

FELT CLOTHING IN AZERBAIJANI CULTURAL HERITAGE

*Primitive form of yapinji.
Bronze figure, BC, 7th century*

Felt and clothes made of it in Turkic states became widespread in vast territory through the years. These matted fabrics were used for various purposes. Felt retains coolness in summer and warmth in winter. It also has antibacterial properties and protects the body from lightning. In addition to its use in the construction of temporary dwelling, such as make-shift tents or dugouts, it also laid groundwork for making clothing elements. Felt played an important role in the clothing culture in Azerbaijan and throughout the Caucasus region. Footwear, hats and cloaks made from felt were of great importance in this regard.

Shoulder garments commonly known as "felt cloaks" are widespread among nations of the Caucasus region, including Azerbaijanis. In particular, "yapinci", a type of outerwear, was widely used among cattle breeders. These clothing items were either fringed or unfringed based on their manufacturing technology. The items, which were shaped as umbrellas and boxes, were long-sleeved (chopoz), sleeveless and hooded (khillig). Fringed yapinci was expensive and only well-to-do people could afford buying such a garment.



Azerbaijani herder with a yapinji on. Modern photo



Nearly all literature and other sources of data confirm that “yapinci” is a type of clothing attributed to the Caucasus. Referring to this type of clothing, which is inherent to the whole Caucasus region, A.S. Piralov wrote that “yapinci, which is a type of outerwear for a Caucasus man, is a companion throughout his life spent on horseback”.

“A Caucasus man is unimaginable without a “yapinci”,” Piralov added.

According to Mahmud al-Kashgari’s “Diwan-Lughat-al-Turk”, “yapinci” was a clothing item commonly used not only in the Caucasus but also among most of the Turkic nations. The variations used in this piece of writing include “chiydam”, “chaydam”; “kamak”, “kedhuk”, “keyuk”, “alma”, “yaptach”, “chakrak” or “chakrak kapa”, etc.

The wide spread of the garment led to the emergence of various terms in Turkic languages and dialects. Thus, it is referred to as “kepenek” in Turkey, while the Uzbeks call it “yapincik”, the Kazakhs say “kebenek”, the Kyrgyz people say “chepken” and “kiyiz chapan” and Uyghurs say “yansiz kigiz chakman”. The Tatar version of the word is “yapinchu”, while Bashkir Turks say “yabinjah” as well as “burka” and Turkmens say “yapinja”.

A great variety of “yapinci” items referenced by different terms have been available in Azerbaijan. The Azerbaijani ethnographic terms used to refer to felt clothing included “yapinci”, “burunma”, “kepenek”, “chopoz” (“chopuz”), “qarti” and “khilliq” (“khillik”). Yapinci, buruncak, kepenek and qarti were shaped either as an “umbrella” or a “box”. The umbrella yapinci does not have a knit line, while the neck part is carved with lateral edging and a lace or a strap sewn on both sides to be tied under the throat. In the “box” type, the upper ends of the yapinci are folded towards the middle and the part that descends to the shoulder is sewn, which makes attaching it to the collar unnecessary.

The word “yapinci” is more widespread in the Azerbaijani language. It is common knowledge that most of people’s achievements resulted from their extensive experience and observations. Thus, a woolen blanket or fleece was placed under the saddle to protect the horseback from being damaged by the saddle, while the rider’s convenience was ensured by putting a woolen cover or fleece on top of the saddle. As a result of the weight reduction as well as the horse’s

Fringed yapinji



sweating and heat, the wool gradually turned into felt, which allowed people to study ways of making felt.

Unlike lamb wool, unwoven coarse wool has long fibers. Therefore, the fibers are wrapped together and the wool is separated from the sheep's body entirely when it is sheared. If the wool is washed carefully, it does not fall apart and is further laid flat and dried. If the wool is wrapped in a piece of cloth at this point and someone sits down over it or puts it under the saddle, it will quickly become matted. The horse's sweat would speed up its heating. Unlike short fibrous sheep wool, it does not require combing or beating with a stick. This feature suggests that "yapinci" was derived from the word yapag (fleece).

"Yapinci", a word that became widespread in Turkic languages, was transliterated into Russian as "yepancha", "yapancha" or "yaponchitsa". Moreover, the poncho, which was used in South America in the past, is identical to yapinci (ya-poncha) both in terms of vocabulary and in essence, providing protection during rainy and sunny weather.

Yapinci is referred to as "burunma" ("wrap") in some dialects. This particular term reflects the style of wearing the garment, as well as its purpose and essence. The word "burunma" has retained its origin in the Russian word "burka". It is associated with "burunma", one of the variations of "yapinci", as well as the word "burgu", which is mentioned in al-Kashgari's divan, a collection of poems. The fact that the term has been used to date as "burunma" in Azerbaijan's Mughan district and as "burunjek" in Goychay proves the purely Turkic origin of the word "burka".

