a feature that has made such hand-woven objects unique in terms of aesthetic criteria. Another outstanding feature is the application of a wide variety of weaving techniques. This is true especially in Ghashghaie hand-woven objects. In fact, the weavers take advantage of various techniques (sometime a combination of them), through making different arrangements with wefts and yarns. First, various kinds of nomadic Persian hand-woven objects were classified in terms of application and weaving techniques. Then, the views of three distinguished experts, Parviz Tanavali, Armen Hangeldin and Cecil Edwards, concerning the nature of broken and/or abstract designs and motifs used in nomadic Persian hand-woven objects were reviewed and examined. Finally, the views of the experts were compared with those of the nomadic weavers themselves in order to discover the real explanation for applying such motifs and designs. In order to extract the nomadic views on the rationale behind applying the indented motifs, the weavers were asked two key simple questions. This study is descriptive-analytic in nature. Data were gathered based on library sources and field studies.

Keywords

Ghashghaie, Hand-woven object, Motif, Design, Abstract.

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Introduction

Nomadic hand-woven objects have had an outstanding place among the Persian handicrafts. It has been a serious challenge to keep this outstanding place in recent years given the present conditions of national textile industry including carpet weaving and similar activities. Recognition of this situation is important not only from the economic aspects but also from cultural ones. Research in the field of nomadic hand-woven objects, as a symbol of ethnic identity, deserves serious attention; it can reveal how delicately humans could manage to integrate artistic creativity and functional facets of art in the course of history. Nomadic tribes in Iran have shown this creativity in their hand-woven objects through simple geometric patterns represented in abstract forms. In fact, one salient character of these hand-woven objects is aesthetically the very abstract patterns. As Armen Hangeldin (1996, 39) has put it, “the most important element in nomadic hand-woven objects which always attract attention is the patterns; they are reflection of an intimate affinity between the weaver, as an artist, and her surrounding environment”. Interestingly, the simple and sensible product of the weaver of the Persian nomadic weavers represents itself in the most interpretable way. “Through the mental filter of her mind, the simple natural forms turn into sophisticated forms; She thinks simple but creates in a complex way” (Nasiri, 1995: 77).

Abstraction in the nomadic hand-woven objects is aesthetically so pivotal; in a sense, it is in line with the definitions and interpretations provided by the minimalist abstraction in the west. “It is convergent with outstanding elements of modern art, such as defamiliarization, emphasis on form and pure visual values, from one hand, and the well-established ethnic customs, from the other hand” (Ebrahimi Naghani, 2014: 19). While the modern artist’s inclination to create artworks has been conscious, nomadic weaver’s endeavor towards abstraction, brevity as well as purity, appeared in the form of various patterns, has been unconscious. Harsh environmental conditions,

rudimentary weaving techniques and tools, simple weaving maps and time pressure during seasonal migrations are all factors pushing the nomadic Persian weavers to represent his/her mentality as simple as possible”, such abstraction and purity in form seems to be inevitably rooted in technical limitations” (Ebrahimi Naghani, 2014: 28). One of the key reasons for popularity of nomadic hand-woven objects is their simplicity. “One of the salient features of contemporary art, simplicity, is deep-rooted in Persian art as well. It is, by the sake of analogy, very similar to lexical brevity applied in mystic literature” (Gholam Hussein, 2010: 131). At the same time, the points of view of certain researchers on the rationale behind the abstraction seem to be far from reality. The present study aims to reveal the root(s) of simple abstract patterns in nomadic Persian hand-woven objects. To do so, the author first examined the views of three researchers who have studied hand-woven objects including Persian carpets. Then, the author by conducting interviews examined the answers of thirty nomadic persons, living in Cheshme Rahaman and Gol Afshan regions, at southern Isfahan. The main questions were about the nature of abstraction in the patterns of hand-woven objects, by Ghashghaie tribes in particular. Finally, the author evaluated the extent of which the answers obtained were in line with the opinions of the three researchers. Moreover, in the process of gathering data, Ghashghaie hand-woven objects were classified systematically in terms of function and weaving techniques.

