

A CROSS-CULTURAL STUDY OF MOTIF SEMIOTICS IN IRANIAN QASHQAI AND SERBIAN PIROT KILIMS

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Abstract: Kilims, while primarily functional as floor coverings, hold deep cultural, artistic, and aesthetic significance. The design, patterns, and motifs on these traditional woven floor coverings, in addition to their beauty and artistic features, reflect beliefs, myths, and cultural heritage, preserving the community's identity across generations. This paper aims to review the rich tradition of kilim weaving and study the motifs, symbols, and patterns found within the kilims of Qashqai nomads in Iran and those of the Pirot region in Serbia. This research employs a cultural semiotics framework, based on "The Theory of Semiotics," to analyze and compare placements, types and connotative meanings of motifs within these two regions. The research adopts a descriptive-analytical methodology, involving developing a corpus (database) of motifs from sample kilims. To set up the corpus, a random sample of 80 kilim photos was gathered, mainly from catalogs and books, consisting of 40 images of Qashqai kilims and 40 images of Pirot kilims. Each kilim was reviewed to detect motifs using an annotation model. A tagset of motifs was then developed to classify and annotate each motif based on its region, placement, type, connotative meanings, and thematic categories. The corpus reports support various forms of analysis, including statistical, descriptive, and comparative assessments. The findings indicate that while Qashqai and Pirot kilims feature some common motifs, the symbolic and semiotic meanings linked to these motifs differ significantly, reflecting unique ways of understanding within each cultural context. The comparative analysis of motifs also indicates cultural similarities and differences rooted in each region's unique beliefs, customs, and myths. The research is divided into four sections: the first provides an introduction to the tradition of kilim weaving, focusing on practices among the Qashqai tribes of Iran and the Pirot region of Serbia; the second outlines the theoretical framework and research methodology; the third discusses the motif classification, annotation schema, and development of the tagset; and the final section presents a comparative analysis of motifs and their representations in kilims from each region. By identifying, classifying and analyzing kilim motifs as a visual language that reflects cultural identity, historical continuity, and regional distinctions, this study aims to contribute to the broader field of cultural studies in general and cultural semiotics in particular.

Keywords: kilim motifs, semiotics, cultural studies, Iranian Qashqai kilims, Serbian Pirot kilims.

Field: Humanities

1. INTRODUCTION

The kilim simply defined as "a flat woven rug or rug without a knotted pile" (Hull & Bernard, 1997, p. 5), is considered one of the oldest human handwoven cultural resources. Finding the exact origin of weaving kilims is not clear, however, since the oldest floor weaving the Pazyryk Rug, dated around the 4th-3rd centuries B.C., has been found in a valley with this name in Siberia (Muccillo De Medeiros & De Medeiros, 2021, p. 160), it can be assumed that kilims as a specific type of floor weaving for purposes of protection from the cold winters and for decorations in tents, were likely developed by nomadic peoples in the East, possibly on the plains of Central Asia, several thousand years ago (Yavari, 2014, p. 12). However, due to their thinner and weaker texture compared to carpets, and their lower durability, there are no known surviving examples of preserved kilims. Despite their simple texture, the patterns and motifs on kilims add artistic, aesthetic, and symbolic value. In general, the patterns and motifs of kilims are determined by the weaver's creativity and memory. Historically, particularly among nomadic and rural communities, kilims were woven without a predetermined design plan, relying instead on the weaver's recollection and improvisation. Kilim motifs and patterns are typically composed of geometric designs that represent specific shapes and symbols, which often remain consistent over time, preserving the traditional cultural identity of the ethnic groups that create them. This paper investigates the rich tradition of kilim weaving in two regions: the Qashqai nomads of Iran's Fars province and the Serbian city of Pirot. It aims to compare the motifs, patterns, and symbols of kilims from these regions using semiotic anthropology to interpret cultural beliefs, customs, and traditions embedded in these designs. By applying semiotics and analyzing the connotative meanings of motifs, this study examines how different cultures conceptualize and express ideas through kilim motifs, highlighting both cultural connections and distinctions between Persian and Serbian traditions in the use of motifs on kilims.