It is worth mentioning that Russian Etymological Dictionary by N. M. Shansky indicates that the word "burka" is derived from Turkish. Some writers, including 11th-century scholar Mahmud al-Kashgari, regarded



Waterproof yapinji

yapinci as a hooded cloak. During further periods of history, the hood was separated from the yapinci and the latter emerged as a garment that merely covered the shoulders and the body. "*Khilliq*", which is referenced below, is its only variation that had a hood.

Al-Kashgari referred to the cap attached to the neck as "yangalduruk". Although precise data could not be established regarding the ancient history of this garment in Azerbaijani territory, a hooded garment was traced upon a seal dating back to the 7th-3rd centuries BCE discovered during excavations in Mingachevir.

Yapinci was sleeveless and aimed toward the left shoulder to free the right arm when horse riding. People would wrap themselves up entirely by the cloak only in rainy and windy weather.

"Their felt cloak is hung from the shoulders by a strap or lace," A. Oleari wrote in reference to the clothes of the Cherkess Tatars. "They do not button it and instead simply turn it in the opposite direction of the wind and rain, which comprehensively protects the body from all kinds of [bad] weather and the wind" [1, p. 83].

The yapinci was the most affordable type of clothing given the nomadic lifestyle of cattle-breeding groups engaged in outdoor farming. It was also used as a mattress by cattle-breeders. Moreover, it served as a winter clothing garment in the Russian Cossack army. From the 1850s, the yapinci was included in the uniform of the Caucasus units of the Russian cavalry regiment. Since rainwater made the cloak heavy and hindered movement, it was replaced by leather clothing from the early 20th century.

Usually, when the shape of the cloak was prepared, the required size and shape were taken into consideration in advance. Once it was ready, the neck opening was made and lining was applied to the neck and chest area to prevent friction. In order to ensure lightness, the cloak used in Karabakh was made thin and it was covered by pearls and coarse linen.

One of the most common types of the garment is "kepenek" ("butterfly"). The word was used in scientific books based on the shape of the clothing item. Nevertheless, the origin of "the butterfly" is an ethnonym associated with the Kapan branch of the Pecheneg tribe [2, p.19]. Afterwards, the psychological image played a key role in disregarding its original meaning and associating it with an insect (butterfly).

Although the outdated word "kepenek" ("butterfly") is no longer used to describe one of the clothing items, it has been used to date in numerous ethn-

Azerbaijani herder. Modern photo



onyms, oronyms and geographic names. The term has been preserved as a geographic name in the ancestral land of Azerbaijanis located in the Republics of Georgia and Armenia as well as in Azerbaijan. A relevant geographic name is encountered in Georgia as Kapanakchi (Kvemo-Bolnisi), Shindilar-Kapanakchi, Ashaghi (Lower) Kapanakchi and Kurustu-Kapanakchi, as well as in rural areas located in Azerbaijan's Zagatala, Goranboy, Barda and Terter districts.

The ethnonym "Kapanakchi" is frequently referenced in the territory of present-day Armenia, one of the ancient Turkic territories where the developments of Kitabi Dede Gorgud (The Book of Dede Gorgud) take place. Interestingly, the word is used extensively in the book. Researcher I. Bayramov confirmed that the word is derived from the "kapanakchi" ethnonym used in ancient Turkic languages that is linked to the "butterfly" oronym and traced back to the Alexandropol province of the Irevan governorate in the Duzkand (present-day Akhuryan) district [3, p. 188].

Azerbaijani herder. Modern photo



In Shorayel Valley located northeast of the city of Gyumri, residents of the village of Boyuk Kapanakchi and Kichik Kapanakchi, which originated from the latter, were ousted from their ancestral land following the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878 and Armenians were settled in the area. Boyuk Kapanakchi, which reflects an Oghuz ethnotoponym, was renamed into “Musaelyan” in 1935, while Kichik Kapanakchi was renamed into Ovit in 1945.

The word “Kafan”, which refers to a city in Armenia, has the same roots. Experts have concluded that this administrative unit, which was once part of the Zangezur district of the Yelizavetpol governorate, was linked to the Gapan village, located on the right bank of the Okhchu river [4, p.102].

The word “kepenek” used with regard to clothing in the historical Azerbaijani territory was preserved in Irevan until recently. The wide spread of the term and its preservation in different placenames once again confirms its tribal origin.

