

Woven into many Central Asian rugs are ancient shamanic concepts such as the Tree of Souls

# TREES ALIVE WITH BIRDS

Nicholas Breeze Wood  
looks at the beauty,  
mystery and folklore of  
Central Asian carpets



Beautiful woollen rugs are one of the greatest folk arts of Central Asia. Remnants of handmade carpets have been found preserved in graves as old as 400 BCE, and rugs and carpets from these regions have been traded across the world for many centuries. In medieval Europe they were the possessions of kings, brought back by merchants who travelled the fabled silk road to China. They were so costly that they were put onto tables or hung on walls, no one would ever think of putting them on the floor.

The weavers of Central Asia not only made rugs to use on the floors of their houses and yurts, but also made carpet bags for the storage of clothes, bedding and personal items, harnesses and saddle bags for horses and camels, beautiful door hangings and decorations for yurts and many other decorative and yet practical items.

Like all traditional societies who decorate items of practical use, the patterns used pass from generation to generation, storing and transferring information on the cosmology and folklore of the people who make them.

Rugs are generally made of wool, originally coloured with plant dyes, although now chemical dyes have become much more dominant. They can take a skilled weaver several weeks to make, or even months on a large carpet.

They are made by stretching a series of cords (warps) on a frame, and then knotting short pieces of wool on to these warps; these knots are then all trimmed to an even length to produce the *pile*.

The weaving of rugs in all of these Central Asian cultures is part of the women's traditions. They are the keepers of the knowledge of pattern, and of the plants to use to dye the wool, and this knowledge is passed on from mother to daughter. Because of the female nature of the tradition, ancient symbols of fertility and rebirth are some of the major themes.

Some rugs can be read almost as sacred texts if you know what to look for, and even modern ones retain many of the ancient features and symbols. This links the original Turkic tribes of Central Asia to their widespread Islamic descendants.

## FROM THE SHAMANS' LANDS

Naturally we think of the Turkish people as coming from modern-day Turkey, but their true origin is actually in Central Asia, and even the modern Turkish language has its roots in the *altaic* language family. This *altaic* root has slowly developed into around sixty different languages, spoken by some 350 million people, mostly in Central and Northeast Asia, including Mongolia and the Tungusic tribes of Siberia. Altaic may well be a possible root language of Korean and Japanese as well.

Central Asia and Siberia are a major world cradle of shamanic traditions, and of course Siberia is where the actual word 'shaman' comes from. Many of the ancient traditions still exist in these lands,

but elsewhere the shamanic traditions have been layered



Yomut girls weaving  
a rug (Iran)







Left: modern Afghan 'war rug'

Top right: Central Asian rug in painting 'Husband and Wife,' Lorenzo Lotto (1480-1556)

Centre right: modern day Baluch prayer rug with a tree of life design

Bottom right: fragment of carpet from a frozen Pazyryk tomb of a female shaman (400BCE)

Bottom left: a shaman's tree bedecked with offering scarfs in Tuva

over by more recent spiritual ways such as Islam.

Of course when a culture changes, develops and takes on new sacred traditions, the old sacred traditions tend to blend and remain part of the folk ways of the people. We see this with Christianity: maypoles, well-dressing, clootie trees, morris men, and even hot cross buns are all far older than Christianity.

Rugs labelled in the West 'Turkish' or 'Persian' actually come from a very large geographic area which includes Turkmenistan, Iran, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Mongolia, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan.

Many of these rugs share styles of decoration that are quite similar. They are often mainly red, with areas of dark blue and white or cream, and with pale green or other coloured highlights. Fresh colours are always sought after by the weavers. For example, I have an Afghan storage bag made in the late 1970's when bright fluorescent socks were all the rage. In the middle of a dark red traditional design, there is a bright flash of vivid pink and another of lemon yellow.

Traditional designs are mostly geometric, while some of them are naturalistic to some degree or another. Some rug designs reflect contemporary culture: since the Soviet, and more recent American invasions of Afghanistan, there has been the emergence of the 'war rug', designs showing repeated patterns of tanks, Kalashnikov AK-47 assault rifles and helicopters.

