International Labor and Working-Class History (2023), **103**, 103–125
doi:10.1017/S0147547923000194

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

SPECIAL FEATURE

Controlling Bazaar, Fighting Precarity, and Producing the Nation

Diana T. Kudaibergen

Department of Sociology, University of Cambridge, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
Email: dk406@cam.ac.uk

Abstract

This article focuses on production cycles of traditional embroidery making (*yaka*) in Turkmenistan. In Turkmenistan, *yaka* is a key element in the national dress for women's everyday wear and since the process of the embroidery making is often handmade, the distribution of yaka and the networks of producing and dealing this essential apparel offer a rich ethnographic context. The article focuses on the study of resellers and dealers who control the market flow and the precarious labor of those women who produce this highly valued handmade product in villages and households and then resell them at the major bazaar hubs in the central cities. At each stage, there is a quality, price and "tradition" control—whether the product adheres to the constructed but widely shared idea of the "national dress." These relations are also imbued with logics of the gendered economy of respect for work and mutual help given the precarious circumstances of each individual yaka-maker. Yaka-making is seen by many women as a way out of financial crises, but it becomes a cycle of precarity based on the trends, demands, and forms of the formal dress requirement in the state institutions to which female clients have to adhere to when choosing the product. What influences the market flows in trends, supply, and everyday profit? How do women regulate the market from within despite the growing precarity? Studying these internal power relations will help us reveal how cultural and social control stems from the precisely political and male domination and how the rules of the game in that field are guided by completely different gendered and labor principles on the ground.

Keywords: precarious labor; gendered economy; Turkmenistan; yaka; nationhood; national dress

Introduction

Tolkuchka[1] is the colloquial name for the Altyn Asyr bazaar, one of the biggest bazaars in Ashgabat. Set outside the center of the city, it serves as a meeting place for the myriad networks of sellers and buyers. The bazaar is open from the early morning hours from Thursday to Sunday when crowds of sellers and producers gather here, coming in groups from the nearest and farthest villages to sell their produce that varies from dried fruits and homemade salads, sauerkraut and bread to traditional embroidery (*yaka*) and the famous Turkmen carpets. Women are the central force in this market, albeit their networks, rules of conduct, and even price-setting policies remain largely informal and are embedded in the careful balance of the

© International Labor and Working-Class History, Inc., 2023. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547923000194 Published online by Cambridge University Press

local demand-supply logic and forms of respect and networks of solidarity. Women adapt to the formal rules of the micro- and macro-conditions of the bazaar, market and state regulations, and some traders also depend on the globalized networks of production, trade, visa regimes, foreign currency flows, and travel restrictions.[2] But their ability to navigate these complex relations through the set of collectively shared and binding codes of conduct is the key to the smooth operations of their dynamic economies.

Turkmenistan represents a unique post-socialist context for the study of gendered economies where the production and consumption of the traditional garments that the vast majority of women wear in the country remains within the domains of largely informal economic sphere. Women remain the main producers, service providers, and consumers in this market. They also drive the cycles of demand and supply in establishing the main trends in key sectors of fabric and embroidery sale. In this article, I focus on the very specific aspect of reselling yaka, the traditional Turkmen embroidery and its market. I focus on the case study and ethnographic work conducted in Ashgabat, the capital city of the country, and demonstrate the discussions solely within the limits of this case study.[3] In doing so, I attempt to reveal how female producers, traders, and consumers shape not only the production and consumption of this precious handmade produce in the consistent contexts of gendered precarity, but also how they influence the practice of the *Turkmençilik*—the dominant discourse of what it means to be Turkmen.

I argue that women use this state prerogative of Turkmençilik to sustain their markets and economies by virtue of moral authority over tradition and representation, but in doing so, their informal market rules allow for the consistent flow of production and consumption. This moral authority over the choice of the traditional motives in the production of *yaka* allows women to control the market through a widely accepted code of solidarity and mutual help, especially for those female producers in precarious positions, but also to avoid direct male involvement in shaping or changing the market logic. It does not mean that men are completely excluded from the trade of traditionally feminine garments—they can engage in the trade of fabric, for example, but finding a male trader of yaka is much harder.[4] And whilst the bazaar is technically within the domain of male power (policemen, rent-seekers, and other regulators), the inner logics of the bazaar itself is controlled by women who establish norms and informal rules of mutual help and respect among themselves. Women as producers and resellers of the traditional garments, embroidery, and other elements of traditional clothing seek their authority over the final product through the ideas of Turkmençilik.

Turkmençilik,[5] the discourse about the authentic or real Turkmen culture, one's dominant perceptions of how to operate within its cultural meaning and how to be Turkmen, is technically a matter of state ideology in Turkmenistan[6] though it remains an open discourse of its own and is open for diverse interpretations. It forms the type of regime of truth about the history of Turkmens and dominates the visual politics of everyday life and the identity of ordinary citizens. According to the state vision, women play a particularly important role in embodying Turkmençilik. Turkmen women wear traditional long Turkmen dresses decorated with yaka—the tie-like embroidery that distinguishes the form and meaning of the dress locally but also

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547923000194 Published online by Cambridge University Press

regionally. While this form of the traditional dress has a long history and women wore these types of dresses as early as the nineteenth century,[7] and with some modifications in the Soviet period as well, since 1991 independence, the traditional female Turkmen dress took an important turn as an obligatory dress code for women engaged in the public sector. The purpose of the traditional female Turkmen dress worn by female employees of state institutions and female students in schools and universities is to create a sense of conformity across the different societal groups by disciplining them within the regime's nationalizing perspective but also to distinguish Turkmen national and visual discourse from any competing discourses, e.g., from the globalized or religious discourses. This does not mean that all women have to abide by the strict dress code and there is a level of plurality when it comes to designs, fashion trends, and even placements of embroidery on other parts of the dress and body.[8] Many Turkmen women experiment with designing their dresses to resemble Western fashion trends and red carpet looks for the special occasions like attending weddings, improvised proms, birthday parties, and other major celebrations. The strict dress code mainly associates with those working, studying, or representing public institutions.

During my study, there was a great level of plurality in Ashgabat female fashion, but many women still preferred traditional long dresses for their everyday wear and did not consider it a sign of conservatism. Many used the choice of the fabric or the quality of the embroidery as well as their silky headscarves (traditionally worn by married women) to demonstrate their married status, class (often judged by the quality and price tag of the silk), and position in the society. The Turkmen headscarves worn by married women were also used to demonstrate their owners' beauty by revealing a hairline, neck, and ears, which is very contrary to the form of hijab also worn in Central Asia.[9]

My focus on female dress and cycles of its production is specified by one of the themes of my ethnography among the sellers and re-sellers of the embroidery and my own learning process in this sphere,[10] By making this focus specific, I only address one part of my fieldwork and the contribution it entails. It does not mean that men are not part of Turkmençilik or that they do not experience it in their daily lives. Men's engagement with Turkmençilik and the regime's vision of building a Turkmen nation is equally complex and very important. The scope of the present article strategically narrows my study to a specific part of the ethnography that focuses on female producers.

In this article, I focus on resellers and dealers of the traditional yaka embroidery and the ways these resellers work as a linking point between the consumers and producers of the highly valuable handmade traditional yaka embroidery (*el keshde*[11]). I then contrast them with the emergent designer studios in the final part of the article to demonstrate the divergent development and lack of solidarity in this new field. The producers remain important in this exchange but the discussion here is almost entirely relegated to the logics of the post-production trade—to the channels of distribution, pricing, and the way the logic of the markets change with the emergence of the design studios. The rise of the design studios that offer their clients a whole dress designed for them without the client's choice over the embroidery skips the intermediary stage of the yaka trade, which is crucial for yaka makers.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547923000194 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The market conditions for yaka production and resale remain in the terrain of the very informal and thus precarious market conditions. Very few of the yaka producers are protected by forms of insurance or subsidies in their labor conditions and largely depend on the flows of the consumer demands and fashion trends set by the market but also by certain groups of consumers and their financial capabilities. Yaka producers are not organized or institutionalized and mainly work with the dealers largely depending on them as their main access to the channels of distribution. This happens because most yaka producers cannot access the market themselves as it is costly, time-consuming and the vast majority of yaka producers also deal with the household and care work and do not have the capacity to trade at the bazaar themselves. The article centers on the yaka resellers and dealers to focus on the more organized (albeit still informal) networks of distribution and solidary that exist at the bazaar. I argue that these networks allow us to understand the working of the market logic itself and the grassroots production of Turkmençilik as the bazaar[12] becomes the prime space for economic exchange, value-production, and quality control for traditional embroidery. The dealers have the power to direct yaka producers to the demands of the consumers.[13]

In this article, I question what influences the market flows in trends, supply, and everyday profit. I also focus on the question of how do women regulate the market from within despite the growing precarity? What are the forms of internal networks of solidarity and market regulations they follow? My findings stem from the two-year-long ethnographic study I have conducted in Ashgabat from December 2016 to December 2018. My primary questions in this project were connected to the ways Turkmen women—consumers, fabric traders, and yaka dealers, producers of all types of traditional embroidery as well as tailors, seamstresses and designers—constructed the national order to which women and their long traditional dresses were the loci of power and meaning-making. My positionality as a fellow Central Asian but not an ethnic Turkmen created a specific setting for the ethnography. Most of the communication was done in Russian with inclusion of Turkmen language that I acquired over time.

