

## The History of Three Rare Exhibits from the Azerbaijan Carpet Museum's Collection

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### Abstract:

Costume plays a huge role in the study of the cultural and social history of a people. It forms an important component of material and spiritual culture, as well as a social code that determines self-identification for particular people.

In all nations and at all times, traditions that are associated with weddings and funerals are consistent and concentrate key spiritual and philosophical beliefs. There are three unique exhibits from the Azerbaijan Carpet Museum collection that date from the beginning and the middle of the nineteenth century – a *doshluk* (pinafore), a *chutgu* (a hair pouch), and *elchek* (decoration for the back of the hand) embroidered with gold plates from the Sheki-Zagatala region of Azerbaijan – and pertain to the mysteries of the wedding ceremony. Traditional Azerbaijani weddings comprise a whole system of rituals, following in strict order one after another. This tradition has evolved over centuries, and in each region of the country is characterized by distinctive features.

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## Introduction

Costume plays a huge role in the study of the cultural and social history of a people. It forms an important component of material and spiritual culture, as well as a social code that determines self-identification for particular people. Studying individual elements of costume – its purpose, role, and various decorations – reveals the most interesting layers of traditional culture that has been lost, forgotten, or ceased to be a part of our lives.

The Azerbaijan Carpet Museum was established in 1967, and became one of the world's uniquely specialized museums, where the carpets and carpet products of Azerbaijan were collected, stored, exhibited, and studied. The museum was also furnished with other items of material culture, including a fascinating collection of national costumes.

This article is about three rare exhibits from the collection that date from the beginning and the middle of the nineteenth century. These are a *doshluk* (pinafore), a *chutgu* (hair pouch), and an *elchek* (decoration for the back of the hand) embroidered with gold plates from the Sheki-Zagatala region of Azerbaijan.

Studying the purpose of these items, their origin, and their usage in daily life, uncovered curious facts that relate to deep beliefs that are reflected in the rituals where these costume items played an important role.

Each object pertains to the mysteries of the wedding ceremony. In all nations and at all times, traditions that are associated with weddings and funerals are consistent and concentrate key spiritual and philosophical beliefs. Traditional Azerbaijani weddings comprise a whole system of rituals, following in strict order one after another. This tradition has evolved over centuries, and in each region of the country is characterized by distinctive features. The choice of a bride, matchmaking and engagement, the number of ceremonies prior to the wedding, the wedding itself – these are the main events in the social life of our people. A wedding is the key social event that promotes the consociation and interaction of families, and strengthens friendly, neighborly, and kinship relations. This ultimately plays an important

role in society's development, by preserving spiritual values, strengthening material well-being, and encouraging procreation.

All wedding ceremonies were traditionally associated with the bride, evoking an image of her vestal purity and physical and spiritual beauty. During the long matchmaking period, all the details related to the bride's character and talents (in the fields of cooking and handicrafts), together with the entire family's spiritual state and relationships between relatives, were revealed and clarified, so that later there were no surprises and the family was strong and friendly.

The desired virtues of the bride were virginity, youth, health, diligence, and a kind disposition.

### ***Khinayakhdi* Ceremony**

*Khinayakhdi* (the literal translation is "henna smearing") is a beautiful ceremony, preceding the wedding day and the bride's move to the groom's house, and is actually a women's wedding. It is believed that it is precisely this ceremony that adumbrates the marriage of the girl. Since ancient times (this ceremony goes back to the pre-Islamic era), henna has been considered to be endowed with magical properties: it protected from the evil eye and evil forces. Therefore, in order to protect the young bride from the evil eye, the bride's hands, feet, and hair were smeared with henna as the main conductor of energy. Red-colored henna was a talisman and considered sacred. Red was the symbol of the Sun and the color of the cleansing and sacred fire. According to belief, red protects from the evil eye and gives vital energy. Therefore, henna is the principal element in wedding ceremonies.

