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From Ancestral Garments to the Podium: the Transformation of National Costume in Contemporary Fashion

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Abstract: This article examines the transformation of Uzbek national costume its fabrics, silhouettes and ornamental vocabulary into contemporary fashion design, situating the Central Asian case within the broader international discourse on ethnic dress, national identity and sustainable fashion. Uzbekistan possesses one of the richest surviving hand-textile traditions in Eurasia, embodied in silk ikat fabrics such as atlas, adras, bekasam and baxmal, and in the symbolically dense embroidery of suzani. Over the past two decades these elements have migrated from ceremonial wardrobes and ethnographic collections onto international runways and into the collections of both Uzbek and foreign designers. The findings indicate three parallel processes: the technical and economic revival of endangered hand-weaving crafts through fashion-industry demand; the semantic transformation of protective and fertility-related ornament into decorative, largely secularised print; and the uneven distribution of symbolic and economic capital between Western luxury houses and Central Asian artisans.

Keywords: National Costume, Adras, Atlas, Suzani, Sustainable Fashion, Cultural Identity, Fashion Globalization.

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1. Introduction

The relationship between national dress and global fashion has become one of the most visible arenas in which questions of cultural identity, economic development and sustainability intersect. As mass-produced, trend-driven apparel increasingly homogenises everyday appearance across continents, a countervailing interest in heritage-based, locally rooted design has emerged among both consumers and designers [1]. Within this broader movement, the traditional costume of Uzbekistan a country whose historical position on the Silk Road made it a centre of silk cultivation, dyeing and weaving for more than a millennium occupies a distinctive place. Fabrics such as khan-atlas, adras, bekasam and baxmal, together with the richly symbolic embroidered textile known as suzani, constitute an internationally recognised visual vocabulary that has repeatedly attracted the attention of couturiers, from Oscar de la Renta's 2005 ikat collection to recent suzani-inspired work by Dior and Gucci [2]. The topicality of this subject arises from several converging developments. First, Uzbekistan's own fashion infrastructure has expanded rapidly since 2019 with the launch of Uzbekistan Fashion Week and, from 2023, Visa Fashion Week Tashkent, both of which explicitly frame national heritage as a design resource and a tool of cultural diplomacy. Second, the global sustainable-fashion movement has begun to treat hand-craft traditions not merely as decorative inspiration but as models of slow, low-impact production worth preserving in their own right. Third, the same globalising forces that create opportunities for Central Asian artisans to reach international markets also create risks of decontextualisation, uncredited appropriation

and the erosion of intergenerational craft transmission [3]. The central problem addressed in this article is therefore twofold. On one hand, there is a genuine revival of endangered hand-weaving and embroidery techniques driven by fashion-industry demand, exemplified by the post-Soviet reconstruction of velvet-ikat (baxmal) weaving in Margilan. On the other hand, this revival is accompanied by asymmetries: symbolic motifs that once carried precise apotropaic or fertility-related meanings within suzani embroidery are frequently reduced, in international collections, to purely decorative surface pattern, and the economic benefits of “ethnic chic” trend cycles are not always shared with the communities of origin. Despite the growing volume of journalistic and museum-based commentary on this phenomenon, there remains a shortage of systematic, IMRAD-structured academic treatment that connects Uzbek ethnographic material with the international theoretical literature on ethnic and national dress. The scientific novelty of the article lies in its integration of three strands of evidence that are rarely combined in a single study: ethnographic and historical material on Uzbek dress, content analysis of recent (2019-2025) domestic and international runway seasons, and the theoretical apparatus developed in international dress and fashion scholarship, particularly the ethnic dress/national dress/world fashion typology proposed by Eicher and Sumberg and the critique of self-Orientalisation articulated by Niessen et al. By applying this apparatus to an under-studied Central Asian case, the article extends the comparative literature on cultural sustainability in fashion beyond its more frequently examined East and Southeast Asian examples [4].

Literature Review

The conceptual starting point for most contemporary scholarship on the globalisation of national costume is the tripartite distinction between ethnic dress, national dress and world fashion proposed by Eicher and Sumberg. In this framework, ethnic dress signals affiliation with a specific cultural or regional group, national dress functions as an officially or popularly sanctioned emblem of a modern nation-state, and world fashion denotes garments whose stylistic vocabulary circulates internationally with little attachment to a single place of origin. Baizerman, Eicher and Cerny further argued that Western dress scholarship has historically treated non-Western clothing through a Eurocentric lens that equates “civilised” appearance with proximity to European fashion, a bias that continues to shape how ethnic textiles are received when they enter global collections [5].