While the article mainly contributes to the rather under-researched field of the Turkmen gendered economies and the politics of the national dress in this Central Asian country, it also contributes to the growing field of the informal economies and "politics of the bazaars"[14] and to the processes of *post-Soviet* nation-building.

The article develops in the following way. First, I situate the production of yaka and then place the Turkmen case within the literature on state- and nation-building to navigate how cultural and social control stems from the precisely political and (often male) domination, and how the rules of the game in that field are guided by completely different gendered and labor principles on the ground. In this discussion, I also turn to the logic of Turkmençilik and explain how this national order works and discuss Turkmen yaka market dynamics. Then I discuss the different power dynamics in the market guided by women's engagement in the field, their positions, and their value-based system that builds equally on the ideas of being a good Turkmen woman and on the ideas of solidarity in these highly risky, precarious, gendered economies.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547923000194 Published online by Cambridge University Press

State, Yaka, and Nationalizing the Regime in Turkmenistan

One of the initial questions anyone unfamiliar with the Turkmen and Central Asian context might ask is why do women in these states and societies decide to heavily rely on the informal markets of traditional clothing-making? Why is the public sphere dominated by the images and performances of the "traditional national dress" on the streets of Ashgabat or any major regions of the country and also in the neighboring states and borderlands (particularly in the borderlands within Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan)?

Turkmen women and their craftsmanship are famous for their exquisite sewing technique and consistent reproduction of traditional motives in clothing, even in the Soviet periods; there are detailed Soviet ethnographic studies on these practices.[15] When dealing with the post-1991 period and the development of the more contemporary stances of the national dress culture in Turkmenistan, I would stress two crucial points, namely the state ideology that tended to focus on more traditional values and engaging these deeply with the regime's nationalizing strategies; while, at the same time, the post-Soviet economic transition influenced the development of an informal economy. These two driving reasons for the sustained production and consumption of the traditional Turkmen female dresses are intertwined.

The collapse of the Soviet-planned economy and state-owned enterprises led to a vast economic crisis. Women were not entirely prioritized for the stable and institutionalized job market in the post-socialist societies[16] that remained largely culturally patriarchal, and thus focused more on male domination and employability, leaving many women seeking jobs in informal and service sectors.[17] Gendered informal economies and markets remained the prerogative for many women[18] who were searching for often creative forms of economic sustainability and survival. In Turkmenistan, these two tendencies coalesced in the consistent nationalization of the public sphere, where the "national" women were the core representatives of this national imagination,[19] and at the same time, these same women were the core players of the informal markets, where they produced these national garments and sustained their economic survival.

The paradoxes of the Turkmen case lie in the fact that the "state"—the web of institutions through which it "makes a decisive contribution to the production and reproduction of the instruments of construction of social reality"[20]—as well its prerogatives in nation-building remained largely male-dominated. After independence in 1991, Saparmyrat Niyazov, *Turkmenbashi*, the Leader of all Turkmens, invested heavily into the paternalistic-traditionalist narratives of Turkmen political and social realities. A nation-building "project in Turkmenistan has necessarily involved a search for real or constructed traditional practices. In order to conduct this search, and in true Soviet fashion of adding bureaucratic layers to the already cumbersome state apparatus, the National Revival Movement was launched in January 1994."[21] The National Revival Movement was comprised of regional administrative representatives, five governors of each region (*welayat*), all of them male, ministers and deputy ministers, "seven regional Imams" with president Saparmurat Niyazov as the Head of the Movement.[22]

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547923000194 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Under Turkmenbashi, the nation-building project became highly institutionalized and dependent on the loyalty to the president himself and his regime as the guiding principles of building the future Golden Era of all Turkmens (Altyn Asyr). This dominant idea of Altyn Asyr became the daily reminder that Turkmen citizens encountered in media, education, as mundane everyday practices while reading these messages on billboards or literally consuming this state ideology through the particular practice of even dressing according to these national traditions. Local shops, bazaars, and other institutions of quotidian life bore the name of Altyn Asyr as a constant reminder of the ways "quotidian practices, modalities, and habits" had to "reproduce the nation in daily life."[23]

According to the logic of this nationalizing regime of Niyazov, Altyn Asyr had to rest on the strict following of "ancient" traditions in order to connect contemporary Turkmens to their ancestors via these traditions. The aim of this ideology was to create a coherent and continuous understanding of Turkmen history, culture, and their place in the world, on the one hand, and to strengthen the rule of the Niyazov regime, on the other. Notably, the logic of constructing a highly male-dominated, traditionalist, nationalizing regime went hand in hand with a deep institutional nature of Niyazov's dictatorship that essentially paved the way to further autocratic tendencies of political development in this country after Niyazov's death while in office in 2006. This process of deep institutionalization and traditionalization of the Turkmen political field and consolidation of Niyazov's rule culminated with the 2001 introduction of *Ruhnama*—the holy book of all Turkmens solely authored by Niyazov himself. *Ruhnama* provided a solid base for the traditionalist-nationalist ideology and vision of the regime encapsulated in the understanding of Turkmençilik and even when the book itself became outdated and irrelevant, the uses of traditionalist values that it highlighted continued to flourish in post-Turkmenbashi era.

National dress is an object imbued with multiple meanings and values of national tradition, pride, history, authenticity, and, inevitably, national representation in Turkmenistan. Turkmenbashi defined the doctrine of the traditional female dress in *Ruhnama* in the following way:

> the Prophet Nukh (Noah) instilled in his [Turkmen] tribesmen a special sense of taste and measure, which was visibly embodied in the clothing of the Turkmens. For the reasons of beauty and convenience, he ordered all women—both young and old—to be dressed in long, spacious dresses, and their hair to be tied and covered with scarves. But he ordered for their faces to stay unveiled (Turkmenbashi 2005:13).

Ruhnama was withdrawn from the school curriculum after the death of Turkmenbashi the Great at the end of 2006. And while the book itself no longer plays the significant role if played before, some of the guiding principles of Turkmençilik, like the form of the national dress, continue to prevail. The new regime that took over from Niyazov continued to build on the Altyn Asyr program and the Turkmenification of the country. The use of the Turkmen national dress in televised events and all major public celebrations continued to take center stage, and a strict dress code following a specific understanding of what entails a "traditional

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547923000194 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Turkmen dress" was further propagated in each state institution—from primary schools to the Cabinet of Ministers.[24] The body of the citizen who wears the dress is more often than ever gendered and becomes a target for double domination—from the patriarchal, heteronormative values of the "national culture" (heavily propagated by the regime but also widely accepted on the micro levels by people in the community) to the dictatorial nationalizing regime.

In the multiplicity of state doctrines on the national dress and even more complex informal nodes of relations, shaming, fashion trends and global capitalism, class divisions, and the patriarchal pressures of beautification, women nevertheless, become powerful actors in shaping the form, meaning, and practice of making and wearing the *national* dress. They claim that power when they become the producers (embroidery masters and dealers, seamstresses, tailors, fabric dealers) of their own dresses and when they shape the cycles of production and logic of the fashionable items as well as controlling the logic of the relations, practices, and codes of conduct at the marketplace. Thus, controlling the bazaar as a symbolic space of interactions and production of fashion trends is as crucial as controlling the spaces of where the dresses are made—from the small collectives of seamstresses working together to the expensive boutiques and fashion studios selling the final product.