The bride's costume is red and all other attributes also have to be of this color or have some element of red. The closest female relatives of the bride and groom, female neighbors, and female friends gather in the bride's house, where the table is set, merry songs are sung, and a good mood is sustained through dance. The groom's female relatives come with beautifully decorated trays, on which are displayed presents. One of the trays bears henna, candles, and different sweets, which are tied with red ribbons. The mother-in-law and the bride are considered to be the center of attention within this celebration. The mother-in-law presents precious gifts to her future daughter-in-law, showing them to participants. She puts gold jewelry on the bride, expressing good wishes. The well-dressed bride is seated in the center of a festively decorated room; guests dance and sing around her, and wish her happiness and fertility. After the celebration, the woman who will accompany the bride to the groom's house (*yenga*) performs the ceremony – one of the stages of initiation – smearing the bride's hands and feet with warm henna. Traditionally, no patterns were made; the main thing is the smearing of the skin and hair. The coppery hue of henna, glowing in the sun, determines the girl's status. She becomes elected to wifehood, differing from her unmarried female friends because only married women can color their hair.

### ***Elchek* (decoration for the back of the hand) – symbolic attribute of a *khinayakhdi* ceremony**

In order to protect the outfit from the smeared hands, she wears beautifully embroidered hand decoration, usually in a spherical shape. The form is not accidental: it symbolizes the sun, which is emphasized by the long fringe of gilded threads that surround the garment. At the wrist was a golden rim, to which braids are attached. An example comes from an exhibit from the museum's collection (fig. 1). Traditional ornamental motifs are embroidered on maroon velvet in the technique of goldwork embroidery and *zaranduz*. In front of us is a stylized image of the tree of life, which was embroidered with goldwork embroidery, around which were sewn gold plates made in the stamping technique, in the form of a shamrock – a symbol of fertility – and zigzag, floral, and astral motifs. A fluffy fringe of gold threads completes the mittens' rich decoration.



Fig. 1:  
Gloves. Sheki, Azerbaijan, XIX century. Fabric velvet, golden embroidery, zaranduz, ACM Inv.

It is clear that all the decorative elements and the shape of the product are interrelated and not accidental; they are based on ancient religious mythological ideas and beliefs. After this ceremony, the girl begins to be called “the bride,” and the young man, “the bridegroom.”

### **Chutgu as an element of a wedding tradition**

The culmination of all the rituals occurring over several months is the wedding day, when the girl enters a new phase of her life, forever saying goodbye to a maiden's innocence. One of the symbols of virginity is long hair, which at all times has had a sacred character. According to beliefs, hair covers women's hidden magical power and is the focus of their internal energy. Hair was thought to arouse passion, and thus must be hidden: a woman was supposed to cover her head. If her hair fell into the hands of a foe, the person could be spoiled. So fallen hair had to be safely hidden, discarded, or buried. Cut hair was a disgrace to the whole family; therefore, as a token of vengeance, foes could kidnap a girl, cut her hair, and safely bring her back, nevertheless inflicting an indelible disgrace on her house. Girls had to weave their hair in braids and not cut them until marriage.

On her wedding day, one of the most important rituals of a bride's preparation was her haircut. In the morning, relatives, female friends, and neighbors were invited to the bride's house, where everyone bustled around the bride, dressing her, and waiting for the woman who would undo the braids, trim her bangs, and create a new hairstyle, like a married woman, before she entered into the groom's house. It was also necessary to unravel all of the bride's things. They were straightened, and the elegant *bokhcha* was untied (a square piece of knotted beautiful cloth containing collected presents to the bride from the groom's house), so that her fate was opened; her way of life was without obstacles. For her haircut only new scissors were used, which a woman would buy from someone within the bride's family. The ritual of the virgin's haircut was part of the ritual of initiation, the deprivation of one of the signs of purity. In fact, hair marks a fine line between spiritual innocence and physical maturity. A woman's social status was determined by her hair.