Production factors

The factors involving in the process of producing Ghashghaie hand-woven objects include wool spinning, weaving, dyeing and designing each of which consists of several parts. For example, the wool strands can be spun thinly, thickly, loosely or tightly. Similarly, weaving process includes fixing wrap threads on a loom, stretching, knotting, hitting and finally finishing the weft threads. Dyeing consists of coloring the threads and color arrangement, that is, setting the colored threads according to the carpet

map (Fig. 1).

Classification in terms of function and weaving techniques

Nomadic hand-woven objects in Iran are potentially rich enough, from different aspects, that they can be studied in a wide variety of fields such as anthropology, semiotics, psychology, sociology, aesthetics, etc. In this study, Ghashghaie hand-woven objects were studied and classified in terms of function and weaving techniques.

A) Function

Ghashghaie hand-woven objects were woven in the past especially to be used functionally. Nowadays, however, the function has shifted to some extent. Although, nomadic weavers rely on their taste and intuition, they also keep in mind the functional purposes and durability of the hand-woven objects. In fact, the harsh environments in which the nomads live in necessitate a kind of durable covering. Nomadic hand-woven objects, and Ghashghaie ones in particular, are of three main kinds: bags, ground coverings and blankets each of which can be further

grouped (Fig. 2).

B) Weaving techniques

A major factor based on which nomadic hand-woven objects can be categorized is weaving techniques. The objects have a wide variety of forms from the aspects of function and weaving technique. Different kinds of weaving techniques and structures have been shown in Diagram 1. What shown in Diagram 2 covers nearly all kinds of Ghashghaie hand-woven objects in terms of weaving techniques which include the following kinds:

1. Fluffy (full-round woven, semi-round woven and evenly woven).
2. Wefty (evenly loosely woven and evenly tightly woven).
3. Twisted woven.
4. Mixed woven (A combination of the mentioned three techniques).

The relationship between the patterns and weaving techniques

Wolf (1993) believes that “through studying the weaving techniques in a civilization, other technical