What is crucial about Niyazov's rule and era was that he managed to create the base of gendered economies, including the yaka-making market discussed in detail in this article and shaped these economies for years to come. Women account for 50.8 percent of the Turkmen population (just above 2.7 million of the total population in 2016) and traditionally (in accordance with the Soviet gendered economic logics) heavily occupy the education and healthcare sectors. In 2013–2014, women accounted for 40 percent of employees in "large and medium-sized enterprises," predominantly in education (38.7 percent share), healthcare (14.8 percent), and manufacturing (10.7 percent)[25] as well as in the large "entrepreneurial" and informal sector of services provisions like tailoring, craftsmanship, and informal beauty services (hair and nail salons). The latter part of the sector remains outside the official and publicly available statistical reporting.

The data I was able to collect demonstrated how attaining a craftsmanship skill—in tailoring or embroidery-making for traditional Turkmen dresses—was a shared value and an opportunity for many women as an "insurance" in case of unemployment in another sector. In other words, the state-provisioned dress code and promotion of traditional-nationalist values, where women in traditional clothing became the visual focal point for these values, created a large and informal sector for the producers of such traditional content and allowed many women to seek employment in these areas. Turkmençilik drove the regime's nationalizing agenda and created informal markets and gendered economies from traditional craftsmanship that, before 1991, remained largely a point of individual household consumption and production, but now became a form of a service provision.

Yaka resellers and dealers form a specific network among themselves where they distinguish prices and offerings according to each class niche and prefer not to compete with each other significantly in order to sustain the market opportunities for all. This allows for each dealer and reseller to have their own stable clientele and a range of consumers who can afford each niche. For example, there is a specific market

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547923000194 Published online by Cambridge University Press

hierarchy of the cheapest yaka (non-handmade[26]) that is used for the dresses worn at home and never in public, the mid-range price for a better quality handmade yaka, and several top-tier prices and dealers whose yaka is usually used to make the most expensive dresses for special occasions, e.g., a wedding, an official work event (*chare*) for women working in public institutions, or other important celebrations and events. It is rare to find a yaka dealer who offers all different price ranges because the market strictly separates these categories. This niche separation also distinguishes more stable dealers who can afford to have their own stalls at Tolkuchka and thus, form a more stable clientele for themselves and for more irregular resellers who have to find a way to sell their produce at the bazaar practically illegally. Yaka resellers were often subjected to harassment from the hands of the bazaar controlling groups—young men who collected informal rent from women who were selling outside the

Figure 1. An example of computer-made yaka.
Courtesy: author's photo, *Altyn Asyr* [Tolkuchka] bazaar, Ashgabat, December 2018

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547923000194 Published online by Cambridge University Press

organized stalls and often spread their produce on the floor or held it in their hands. These resellers would walk around the bazaar in hopes of getting a random client and a sporadic sale. Due to their lack of stable income or even a stable flow of yaka production in their hands, they could not afford to rent a proper stall at the bazaar and thus, avoid the annoying harassment for trading rent-free.

The logic of the market I am describing here is best understood through the valorization of the traditional handmade yaka of the highest quality known as *el keshde* or *keshde*. There is a great distinction in price and quality that I discuss further in the article, but it is important to specify why el keshde remains at the top of the market hierarchy, in high demand among the consumers but also how and why it remains a source of the precarity for its producers. Female consumers and resellers alike create the market logic conditions as they regulate the prices in lieu of a demand-supply model and in conjunction with seasonal peaks in sales due to the increase in the number of weddings and other celebrations (in spring, summer, and early autumn), when more consumers crowd the bazaars in search for embroidery and fabric to make new dresses. El keshde is at the top of the yaka market priority because it is a good investment and point of pride for the women who own it. As my interlocutors explained to me, el keshde can be recycled—a dress made for one wedding can be used for other important events and some embroidery can even be re-used in a new dress if it is cut out from the old dress and applied to a new one. Some of the best el keshde samples my interlocutors demonstrated to me were old family relics that belonged to their mothers and grandmothers. This type of rare needlework was incredibly valuable and was not for sale.

Precarious Labor: The "Code" of Yaka Makers and Yaka Dealers

The typical layout of yaka sales at Ashgabat's largest bazaar Tolkuchka is multilayered and known to the majority of its habitual consumers.[27] While there are hundreds of sellers, handmade yaka remains one of the most expensive products. Consumers rummage the bazaar in search of the most exclusive designs. The top tier of the market is handled exclusively by the specific dealers that guarantee quality, uniqueness, and the latest designs from their secret pool of top producers that they do not share with anyone else on the market. The top dealers manage to sustain the highest prices in the market and are not interested in selling any mid-range products that could potentially destroy their image and turn off their clientele. Their stalls have to be identifiable from afar with the most sparkling and highest quality stuff available on the market. The styles remain on the stalls for a few weeks and then are quickly changed by the newest trend—the luxury market surprisingly had the quickest cycle of production and sale.

Then there are mid-level sellers who must combine a wide range of prices and offerings. As we both found ourselves exploring the typical Tolkuchka setting on a Saturday morning, my interlocutor—a local trendsetter in Turkmen traditional dresses—told me that what you can find at their stalls is a variety of quality, from very good production to some less elegant work.[28]

Finally, there are the "sporadic" resellers—yaka traders who cannot afford the expensive stall rent but still come to the bazaar to sell what they have produced or

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547923000194 Published online by Cambridge University Press

bought from others in their villages. This third group of traders seek any potential buyer but often do not possess a stable clientele. I discuss each one of them in detail through the ethnographic encounter of getting "introduced" to the bazaar layout by one of my interlocutors in February 2017, when we were shopping for her yaka for the family wedding she had to attend. Through her eyes and tactics of decision-making in choosing the specific product, I describe the logic of the market and consumption.

As my interlocutor, Gulbayram[29] walked me through the "embroidery" section of the bazaar; she guided me through the territorial distinctions of class, luxury, mid-range and often accidental good buys, and the cheapest versions of what was available. There are stalls with the exquisite, best handmade embroidery of all varieties—the very traditional and trendy, but that type of sparkly and exciting product comes with the top price on the market. Owning a yaka from one of these stalls would cost two or more average monthly salaries. In 2017, an average price just for yaka travelled from 600 manat up to 1,200 manat, and the price for hand-embroidered *gyngach*—a shawl—up to 2,000–3,000 manat. Yet the whole city would know where it came from and the net worth of its owner—the exquisite and unique design of these handmade embroideries was almost never repeated in the same way by any other seller. Buying from the top dealers meant not only buying the latest fashion or the best quality "tradition" but also buying status comparable to that of a global luxury brand like the latest Gucci[30] bag or a timeless Chanel, for example.

Then there are medium-range sellers—mostly older ladies who have been working at Tolkuchka for years and remember all their clients by their names. Each conversation at the stall starts with a prolonged and detailed interrogation of each family member's well-being, news about planned weddings, and other important things. The mid-range sellers were the real keepers of the market, and along with the sellers of the antique and traditional Turkmen jewelry and silver, these older women were the unofficial "chiefs" of the bazaar. Together they regulated prices, provided advice for new traders, took care of those in trouble, and kept an unofficial accounting of the overall financial trends of the bazaar when it came to the specific segment of women's economy—fabrics, jewelry, and yaka and their correlation to the overall economic trends inclusive of the fluctuating foreign currency trade at a black-market rate.

Finally, the third group is the most heterogeneous and is represented by the resellers who come to the bazaar on a less regular basis, lack coherent clientele, and depend on sporadic trade by offering the lowest range of prices. Among this group of people, there are usually many resellers—those who travel within their own neighborhoods and villages collecting the embroideries that were not sold to the mid-range sellers or did not find other channels of distribution. Often there are also yaka producers themselves who come to the bazaar in hopes of selling their work without dealers and middle women. Among this group, there are also some occasional "jewels," Gulbayram tells me—some accidental finds that do not make it to the higher-priced stalls. This explains why the third group of resellers are so popular among the higher-class fashionistas and those who cannot afford anything else but an occasional 50 manat yaka that this group is happy to offer in the abundance of styles, albeit often at a slightly lower-quality level.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547923000194 Published online by Cambridge University Press

While there is a quality check at the two top layers of the market, this third group organizes its own logic of the trading segment and the quality check is as sporadic as the trade itself. But "quality" is more part of the Turkmen habitus than an exclusive knowledge. Everyone at the bazaar is an expert in good yaka, Jahan, one of the resellers to whom I came back and interacted with for almost a year, explains to me. In the end, for most of her clients, who often find her spreading her product on the floor in-between the corridors that lead to the more expensive stalls, the issue is "about the price and nothing else." Jahan was able to establish a whole segment of her own in this third group by offering affordable yet "fashionable" designs that often stand out—especially when she experimented with yaka in neon colors. This is how I met Jahan in late December 2016, and this was also why I came back to trade and talk with her for almost a year until she left Tolkuchka, possibly to establish a new business outside the bazaar or deal in other products.

