

THE FUNCTIONS OF THE PRAYER RUG IN THE CULTURE OF ISLAM

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The anthropological problem of interpreting artifacts has recently been the subject of considerable scholarly interest. Many scholars have emphasized the semantic significance of the everyday-life artefact as well as its semiotic essence. Nonetheless, the long-lasting enthusiasm for the philosophy of utilitarianism, everyday existence, is gradually giving way to the theory of an integral semiotic approach to the study of "material culture". The formation of the semiotic system in parallel with other "languages" of culture is a characteristic of the object universe (Antonova & Rayevsky 1991; Baiburin 1981). The method for deciphering the mythological codes on the basis of the object's structure analysis, its ornamental motives as well as its application is heavily used in contemporary science (Antonova & Rayevsky 1991: 223).

In the field of art theory, as far as the analysis of ornamental and craftsmanship works is concerned, there is a vulnerability within the concept that separates and singles out only two functions of the artefact, which are utilitarian and semiotic (Molok 1990). Another function of the applied arts is defined as "cosmos-creating", or active, which is left outside the scope of attention. An object is more than just a sign, or a symbol, even a microcosm representing some macrostructures; it is an active part of the universe that orders, systematises and organises the latter, as well as the space and man himself (Gamzatova 1988: 122-124; 1996).

In the Muslim prayer rug, the semantics of its ornamental and decorative motives and its overall composition is closely linked with such characteristics as materiality, efficacy, purposefulness and applicability. Here, a problem of the human sensory organisation becomes apparent, his universe is both real and semanticized. It should be noted that the expression forms of main ideas constitute the canon sanctified by the tradition.

Despite the great number of various stylistic and ornamental traditions in the culture of the peoples who follow Islam, it is possible to say that an archetype of the prayer rug had already developed, whose functions were not only determined by the ritual prescriptions, but also by a Muslim's world-view. The use of the prayer rug is connected with the religious prescription to pray in a ritually "clean" place.

The rug is not considered to be integral part of the prayer, and can be replaced by a piece of cloth, some raiment and other materials. However, the overall composition of the prayer rug represents the world-view and the aspirations of the Muslims, surrounding their rituals, with no connection to the use of the object itself.

The earliest known specimens of this type originate from the Ottoman manufactures of the 15th century (Batári 1994: 18). The few still existing rugs dated the 16th century are characterised by a fully developed iconography, which persisted down to the later periods of Muslim culture. The foundation of the pattern is the representation of an arch in various shapes, which imitates a niche (*mihrāb*) positioned in one of the walls of a mosque, with an apex pointing in the direction of Mecca (*qibla*), where the main sanctuary of the Muslims, *al-Ka'ba*, is situated. The prayer rug is spread out towards the *qibla*, by fixing the spatial orientation of a Muslim during the prayer.

The object of worship in *al-Ka'ba* is the so-called "black stone", fixed at the eastern corner of the sanctuary. According to Muslim belief, it is a sacred white stone given to Adam by Allah that turned black because of humanity's sins. Inside of it, Paradise could be seen. It was believed that those who were able to see Paradise would go there after their death. The prototypes of *al-Ka'ba* and the Koran are in the higher spheres of the Muslim Paradise.

The waters of the sacred well Zamzam, situated next to *al-Ka'ba* in the main mosque of Mecca, flow out of the wells of Paradise. This overwhelming desire for the divine, heavenly, during prayer is realised both in the mental sphere and, in particular, the spacial orientation of the praying person. This total desire underlies the symbolism of the prayer rug, the ways of its use, as well as the functions it performs.

One of the functions of the prayer rug is to isolate the praying person in a special place: in other words, to seclude him from the outer, ordinary world. At the same time, it organises the individual in this outer, quite real world. By this time, the individual is introduced to a certain spiritual sphere and is included in the *socium*, whose members are united by the same spiritual foundations¹.

In his article entitled, "The concept of space in the Islamic world" Nadgim ud-Din Bammatt describes this shared spacial and spiritual concentration during the prayer: "But where are these glances turned?... There is no mosque as such here, but this place seems to establish the existence of Islam territory in its synchronic and diachronic dimensions. In other words, it is a symbolic mosque whose task is to unite the religious community. The turning point in Mecca is simply a vertical line indicating the direction to God. Thus, belonging to Mecca is determined not by the space it occupies, or its history, and geography, but, in the first place, by the attitude towards this vertical axis that is supposed to remind the Muslims about other dimensions.