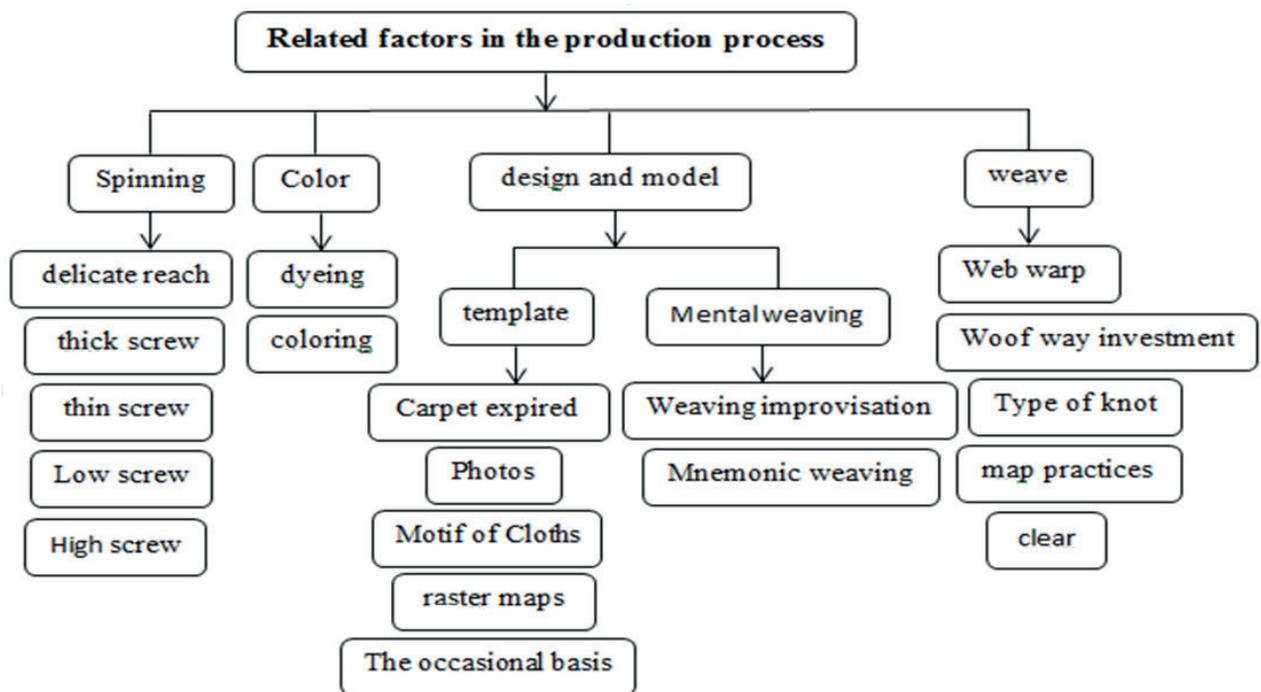


Diagram 1. Related factors in the production process Woven by Qashqai. Source: authors.

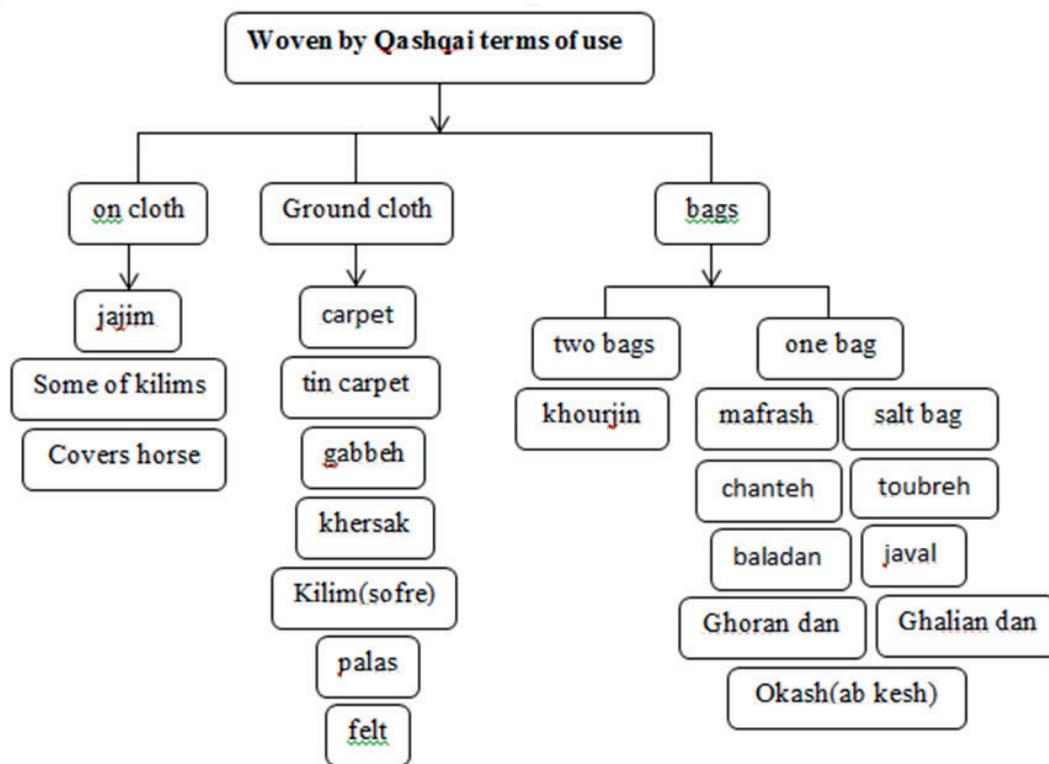


Diagram 2. Classification woven by qashqai terms of use.

Source: authors.