Within Uzbek and regional scholarship, Irmatov provides a technical and symbolic account of ikat textiles, describing atlas as a fabric woven entirely from silk and adras as a hybrid of silk warp and cotton weft, both produced through the resist-dyeing process that yields the characteristic blurred pattern associated with Central Asian ikat. Barannikova extends this analysis by framing resist-dyed adras as an element of national identity formation, arguing that Uzbekistan's ikat tradition functions as a form of cultural negotiation between Soviet-era suppression and post-independence revival. The *Web of Scientist* journal offers a complementary account of the weaving and dyeing processes behind atlas and adras and their continuing symbolic importance during festivals such as Navroz [6].

On the ornamental side, Tashpulatov's analysis of Uzbek embroidery catalogues more than thirty recurring symbolic elements from the pomegranate and almond to astral and zoomorphic motifs and demonstrates that Uzbek decorative vocabulary varies systematically by region (Tashkent-Fergana, Samarkand-Bukhara, Surkhandarya-Kashkadarya, Khorezm-Nurata and Karakalpakstan), each with distinctive colour palettes and compositional logics. Historical treatments published in the *San'at* art-history journal trace the evolution of Uzbek costume from the archaic tunic-dress (kuylak) and trouser (lozim) combination through the emergence, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth

centuries, of the yoked and pleated kukrak-burma dress that is now popularly identified as the quintessential national dress [7].

2. Statement of the Problem

This study employs a qualitative, multi-method research design combining historical-comparative analysis, visual and content analysis, and case-study method, an approach well suited to a phenomenon that is simultaneously material, symbolic and economic. Historical-comparative analysis was used to reconstruct the baseline development of Uzbek national costume, drawing on ethnographic descriptions, museum documentation and historical art-journal sources spanning the pre-modern period through the Soviet and post-independence eras. This baseline provides the reference point against which contemporary transformation is assessed.

Data sources combined peer-reviewed journal articles, UNESCO and Smithsonian institutional documentation, and specialist fashion journalism from outlets with demonstrated subject-matter expertise (Forbes, Metal Magazine, Elle Uzbekistan, Voices on Central Asia). Because Central Asian fashion currently lacks a large-scale indexed database comparable to those available for major fashion capitals, reliance on high-quality secondary and journalistic sources was unavoidable and is acknowledged as a limitation; findings concerning very recent (2024–2026) collections should accordingly be read as indicative rather than exhaustive. A further limitation is the predominance of English-language sources, which may under-represent Uzbek- and Russian-language craft scholarship not indexed in the databases consulted.

3. Results

Archaeological and art-historical evidence indicates that weaving was well developed in the territory of present-day Uzbekistan by the early centuries of the common era, with frescoes from sites such as Afrasiab depicting silk kaftans worn by the wealthy alongside simpler cotton garments worn by the general population (Central Asia Guide, n.d.). By the nineteenth century, women's costume had stabilized around the ankle-length tunic dress (kuylak) paired with loose trousers (lozim), while men's dress centered on the layered robe (chapan), often worn in multiples as a direct index of social status. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw the emergence of the kukrak-burma silhouette a yoked, pleated dress form that remains the popular referent for “national dress” today (Advantour, n.d.-a) [8]. Men's costume followed a parallel trajectory of layering and status display, centered on the chapan robe, the doppi or duppi skullcap, and the sash. The number of chapans worn simultaneously functioned as a direct, legible index of wealth and prestige, a practice that had largely disappeared from everyday use by the late twentieth century but that survives in ceremonial contexts such as weddings and national holidays, and that has, as documented in Section 4.4, been selectively revived as a design reference in recent menswear collections [9]. Table 1 summarizes the composition, historical function and contemporary fashion application of each fabric, illustrating a consistent pattern: materials once reserved for ceremonial or status-marking contexts have been redistributed across a wider range of contemporary garment categories, from evening gowns to structured menswear.

Table 1. Historical function and contemporary fashion application of each fabric.

