Carpet weaving in Ladakh and the influence of Sonam Paljor

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Marco Pallis, one of the few scholars of Ladakh to write about material culture there in the first part of the twentieth century, made a passing reference in his book, Peaks and Lamas, that has long interested me in my research on textiles in the region: “…at Kalatze [Khalatse],…lived the only man with any reputation for weaving rugs” (1946: 296). Who was this man, albeit nameless, and why did Pallis single him out? Presumably he must have been living and making carpets in Khalatse when Pallis passed through the village in 1933.

In an essay entitled “The Tibetan Carpet Weaver”, Walter Asboe also writes about a carpet weaver in “…the upper reaches of the Indus,…” as “…the only one of his kind in the whole of Little Tibet” (1950: 36). It is most likely that both Asboe and Pallis are referring to the same person, a man I have been able to identify as one Sonam Paljor. This paper discusses carpet weaving in Ladakh and the importance of his role in the development of this craft.

Carpets in Ladakh

Carpets (tsug-gdan or just gdan) are a ubiquitous sight throughout Ladakh. As floor coverings they serve a decorative purpose as well as providing warmth in homes and tents, monasteries and mosques. They are used as sleeping mats and to sit on whilst doing a number of household chores. The best rugs are kept for guests or used as floor coverings in private chapels. Typically made in sizes of three by six feet, smaller rugs serve as saddle coverings, while longer ones are used in monasteries for monks to sit on while they pray. Usually woven from wool, with a thick pile, their deep colours and simple geometric designs give them their own appeal.

1 Walter Asboe was an English missionary with the Moravian Mission, who lived in Ladakh from 1939 to 1947.
Until about the 1930s, carpets or rugs using the knotted pile technique were mainly made by nomadic women in north-eastern Ladakh (Figure 1). These were woven on backstrap looms in three equal strips that were later stitched together (for a description on nomadic carpet weaving see Ahmed 2002: 122–24). The edges were either hemmed or knotted with woollen fringes. The fibre used was sheep and/or yak wool; acrylic and cotton yarns were not widely used until the 1950s. Nowadays, thick cotton thread is generally used for the warp. Because of the extensive colour palette offered by acrylic yarns they are widely used for weaving designs into the rugs.

While it is not known when rugs were first made on the backstrap loom in Ladakh, it is certain that single piece carpets or rugs woven on the vertical frame loom were largely unknown before the first part of the twentieth century. Pallis wrote about this and Tonyot Shah, whom

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2 Myers also mentions that the Tibetans at quite an early date “...must have begun to weave a type of pile textile, perhaps on a simple backstrap loom...” (1984: 22).

3 Kuløy suggests that while it is difficult to date the origin of weaving in general in Tibet, the production techniques of the carpet-making tradition can be dated back at least to the fifth century A.D. As evidence of this he mentions that a “10th Century silk thanka or temple banner from the Tunhwang caves shows two rugs or mats...”