and artistic activities and, probably, economic, political and spiritual attitudes can be understood better". Weaving techniques dictate how weft and wrap strands are structurally get involved through each other on a loom creating different forms and functions. In each hand-woven object, two key elements are important: the technique of weaving background and the technique of creating patterns. For example, in Rened, the background is woven in the form of Jajim and the pattern is created through twisting weft threads around wraps. In certain hand-woven objects, the background and the patterns may look as a single-color hand-woven (Table 1). Both in terms of function and weaving techniques, Ghashghaie hand-woven objects enjoy beauty, identity and a wide variety. The outward appearance of the hand-woven objects, that is, softness, coarseness and thickness, all depends on weaving techniques. The form of the patterns and designs is a function of weaving techniques without which no pattern or design, even in its simplest form, would be possible. In brief, there

is a close relationship between the pattern, function and weaving technique. For instance, slight changes in the location of wrap and weft threads to each other result in various kinds of hand-woven objects such as simple Gelim (with shared weft or wrap threads), Poud Aviz (literally, hanging weft-woven), Charkh, Pelas, Oie, Shesh-dar-Mah and Morrakab Bafi (a kind of Jajim) (Diagram 1). Function and weaving techniques determine the intended characteristics like durability, lightness (or heaviness), softness and coarseness. For example, softness and comfort are the basic features for coverings to sit and rest on, the examples of which are fluffy carpets and Gabbeh. It should be mentioned that nomads do not any longer use some of the hand-woven objects. What has been shown graphically in table 2 is based on hand-woven objects available now.

Abstraction in patterns of nomadic hand-woven objects

In main nomadic hand-woven objects, including

weft-based objects (Gelims), wrap-based (Jajims) and twisted-woven objects (coverings with needle-like texture), the general form of the patterns is geometric. The patterns can be divided into two general groups: A) abstraction and B) subjectivity reflecting the visual awareness or pure aesthetics tastes of the weaver.

A) Abstract patterns

Abstraction may be defined as the quality of dealing with ideas rather than events. 20th century artists used the term in art to connote “freedom from naturalism, simplified natural elements, arrangement of dissimilar elements in a non-representational way” (Pakbaz, 1999: 652-653). The salient feature of abstract patterns is “turning the kinetic quality of the visual event into basic visual variables focusing on message-transfer tools as immediate, exiting or even primitive as possible” (Dondis, 2001: 103). Interestingly, nomadic weavers are aware of this quite intuitively and implicitly; what they do in principle is turning the simplest available shapes into visually active forces. Even if they intend to convey a message, they do so, as Collingwood puts it, quite creatively and not through a calculated plan as presented in magic or entertainment art. “Such patterns commonly seen in Ghashghaie hand-woven objects, are rooted in the weavers’ attitudes towards the natural shapes, as filtered in their mind. Nomadic weavers do their best to reach a visually workable balance and to come close to visual purity (Ebrahimi Naghani, 2014). In the process of creating abstract patterns, the nomadic weaver tries to simplify a pattern as much as possible. For example, the pattern of a peacock, hen, rooster or a duck is depicted through minimum visual reality in a way that the general structure of

the bird or animal is readily recognizable (Fig. 1) so that the original resemblance between such patterns and the object, an animal or whatever, in the external world is kept.

B) Subjectivity

“Sometimes nomadic weavers extract their own interpretation out of natural events/things in a way that the represented picture is no longer similar to the original phenomenon in the external world. In such cases, the interpretation does not depict mere reality (Ebrahimi Naghani, 2014: 29). To nomadic weavers, subjectivity “is not mere the selective natural elements. But rather, it is a kind of creation which is free from symbolic concepts” (Ibid); (Fig. 2). For example, the pattern of Almagol- apple blossom- is not at all similar to real apple blossoms; or the pattern of a kohl holder is completely different from its real correspondence.

It should be, of course, noted that referring the nomadic hand-woven objects as abstract or subjective is the terms that the authors has used to describe his study; the weaver may accept or reject such interpretations and/or definitions.

Factors creating abstraction or subjectivity

The subjective patterns represented in nomadic hand-woven objects, usually in the form of geometric shapes, seem to have a historical or even prehistoric background. Most probably, the origin of these objects is the patterns painted on the clay objects used in ancient civilizations in Persia. Nonetheless, there are different views on the origin of these patterns. Most of the researchers studying the nomadic hand-woven objects have not asserted their opinions on the origin of the patterns. Often they have taken the



Fig. 1. Abstract motif (roosters and dogs) , Part of a Qashqai carpet. Source: authors.