### THE TREE OF SOULS

The sacred Tree of Life, which sits at the centre of the world, is a major theme in many shamanic cultures and is also found extensively in rug design. This tree connects the three worlds of the shaman's cosmos, the Lower, Middle and Upper Worlds; in many cultures the souls of the unborn and those of shamans sit on its branches like birds and wait for physical existence.

A beautiful example of this tree alive with birds was found in the Altai mountains of Southern



Siberia in 1993. In a frozen C5th BCE Pazyryk tomb a well-preserved body of a woman was discovered, who became known as 'the Ice Maiden.' She had beautiful tattoos and was dressed in wonderful silk robes, the colours of the three worlds: red, amber and sky blue. On her head was a tall headress in the shape of the tree of life, hung with many small golden birds which would have softly rocked and swayed as she walked. Also in the tomb was a 2,500-year-old







**Above:** 18th century camel decoration (Tekke tribe - Turkmenistan)

**Bottom:** aerial coffin in a sky grave amid trees (early C20th Yakut tribe - Siberia)

carpet (see photo below) with intricate designs of animals and horse riders.

In many Central Asian cultures, epic tales, some over half a million lines of poetry long, taking weeks to recite by heart, are centered around the Tree of Life. In these tales, major battles and great loves are won and lost under the great tree. It is not surprising therefore that the tree symbol has appeared in Central Asian carpets for millennia.

The tree design is sometimes almost naturalistic, its branches crowded with symbolised birds, and in other carpets the tree design has become much more abstracted.

Not all Tree of Life carpets have birds, and not all birds appearing in carpets represent souls, some are just birds; but in either case, birds are seen as symbols of good luck.

Sacred trees still hold a place of great importance in the spiritual life of these people, even those that have lost their shamanic traditions to Islam. For instance, childless Turkish women will make a pilgrimage to a special tree, often growing in a lonely place near to a *mazar*, which is a sacred place connected to a local Moslem saint. At the tree, small models of cradles and dolls are tied to the branches as foci of intent for fertility. Childless Kazakh women also go to sacred trees which stand alone on the open steppes and offer the spirits there a sacrificed sheep.

Women of the Yakut, a Turkic speaking tribe in Siberia, have a tradition that a childless woman could conceive after spending a night under a larch-tree (a very sacred tree in many Siberian shamanic traditions).

Fruit trees, especially apple trees, play an important part in many Turkic fertility traditions. In the Kyrgyz epic story '*The Manas*', one woman remained childless for many years and explained it saying she 'neither went to a sacred place, nor lay down where an apple tree grew.'

The Uzbeks of Samarkand also have fruit trees as a symbol of fertility and in parts of Turkey, an apple branch is put in the room

where a woman is to give birth, to both protect the mother and baby, and bring blessings and luck.

### TREES OF LIFE AND DEATH

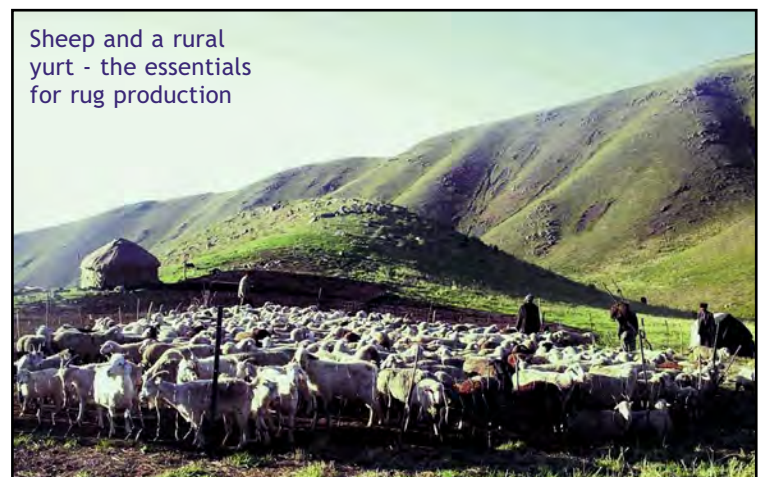
Just as the tree is a symbol of life in Central Asia, it is also a symbol that is closely related to death.