Fabric	Composition / Technique	Historical Use	Contemporary Fashion Application
Atlas (khan-atlas)	100% silk; warp-ikat (abrbandi) resist-dyeing	Festive women's dresses, bridal wear, ceremonial gifts	Couture gowns, evening wear, digital-print reinterpretations (Oscar de la Renta, LALI, KOMA)
Adras	Silk warp, cotton weft; ikat technique	Every day and semi-formal dress, robes	Menswear capes and coats, ready-to-wear separates (Kamola Rustamova, Rano Collection)
Bekasam / Beqasam	Silk or semi-silk striped weave	Outerwear, status-marking robes	Structured jackets, upholstery-inspired accessories
Baxmal (velvet ikat)	Silk-pile velvet with ikat-dyed warp	Men's ceremonial and bridal robes	Revived luxury outerwear following the Mirzaakhmedov-de la Renta collaboration (2005)

Uzbek ornament, most densely expressed in *suzani* embroidery, carries a layered symbolic vocabulary that predates and overlays Islamic-era floral idioms with older astral and fertility symbolism. Documented meanings include the pomegranate as an emblem of fertility, the almond and pepper pod as protective talismans against the evil eye, the poppy as a marker of unmarried girls and the cornflower as a marker of men, alongside archaic geometric forms such as the rhombus and rosette linked to pre-Islamic solar symbolism [10]. Regional schools of embroidery Tashkent-Fergana, Samarkand-Bukhara, Surkhandarya-Kashkadarya, Khorezm-Nurata and Karakalpakstan encode this vocabulary in distinct colour and compositional conventions [11]. The convergence between heritage textile revival and the global sustainable-fashion movement recurs throughout the corpus. UNESCO's safeguarding programme for Margilan's atlas and adras crafts explicitly frames hand-weaving revival as a form of intangible-heritage sustainability. The social enterprise Bibi Hanum, founded in 2006, operationalises this link commercially: its 2019 collaboration with Oscar de la Renta on a fair-trade basis provided sustained income to Fergana Valley artisans while supplying ikat textile for a globally distributed collection. This model parallels findings from Le et al and Liu, both of which identify direct, reciprocal engagement between designers and artisan communities as the decisive factor distinguishing sustainable cultural transformation from extractive appropriation [12].

The single most influential episode in the international diffusion of Uzbek textile heritage is Oscar de la Renta's engagement with ikat, beginning with a 1997 haute couture collection for Pierre Balmain inspired by nineteenth-century Central Asian robes and culminating in his landmark spring/summer 2005 collection, in which six of fifty-nine looks incorporated ikat fabrics commissioned directly from Margilan weaver Rasuljon Mirzaakhmedov. This collection is widely credited with catalysing a decade-long

international vogue for ikat prints, subsequently adopted by Balenciaga, Dries Van Noten and Gucci, Naeem Khan and L.A.M.B, and Isabel Marant (2015-2016), before migrating to mass-market retailers including Zara, H&M and Forever 21. The Smithsonian's 2018 "To Dye For: Ikats from Central Asia" exhibition subsequently placed six de la Renta garments alongside roughly thirty nineteenth-century Uzbek ikat robes and hangings from the Freer Sackler collection, making explicit the historical source material that had, for much of the intervening period, circulated in Western fashion media largely without attribution.

Table 2. Diffusion timeline.

Year	Designer / House	Nature of Engagement with Uzbek Textile Heritage
1997	Oscar de la Renta for Pierre Balmain	Haute couture robes inspired by 19th-century Central Asian ikat coats
2005	Oscar de la Renta	Spring/summer collection with commissioned adras, baxmal and atlas ikat from Margilan weaver Rasuljon Mirzaakhmedov; 6 of 59 looks featured ikat
2007	Balenciaga	Fall collection consolidating ikat as a defining print of the decade
2010	Dries Van Noten; Gucci	Spring/summer collections featuring Uzbek-derived ikat prints
2011	Naeem Khan; L.A.M.B. (Gwen Stefani)	Ikat evening looks and ready-to-wear ikat pieces
2013- 2014	Oscar de la Renta; Roberto Cavalli	Continued ikat gowns; cruise-collection ikat pieces
2015- 2016	Isabel Marant	Autumn/winter collection with ikat-patterned knitwear
2018	Smithsonian National Museum of Asian Art	"To Dye For: Ikats from Central Asia" exhibition juxtaposing de la Renta pieces with 19th-century Uzbek robes
2019	Bibi Hanum × Oscar de la Renta	Artisan-made ikat pieces produced under a fair-trade model supported by the NGO Nest