¹ Cf. one of the names of the Muslim community as "people of *qibla* and unity" (*Enc. Dict.*: 136) and the use of the word "*saġġāda*" (prayer rug) as a synonym of the terms referring to the sufi fraternity (*Enc. Dict.*: 203).

In any other place (but for Mecca), the Muslims are situated next to each other while praying. The rows are dense with no empty spaces between them, which explains the mosque's inner architecture. But what happens when the Muslims come to Mecca?

At the end of their journey, the circle is closed around the Ka'ba: Mecca is the only place in the world where all Muslims pray while standing around the sacred place. The straight line symbolically turns into the circle" (Bammat 1983: 49).

Jerusalem's Mosque *aṣ-Ṣaḥra*, or Mosque/Dome of the Rock, is the only Mosque where the *mihṛāb* is placed in the centre. The *mihṛāb* is situated on the sacred rock from which, according to Muslim belief, the prophet Muḥammad was resurrected (performed his "*mi'rāğ*"). The suggested Muslim concentration upon the centre of the mosque *Qubbat aṣ-Ṣaḥra* during their prayer is connected with the place where transcendence from one sphere into another occurs.

The function of the prayer rug as an object constructing either an environment or a perceivable world is not unique and refers to the general functions of carpets, not only in the East, but also in the Christian world. Apart from carpets found in mosques and palaces, the prayer rugs were an important part of the equipment of churches.

Thus, in the 6th century there were carpets in both the St. Sophia Cathedral of Constantinople and in Justinianus's palace, located in Constantinople (Dimand 1961: 7). A great number of Turkish carpets of the 17th and 18th centuries, including prayer carpets, originate from the Protestant Transsylvania (Dimand 1961: 16, 20). They were placed on altars, pulpits, and parapets of Catholic cathedrals (Batári 1994: 38). Oriental rugs were often portrayed in European painting, beginning with the Renaissance. In Renaissance painting, it is possible to single out quite a wide range of interesting plots for our study, where various kinds of carpets are used: for example, rugs on the threshold under the throne of Madonna and the Infant, carpets at the altar² as well as in the plot "The Annunciation". Such carpets appear in painting where we encounter the motives of sacred, heavenly, and miraculous. The use of "magical" objects (special in their exquisiteness, and stylistically non-characteristic of a given socium), brought from remote (that is, strange and almost fairy-like) countries, in the Biblical plots of Renaissance painting is one of the topics studied by modern art theory. No wonder that the attention to the image of the oriental carpet can form an interdisciplinary branch of these studies.

In the Persian miniatures of the 16th and 17th centuries, the Muslim carpet was an undeniable attribute of the royalty. Carpets could also make canopies (tents under which a ruler was sat), which, though unjustified from a functional point of view (the

² For the first time the altar covered with a rug belonging to the so-called "Konian Group" appears in the fresco by Giotto in the Arena Chapel in Padua (1304) (Dimand 1961: 12).

carpet is not the best means of sun protection), can probably be best explained by their symbolic loading, that is, the formation of a specific environment. In Nizāmī's "Seven Beauties", both the rug and the throne are the attributes of an ideal paradisiacal lover of the prince.

The rugs were spread out and rolled up on special occasions such as during a feast, or when guests were honoured at the palace.

The custom of decorating windows and balconies in cities with carpets during a feast was widely practised in the East. It is common knowledge that during a feast, in traditional societies which almost always depend upon a ritual, another, specific temporal and spacial situation is created; and applied arts in this instance play a significant role in its design. Interestingly enough, the custom of decorating windows and balconies with oriental rugs was clearly evident in the paintings of the Renaissance epoch.

For example, in Carlo Crivelli's work entitled, "The Annunciation", the carpets cover the balcony and the Triumphal Arch, while distorting the normal order of things, and emphasising the sacred, mysterious nature of the situation.