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1.1. THE ART OF KILIM WEAVING IN IRAN AND SERBIA

In Iran, kilims are woven extensively due to the nomadic lifestyles of various ethnic groups, whereas in Serbia, the city of Pirot serves as a significant center for kilim production, mainly due to settled communities. Like Persian carpet weaving, which is considered one of the unique arts of Iranians with a history going back over two thousand years, kilim weaving also has a deep-rooted tradition in Iran. Kilims in Iran are woven in every corner of the country, including Khorasan, Baluchistan, Fars, Kurdistan, Azerbaijan, and other provinces. Each region has its own unique style, method of weaving, and way of depicting patterns and motifs. Also, among the most famous nomadic regions (or tribes) in Iran, known for their unique woven kilims and artistic designs, patterns, and motifs, are the Qashqai, Bakhtiari, Shahsavan, Lori, Harsin, Kermanshah, Sene, Baluch, and Khamse. The Qashqai is one of the largest tribes in Iran, primarily residing in the Fars province in the southwest of the country, and they predominantly speak Turkish. According to Yavari (2014, p. 96), the origin of this tribe can be traced back to the 16th century, when they were part of the Turkish-speaking armies that invaded northern Iran, and as a result, some Qashqai kilim designs can be related to kilims of the Caucasus. Qashqai kilims are one of the most famous kilims in Iran. The main characteristics of Qashqai kilims that make them highly famous in Iran and worldwide, are their handwoven craftsmanship, the use of natural dyes, exceptional durability, and beautifully designed patterns and motifs. According to Davar and Momenian (2006, p. 50) "the Qashqai are well-known for their exceptional artistry and expertise in wool dyeing, their mastery of producing vibrant and diverse colors, and their remarkable skill in various kilim weaving techniques."

In Serbia, the term "kilim" (in Serbian, "Ćilim") has been used since the 16th century, reflecting its introduction following the arrival of the Turks in the Balkans and the subsequent influence of the oriental lifestyle in the region. The most worldwide well-known kilims of Serbia are from "Pirot", a city in the southeast of Serbia, and in some other parts of the country especially in Vojvodina the art of kilim weaving has its own tradition. The origin of Pirot kilim weaving is not entirely clear, making it difficult to determine its exact beginnings. According to Velkova (2020, p. 29), "kilim-making came to Pirot from east and Pirot Turks first started making kilims after designs they had brought from their homeland, Asia Minor". Ćirić (1954, p. 115) also indicates the unknown origin of Pirot kilim and suggests that the origin and early development of Pirot's kilim production were likely determined by the Turkish period. Existing research confirms that the late 18th and 19th century was undoubtedly a period of significant development for this craft (Cvetković, 2015, p. 66; Petković & Vlatković, 1996, pp. 17, 22). Frfulanović-Šomođi et al. (2020, p. 45) indicated that the Pirot kilim, as a brand, was recognized by the Serbian state during the second half of the 19th century as an authentic product of folk craftsmanship. It was presented at numerous fairs across European capitals starting in the early 20th century, introducing a new perspective on the culture and artistic creations of previously unknown women.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS AND METHODOLOGY

While kilims are primarily used as floor coverings, their designs, patterns, and motifs can reflect the beliefs and myths of the weavers, serving as a means to preserve and transfer these cultural expressions to future generations. Ateş (2004, p. 44-45) indicates that, for centuries, kilims were woven with specific symbolic patterns to ward off natural calamities like storms, floods, extreme heat or cold, death, or wild animals, which were believed to be sent by the gods. Prior to this tradition, such symbols were inscribed on rocks or could even be found on other handicrafts, such as plates and jars. Research on kilims in the late 19th century reveals that, for centuries, women have used kilims as mediums to express their emotions, including love, death, and fear, through the patterns and motifs they wove. This practice emerged because women were the primary weavers while men were engaged in hunting or warfare. Therefore, it is evident that a kilim carries its own unique "sub-text," offering a wealth of intellectual, artistic, emotional, and sensory messages. Anquetil (1994, p. 27). As such, kilims serve as cultural and psychological chronicles of society, providing insights into the culture and family structures of past eras. To study and analyze the symbols, patterns, and particularly the motifs depicted on Qashqai and Pirot kilims, this research adopts "The Theory of Semiotics" as its theoretical framework. According to Niu, M. (2020, p. 4), "Semiotics is the study of signs and their processes, including the relationships between the sign, its object, and the interpretant. It explores the conceptual connections between semiotics and semiosis, aiming to clarify the roles and connotations of signs in meaning-making." This study also employs the theoretical framework of "Semiotic Anthropology" to conduct a comparative analysis of the motifs on Qashqai kilims of Iran and Pirot kilims of Serbia. Semiotic Anthropology as an approach deals with symbolic and conventional meanings through analyzing a broader contextual framework, which can be called "a society". Therefore,