Parallel to this outward diffusion, Uzbekistan has developed its own institutional platforms for showcasing reinterpreted national dress. Uzbekistan Fashion Week, launched in 2019 and held biannually since 2022, has grown from approximately 100 local and 30 foreign designers presenting around 3,000 looks in its first season to a cumulative total of roughly 4,500 works by 280 designers across three subsequent seasons. Visa Fashion Week Tashkent, an extension of the Almaty-based Visa Fashion Week franchise, was inaugurated in 2023 and by its fourth season in 2024 hosted eleven brands under the theme "Heritage meets Modernity," explicitly instructing participating designers to engage with national cultural values. Designers repeatedly identified in this domestic

corpus including Jenia Kim, Dildora Kasimova, Zukhra Inat, Suhrob Habib, Dilnoza Umirzakova, the LALI collective, Rano Khamraeva and Liliya Palyunina collectively illustrate the range of strategies documented in Sections 4.3 and 4.4, from motif-literate embroidery reinterpretation to full-scale hybrid silhouette redesign.

4. Discussion

The results confirm, for the specific case of Uzbekistan, the general typology proposed by Eicher and Sumberg (1995): garments such as the kukrak-burma dress and the chapam robe function domestically as national dress, retain residual ethnic-dress meaning within specific regional and ceremonial contexts, and are simultaneously abstracted into world fashion once their surface characteristics ikat pattern, saturated colour, suzani motif circulate internationally detached from silhouette and context. This three-way coexistence, rather than a linear replacement of tradition by fashion, appears to be the dominant pattern, consistent with Niessen et al.'s (2003) observation that globalised Asian dress rarely displaces local dress practice so much as it multiplies the registers in which a given garment or motif can operate [13]. Comparison with the Vietnamese Nhat Binh robe case and the Chinese Han and Suzhou-embroidery cases shows a shared underlying mechanism: a historically elite or ceremonial costume is decomposed by designers into discrete, transferable design elements motif, silhouette, palette which are then recombined with contemporary cut and construction [14]. The Uzbek case adds a distinctive dimension to this pattern because of the sheer scale of unattributed international adoption documented for ikat specifically; unlike the Nhat Binh robe, whose reinterpretation has remained largely within a Vietnamese design context, Uzbek ikat became a genuinely global mass-market print within roughly a decade of its 2005 couture debut, a trajectory that more closely parallels the self-Orientalisation dynamics Niessen et al describe for the qipao and sarong. The regional diversity documented in Section 4.1 also bears on the discussion of authenticity that runs throughout the comparative literature. Because contemporary fashion marketing tends to flatten Tashkent-Fergana, Samarkand-Bukhara, Khorezm-Nurata and Surkhandarya-Kashkadarya conventions into an undifferentiated "Uzbek" or "Central Asian" aesthetic, designers who do engage seriously with regional specificity as Tashpulatov's documentation of five distinct embroidery schools makes possible arguably perform a more historically accurate, and potentially more sustainable, form of cultural translation than those who treat "Uzbek ornament" as an undifferentiated stock of motifs [15]. This suggests a refinement of the reciprocity criterion proposed above: attribution should extend not only to national origin but, where possible, to the specific regional or workshop tradition from which a motif or technique is drawn, a level of specificity rarely achieved in the international corpus examined in Section 4.6 but increasingly present in the domestic corpus examined in Section 4.7.

5. Conclusion

This study has traced the transformation of Uzbek national costume its fabrics, silhouettes and ornamental vocabulary into contemporary fashion, combining historical-comparative analysis, visual and content analysis, and case-study method to produce an integrated account of a phenomenon previously documented mainly in scattered journalistic and museum sources. The findings show that Uzbekistan's textile heritage, and ikat in particular, has moved through three overlapping registers of use as national dress, as ethnic-identity marker, and as globally circulating world fashion in a pattern consistent with established international dress theory but distinguished by the unusually rapid and extensive mass-market diffusion of the ikat print following its 2005 couture debut.

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