However, carpets are not the only integral part of the feast setting. For instance, A. Nester's analysis of the Northern Ukrainian carpets of late 19th — early 20th centuries, mentions that the population of the basin of the river Uzh decorated their houses with carpets both on the feast and funeral days, hanging them on poles. When meeting honoured guests, they spread out carpets on the road, as well as hanging them on the gates and roofs of the houses (Nester 1988: 191). In this case, the totally non-functional use of rugs is evidence of their semantic significance. Changing the habitual design and, consequently, its environmental structure, they construct their own universe around a given situation (in a number of cases — the situation of a feast).

One cannot help but casually mention the so-called "flying carpets" that take a fairy-tale hero from one spatial environment to another; for example, from our world to a fairy land. Interestingly enough, when the concept of flight by a carpet is introduced in some Daghestanian fairy-tales, the authors themselves do not always mean that a carpet flies through the air. Seeing the carpet on a glade, the hero only has to step on it, and a few minutes later, he finds himself in the fairy world.

Supposedly, the use of carpets in the funeral ceremony³ is directly connected with this function of the carpet as a mediator between different worlds. Moreover, the parallelism between both the symbolism and, in a number of instances, the overall

³ With the funeral ritual is connected the earliest existing specimen of pile knotted carpets found in one of the tombs at Pasyryk in the Altai mountains. The most ancient tradition to use carpets in the funeral ritual has persisted down to the present with a number of peoples.

composition of prayer rugs and Muslim tombs is evident. (The motif of the arch on stela, symbols like a lamp, a churah, the life tree, a jug, a comb).

The idea of transcendence, or entering is one of the fundamental themes which can be drawn from the symbolism of the prayer rug, where the arch (*mihṛāb*) is interpreted as a gate into a different religious realm, into Paradise. Moreover, this idea is characteristic of the *mihṛāb* which is shaped as a door in more than a number of mosques.

A reminder of the world where the Muslim strives for acceptance, is shown in the decorative and ornamental patterns of the prayer rug.

The theme of Paradise embodied in a carpet, is represented not only through symbolic elements, but is also clearly evident in its aesthetic qualities: in the beauty of colourful and rhythmical combinations, in the softness of wool, in the smoothness of both the shine and tinge of silk, in the radiance of golden threads. These wonderful artifacts, more than any other objects of applied arts, seem to correspond to the heavenly spheres. Perhaps, this is exactly the reason why, according to the Koranic descriptions, righteous people, dressed in green gowns, recline on embroidered couches and carpets in Paradise (55:54, 76; 56:15; 76:11-22). There are multiple variants on the idea of both Paradise and the upper spheres, all of which are developed on different levels, and can be most correctly described as entering a chain of complex associations. The carpet, as an artefact of the cultural heritage of Islam, is persistently associated with such ideas or images as a garden, greenery, grass, spring, and, most significantly, with the Paradise Gardens motif.

According to a legend, the first carpet, the so-called "Spring Carpet of an Chosroes" was made on the order of the Sasanian king Chosroes I (531-579). (This conclusion is usually made upon the authority of at-Ṭabarī and other noteworthy historians.) As that famous ruler wanted, the carpet did remind him of a spring garden in its full blossomed state in the middle of winter. The carpet was also worked in with pearls and jewels, both of which, as well as the spring garden motif, scholars associate with the so-called "garden scheme" archetype. Such an iconography was inspired by the description of the Paradise Gardens in the Koran.

In the Koranic *sūra* "*Rahmān*", four Paradise Gardens are fully described. In the description, there is a well in each of the gardens. The main reservoir of Paradise is Kawṭar, where all the heavenly rivers flow down. Cedar trees and the so-called "cider of the top limit", the main paradise tree, grow there (53:13-15).

The prayer rug from the collection of the temple artifacts in Mešhed (Bennett 1982: 72) completely follows this description. In the arch, there are two channels perpendicular to each other that divide the whole square into four separate gardens, among flowers and trees around which different kinds of birds are flying. In two upper gardens, two cypress trees grow symmetrically to each other, the birds are sitting on both the top of the trees and their branches. At the crossing point of the channels, there is a particular basin with ducks and fish swimming around in it. The

range of images used in this rug matches the symbolic images popular in Persian literature: a gate-arch, a garden, a pond with ducks, birds, cypress trees with a couple of birds on each tree. All of these images were successfully analyzed by Dr. Sh. M. Shukurov, when he closely studied the miniatures of 16th century, the "Contest of Two Sages" for the "Mystery Treasury" created by Nizāmī. The duck, for example, is an embodiment of complete innocence and purity (Shukurov 1988: 105). Cypress trees become synonymous with the "Life Tree" (Shukurov 1988: 107). We should emphasize a peculiarity in the arrangement of images on the prayer rug: the symmetrical cypress trees in the upper gardens emphasize and set the tone for the general mirror symmetry of the composition. Numerous gardens (six, eight) are usually represented on non-prayer "garden rugs", and there is no symmetrical composition.