Jahan was a trendsetter even in her own milieu of resellers because she always brought something new and exciting to the bazaar. She was tall, confident, chatty, and constantly laughing—to me, she was the heart of the yaka trade in her segment. She also attracted a number of resellers who all wanted to trade next to her due to her vibrant personality, and also because her colorful product attracted many clients who would browse through the whole line or all of the resellers in hopes of finding something extraordinary. I met Jahan in her usual spot in the long and wide corridor that separated one large "sector" of the bazaar into two parts. At the time of my fieldwork, there were three specific sectors at Tolkuchka that sold predominantly yaka, fabrics for female dresses, and silk headscarves. Every woman who was out and about for shopping for one of these pieces knew these three sectors almost by heart. The wide sector corridor provided enough space for the whole range of resellers (about ten to fifteen of them) to fit neatly on the ground and spread their products. They carefully placed more expensive and exquisite pieces on top of the yaka pile and the cheaper ones in the separate stack to attract a different type of clientele.

Resellers particularly cherished clients who were coming in to buy for *bohça*—a bride's traditional dowry made up of her best dresses and whole traditional outfit garments, such as headscarves (*chille, oymek*), underpants (*balak*), a traditional and often embroidered vest (*don*), and a heavily embroidered shawl for married women (*gyngach*). Each bohça had to represent the bride's family, class, as well as her in-laws' capacity and their position in the society as they make up a significant part of bohça investment and often the future mother-in-law shops for the fabric, embroidery, and jewelry together with her future daughter-in-law and her family. Every time a new bride and her "delegation" entered the sector, resellers would buzz with excitement and offerings—each one of them hoped to bank with selling *gyngach*, the most expensive part of all embroidery as the triangular shawl had to be wide enough to wrap a woman's body, and thus required a lot of hand stitching and long hours of hard labor. An average good quality (densely embroidered) gyngach could go up in price up to 3,000 manat even among resellers, but each family preparing for the wedding had to own one of those in their bohça, so the stakes were high for resellers and producers alike. Tradition and class intertwined in the gyngach sales as each newly married woman had to have at least one of those shawls in her dowry to show off her status and the financial (success-rate) status of the family she married into.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547923000194 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Jahan always looked at these sudden sparks of activity with suspicion—gyngach is too serious of a business to engage in, she would tell me. "Too risky with so much work and investment but difficult to sell," she would explain as I would be equally glued to this important trading process. Since our first meeting, Jahan, a natural observer, spotted that I was a rookie in choosing yaka,[31] and this was how she won me over, by naturally becoming my teacher in the art of yaka appreciation. For the first three months of my detailed yaka learning when I came to the bazaar almost every week, I came to her for advice and suggestions. "You go for the color, not the quality!" she would tell me in awe, and I appreciated her honesty. She was blunt and to the point. Even though sometimes it required her to lose extra points on price, she would knock it down for me due to the lack of quality that I was not even be able to decipher at first.

Once I could not stop admiring a very colorful yaka design made of flowers on dark background, but Jahan disapproved of her own product she was reselling! She told me the design was far from traditional and suggested not to buy this yaka for an official dress—"teachers should not wear that" was her verdict. Plus, the stitching was uneven, and she folded yaka into two equal parts to demonstrate how the left side was slightly unbalanced and asymmetrical—"not a sign of a good quality piece," she said. Finally, she revealed that she bought this *yaka* from a young teenage girl who was just learning how to make stitches when she was buying wholesale from one of the households where a number of women were yaka makers. For the teenage girl, this was one of her first works accepted by the reseller, which was a great step toward a possible career and better product that could reach a high-end dealer one day. For Jahan, it was a gesture of support for a young craftswoman but not a good business deal. I insisted that I wanted the "flawed" yaka precisely for its flaws and the story behind it. Jahan looked even more surprised—who in their right mind spends money on yaka that is far from traditional design, meaning that it could be used only outside formal gatherings at work, and besides, what woman in Ashgabat would want "bad" quality stitching that is uneven? For her, my decision to buy this embroidery was a "waste of money," so she tried her best to convince me not to do it even though it meant a loss of profit for her.

This type of honesty and care for clients was not unusual among yaka resellers. It was part of the internal code at the bazaar—honesty had to be valued above all, even the immediate profit. This shared value in honesty worked for different reasons—being Muslim was one of them but being a good Turkmen (woman) was another crucial reason. Atken-apai,[32] my other interlocutor who had the most eclectic collection of antique jewelry mixed with less pricey contemporary jewelry ("probably from Pakistan," she would always tell me) and some (exquisite quality) old Soviet Turkmen garments ("mostly from the 1970s and 1980s" she said), spoke in length about "honesty." Atken-apai collected old garments and jewelry in her neighborhood and bought it from households on the outskirts of Ashgabat and was very popular among the rare "tourists" (mainly expats) who came to Tolkuchka and were always attracted to her eclectic stall. Thus, her sale strategy of mixing cheaper and more expensive produce allowed her to remain popular but also to afford a small but prosperous stall that she strategically squeezed between an affordable fabric seller and a very expensive antique jewelry seller. "Baby-girl, I would never lie to you. Honesty

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547923000194 Published online by Cambridge University Press

is everything to me!" Atken-apai would often tell me even though I never questioned her honesty, and I was just curious about a particular era of the garment history, which eventually led her to think that I was a museum collector or curator and not just an average consumer.

Atken-apai valued honesty above all because it was a virtue of "being a good Turkmen" to her, and this "code" played an important role to her personally in all business and personal exchanges, as well as in the bazaar logics. She often took over her friends' stalls and guarded their very expensive jewelry and worked as a saleswoman, meticulously counting the cash and reporting back to the owners of the stall once they would come back from their breaks. She could remember all prices of the stalls directly opposite of her and all around her. For her own sales, she kept a notebook where she would meticulously write down every small thing she sold that day and account it for the profit and the investment she put in. But Atken-apai truly never speculated on prices and adhered to the market logic—everyone had to sell within their own price niche. If the product was of great quality, it would naturally go up in price, but if it was mediocre—it had to be sold for in the mid- or lower-price range for its lack of quality. Atken-apai knew I was on the market for the long traditional bracelets embellished with red carnelian stones, and she often told me to look at her friend's antique stall. Once I came to her and found these long bracelets among other eclectic and sporadically placed items, but the bracelets were lacking the stones. The holes where the stones were before were painted with red paint (maybe even nail polish), and Atken-apai looked very embarrassed when I tried these on and wanted to take a picture. "Honey, this is cheap, don't buy it! People would laugh at you!" she said but I was already laughing myself.

Honesty and good virtue were found with every seller I met at Tolkuchka but the two different cases and two different generations of Atken-apai and Jahan were special; the yaka reseller connected almost completely on the point of being a "good Turkmen." Both of these women—one of who could have been a grandmother to the other—regarded themselves as the guardians of the sacred Turkmen traditions, while at the same time seeking profit from selling these garments. They both tried their best to help other struggling resellers, especially those who did not have an opportunity for a stable stall and were often harassed by the local bazaar guards. Atken-apai often offered "illegal" resellers the use of bits and parts of her stall and did not charge them for it. Speculation on someone else's precarity and hardship was a moral taboo for her. Honesty and being a good Turkmen intertwined in a host of different values and practices related to trade (money, produce, fair pricing) but also mutual help for their clients, for fellow resellers who were often struggling to make ends meet, and for their yaka-makers from whom they outsourced their product. She would often suggest her clients to go look over at a specific corner of yaka traders who struggled to find new clientele, for example, and directed her old customers to the best prices for things they needed at the bazaar.