Along with “yapinci” and “burunma”, the word “kepenek” was used in the languages of neighboring nations. Thus, “kebenyak” in Russian is consonant with the Turkic “kepenek”. It was adapted to North Caucasus and Slavic languages in various modifications, such as

“qubenech” in Adyghe, “aquabenek” in Abkhaz, “qebena” in Ossetian and “kobenyak” in Belarusian. The cloak-like outer garment, which was called “gupelyand” in the Italian aristocratic society in the past [5], was most likely derived from the “butterfly” or the Etruscan “tebenna”, given that felt was introduced to Europe by the Turks.

According to Ismail Danismend, Robert Lewie, a professor of anthropology at the University of California, concluded in his research that “felt” was a Turkish multi-purpose invention introduced to Oriental countries, Greece and Rome by the Turks. Even ancient Greeks and Romans could protect themselves from the rain by covering themselves up with Turkish cloaks [6, p.124], the researchers concluded. The conclusion adds credibility to the assertion that the word “gupelyand” is linked to the words “tebenna” or “kopenyak”.

The cloak was referred to as “khillig” among western Azerbaijanis. Khillig, which was made of relatively thin felt, was a type of a shepherd’s jacket and unlike other felt-made garments, it had armholes and a hood. The garment was long enough to reach the ankle. Cylindrical “box” types of this garment were common in the foothills, while the conical “umbrella” types were widespread in mountainous areas.

A long piece of cloth was used for a “box-type khillig” and then folded in half in the middle and the sides were further sewn together, while the armholes were left open. The collar and neck parts were cut open. It was attached with a button sewn to the right or left-hand side under the throat or leaving the ends of the welt sewn to the neck opening long, which is also done in “yapinci”. The neck and collar incisions were covered with tanned leather or thick fabric edging. In contrast, the umbrella-shaped “khillig”, impressed in an oval shape, was long enough to reach the shin. The simple production technology, cutting and sewing methods used to make khillig indicate that it is an ancient clothing item. It led to the emergence of the expression among western Azerbaijanis saying “it is so easy to sew it that it looks like a khillig”.

As for the etymology of the word “khillig”, it is derived from the word “hair”, given that the Turks referred to human and animal hair in a broad sense as “qil”. Considering that the letter “x” was non-existent in the ancient Turkic alphabet, a conclusion may be made that the word “killi” was previously used. It is also known that felt was produced by beating goat fur. The expression “kil yapinci” (“fur maker”) is also used in the “Kitabi-Dede Gorgud” epic story.

Azerbaijani bey (Karabakh region) wearing fringed yapinji



"Chopoz" is one of the types of felt-made outerwear included in the "yapinci" group. Chopoz, a garment worn in the northwestern Azerbaijani regions that replaced fur coats, was made using the same techniques as yapinci, but it had a rather different shape. Unlike the yapinci, which was worn over the shoulders, the chopoz was pulled over the clothes and had sleeves. The main difference between the two items was that the yapinci, which was relatively large, was impressed in a trapezoidal shape, while the chopoz, which stretched to the elbow when folded, was "T"-shaped.

The method of making chopoz was more similar to the way khillig was made. When shaping the garment's layout, a protrusion was made from the central part toward the edges to cover up the arms. After the item was shaped, its layout resembled a butterfly. Afterwards, the edges were folded over each other from the middle and the protrusion further formed a sleeve up to the elbow. The chopoz layout is typologically similar to the tunic shirt called "kebelek" by Turks of the North Caucasus and Crimean Tatars.

A comparison drawn between the chopoz and the khillig highlights the similarity between the two garments. The fact that the khillig has a more simplistic shape suggests that it dates back to the historical period preceding chopoz.

"Chopoz" has been preserved in the hydrographic name "Chobaz" in the Oghuz district. Phonetically, the hydronym has been a variation of "chopuz" (a jacket or short yapinci), implying "a short river". In the Karachay-Balkar language, such a jacket was called "chubur", a word that had the same root as "chopoz". Since shepherds walked around a lot, short jackets were more useful and protected them against mud on the ground. To the contrary, long cloaks were suitable for horsemen as such garments, which were more frequently of the "umbrella" type, would protect both the rider and the horse from rainwater. The rider would usually prevent rainwater from affecting the horse by spreading the jacket over its back while seated on the saddle.

Although different types of yapinci, men's clothing with a very ancient history, were available, all these garments had the same origin and essentially identical functionality. Its emergence was mainly stipulated by the natural climatic conditions, economic activity and the strict requirements of the horse-riding lifestyle. Practical advantages of this apparel prompted other nations to start using this garment as well. Therefore, the words "yapinci", "kepenek" and "burunma" have been transferred to all Caucasus languages as well as Slavic ones. 🌟

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