semiotic anthropology studies how signs and symbols are used in societies, focusing on their cultural and historical backgrounds. In this regard, based on Mertz (2007, p. 340), Semiotic Anthropology employs language, culture and society to analyze how language and other systems of human communication contribute to the reproduction, transmission, and transformation of culture. Motifs on kilims, as symbolic signs, could represent the cultural views, customs and traditions, beliefs and attitudes towards the life, world and the society of the weavers in particular and a tribe or an ethnic group in general. Therefore, this study adopts two theoretical frameworks: semiotics to identify and define the connotative meanings of motifs, and social semiotics to conduct a comparative analysis of the motifs from the Qashqai and Pirot regions. The aim is to explore the cultural interactions, similarities, and differences between these two regions, situating the research within the field of "Cultural Studies." The methodology comprises three main phases: (1) Constructing a comprehensive database of motifs, (2) Developing an annotation model to classify and analyze motifs, and (3) Conducting statistical, descriptive, and comparative analyses of the motifs found on Qashqai and Pirot kilims. In the first phase, the focus was on constructing a kilim motif corpus (database) through three stages. First, motifs were collected by reviewing catalogs of Iranian and Serbian kilims, with 80 kilim pictures randomly selected, 40 from each region. Second, standards for motif annotation were established to ensure consistency in identifying the diverse forms that motifs can take. Third, a Microsoft Excel database was created to store and manage the collected data after finalizing the standards and patterns. In the second phase, a model for motif annotation was proposed in two stages, as follows: First, a classification scheme was developed to categorize the most common motifs on kilims based on motif regions (originality of motifs), motif placements (where motifs are located on the kilims, whether in the borders or the center), motif types, and their symbolic meanings. Second, based on this scheme, a tagset was created, named the Kilim Motif Tagset (KMT), classifying motifs by region, placement, type, connotative, and thematic meanings. Finally, in the third phase, data analysis was performed using statistical, descriptive, and comparative methods. Quantitative analysis interpreted findings through statistical methods applied to the tagset results. Qualitative analysis explored the similarities and differences between Iranian and Serbian kilim motifs, guided by Semiotic Theory. This resulted in a comparative analysis, based on Semiotic Anthropology, which provided a detailed examination of motifs from both cultures, highlighting shared themes and unique elements in Iranian Qashqai and Serbian Pirot kilims.

2.1. DEVELOPING A MODEL FOR MOTIF ANNOTATION

After setting up the corpus and collecting the sample kilims pictures, in the second phase, the annotation model was established. The primary criterion for determining the annotation model is the establishment of a theoretical framework of semiotics that allows for the interpretation and meaning of motifs. For this purpose, the Barthes' semiotic theory was chosen as the scheme for motif annotation. This theory, as outlined by Jadou and Ghabra (2021, p. 472), focuses on three levels: denotation, which refers to the literal meaning; connotation, which relates to cultural and mental concepts; and mythology, which reflects historical and cultural ideologies embedded in signs. Based on this theoretical framework, after identifying the kilim motifs and adding them to the corpus, they are classified in two stages: first, by their formal-structural shape (denotation), referred to as the type of motifs; and second, by their symbolic meanings, referred to as the connotative meaning. Therefore, in terms of shape and structural forms, the motifs are categorized and annotated into four types, similar to some previous studies, including Suri (2018, p. 65), which are as follows: (1) Human-Representative Motifs: This type of motif includes human figures and specific body parts like hands, feet, or faces. (2) Animal-Representative Motifs: This group features motifs representing various animals, real or mythical, such as turtles, scorpions, or birds (3) Plant-Representative Motifs: This group includes motifs depicting botanical elements such as flowers, leaves, vines, or trees. (4) Geometric and Abstract Motifs: These motifs, which are the most common and frequent, are characterized by geometric shapes, abstract forms or repetitive arrangements, such as stars and zigzags.