Jahan often bought "bad quality" yaka from poorer households and paid them more for it even though she knew there were little chances for her to make a good profit out of it on the market where everyone knew how to check the stitch for quality. Over time even I learnt how to flip a yaka to evaluate the stitch, rub the base fabric (usually *keteni*) to check its quality, and evaluate how quickly the colors of the thread

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547923000194 Published online by Cambridge University Press

would fade away. All of these processes were part of experiencing and exposing our levels of Turkmençilik when it came to the knowledge of traditions and traditional produce. But another part of Turkmençilik for these women was also connected to this understanding of mutual support and being a good person.

Speculation would not lead one to good things, Atken-apai would often explain to me during our conversations. She was meticulous with money and often counted it in the old way—with "millions" instead of hundreds as she and other Tolkuchka traders were stubborn to adapt to the post-2008 financial reforms where a million of manat became 200 manat. But never did she try to speculate with money or with the trust and good virtue of her clients. Speculation had worse repercussions for her moral standing and values than any immediate gain would have been, she told me once when I offered her to pay a bit more than the price we agreed on. "I take what is my own, I do not take anything above that," she said and continued with the traditional "Wear it to your wedding!"

The conditions of the bazaar precarity led the majority of resellers, dealers, and producers to form an unwritten code of behavior, respect, and mutual support even if they occupied very distinct price- and class-based niches. This code prospered due to its connection to the deeper sense of their own understanding of Turkmençilik connected to values of honesty, good virtue, and the aspiration to be a good Turkmen.[33] But it was also the condition of the bazaar with its sporadic and often unstable nature of trade, where no one was guaranteed to make a stable return on their investment even if they sold a product high in demand like a good handmade embroidery, which rarely goes out of fashion. These women were able to control their informal relations because they all intrinsically felt being part of the same group and being in the same boat, where competition was guided by collective rules rather than individual greed or immediate interests, was better. The sense of the shared identity and shared precarious conditions in the whole field of gendered economies allowed for all of these women to navigate on a plane of mutual support even if they did not know each other personally. This code was shared all across the gendered economy cycles—from the singular yaka production to the massive fabric trading business or the tailoring studios and sweatshops where these products made it to the final form of the Turkmen dress. However, when the new trend of the first design studios broke this cycle, many of the producers and members of this field were angered as design studios essentially brought in the competition and a new form of production unknown to the market prior to that.[34]

The Rise of Design Studios

By the early spring of 2018, Ashgabat was buzzing about the new "design studio" that offered exclusive yaka designs and dressmaking by a new up-and-coming designer all in one place. This was an unusual development as in the cycle of the Turkmen dress-making, yaka producers, dealers, and resellers, as well as tailors and seamstresses generally represented the dividing markets and very different spheres of gendered economies. Apart from several well-known designers, the approach of selling a ready-made dress was rare. Tailors, seamstresses, and dressmakers usually did not intervene in the client's choice over yaka and only very trusted relations

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547923000194 Published online by Cambridge University Press

between clients and their long-term dressmakers allowed for dressmakers to negotiate with their clients on the type of dress design (*fason*) or fabric choice. This type of advisory service was not part of the dressmaking fee for the majority of tailors and seamstresses. So, the rise of the special design studio that did not separate the cycle of the dressmaking into specific stages and logics of the economic relations was both unique and also unprecedented.[35] The majority of fashionistas I spoke to at the time had mixed feelings—they were generally intrigued about the new type of service, especially about the "exclusive *yaka*" part but were not completely sold on the idea of giving up too much power to the "designer" in making the fabric and design choices for them.

My interlocutors among seamstresses and tailors in two specific locations I went to almost every week were furious about this new trend of the design studios mainly for two reasons. It stole from their positionality, and it robbed yaka makers of wider markets as they were forced to produce exclusively for a monopolistic designer.

The emergence of the new design studio stripped many of the nondesigners—those known as seamstresses and tailors—of their agency, as they were not counted as "designers" or one-stop shops for new trends, albeit all of them were actively involved in experimenting and creating new designs but not branding their service as such and thus losing the additional value on their labor. They could not afford renting studios in similar, expensive locations as these new design studios, while rebranding their service completely to raise prices for equally good level of production was unthinkable for some of them and too risky even for the most qualified of them. "You tell me if I am not a designer, when I can make all types of *fasons* for days, but I am not paid as much as a new hot 'designer' in town because I am still a seamstress!" Aiperi, one of my long-term tailors, told me when I brought her the news about the new design studio opening. To her it was about the "branding" and positioning in the market that constantly demanded all the new things and trends. Aiperi was openly embracing the "new" trends and bringing to the table often risky designs—the slits for New Year's parties, the "bootilicious" shapes for "Hollywood"-designed dresses (with a small stich right under the bum miraculously making a huge difference on softer fabrics like stretchy velvet), and the mixture of different fabrics. She was a true trailblazer who wanted to make dresses that made women happy whether they wore comfortable and warm dresses in winter or very figure-flattering and sparkling, "exciting" dresses for weddings and big parties. But over her eight years of working in Ashgabat, she was never risky enough to "rebrand" her services and charge considerably more for the service that was truly a design.

In order to make ends meet and to afford the warmer studio with accessible toilets, Aiperi had to work six days a week for eight to nine hours on average making four dresses a day. She also had to share the rented studio with five or six of her colleagues and often had to rely on occasional new customers who came in for a quick repair. But the prices for tailors and seamstresses—the simple "dressmakers"—were average and around 70–80 manats for a dress or around 300 manat for a velvet (*pombarh*) or more difficult type of fabric dress at the time of my fieldwork. Each woman in the studio shared with Aiperi had to pay 400 manats each for the monthly rent of their studio and on top of that for the rent of their apartments as none of them were native of Ashgabat. "Life was bearable" for Aiperi as a dressmaker, she would

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547923000194 Published online by Cambridge University Press

often tell me when she compared herself to the yaka makers that she considered had "work from hell" (*adskii trud*). Yaka making was too meticulous and tiring for her eyes even though she was trained to do it as a child—a tradition most Turkmen girls learn from their mothers or sisters. "That is no easy labor!" she told me, still angered that the new "hot designer" was issuing "exclusive *yaka*"—Aiperi was convinced the designer studio was exploiting yaka makers by offering them a bit more over the market price for their produce but scooping more off the clients for the whole dress. This was just a wrong business strategy, she continued, because the market regulates yaka prices and allows everyone to gain. Design studios, on the other hand, monopolized female labor and degraded other women's services simply because they lacked "exclusivity" or "design" branding, Aiperi concluded.

The next day I found the address for the named designed studio and prepared for a visit when someone told me I had to call and make an appointment with the designer. This was bizarre. There was no such procedure as to "make an appointment" anywhere else in the city. Surely, I met most of my dressmakers through acquaintances and friends, but we made our first connections literally "in the process"—while these dressmakers would make the fitting for their other clients or generally just work. I first met Aiperi in the heat of a large order to make twenty to thirty Turkmen dresses (with yaka) for the waitresses at the big local restaurant. She was running around helping others with small stitching problems or glued to her sewing machine when she asked me short questions about what I needed the dress for and told me to come the next day for the first fitting. The designer in the new fashionable "designer studio" I called for an appointment was "busy" choosing fabrics for her advanced orders and asked me to come in two days at a strictly allocated time slot. By then I was too intrigued about the services provided, so had to follow the rules and showed up two days later at the precise time of the appointment.