Two further motives canonical for the prayer rug are linked with idea of Paradise – the "Life Tree" (the prototype of which is in the Paradise) and a vase with flowers. It was very common for Islam, as well as for other ancient cultures and folklore, to view the "World Tree" as some vertical line which connects different spheres. The symmetrically organised floral ornament, typical of prayer rugs, reminds us of this Tree.

Mirror symmetry is one of the main principles of composition used for the creation of prayer rug. An interesting deviation from the correct positioning of the inscription in accordance with this principle can be seen on the silk curtain of 1626, from the collection of Shirin of Imam Ali at an-Napt (Aga-Oglu 1994: 24, table XVIII), with the reproduction of the basic composition of the prayer rug and the usual, symmetrically arranged, artistic images: vases, trees, birds, the basin with fish and ducks, clouds, and so forth. The inscription from the Holy Koran on the left border, which reproduces *sūra* 2:25, is repeated in reverse on the right one (Aga-Oglu 1994: 24). In some groups of rugs (particularly Turkman and Baluchi), the symmetry is particularly emphasized by placing two spiral-like forms curved into different shapes on the top of the arrow-like end of the *mihṛāb* arch. Geometrical, symmetrically arranged double motives are typical of the prayer rugs of the Caucasus. On Caucasian and Turkish rugs, we encounter another variant of the artistic motive which shows their symmetrical structure, namely pictures of right and left hands placed respectively in the upper part of the rug on both sides of the arch.

The idea of the world in harmony, important for the meaning of the prayer rug, is realised in a scheme of composition relating to one of the main structures of the human body.

One of the most significant motives used in the symbolic system of Persian and Turkish rugs and the rugs of Asia Minor, was the lamp placed in the upper part of the arch. In the Islamic cultural tradition, such notions as lamp—light—love—thought—knowledge—truth—God are bound together (see Shidfar 1991; Loewa 1988). The nature of these connections is based on the images of *sūra* "an-Nūr":

“Allah is the Light / Of the heavens and the earth. / The parable of His Light / Is as if there were a niche, / And within it a Lamp: / The Lamp enclosed in Glass: / The Glass as it were / A brilliant star: / Lit from a blessed Tree, / An Olive, neither of the East nor of the West. / Whose Oil is well-nigh / Luminous, / Though sire scarce touched it: / Light upon Light! / Allah doth guide / Whom He will / To His Light: / Allah doth set forth Parables / For man: And Allah: / Doth know all things.”

The lamp in the arch-niche of the prayer rug broadens and completes the range of the Muslim's spiritual dreams. Here, at the symbolic border of two worlds, at the threshold — gate — door, the light appears to be an all-embracing, and, at the same time, not fully comprehensible metaphor.

On the metaphoric level, real lamps in mosques and *mihṛābs* embody the image of light. Light, as one of the basic categories of Ṣūfī philosophy and poetry, has become the foundation for the mystical image of the universe, which is being developed by Ṣūfī poets as-Suhrawardī and Ibn al-ʿArabī; where, along with the doctrine of the “Unity of the Light”, there is a division between different levels of the angelic light and the natural form of light emanation (Netton 1987).

Even in the earliest of the known rugs of the 16th century, we can trace the principle of composition which is later preserved in this type of rugs and cannot be applied anywhere else. The main field placed in the *mihṛāb* arch is absolutely free from decor, despite the usually magnificent and very rich decoration on the border, as well as on three-cornered sectors above the arch. The “dislike for emptiness” in the applied arts of the Muslim peoples, the desire to fill space with an ornament has often been noticed by researchers. It is possible to understand the semantics of this device only in the context of the specific ideological attitudes of the Muslims, for example, in the context of such a category as the “concealment of the mysterious”, and the image of the curtain connected within it (Shukurov 1989).