In terms of symbolic or connotative meaning, motifs were classified based on Barthes' theory, referred to as "the second-order semiotic system". This system uses the first-order signification as its foundation, and while the first-order signification, annotated here as "Motif", provides a sign with denotation, or a literal meaning, the second-order signification, annotated as Connotative Meaning, adds connotative or symbolic meaning, which includes cultural and ideological concepts.

For instance, in Qashqai kilims, the "Ram's Horn" motif is classified as an Animal-Representative motif, symbolizes fertility (connotative meaning) or in Pirot kilims, the "Devil's Knee" (Vražko kolena) identified as a Geometric motif (denotative) which, according to Živadinović (2022, p. 79) it is one of the oldest symbols in pre-Christian Slavic mythology and is believed to provide strength, fearlessness and

bravery and luck in battle. It also serves as defense against any evil, signifies protection (connotative meaning). It is also worth noting that the origins of many motifs and symbols are rooted in ancient myths, either specific to a particular culture or borrowed and exchanged between cultures. These motifs appear not only on woven artifacts such as carpets and kilims but also, in other handicrafts like vessels, goblets, and talismans. Therefore, understanding their mythological significance is also essential for analyzing the meaning of motifs.

Considering the diverse connotative meanings of motifs and the need for consistent analysis, developing a thematic classification outline became essential. This outline organized motifs with shared connotative meanings, providing a basis for comparative analysis within the framework of Semiotic Anthropology. Therefore, five primary thematic domains were defined to categorize motifs: 1) Spirituality and the Divine, 2) Protection and Power, 3) Life and Nature, 4) Cultural Identity and Social Values, and 5) Fertility and Renewal. This outline facilitates a more organized and meaningful analysis of motifs, emphasizing symbolic connections within each category. Based on the motif annotation scheme and classification, a Kilim Motif Tagset (KMT) has been created. Based on the motif annotation scheme and classification, a Kilim Motif Tagset (KMT) has been developed. This tagset categorizes motif regions, motif placements, motif types, and their connotations. Furthermore, each motif is assigned a unique ID code to ensure precise identification. The tagset helps structure the research and ensures consistency, making it easier to analyze the data both quantitatively and qualitatively. Table 1 presents the classification of motifs and their descriptions, which form the foundation for developing the tagset.

Table 1. Classification of Motifs and Their Descriptions

Classification	Total	Description
Motif Regions	2	Iran (Qashqai), Serbia (Pirot)
Motif Placements	2	Borders, Center
Motif Types	4	Human, Animal, Plants, Geometric
Motifs	66	<i>Qashqai motifs and patterns:</i> Alma Gol (Apple Flower), Alaqord (Two-Colored Wolf), Broken Lines, Chahār Khāl (Four Spots), Checkered, Comb, Crab, Cross (Mithraic Swastika), Deer, Double Cross, Finger, Hook (S), Interconnected Triangles, It-al (Dog's Paw), Kheshti (Brick), Khorāsāni Motif (Positive and Negative Chicken-head), Langaj, Modākkel (Sky Gateway), Mohramāt (Striped Patterns), Peacock, Qashqai Border (Domino Beads), Qezel Qeychi (Eight-Pointed Star), Ram's Horn, Scissors, Semi-Mo'aqali, Sorme-dān (Diamond Star), Stepped Border, Wild Goat, Woman. <i>Pirot motifs and patterns:</i> Apron, Birdie (Tiče), Bombs (Bombe), Chair (Stolica), Comb, Cross, Crown Prince, Čurlinjak, Devil's Knee (Vraško koleno), Dove (Gugutka), Dragon, Eye (Očilo), Fetter (Bibice), Flame, French Candies (Francuske bombone), Fruit, German Box, Hook (Čendeli), Kuveri (Smirna Pattern), Lion Paws, Little Devils (Đavolčići), Lizard (Gušter), Mara Convent, Mihrab, Mirror, Octopus (Atapot), Opanak Shoes, Perched Doves, Queen's Sleeve, Rašić's Pattern, Roses (Đulovi), Sofra (Sovra), Soldier, Soveljka (Shuttle), Tree of Life, Tulip, Turtle (Kornjača/Zeljka).
Motif Connotative Meanings	46	Abundance, Adaptability, Affection, Authority, Bad luck, Beauty, Birth of Mehr, Blessing, Connection, Cycle, Devotion, Duality, Elegance, Eternity, Faithfulness, Femininity, Fertility, Freedom, Happiness, Honor, Immortality, Marriage, Masculinity, Messenger, Monarchy, Mountain, Nobility, Passion (love), Peace, Power, Protection, Rain, Rebirth, Running water, Sacred Space, Sky entrances, Spirituality, Strength, Sun, Support, Tolerance, Tradition, Truth, Unity, Water, Wealth.
Motif Thematic Categories	5	Spirituality and Divine, Protection and Power, Life and Nature, Cultural Identity and Social Values, Fertility and Renewal