The studio was very spacious and even had a sofa with several books on Turkmen traditions and an old vintage Turkmen dress displayed at the entrance. Everything in this space was located in sharp contrast to the overcrowded tailor studios and sweatshops that one could find in specific locations close to the central, Russian bazaar (*Russkii bazar*[36]) in the city. Most tailors and seamstresses work in bigger groups to afford the rent in expensive central shopping malls where they can attract more clientele but also work in more comfortable conditions with stable heating, electricity, and access to basic utilities. Tailors and seamstresses who cannot afford the rent in a tailor studio either work from home, in locations that are further away from the city center, or in the sweatshops usually located in the underground pedestrian pathways (*podzemka*) with no access to running water, heating, or sometimes even bathrooms.[37] Most tailor studios I have studied before represented the same layout of overcrowded space with six to seven tailors or seamstresses working together. Each one of them had a small station where only their 60cm table with a semi-industrial sewing machine could fit. They would all share the larger station where they cut and put together fabric for the dress, one small space for the client's fitting room, one wall with shared threads, one small ironing station, and very little space for storage (usually under the big table). There was virtually almost no space for having a break or offering a client a seat.[38] Most of the tailors I worked with also had no space for lunch breaks and ate at their work stations or on some special occasions, we would go to a nearby café.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547923000194 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Thus, when I entered the "designer's studio" I immediately felt the difference. The designer clearly could afford having "empty" space, which was unthinkable in the usual Ashgabat tailor studios, where seamstresses and tailors worked in incredibly precarious conditions dependent on how much they made monthly. The designer, Maral, was almost half an hour late, so two of her seamstresses had to entertain me in the meantime. They offered me tea and at first hesitated to show me some of their "works-in-progress"—four or five unfinished dresses for other clients. They explained to me that Maral had full control of the whole process from yaka and fabric selection to the design and every final stitch. When I asked them what their task was, they told me that they were paid for the "mechanical" labor of putting the dress together following Maral's "design." Her design represented the recreation of the traditional wide, *yanly* dress with a tiny narrow yaka following the traditional, *gadymy* design she copied from old books, archival photos, and her grandmother's dress that was displayed in the studio. Why was this a new design, I asked the seamstresses, but they were too scared to say something wrong that would damage Maral's business idea. She emerged in the doorway right before our conversation could continue, but she could not answer any of my questions about the "new" design either, apart from mentioning that the final product would have been a surprise for me and nothing that I have experienced in dressmaking in Ashgabat before. She then showed me three "exclusive" narrow, handmade old-style yaka, she just brought from a secret place in Goktepe, where she outsourced them in the household that only worked exclusively with her.

Maral's strategy was to control the whole process very strictly. She did not allow me to touch any of the yaka (forget about snapping a photo of it!), did not allow me to choose the type of fabric for the dress or even determine its color, and quickly hid away the embroidery in fears that I would copy it somehow. The dressmaking process had to be done in full secrecy and I was told that I would be contacted directly for the first fitting "maybe in some weeks." This was not only unusual but unprecedented for Ashgabat where the internal rule of client-tailor relations was often following a very friendly and polite mode of interaction. Long-term client-tailor relations grew into friendships and as one of my tailors once told me, for her the quality of her work meant knowing "every change of the body" her client had since they met —from teenage years to maturing, to marrying, getting pregnant, giving birth, and so forth. Very few of my tailors and only those I trusted the most could take the liberty to "design" for me without my consent but none of them ever took charge over yaka or fabric choice for any of their clients. As Aiperi often would tell me, "it's your choice, your freedom, and none of my business" and would only occasionally agree to play around with the design if she liked my fabric choice.[39] Compared to my other tailors, Maral acted as a dictator—she gave no choice and no freedom. Above all, she was worried that someone would steal her designs and she would lose the niche of being "the first exclusive designer" in Ashgabat. In a way, her rudeness, delays, and last-minute changes to all aspects of the dressmaking allowed her to remain in that niche even though she eventually had to move to a cheaper and centrally-located studio in a mall just two months after opening her business.

The story of Maral's "exclusive" yaka products quickly became a new sensation at the Tolkuchka where the groups of dealers and resellers were first angered by the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547923000194 Published online by Cambridge University Press

emergence of the design studio but then decided to embrace the trend. The return of the narrow yaka, which used to be a thing of the past or something that their grandmothers were wearing, meant less work for yaka makers but still good prices for the market because it was a new hot trend. Many of the resellers at the bazaar cherished this trend for a variety of reasons. The "tiny" yaka entered the market as a redemption to the last trend of the "Swarowski" yaka, which was far from the real Turkmençilik staple. Older female resellers were happy to see that young women (*molodezh'* in Russian) were coming back to their "traditional" roots and changing their tight dresses and sparkling embroidery that had little to no actual embroidery to the wide yanly dresses with traditionally cut and narrow yaka.

The rise of the design studios led to far more transformative and positive aspects to the market overall even if Maral's own business remained quite niche. First, yaka makers could spend less time on tiny embroidery but expand the price range and some of them even entered the trade without the resellers. Second, some of the tailors I have worked with over this period decided to follow Maral's steps and organize their own business model. They started producing and selling ready-made dresses but pricing them within more affordable price-range than what Maral initially offered. The market for ready-made Turkmen dresses was always considered a risky affair among the many tailors I spoke to during my research. They believed that each client had their own point of view and would not opt for buying something already made for them. However, the designer studio fever managed to change even some of the most stubborn clients. This led to the emergence of many design studios that combined ready-made traditional Turkmen dresses and also offered separate yaka pieces for the dresses to be designed from scratch. The success stories of the "Sahin" brand,[40] Hatyja Han design studio, and the exclusive design studio "Zynat" owned by the popular Turkmen singer and trendsetter Zuleyha Kakayeva Owezova allowed for this trend of design studios to remain a coherent part of the Turkmen dressmaking market and shape the understanding of Turkmençilik even further.

The rise of the stable design studios gave more hope to the possibility to eradicate consistent precarity that the vast majority of female producers of Turkmen national garments experienced. In a way, design studios allowed for the institutionalization of different types of female labor and gave some of the seamstresses and yaka makers stable income not dependent on the sporadic flow of clients or dealers at the bazaar. At the same time, the emergence of design studios shifted these burdens and the risks of financial planning to the shoulders of the studio owners—most of them female designers, trendsetters, famous Instagram bloggers,[41] or singers. So, the logic of the market shifted slightly but remained within the gendered paradigms where women remained the key actors controlling bazaar, because Tolkuchka lives on within its own class and price niche, and controlling the more institutionalized market of the design studios. However, the "exclusivity" of the design studios cuts through the competition where these studios have to brand themselves above and beyond the traditional cycle of dressmaking that involves a whole sector of seamstresses, yaka makers, resellers, and fabric sellers, all of whom have to catch up with the "designers."

This catching up does not involve any consideration for those who remain largely de-institutionalized—the seamstresses who come to Ashgabat from other cities and cannot afford to raise prices too quickly or the yaka makers who have to constantly

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547923000194 Published online by Cambridge University Press

change their stitching technique according to the newest trend catapulted by each design studio. In other words, the rise of the design studios follows a distinct logic of sharp competition that disregards the positions and precarity of other actors involved in the market. Unlike the logics and rules of honesty and solidarity at the bazaar where the survival of each member of the network depends on their collective decision-making and code of practice, the new design studios add to the already precarious labor conditions of all workers who occupy the niche below them. These same actors "below" the design studios cannot yet have the capacity to compete on the same level as they lack the same investment and opportunities to attract clientele unless they occupy the higher (el keshde) niche already.

In this vicious cycle, the precarious conditions of de-institutionalized actors (seamstresses, disorganized yaka makers, and resellers) have to rely on each other's solidarity in hopes that further development of the market would allow them to move up to the higher niche or somehow organize in the future. Only few of them are able to succeed in organizing their own design studios as it comes with a higher risk and requires initial capital. In these conditions, relying on solidarity and the productive force of Turkmençilik remains the only way for many of these women to earn a living.

Conclusion

The colorful field of the yaka market in Ashgabat is a unique space for studying and observing the interplay of nation-building and *nation-ness* as well as power relations played out on the myriad of embedded values, codes of behavior, and community priorities. Bazaar is a place that is never stagnant—it is a space of constant change of a variety of products, sellers, dealers, and producers as well as a vivid internal culture. In this article, I have argued that there are underlying power relations that guide the production of this national order in female attire and these power relations are guided by the women who control the market flows of embroidery production. Tapping into the cycles of production and resale of traditional embroidery, I also argue that these networks remain highly informal and lacking more "solid" institutionalization due to the market logics which leaves many yaka producers in very precarious labor conditions. However, with the emerging trends in design studios and the possibility of opening the markets for import might influence further institutionalization of the yaka making that would raise the prices for the production and provide the producers with more stable income and channels of distribution. The rise of the design studios also shifts the risk-and-business management prerogative to the sole shoulders of the studio owners, the majority of whom are female designers. But it also describes the important changes dictated by the globalization of the markets, which places Turkmenistan in a unique position. On the one hand, numerous Turkmen entrepreneurs are involved in the global trade and network of resale while it simultaneously continues to condition the garment market according to the traditional styles of female national dress, on the other hand. The flow of fabric and related items does not disturb or compete with the networks of traditional labor and production cycles mostly governed by female participants like embroidery makers and dealers as this article focused on.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547923000194 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Notes