Fig. 2. Subjective motifs: Almagol(Apple blossom), Sormedan and Alaghord(gray wolf). Source: authors.

origin of the patterns for granted and attributed it to technical limitation. From the other hand, some believe that the intended patterns are rooted in other factors. The author tried to examine the views of the latter group. First, the views of three outstanding researchers in the field of carpet and weaving studies were reviewed. Then, based on field studies and interviews conducted with nomadic weavers, as the most immediate and reliable source/creators, data were gathered. Finally, in order to reach a sensible conclusion, the two source of information, were compared with each other.

Researchers' views

Researchers working on carpet and nomadic hand-woven objects have mentioned various perspectives for the origin of abstraction, subjectivity as well as the simplicity of the presented patterns. In this respect, the views of three famous researchers, Parviz Tanavali, Armen Hangeldin and Cecil Edwards, are reviewed here.

Parviz Tanavali's views

In nomadic hand-woven objects, especially in Sheeri carpets and Fars Gabbehs, tradition has been broken; the weavers have tried to express their feelings to whom they've woven the carpet in a quite personal way.

Since the nomadic women had no access to old books or to other art sources to be able to copy the picture of a lion, for example, the forms, gestures and all decorative details of a lion represented are all imaginary.

... Since the nomadic weavers inclined to depict symbols, the physical reality of natural things have not been of concern to them. For instance, a lion has been the source of power, masculinity and courage to them. Therefore, they have represented a lion as they visualize it in a way that it could convey the attribute of courage. That is why it has been represented in the form of beasts, demons or even humans.

The combination of a lion's head and a man's body, incarnated skillfully, implies the weaver's elevated

imaginations and dexterity to represent it. In fact, the weaver could manage to represent an imaginary lion just to show her ideals and dreams.

Armen Hangeldin's Views

The prohibition imposed by Islam on the artists, pushed them into creating forms and shapes as simple and purified as possible. This exculpated them from the accusation of idolatry and temptation to rival God- the creator of all things.

The abstract and geometric patterns connote the primitive level of the civilization creating them.

The origin of geometric and abstract patterns has been religious beliefs.

The patterns of Ghashghaie hand-woven objects are inspired by nomadic life meeting daily needs.

The patterns of Ghashghaie hand-woven objects are symbolic.

...these patterns have been created thank to the weavers' power of imagination.

...the patterns are outcome of artistic taste of its creator or, perhaps, of the technique itself.

Cecil Edwards' Views

The patterns of Ghashghaie hand-woven objects, characterized by purity and delicacy, are inspired by love for nature.

The reason for existence of broken patterns and designs in Ghashghaie hand-woven objects is that the weavers were not skilful enough and that there was not a complete weaving map.

The difference between broken and curved patterns has not been out of coincidence. Rather, it has been inevitable. Nomadic hand-woven objects are always woven with linear patterns. Because weaving such patterns needs no special expertise. Moreover, it is not necessary to have a plan in advance.

Weaving curved patterns, unlike linear ones, needs an exact plan in advance. Furthermore, only highly skilful weavers are able to weave curved patterns.

Adoption of patterns in the form of spiral motifs or heavenly birds from other countries should not be interpreted as having spiritual or mystic concepts.

The reason has been simply for pleasant feeling they could convey. The weavers have been in pursuit of visual pleasure through symmetry and nothing more. During the years I was in Iran, I heard no reference to symbolism or mythology in relation to Persian carpets.

The ideas of the mentioned researchers on the rationale behind the abstraction and subjectivity of nomadic hand-woven objects have been summarized in table 1. The ideas include such issues as symbolism, imagination and feeling, taste, escaping from being accused of idolatry and of rivaling god, not being skilful enough, and not having an exact weaving map. Each of the reasons stated is certainly defensible by the researchers. Nonetheless, in order to accept or reject such reasons, the best solution seemed to conduct field studies. Accordingly, the responses of the weavers, themselves, were elicited through asking seemingly simple, but deep, questions. To do so, the author interviewed the nomad weavers on two basic questions.

Methodology

The target population of the study was a group including 30 nomadic weavers living in Cheshme Rahaman and Gol Afshan regions. In terms of educational background, one person had a high school diploma; one person had a license of 3rd Grade in pre-high school, eleven persons had license of 5th Grade in primary school and the rest were illiterate. In terms of age, eight persons were between 40-60 years old; four persons were between 20-30 years old and nineteen persons between 30-40 years old (Table 3).