Source: Authors

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The selected motifs from Qashqai and Pirot kilims were carefully categorized and tagged using a structured framework. Therefore, a total of 40 kilims were analyzed from each region (80 kilims in total), with 150 tags assigned to each, and a tagset of 300 motifs was developed based on the annotation model of the research. The motif classification was organized into three main categories: Motif Placement, Motif Types, and Thematic Categories. The detailed distribution of motif tags is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Distribution of Motif Tags in the Corpus

Classifications	Motif Tags	Qashqai Kilims	Pirot Kilims
Motif Placement	Motif in Border	30 (20%)	28 (19%)
	Motif in Center	120 (80%)	122 (81%)
Total tags	2 Groups	150 (100%)	150 (100%)
Motif Types	Geometric and Abstract Motifs	68 (45%)	82 (54%)
	Animal Motifs	45 (30%)	37 (25%)
	Plant Motifs	31 (21%)	24 (16%)
	Human Motifs	6 (4%)	7 (5%)
Total tags	4 Groups	150 (100%)	150 (100%)
Motif Thematic Categories	Spirituality and Divine	41 (27%)	24 (16%)
	Fertility and Renewal	16 (11%)	21 (14%)
	Life and Nature	44 (29%)	8 (5%)
	Protection and Power	28 (19%)	42 (28%)
	Cultural Identity and Social Values	21 (14%)	55 (37%)
Total tags	5 Groups	150 (100%)	150 (100%)

Source: Authors

Based on the quantitative data above and the examination of motifs in Qashqai and Pirot kilims, a descriptive analysis can be made in three sections:

A) Placement of Motifs: The composition and arrangement of motifs on each kilim are significant as they determine the structure of the artwork. Both regions predominantly focus on central motifs, which serve as the focal point in kilim design. In Qashqai kilims, 80% of motifs are positioned centrally, and similarly, in Pirot kilims, this figure is 81%. Border motifs are slightly more prevalent in Qashqai kilims (20% compared to 19%), reflecting greater attention by Qashqai weavers to framing the overall design. Border motifs are often arranged as patterns, with the most prominent ones in this research corpus in Qashqai kilims include the Madākhāl border (Marvel of Peru, also known as Laleh Abbasi flowers in Persian, which appear as positive and negative shapes in ancient Iranian arts, with the connotative meaning of the entrance to the sky, and Langaj, with the connotative meaning of the throne gateway (enlightenment or spiritual perfection). On the other hand, in Pirot kilims, the most prominent border motif identified in the research corpus was Kornjača/Zeljka (turtle), a widely recognized pattern in Pirot kilims. It conveys the connotative meaning of durability and longevity while also representing fertility, a healthy life, and protection from danger. Another notable motif, Cendeli, depicts a grappling hook mounted on a wooden pole, traditionally used for hanging items, connoting support and connection.