1. This Russian-language term was mainly used in relation to the old bazar that existed until it was demolished in 2011. *Altyn Asyr* bazaar was built near the place where the old Tolkuchka was located. Many of my interlocutors told me that the two bazaars differ but somehow the old name remained quite popular and was often used colloquially among my interlocutors (both Russian and Turkmen-speaking), as well as among my co-travellers on the bus that took us to Altyn Asyr from the large bus stop behind Teke bazaar in central Ashgabat. Like my co-travellers, I often used *markshrutka*—a small bus that filled up with passengers much more quickly. The drivers used to announce the direction of travel as Tolkuchka rather than Altyn Asyr bazaar. On my occasional trips to other regions and notably on the bazaars in Lebap welayat, I heard local fabric and *yaka* sellers mentioning "Ashgabat's *Tolkuchka*" as a prime space of yaka trading in the capital city. I use this more popular name of the bazaar used by both my Russian- and predominantly Turkmen-speaking interlocutors but underline that the official name of the bazaar is Altyn Asyr.
2. On global trade and gendered economies, see Ishkanian, Armine. "Gendered transitions: The impact of the post-Soviet transition on women in Central Asia and the Caucasus." in *Central Eurasia in Global Politics* (Brill, 2005), 161–182 and Özcan, Gulberna. *Building states and markets: Enterprise development in Central Asia*. (Springer, 2016.)
3. While Ashgabat's market remains the biggest in the country and sets the trends for other regions, there are often varying dynamics of production, consumption, and trade of embroidery in other regions of the country, which I do not engage with in this piece. There is also an important historical context to yaka production. For the fuller historical account on Turkmen traditional clothing, see Olga Sukhareva, *Costume of the Peoples of Central Asia* (Moscow, 1979); especially "Opyt analiza traditsionnoi 'tunikoobraznoi' sredneaziatskoi odezhdy v plane ih istorii i evolutrsii" [The experience of analysing 'tunic-like' Central Asian clothes in terms of their history and evolution]; Y. Khozyaistvo Vinnikov, *Kul'tura i Byt sel'skogo naseleniya Turkmenskoi SSR* (Moscow, 1969) [Economy, Culture and Livelihood of the Village Population of the Turkmen SSR].
4. Some yaka traders had husbands, brothers, and even sons helping them move their produce around but that was about all of their interaction in the embroidery market; in my findings, they never engaged with the open trade of embroidery itself.
5. The term coined by Kadyrov. Shohrat Kadyrov, *Mnogolikii Turkmenchilik* (Moscow, 2010).
6. Shahram Akbarzadeh, "National identity and political legitimacy in Turkmenistan." *Nationalities papers* 27, no. 2 (1999): 271–290; Ahmet T. Kuru, "Between the state and cultural zones: nation building in Turkmenistan." *Central Asian Survey* 21, no. 1 (2002): 71–90; Victoria Clement, "Articulating national identity in Turkmenistan: inventing tradition through myth, cult and language." *Nations and Nationalism* 20, no. 3 (2014): 546–562 also terms it as "Turkmenification".
7. The historical accounts of the traditional dress are well accounted by the Soviet ethnographers; see Olga Sukhareva, *Costume of the Peoples of Central Asia* (Moscow, 1979), for example.
8. While traditional embroidery is mainly used on the frontal part of the dress (*koynnek*) from the neck down to the waist, on the sleeves of the dresses or other clothing (*don, chabyt, kurte*), and on the lower end of the underpants (*balaq*), some contemporary interpretations of the embroidery are placed in different forms and as ornaments on the waist, on the shoulders, and other parts. This newer interpretation of the embroidery is usually called locally *fason yaka* to specify that it is style-based.
9. See Shahnoza Nozimova, "Hijab in a Changing Tajik Society," *Central Asian Affairs* 3, no. 2 (2016): 95–116; Emil Nasritdinov and Nurgul Esenamanova. "The war of billboards: Hijab, secularism, and public space in Bishkek." *Central Asian Affairs* 4, no. 2 (2017): 217–242.
10. I was always very open about my own journey into the world of Central Asian garments, embroideries, and fabrics and how the journey itself was a decolonial process. My maternal grandmother who refused the Soviet categorization into ethnicities, spoke different Turkic languages, and whose ancestry came from pre-revolutionary Ferghana Valley and Kashgar, kept a carefully curated wardrobe of tailored dresses with ornaments and shapes of what we now call "Central Asian," "Uzbek," or "Tajik" prints, embroidery, and stamps. She never identified her dresses along the ethnic or "republican" lines (e.g., Uzbek, Kazakh, etc). After her death in June 2015 and when her *sandyq*—the wooden dowry chest she kept from her mother—was distributed to all female relatives in our extended family, I started a project aimed at reconciling with her knowledge that was often embodied in practices (including making and wearing dresses and becoming a pro in different fabrics), story-telling about the past, cultural texts, and dialogues across different communities. When I came to Turkmenistan first in April 2015, and then again in December 2016, I didn't claim to be an expert in any of

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547923000194 Published online by Cambridge University Press

these things but embraced the process of constant learning, engaging in conversations, and asking questions about things that my cultural knowledge missed. My decision to start learning about embroidery and learn more about making the dresses as well as the art of wearing them was and remains a big part of this decolonial journey of learning, filling in the gaps, and decolonizing at the same time. This text is only a small part of an attempt that I am still engaged in; it is a continuous process. My inbox is always open for your reflections.

11. *El keshde*, the handmade embroidery is valued more in price compared to machine-made or computer-produced embroidery that are also sold in large quantities at the bazaars.

12. My findings primarily focus on the Ashgabat as the central space for the fieldwork but also the central space for the fashion cycle productions in the whole country. My other findings (not presented in this article) focus on separate bazaars outside Ashgabat (in *welayats*, the regions).

13. There were attempts and initiatives to centralise the artisans and producers' domains in smaller business-models selling souvenirs for foreigners, for example, or through the organisation of local craftsmanship and artisans' markets and fairs. However, these initiatives remained largely inaccessible to the artisans and producers who could not afford to rent a place at the bazaar and who did not have access to the craftsmanship fairs. Bazaar trade remains a cheaper and often more viable option for many traders. They believe that a large bazaar like Tolkuchka provides more trading stability as it never fails to attract consumers. More niche craft fairs still required marketing campaigns and did not attract the same numbers of consumers and clients as the popular bazaar did, my respondents told me. However, some of my other interlocutors still shared a belief that the small craftsmanship enterprises could grow to reach foreign markets in the nearest future and could change the logic of the locally produced apparel trade.

14. Coined by Regine Spector in Regine A. Spector, "Bazaar politics: The fate of marketplaces in Kazakhstan." *Problems of Post-Communism* 55, no. 6 (2008): 42–53; see also Regine A. Spector, *Order at the bazaar: power and trade in Central Asia* (Cornell University Press, 2017); Botoeva, Aisalkyn, and Regine A. Spector. "Sewing to satisfaction: Craft-based entrepreneurs in contemporary Kyrgyzstan." *Central Asian Survey* 32, no. 4 (2013): 487–500; Karrar, Hasan H. "Kyrgyzstan's Dordoi and Kara-Suu bazaars: mobility, globalization and survival in two Central Asian markets." *Globalizations* 14, no. 4 (2017): 643–657; Meiirzhan Baitas, "The traders of Central Bazaar, Astana: motivation and networks." in *Informal Markets and Trade in Central Asia and the Caucasus*, (Routledge, 2022), 33–45.

15. See Olga Sukhareva, *Costume and Peoples of Central Asia* (Moscow, 1979) and Vinnikov, Y. Khozyaistvo, *Kul'tura i Byt sel'skogo naseleniya Turkmenskoi SSR* (Moscow, 1969) [Economy, Culture and Livelihood of the Village Population of the Turkmen SSR], for example.

16. See Cynthia Werner, *Feminizing the new silk road: Women traders in rural Kazakhstan.* (na, 2004); Yvonne Corcoran-Nantes, *Lost voices: Central Asian women confronting transition* (Zed Books, 2005); Armine Ishkanian, "Gendered transitions: The impact of the post-Soviet transition on women in Central Asia and the Caucasus." in *Central Eurasia in Global Politics*, (Brill, 2005), 161–182; Marianne Kamp, "Gender ideals and income realities: discourses about labor and gender in Uzbekistan." *Nationalities Papers* 33, no. 3 (2005): 403–422; Deniz Kandiyoti,. "The politics of gender and the Soviet paradox: neither colonized, nor modern?." *Central Asian Survey* 26, no. 4 (2007): 601–623; Behzadi, Negar Elodie. "Women miners' exclusion and Muslim masculinities in Tajikistan: A feminist political ecology of honor and shame," *Geoforum* 100 (2019): 144–152.