The two basic questions the participants were asked included:

1. Why the patterns of birds and animals you weave are in broken or abstract form?

2. Do you prefer to weave based on a map or to weave from memory? Why?

The examination of the answers to the mentioned questions could reveal to what extent the opinions of the three researchers were close to reality. In other words, it could be evaluated that whether the opinions stated were mere personal interpretations or were rooted in reality.

The analysis of the respondents' answers

With regard the first question, twenty-two persons said that they had no access to a weaving map. Similarly, eight persons stated that the natures of weaving techniques dictated the pattern forms they wove. In addition, two persons simply said that they had no enough mastery over weaving techniques.

Concerning the second question, thirteen respondents were more inclined to weave subjectively/intuitively. Ten respondents preferred to weave based on a map. Also, for seven persons the weaving quality was much more important than the patterns and/or weaving techniques so that the final product could be sold more easily. At the same time, all three groups preferred the natural patterns to abstract and/or subjective ones. Moreover, with regard the question why they weave without a map, the answers included cases such as because "it is habitual" or "it is easier and faster this way" or "the patterns would be nicer this way". Given the nature of responses to the second question, the author believes that the respondents, in general, inclined to both subjective patterns as well as map-based patterns. It is worth mentioning that those Persian nomads who settled somewhere (rather than doing seasonal migration), weave their hand-woven objects, especially Gabbeh, based on a weaving map.

Table 1: kinds of weavings, Field techniques And factors of production motif(Source: authors)

Production of the motif	Background	The type of woven and techniques	
Tie	Fluffy (knotted)	Tissue of full tight	
tie	Fluffy (knotted)	Tissue of half tight	
tie	tissue of flat , sleazy of woof and firm of woof	flat weaveloose of woof & firm of woof	
woof	Tissue of woof	Simple products(font or step)	
woof	Tissue of woof	loop	
woof	Tissue of woof	Pendant of woof	
warp	Tissue of jajim	jajim	
warp (four koji)	Tissue of burlap	Plus	
warp (two tissue layers)	Tissue of burlap	oeey	
warp	Tissue of burlap	Shesh derme	
warp (four koji)	Tissue of jajim	Jajim tissue of compound	
woof	woof winding	Dawreh chin (Tissue of inverse)	
Woof and warp	Combined, jajim and tissue of twist	rend	rend
woof of wrest	twist of woof motif and background of tissue of jajim	Jajim gol	
woof of wrest	full of woof tissue of screw	Sibama	
tie	motif of tie and background tissue of jajim	torkmen naghsh(ghali bori)	
Pendant of woof	tissue of burlap	gachme	