Taking the front strand of hair, the woman would cut a long bang, expressing good wishes, while the bride shed tears of innocence. Dividing the bangs exactly in the middle, symmetrically on the sides of the woman's face, gave her hair the shape of a spiral or horns, which symbolized fertility. A few cut strands of hair were sewn into the bride's dowry – the groom's pillow, the woolen mattress, and the blanket – so that the girl's energy would tie the groom to her forever.

From the remaining hair a hairstyle was created and collected in a small pouch: a *chutgu*. An amazing fact confirmed by archaeological excavations in Azerbaijan is the tradition of hiding hair from prying eyes, which goes back to the pre-monotheistic epoch. Metal tubes of different thickness were found in the burial place in Mingechaur, in which women hid their braids.



Fig. 2:  
*Chutgu* (textile pouch for hair). Sheki, Azerbaijan. XIX century. Fabric silk, cotton. 24,5x37 cm.  
ACM Inv. DDK-2310.

The *chutgu* could be from 10 to 40 cm, and was sewn in the form of an elongated pouch, one part of which remained open, where the hair was dropped and the ribbons were tightened either under the chin or on the back of the head. An example is the museum's exhibit (fig. 2). The 37 cm long object is sewn from three fabrics: Russian-made silk fabric (*zarhara*), a "coupon" from brocade fabric, and plain cotton fabric for the lining. The object's lower part is adorned with hand-twisted braids of black silk and gold threads (*garagaz*). Long ribbons are also made of black silk fabric; on one side is sewn a colored silk braid.

Often, a *chutgu* was sewn from silk or canvas. Rich families used satin, *darai* (delicate silk) and brocade, while poor families used print. Gold ornaments were sewn onto the front part of the velvet or taffeta wedding *chutgu*, which was covered by a red shawl sewn with gold thread. Thus, the bride was ready to enter a new life, and to embark upon her main mission: procreation. For this purpose, numerous rituals were performed and prayers were read, fulfilling exactly all the age-old canons.

### ***Doshluk* (pinafore) – part of a wedding dress**

Most of the wedding rituals, song lyrics, sayings, good wishes, and the bride's costume and its ornaments, were related to one dominant wish: fertility, the appearance of healthy offspring. The wedding costume, depending on the region and the financial situation of the family, was bright and richly decorated. In wealthy families, it consisted of a silk shirt; up to eight lower skirts and an upper skirt sewn from expensive fabric; the upper shoulder clothing called *arhalyg*, sewn from expensive dense fabric – velvet, brocade, and thin woolen fabric; and a *termeh* (a thin hand-woven woolen or silk fabric) richly embroidered with golden threads, stones, and beads. One of the elements of the costume was the wedding pinafore – the *doshluk* (also called *meizar* *مِيزَر* = pinafore in Arabic) – which was sewn from expensive fabric and decorated with coins fastened with silver hooks to the side. The pinafore consisted of two parts — the upper part, covering the chest; and the lower part from the waist to the bottom, sewn to the upper one with a waistband. Unlike other types of pinafores, which were tied at the waist, passed through the head, and worn over everyday clothes, this one



had a pronounced festive and ritual purpose. According to one explanation, this type of pinafore was worn at the moment when the bride entered the groom's house as the mistress of the house. The coin jewelry was also intentional, for it promised wealth and prosperity to the house. The collection of the museum contains a pinafore made of Russian dark purple brocade with large floral ornaments that are sewn with silk and golden threads; a chintz serves as a lining (fig. 3). The fabrics date from the second half of the nineteenth century, while the chain, which holds Russian coins of 1861, refers to the first half of the nineteenth century.



Fig. 3:  
Apron, Shirvan, Azerbaijan, XIX century Fabric brocade, cotton Silver coins 96x53 cm. ACM Inv. DDK-9449.

## Conclusion

These small exhibits eloquently tell us about the amazing pages of our history, and reveal the layers of ancient culture that are preserved in rituals, in the wisdom of the people, conveying the true knowledge of the laws of the universe. These laws determine spiritual and moral values, and cultural and philosophical traditions that are based on creation, love, and harmony.