When analysing the phenomenon of the “concealment of the face” in medieval Islamic culture, Dr. Sh. M. Shukurov interprets this problem as follows: “The curtain is there to mark the borderline between expressible and inexpressible, material and spiritual, phenomenal and transcendental. As a mediator between the two realities, the curtain optimally separates and positions them in a hierarchical structure, but at the same time brings closely together these two aspects to the same image. We would also like to note that the curtain is not just a sign which is described by such terms as *wrat* and *niṣān*; it is rather a sacred sign, sign-symbol (*ʿalāma*) which embraces and manifests the whole complex of phenomena in the world (*ʿālam*), and, at the same time, conceals something more essential: secret, inexpressible, incomprehensible” (Shukurov 1989: 254). The absence of both image and sign is, in this context, the highest sign as the researcher sees it: “The absence of real, sensually comprehensible signs is, nevertheless, vivid evidence of a symbolic operation which grips the highest, alien dimensions (both qualitative and quantitative), objects of comprehension. The

emptiness is always meaningful, it is symbolic" (Shukurov 1989: 254-255). So, the emptiness of the inner field of the *mihṛāb* arch exactly defines the basic conception, the ideal nature of the prayer rug.

The symbolic system of the colours of the inner field of the *mihṛāb* arch serves the same purpose. Green, red, white (cream) are the most frequently used colours, each of which is connected with certain symbols: green is the colour of Paradise, red is the royal colour, white bears no symbolic meaning, but at the same time, it contains the whole spectrum of colours; it is the analogy of light. White is used in prayer rugs both independently and as a background for the motive of the "Life Tree". It is possible to find other colours in all types of rugs, but white is rarely used in non-prayer rugs. Thus, white backgrounds were used in Turkmen *asmaldyk*-rugs for the decoration of the camel which carries the bride to the groom's house during a wedding. The ritual symbolic meaning of the wedding as a transitional ceremony is well-known.

It is a widely known fact that the white colour was sanctified and used in ritual situations (wedding, mourning) among many peoples of the world. The Muslims dress in white when they go on a *ḥaǧǧ* (pilgrimage) to Mecca. On Uzbek rugs, it is sometimes possible to see a small white spot which completely breaks out of the general compositional structure of the rug; in accordance with popular beliefs, it protects the rug from the evil eye; therefore, this spot has the powers of the supernatural world. (One could not help but note and remember here the steady image used in different films by A. Tarkovsky to describe the appearance of the "lyrical character": the round asymmetric spot of grey hair.)

Practically all symbolic motives and compositional principles used to decorate the analysed rugs are various levels of the same problem and the same idea; they are logical rows, where the real absence of one component presupposes its mental presence. Also, the possible absence of the rug in the process of praying presupposes the presence of the ideas realised in it. The archaic tradition allotted the subjects of applied arts with magical structural power, and placed the reality and the effectiveness of the purely spiritual, mental and ethic aspirations of a human being, which had priority in later religious beliefs, under their command.

Here we would draw a line of distinction between the meaning of the artefact in pagan mentality and in Islamic religious consciousness. In the system of archaic beliefs, the artefact has certain functions and abilities. It is impossible to perform a ritual, to be "normally" born, to get married, to heal, to die "normally", without a particular artefact or a particular manipulation with it; but in monotheistic religious traditions, there is a certain primacy of all things spiritual and intellectual. A spiritual aspiration is the basis for the right organisation of a person, the basis for performing a prayer.

In our opinion, however, the specific intellectual trend in Islamic culture should not be regarded absolute. A beautiful artefact and form are meaningful for the

Muslim. The beautiful external form is the evidence of the inner essence. The delight, the admiration of the real world is one of the foundations of Oriental poetry. Moreover, the concrete, sensual aspiration and delight in Paradise are typical of Koranic descriptions.

It should be noted that beautiful green cloths of righteous people, adornments, rugs are also mentioned in the Koran, along with the description of gardens, fruits, and basins (55:54, 76; 56:15; 76:11-22). Ideal objects correspond to the ideal world, just as an ideal form calls for an ideal essence. People communicate and feel with their hearts the total divine harmony which reigns in the universe, exactly through this sensual, emotional experience of the beauty of the cosmos and cultural phenomena.

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