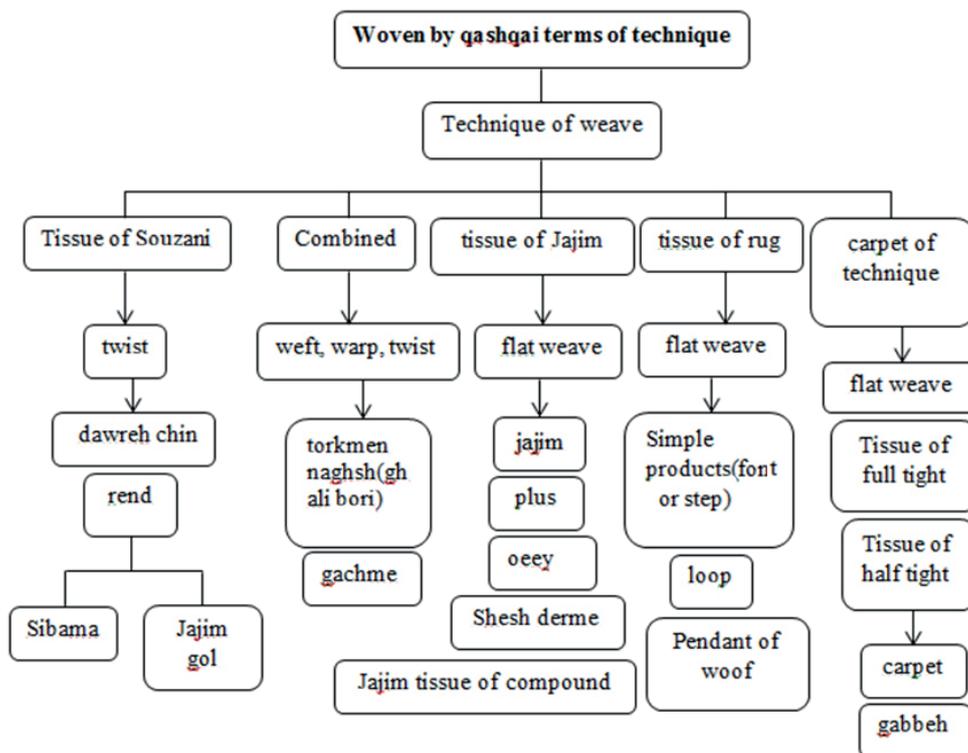
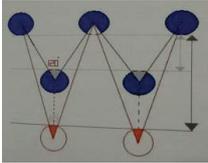
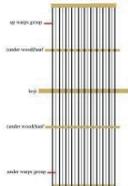
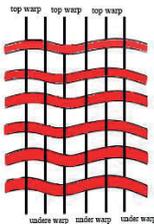
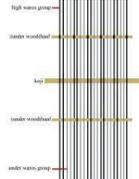
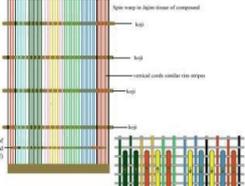
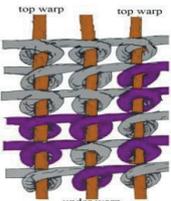
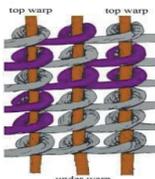
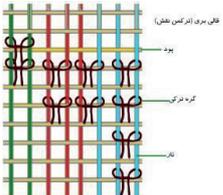


Diagram 3. Woven by qashqai terms of technique. Source: authors.

Table 2. The main structure some tissue techniques in woven of qashqai that still exist. Source: authors.

Structure Carpet of Technique (nappy)			
Symmetric and Asymmetric tie	angle warps in flat tight	angle warps in half tight	 <p>angle warps in full tight</p>
Structure Tissue of rug			
Kilim Pendant of woof	kilim with common woof	Kilim with common tar	Simple kilim
Structure Tissue of Jajim			
 <p>Shesh derme</p>	 <p>Plas</p>	 <p>oyee</p>	 <p>Jajim tissue of compound</p>
Structure Tissue of Souzani			
Jajim gol Jajim gol	 <p>Sibama</p>	 <p>Dawreh chin</p>	Rend
Structure Combined			
	Gachme		

Conclousion

The nature of responses obtained from the interviews with nomadic weavers (concerning the preference of abstract and/or subjective patterns to other ones) indicated that such responses are in contradiction to the views posed from the researches cited in the study. In fact, the researchers have tried to express their own interpretations without taking into account technical aspects and tangible reasons. Among the three researchers, only Armen Hangeldin has pointed out in his book, very briefly and tentatively, that “the patterns might be woven, inevitably, under influence of the weaving technique”. In a sense, it can be said that the patterns have been woven out of necessity and not out of selection. In addition, the views of the researchers, with exception of Hangeldin’s uncertain comment, seem to be far from the reality of the patterns in terms of shape and character. The factors why the nomadic weavers have applied abstract, subjective and/or geometric patterns may include having no access to weaving maps as well as weaving techniques. Interestingly, the views of the weavers, themselves, were mainly different from those of the researchers cited. This implies that expressing views on artistic fields, especially in the field of hand-woven object, demands considerations of different aspects, the most important of which is investigation in the real living conditions of the nomads. Otherwise, the judgments would be subjective.

1) Armen Hangeldin

2) Since the nomadic weavers were not familiar with technical terms such abstract and/or subjective, the questions were simply as “Why do you weave the patterns of birds or animals in the way you do?” Although the questions might seem simple, the nature of responses were quite important (Diagram 3).

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