B) Type of Motifs: The corpus reports indicate that the most common types of motifs are geometric and abstract. In arts and handicrafts, especially in tribal and rural weavings, abstraction and stylization are the dominant forms of representation. The use of geometric shapes is more frequent due to their simplicity and symmetry, resulting in a final design with clear geometric order. Although these motifs are the most frequent in both Qashqai and Pirot kilims, they are more prominent in Pirot kilims (55%), reflecting a focus on symmetry and weaving precision, which are distinctive features of Pirot kilims and the Balkan region. On the other hand, animal and plant motifs are more abundant in Qashqai kilims, highlighting their deep connection with nature, likely due to the nomadic lifestyle of these communities and their harmony with the natural environment. In both regions, human-related motifs are the least common, likely due to the complexity of designing and weaving such motifs and a preference for symbolism over figurative representations.

C) Thematic Categorization of Motifs: A crucial part of this analysis relates to the connotative meanings and thematic categories of the motifs. The statistical data reveal distinct thematic differences between the motifs in the two regions. In Qashqai kilims, motifs related to the category of Spirituality and Divine (27%) and Life and Nature (29%) are the most frequent. Conversely, in Pirot kilims, the highest numbers of motifs are seen in the themes of Cultural Identity and Social Values (37%) and Protection and Power (28%). This highlights the focus of Qashqai kilims on spiritual themes, reflecting the beliefs and values of the Qashqai tribes, as well as motifs linked to nature, emphasizing their attention to such elements. On the other hand, Pirot kilims, with motifs emphasizing power, protection, and collective identity, hold a special place in the culture and history of Serbia and serve as symbols of home and family

in the daily lives of its people.

Overall, it can be concluded that cultural, social, and geographical factors, along with historical, mythological influences and intercultural exchanges, significantly influence the development and frequency of kilim motifs in these two different regions. This indicates a strong connection between the motifs used in kilims and the social and cultural traditions of the communities that produce them. The most frequent Qashqai kilim motifs within the research corpus include It-al (Dog's paw), Khorāsāni, (Birds' head), with their connotative meaning linked to the concept of "rain/seeking rain" (Parham, 1991, p. 42). These motifs fall under the thematic category of Life and Nature. Additionally, Madākheh (Marvel of Peru) and Sorme-dān (Diamond Star), with their connotative meaning of "eternity" belong to the thematic category of Spirituality and Divine. In Serbian Pirot kilims, the most common motifs found in the corpus are the Turtle (Kornjača/Željka), with the connotative meaning of longevity and fertility (Živadinović (2022, p. 85), falling under the thematic category of Fertility and Renewal. Moreover, the Hook (Čendeli) and Devil's Knee (Vraško koleno) convey the connotative meaning of "support and protection" under the thematic category of Protection and Power, while the Sofra reflects the connotative meaning of "unity" under the thematic category of Cultural Identity and Social Values.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This comparative study, grounded in the theoretical frameworks of semiotics and semiotic anthropology, uses both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to identify, categorize, and analyze the similarities and differences in the motifs of kilims from Qashqai, Iran, and Pirot, Serbia. Kilim weaving has a much longer history in Central Asia, Iran, the Caucasus, and Anatolia than in Pirot, suggesting that the motifs of Pirot kilims were influenced by neighboring regions, particularly Anatolia and the Caucasus. On the other hand, the migratory lifestyle of Qashqai nomads across northern and central Iran, combined with their interactions with the Caucasus, has resulted in shared features between Qashqai and Pirot kilims. Despite these similarities, the motifs, designs, and patterns in each region reflect distinct cultural contexts. Both Qashqai and Pirot kilims focus on central motifs and geometric designs, but their themes differ significantly. Qashqai kilims emphasize nature, animals, and spirituality, rooted in the nomads' mystical and migratory heritage. In contrast, Pirot kilims focus on geometric abstraction, cultural identity, and protective symbols, deeply tied to Serbian local traditions. These differences highlight the diverse cultural expressions shown through kilim weaving in the two regions. Further research into kilims from other regions, such as Central Asia, Anatolia, and the Caucasus, could provide a more complete understanding of shared and unique motifs, helping to explain how ancient trade routes, like the Silk Road, influenced their development. The collection and documentation of these motifs, along with identifying their connotative, symbolic, and mythological meanings, are essential for preserving the cultural and artistic heritage of each region. Conducting more extensive and comparative studies will improve the understanding of different cultures and uncover the shared values that connect them.

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