Small babies who are not old enough to have teeth are regarded in many Turkic cultures as being not fully incarnated, still belonging to the spirit world. A baby who died at this young age would be buried beside a tree, especially a fruit tree, so that its soul could enter the tree and wait as a bird on its branches for rebirth. In Siberia, Turkic tribes wrap dead babies in birch bark and hang them in the branches of trees to symbolise their return, and coffins containing the dead may be hung from the branches of trees, although this tradition is probably now extinct.

According to some Turkic traditions, a baby can still remember the tree on which its spirit sat in the shape of a bird waiting to be born.

Some Turkic tribes in Siberia perceive a sacred tie between each man and a tree - like a kind of umbilical cord. According to tradition, when an old tree dies, an old man has died somewhere; and when a young tree falls, a youth has died. After death, the soul returns to the soul tree. A related Kazak tradition holds that there is a tree in heaven, and every leaf of that tree represents someone on Earth.

Siberian myths tell about the creation of the 'shaman tree' by a spirit, who is, at the same time both a shaman himself, and a married couple who are a brother and a sister born from a tree. Stories of a married couple, the great-grandparents of humans, are widespread in Central Asia.



**Sheep and a rural yurt - the essentials for rug production**



## SACRIFICES TO THE TREES

Turkic people have many traditions of making sacrifices to spirits at trees. There is a tradition of horse sacrifice in Mongolia and Southern Siberia, where a horse is suspended from a tree or a pole representing the world tree. Historically the Huns of the Northern Caucasus mountains also sacrificed horses to sacred oak trees.

However, the practice of blood sacrifice gradually evolved to tying coloured streamers and cloth rags to trees, and even rugs were tied to them. The connection between life and death and trees is also reflected in the custom of tying rugs onto graves, making a direct link between tree and grave.

## ELEMENTS IN RUG DESIGNS

The tree of life is only one aspect of Central Asian rug design that has a direct link back to animism and shamanism. There are many other symbols that can be found in rug designs such as the swastika, the endless knot, animals like lions, birds of prey, snakes, dragons and double-headed eagles.

Carpets have often been seen as being protective and magical, a sort of amulet, and so representations of protective plants are woven into the design too. One such plant is burdock, which is associated with protection against the 'evil eye' in Turkey. Symbolic eyes are also put into rug designs, often simplified to a mere triangle, as eyes are seen as the best protection against the evil eye. Small glass, eye-like beads are commonly for sale in Turkey today as charms against the evil eye.

The cross of the four directions is another protective symbol that occurs often in carpets. Much less frequently, dragon carpets are found, which are seen as strong protection, and dragons are especially seen as guardians of the tree of life. When a dragon and a phoenix are found together in a carpet this symbolises fertility.

But perhaps the most intriguing design, which might link right back to the essence of shamanism, is a design element known as the *Turkoman gol*. Gols are small, roughly round or lozenge shaped designs that are found as a repeating pattern all over

some types of rugs, especially a rug often known as a *Bokhara*. The word *gol* in Mongolian shamanism means the essence, the core, the centre. It is the place of power at the centre of the universe. It is related to the word *gal* which means fire.

By focusing and getting in touch with the *gol*, Mongolian shamans gain great power and knowledge. The *gol* is outside of space-time; there is no past, present or future. It is the home of the spirits, it is the place that lies inside the shaman's mirror, the *gal golomt* is the axis mundi of the world, the tree of life that connects the three worlds.

To have a rug covered with *gol* is to have a rug that contains and amplifies the power of the tree of life, the very quintessential centre of creation, the heartspring of a shaman's power, a true flying carpet.

Nicholas Breeze Wood is the editor of Sacred Hoop Magazine and a self-confessed rugaholic, with a collection of around fifty carpets, rugs, tentbags, yurt hangings, horse trappings and other Central Asian textiles, big and small.

Nick@sacredhoop.org  
[www.3worlds.co.uk](http://www.3worlds.co.uk)



Top: detail of a dragon carpet (author's collection)

Right: Pazyryk golden belt buckle (400BCE)

Below: Turkoman 'Bokhara' carpet with repeated 'gol' design (C19th, Turkmenistan)