17. Gulberna Özcan, *Building states and markets: Enterprise development in Central Asia* (Springer, 2016); Negar Elodie Behzadi, "Women miners' exclusion and Muslim masculinities in Tajikistan: A feminist political ecology of honor and shame." *Geoforum* 100 (2019): 144–152.

18. The informal market also accommodates men who mainly trade fabric rather than other items for the garments. Some men also engage with helping their female partners, but women remain the driving forces of this segment of economy.

19. For the historical account see Olga Sukhareva, *Costume and Peoples of Central Asia* (Moscow, 1979) and Adrienne Lynn Edgar, *Tribal Nation: the making of Soviet Turkmenistan* (Princeton University Press, 2006)

20. Pierre Bourdieu and Samar Farage. "Rethinking the state: Genesis and structure of the bureaucratic field." *Sociological Theory* 12, no. 1 (1994): 1–18.

21. Shahram Akbarzadeh, "National identity and political legitimacy in Turkmenistan." *Nationalities Papers 27*, no. 2 (1999): 271–290, p. 277.

22. Shahram Akbarzadeh, "National identity and political legitimacy in Turkmenistan." *Nationalities Papers* 27, no. 2 (1999): 271–290, p. 278.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547923000194 Published online by Cambridge University Press

23. Jon E. Fox and Maarten Van Ginderachter. "Introduction: Everyday nationalism's evidence problem." *Nations and Nationalism* 3 (2018): 546–552.
24. Female politicians and female TV presenters are lauded for their traditional Turkmen dresses, very strict use of the embroidery, and strict following of the established dress code.
25. Gender Approaches in Turkmenistan 2016 report and the State Information Agency of Turkmenistan: The Golden Age, 2015 report.
26. This is computer-made embroidery where a special portable machine takes about two to three hours to make a machine-made embroidery from the designs uploaded to it. This type of embroidery is known as *kompyuter yaka* and it is clearly visible to anyone who knows how a good embroidery looks that "computer yaka" can have good quality (good design, good threads, and clean work) while others can be simple and cheap-looking. At my time of fieldwork, no computer *yaka* stood in competition to the expensive handmade *yaka* (*el keshde*) that was still valued much higher.
27. See Snezhana. A. Atanova, "Representation of Turkmen national image. the Turkmen carpet and National self-identification." *Islam in the Modern World* 14, no. 1 (2018): 199–208.
28. Author's fieldnotes, February 2017, Tolkuchka, Ashgabat.
29. Name changed. Gulbayram was a middle-class married woman who valued quality and status in her meticulously curated wardrobe above all other things (including practicality, comfort and often questions of budget). She was the representation of a particular class of Turkmen women who attained not only the class and (higher) status they occupied but also the type of self-identified role of the keeper of sacred traditions in clothing. She invested a considerable amount of time and money into sustaining a very polished and almost a history-book look of her dresses where every yaka had to resemble the ones portrayed on the old paintings (albeit all from the Soviet period) in the National Museum. Gulbayram sought particular sense of capital from this practice and self-representation.
30. These luxury brands are also popular in Turkmenistan, and I enjoy following Guncha Gucci, a Turkmen fashionista, on Instagram where she shares the latest works her haute couture studio *Dameli* produces. She often pairs a Turkmen dress with a Gucci or Hermes Birkin bag but often switches it up to wear a local "carpet" bag—literally made from the same threads and in the same technique as a handmade carpet but shaped in a form of a bag.
31. Initially, Jahan was perplexed as, according to her and some of her reseller friends, I looked like an average Turkmen woman, and I dressed like one too (for the bazaar purposes particularly as I was often disciplined not to show up to any important event in jeans and eventually gave up wearing anything but long Turkmen dresses altogether). It was impossible for Jahan to imagine a Turkmen woman or someone living in Turkmenistan (and perhaps non-ethnically Turkmen) who would be as unaware of the yaka logics as I was at the very beginning of my journey. I kept on asking her whether there was a special meaning behind each symbol because I was used to it in my Kazakh "cultural background" where each ornament has a long history and meaning. Thanks to Jahan and many of my other interlocutors I learnt fairly quickly though my personal yaka choices and fashion decisions remained largely eclectic. I valued colourfulness and abstract forms over the more mainstream choices. Often, I made my choices based on the "story" behind each embroidery (as my interlocutors would go on interesting conversations about these) rather than any useful value of wearing it.
32. Name changed for the safety of my interlocutor.
33. In this part, I think it is important to stress that I distinct at least two forms of *Turkmençilik* here—the one that the regime attempted to appropriate and control (which I discuss in the first part) and the *Turkmençilik* as people in different communities understand it. For me, it was important to describe the order at the bazaar where many of the official doctrines, including the obligatory dress code of the female Turkmen dress, take on a different embodiment and meaning imbued with the citizen's own agency, power, and contribution to these valuable forms of knowledge.
34. There were several highly ranked designers in Ashgabat and other major cities before that like Wepa Soyunov, for example. But these designer produced embroidery were so exquisite and expensive that these largely belonged to the local haute couture space rather than mass market of bazaars and sweatshops. The development of the "design studios" in 2018 never managed to match the level of Soyunov no matter how much they aspired to do so.
35. Previous design studios offered either high-end and often unaffordable products like exquisite designs of Wepa Soyunov's fashion studio whose numerous fashion shows I attended during my stay in Ashgabat or

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547923000194 Published online by Cambridge University Press

offered princess-style Western white wedding dresses (often these dresses were also rented out because few people could afford owning such expensive garment).
36. The Russian Bazaar in the old centre of Ashgabat largely represents food trading with separate second floor structures where some smaller boutiques sell accessories, lingerie, and cheaper jewellery as well as stationary. The space around this central bazaar, however, is surrounded by networks of fabric trading shops, one big mall, and the Altyn Asyr mall that homes state-produced fashion and household goods—carpets, the most famous locally produced velvet shop, and cotton fabric shop. This makes the Russian Bazaar a magnet for independently-run tailor studios and sweatshops. I use the Russian language name here.
37. One of the first places where I started my fieldwork was in one such sweatshop located in the underground pedestrian pathway. There I met many of my long-term interlocutors and they all had to use a public bathroom located on the different side of the street about 100m away from their sweatshop. When local authorities decided to clear up *podzemka* (in Russian) spaces of any trade but particularly of the sweatshops, these tailors I was working with had to move to the nearby fancy mall and rent a studio that cost them a lot more, so they had to expand their group to be able to afford the rent. Instead of working in a group of four, they crowded in a small studio with six to seven stations at the same time and a large table for fabric cutting shared among them.
38. I often found myself a small space at the big table watching everyone cut the fabric or offered to iron pieces because sadly ironing was the only thing I could do well at their workplace. Sometimes we had tea or coffee breaks right at the big table or went outside for small breaks, to buy food or something we needed. Miraculously, there was always a place for me and one more client friend who came to share the latest gossip even when the studio Aiperi ran was overcrowded. Together we watched other clients fitting their new dresses and discussed fashion things with other tailors and seamstresses.
39. Even though she was first stubborn to acknowledge her designer talents, she quickly became my favorite designer and a good friend. To her I owe some of my best styles, extraordinary designs, creative cuts, and impeccable tailoring.
40. Unfortunately, the brand store was closed in 2023.
41. While the internet access is very limited in Turkmenistan, its Instagram scene continues to flourish. Turkmen influencers like Elnara and Dinara twins (@double_mood) have more than two-hundred-and-fifty thousand followers, Turkmenmoda.vip account dedicated solely to Turkmen contemporary fashion has one-hundred-and-seventy thousand followers on Instagram. Make-up influencers like Sapargul Karayeva (@aynulya2707) had over one-hundred-and-seventy-five thousand followers on Instagram and often engages in online competitions to gather even more followers while living permanently in Turkmenistan. Even with the restrictions, the local online spaces and online users can find ways to access popular social media platforms like Instagram.

Cite this article: Kudaibergen DT (2023). Controlling Bazaar, Fighting Precarity, and Producing the Nation. *International Labor and Working-Class History* **103**, 103–125. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547923000194

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547923000194 Published online by Cambridge University Press